

The worrisome drifts of the Sivananda yoga centre

Sexual harassment, concealed work: testimonies are multiplying against this international network.

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SECTS It is one of the most important yoga places in Paris. A centre located just a stone's throw from the Gare de l'Est train station, calm and clean, where more than sixty activities are normally held each week: yoga classes, but also vegetarian cooking workshops, meditations or "positive thinking workshops". It is part of the international Sivananda network, present in 26 countries, which has graduated *"more than 43,000 yoga teachers since 1969"*. The organization, headquartered in Val-Morin, near Montreal, Quebec, is in the midst of a controversy over accusations of sexual harassment at the highest level.

On December 10, 2019, Julie Salter, a 63-year-old New Zealander, posted on Facebook a testimony accusing founder Vishnudevananda of sexually abusing her for three years. She worked as a personal assistant to the Hindu monk, who died in 1993. In the aftermath, a Facebook group with 2,400 members gathered further accusations. Thirty-five people testified to the charges for *"sexual misconduct, psychological and emotional abuse, physical and financial abuse and exploitation"*, says U.S. attorney Carol Merchasin.

Support group

Among the alleged victims, eighteen women, including one French woman, report situations of sexual harassment. They mainly target three people: the deceased Vishnudevananda and two members of the board of directors, the Italian Maurizio Finocchi (Hindu name Mahadevananda) and the Indian Thamatham Reddy (Hindu name Prahlada). The former retired in 2013. The latter was temporarily dismissed on 17 February, pending the results of an investigation by Sivananda, which is being conducted by Quebec lawyer Marianne Plamondon.

The alleged victims have not filed a complaint to date, but the support group initiated on Facebook has raised \$15,000 on the Gofundme platform to fund its own investigation, led by lawyer Carol Merchasin and an Australian psychotherapist. *"The allegations are overwhelming and should spur Sivananda to take action"*, says Merchasin. A first 39-page report from her investigation was published at the end of June. Seven women, including a French woman, testify against Mahadevananda. Two other reports will be released by the end of August. No release date has been announced for Marianne Plamondon's report.

The Quebec daily *Le Devoir* published an article in February about the touching by Prahlada of two women, one of whom was a minor, during their stay at the ashram in Val-Morin. Contacted by *Le Figaro*, Ellie, a teacher from Saint-Nazaire who wished to change her first name, said that Mahadevananda, then director of the South Indian ashram, *"touched her breasts by force"*, while Pralahad tried to seduce her insistently for two months before rejecting and scorning her in public.

Half a day's rest a week

She was a volunteer between 2000 and 2005, first in India and then in France. It started as a part-time volunteer. She decided her departure and arrival dates. *"When I no longer had the money to travel freely, I became a permanent staff member. I was paid for my journeys, but my missions were imposed on me. I was sent against my will to France while I loved my life in India"*, she explains. *"My days were getting busier and busier, the leaders became stricter, advised me not to see my family. The volunteers at Sivananda's don't complain: Indian tradition says that you burn the bad karma of past lives"*, says the mother of two, who spent about four years as a full-time volunteer in France.

In Paris, Ellie would wake up at 5:30 a.m. and rarely finished before 11 p.m. She slept in the yoga room, helped with teaching, cleaning and cooking. She also took care of accounting and communication. With only one half-day free: Sunday morning. Living conditions were similar to those of other long-term volunteers, according to her. The non-profit association Sivananda, which did not wish to answer our questions, generates a substantial turnover, estimated at more than one million euros per year. Its ashram in Neuville-aux-Bois, near Orléans, charges between 2,500 and 4,130 euros for a one-month internship.

The case also has a social component. In May, five former volunteers sent a report to the Loiret labour inspectorate for concealed work concerning Neuville-aux-Bois. They reportedly worked six days a week, between eight and twelve hours a day. They reported subordination, imposed schedules and remuneration in kind, in the form of accommodation, meals or yoga classes. *"These conditions are likely to justify a reclassification as salaried employees"*, says lawyer Éric Verrière.

The Miviludes seized several times

The Interministerial Mission of Vigilance and Combat against Sectarian Drifts (Miviludes) indicates that it has *"received since 2015 about fifteen questions about the ashram of Neuville-aux-Bois. Often, in this type of center, the accommodation conditions lead trainees to reduce their critical faculties. From then on, the conditions are right for a possible mental hold"*, warns Miviludes, without commenting on this specific case, which is *"under analysis"*. At the beginning of the year, its transfer from Matignon to the Ministry of the Interior, more precisely to the secretariat specialising in the prevention of delinquency and radicalisation and in the fight against community withdrawal, had caused concern. *"I am afraid that this decision reflects a disengagement of the French authorities from the sectarian problem, considered to be less of a priority than radical Islamism"*, criticises Marie Drilhon, president of the Association for the defence of families and individuals who are victims of sects. But the secretary general of Miviludes assures that *"we are going to be more offensive in justice"*. T. L.