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## Yoga training centre accused of concealing a cluster of 20 cases after a seminar

The Sivananda Ashram in Neuville-aux-Bois, in the Loiret region of France, has been accused by several trainees of being lax in dealing with covid-19 and of concealing the emergence of a cluster estimated at between 14 and 35 cases during the first half of August.

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An ashram in the Loiret region of France is accused by former trainees of having concealed a covid-19 home. Illustration photo. - Francisco Guasco / Maxppp

[Loiret Orléans](#)

*"We may be a spiritual community, but waving bells and spreading incense is not going to protect us from the covid! Annette\* has just returned from a training session as a yoga teacher at [the Sivananda Ashram in Neuville-aux-Bois](#). From 1 August, this "monastic congregation recognised by the French government", as it defines itself on its website, was supposed to welcome a class of about fifty future teachers for a one-month training course, which was abruptly interrupted after a fortnight.*

This '*ashram*', from the Sanskrit word for 'hermitage', was established in 2003 as the first sanctuary of the Sivananda School in Europe. Founded in 1957 by the Indian yogi Swami Vishnudevananda, this non-profit organisation has 11 ashrams and 31 centres worldwide, dedicated to teaching an "*integral*" philosophy of yoga. Since 2019, it has also been at the center of a controversy related to sexual abuse reported by several women who attended Vishnudevanda.

## ***A "training course" costing several thousand euros***

Prior to the course, the cost of which is listed on the ashram's website as ranging from €2575 to €4255, the congregation sends an email to its participants reminding them to be tested for covid-19 less than 48 hours before the course starts, and reminding them of various barrier measures and health precautions.

Again, as a health precaution, the 51 participants are encouraged not to leave the ashram too much, and their families cannot visit them. "*People came from Bordeaux, Toulouse, Rennes, Paris, everywhere,*" adds Beatrice\*, also enrolled in the course. *I'm vaccinated, but I also took the test,*" she continues. *But I'm sure they didn't check. Some people were able to participate in the course without having sent their papers! "*

At first reassured by the health precautions displayed by the structure, the two participants were quickly disappointed. On August 4, without the future yoga teachers being informed, between 40 and 60 newcomers arrived for a week of "*bhakti*", a form of worship that is an integral part of Hinduism, until August 11. Then come people on "*yoga holidays*", a mode of stay that is also part of the ashram's services. "*In the meantime, there was also a training course on the 'biology of happiness' run by someone from Germany,*" recalls Annette\*, as well as a new batch of trainees from the 13th. However, in its July 27 email to its trainees, the ashram explicitly stated, "*we will not have any more trainees or visitors to the ashram during the training.* "

When contacted by France 3, the training centre explained this influx by a simple error in the email, which was copied from a model used the previous year. It is not a good *idea to have a lot of people in the same room as you,*" he said. "*Normally we have checked all the PCR tests,*" which were all negative, insisted Florence Aillot, the ashram's manager, who was confined to the site with the staff.

## ***A hundred or so people "mixed together, singing merrily, without masks"***

But very quickly, symptoms appear and rumours circulate. The facility, which announced that four members of the staff were already positive for covid-19 and were confined, had all its students purchase self-tests. On August 12, the first four cases appear, which are then confirmed by PCR test. On August 13, she says, six more cases are detected. By the 15th, there were ten

more, but not all were confirmed by PCR test. *"While the yoga teacher's class was supposed to be alone in the ashram, there were a small number of people who paraded around the place," she says indignantly. Everyone was mixed together, singing merrily, without masks. "*

And indeed, in the photos shared on social networks, dozens of people can be seen gathered without masks and close to each other, as well as what looks like dormitories.

*"One year after the beginning of such a health crisis, I don't understand," says Beatrice\*, who does not hesitate to describe the lack of reaction of the ashram as "shameful". "How can they make this kind of mistake? They didn't disinfect the room, I slept three nights next to contaminated sheets, they didn't come and air it out, or put disinfectant, nothing! There are three or four of us per room in the ashram!" Comparing their figures, the two trainees put forward the figure of thirty-five cases over the weekend.*

*There is one who is asmatic, laid up for 4 days, her father came to pick her up, and her things are still there!*

*Beatrice\*, training participant*

On the ashram side, Florence Aillot gives very different figures: *"It started on Thursday [12 August], we received the information that two people, who had already left the ashram, had tested positive. The next day, other people started having symptoms, so we decided to test all the students and staff immediately. Following this self-test we had eight people positive, and we asked them to confirm it with a PCR test. On Sunday, they received confirmation that it was positive so they were isolated. Following this, the whole group was re-tested on Sunday, and as a result of this second self-test we had nine more people from the training who were positive, and five staff members as well, following which we took the decision to close the ashram immediately and ask people to go home and isolate themselves. "*

## **Reactions too late?**

In fact, on Sunday 15 August, in an email that France 3 was able to read, the ashram warned its students that *"two people who stayed at the ashram between 4 and 11 August had tested positive for covid when they returned home"*, and asked them to *"take precautions"*. However, this number of two cases, which is difficult to verify, must be questioned: it is below the four cases put forward by the two witnesses, which were confirmed by PCR test, but it is also below the threshold of three cases from which one speaks of an outbreak of infection or *"cluster"*. It was not until the following day, Monday 16 August, that the Sivananda Ashram announced by email at the end of the morning that the site would be closed for ten days and urged participants to get tested.

Finally, the Regional Health Agency (ARS), received by email during the afternoon of the same day the report of a cluster within the ashram, with the same figures: *"two first cases detected on Thursday, August 12"*, followed by a sudden deterioration during the weekend leading to *"14 confirmed cases"* this Monday, August 16. *"The structure is in the process of establishing the precise list of people who have stayed in the centre between 4 August and today"*, says the ARS chief of staff, Christophe Lugnot, and the health *"tracing"* investigations have been launched to determine exactly how many people have been contaminated by the virus and, above all, when.

For Annette\* and Béatrice\*, concern has in any case given way to anger and indignation. "There are *fragile, weak people who go there and believe that they will be protected*" within a spiritual community, Annette\* said. "*Under the guise of spirituality, we don't send thirty people who are convicted back home, it's scandalous!*" Beatrice agrees. "*Establishments that welcome the public should not lie to us.*"

At the ashram, about 15 permanent staff members are now confined to the site, according to our information.

Update **19 August:** According to the ARS, a total of 32 cases have been confirmed in relation to the Neuville-aux-Bois ashram, but a number of people have yet to be contacted.

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