

# Report on Themes and Impacts of 3HO Childhoods

## Prepared for the Independent Healing & Reparations Program

by

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## Introduction

This report has been drafted in response to a request from a group of adults who were born and/or raised in 3HO under the leadership of Yogi Bhajan. After stating my qualifications and sources used for the report, I briefly discuss Bhajan's role and the situation of 3HO parents. I then lay out, with examples, the key themes of separation, neglect, abuse, coercion, isolation and grooming as experienced by children in the group. Following this I discuss how these conditions affected the children and, later, their life chances as adults. I then put this into context by describing how 3HO fits the definition of a cult and the resulting attachment and recovery challenges for those who grew up in the group.

## Qualifications and relevant expertise

I have a doctorate (2007) from the University of Minnesota where I applied attachment theory, among other theories, to a comparative study of a cult with an open group. I have trained in the Adult Attachment Interview research instrument. I have published two books: a memoir, *Inside Out*<sup>1</sup>, and a systematic study: *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in cults and totalitarian systems*<sup>2</sup>. In addition I have published book chapters and numerous articles on the topic<sup>3</sup>. I designed and taught a course on the *Social Psychology of Cults and Totalitarianism* at the University of Minnesota and at the Mary Ward Centre in London, in addition to frequently presenting internationally at conferences, workshops and invited lectures. I am currently on the board of the charity *The Family Survival Trust*, and am on the Scientific Committee of the *European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Cults and Sectarianism*. I served on the EU's *Radicalization Awareness Network* Expert Panel for several years. I have counselled hundreds of cult survivors over the past 20 years. Much of my work has focused on how the manipulation of personal relationships and families is key to the formation and success of cultic groups. My CV is available on request.

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## Sources used for this report

In order to gain a thorough understanding of the overall context and particular experiences of the claimants who have requested this report I have made use of several sources. Primarily this has involved in-depth interviews (averaging two hours each) of eight persons who were born or brought up in the 3HO organization, and whose experience at 3HO schools span the key years from 1980 to 2019 (including years as adult staff). I performed a basic thematic analysis from these interviews. Although the eight in-depth interviews are only a small sample of those affected, I believe that their experiences are fairly representative of the larger group.

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<sup>1</sup> Stein, Alexandra. 2002/2016 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. *Inside Out: A Memoir of Entering and Breaking out of a Minneapolis Political Cult*. St. Cloud: North Star Press of St. Cloud.

<sup>2</sup> Stein, Alexandra. 2017/2021 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*. London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.alexandrastein.com/publications](http://www.alexandrastein.com/publications) for a full list.

Other sources include various publicly available press reports and videos<sup>4</sup>, the Olive Branch report<sup>5</sup>, podcasts<sup>6</sup>, and two books (one unpublished)<sup>7</sup> by former members. Finally, I have reviewed various websites describing Yogi Bhajan or 3HO, as well as some of 3HO's own current websites<sup>8</sup>.

Only a summary with examples is presented here. However clear patterns have emerged of coercive control, neglect, abuse and so forth. Direct quotes are from my interviews, unless otherwise noted. This is not a comprehensive account, but hopefully one which shows the general themes of life growing up in 3HO, and its effects.

## **Yogi Bhajan's Leadership**

Yogi Bhajan<sup>9</sup> (born Harbhajan Singh Puri) arrived in North America in 1968 at the height of the cultural and political upheaval of the 1960's. He then created and led 3HO until his death. Bhajan synthesised various elements of mainstream Sikhism and added New Age tropes and language – referencing the Age of Aquarius, for example – which appealed to American youth. He later introduced practices such as wearing all white, and women wearing turbans, which visually separated his followers from mainstream Americans as well as from mainstream Sikhs. He was the ultimate authority in the group, setting out both abstract spiritual principles as well as the “Code of Conduct” detailing the minutiae of daily life from sex to diet to tooth brushing methods. He was able to create in followers a feeling of being “seen”, or having a special and deep connection to him. He appeared to followers to have great insight and wisdom. On the other hand he frequently showed anger and impatience sometimes leading to verbal and even physical abuse. Most recently his systematic sexual abuse of women and even girls has come to light<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> For example: Stukin, S. 2020. *Yogi Bhajan Turned an L.A. Yoga Studio into a Juggernaut, and Left Two Generations of Followers Reeling from Alleged Abuse*. Los Angeles Magazine. July 20; Scofield, B. 2020. *Master of Deceit: How Yogi Bhajan Used Kundalini Yoga for Money, Sex and Power*. The Guru.

<https://www.gurumag.com/master-of-deceit-how-yogi-bhajan-used-kundalini-yoga-for-money-sex-and-power/>. Retrieved 2 Nov. 2022. and Vice TV, 2022, *Empire of Yoga*. Broadcast April 8.

<sup>5</sup> Olive Branch Associates, 2021, *Report on an Investigation into Allegations of Sexual and Related Misconduct by Yogi Bhajan* <https://epsweb.org/an-olive-branch-report/>. Retrieved 5 Nov. 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Gurunischan, 2021, *Uncomfortable Conversations*, <https://www.gurunischan.com/uncomfortable-conversations-podcast>

<sup>7</sup> Dyson, Pamela Sarahah. 2019. *Premka: White Bird in a Golden Cage: My Life with Yogi Bhajan*: Eyes Wide Publishing.

<sup>8</sup> For example: *A World of Kundalini Yoga* <https://www.3ho.org/>; *Sikh Dharma International* <https://www.sikhdharma.org/>; *Miri Piri Academy* <https://miripiriacademy.org> all retrieved 2 Nov. 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Yogi Bhajan's given name at birth was Harbhajan Singh Puri. Over the years he gave himself various titles. For the purpose of this report I refer to him throughout as “Bhajan”.

<sup>10</sup> Though reported many times before, systematic research of these abuses is detailed in: Olive Branch Associates, 2021, *Report on an Investigation into Allegations of Sexual and Related Misconduct by Yogi Bhajan*.

## The Situation of Parents

Of the persons I interviewed (and from other accounts), nearly all their parents joined 3HO in their late teens or early twenties. One interviewee is a third generation group member (his parents were born into 3HO). Some had not been to college while others were college dropouts with only a few having completed degrees. Some of these parents came in already married but most were married quite young within the group (one mother was only 16) and often in marriages arranged by Bhajan. Bhajan sometimes arranged these marriages seemingly impulsively, and at other times as rewards or punishments, or for other forms of control – for example when Pamela Dyson expressed an interest in marrying a particular follower, Bhajan married him off to someone else and even had Dyson perform the ceremony, thus further humiliating her<sup>11</sup>.

Couples were allowed to have children – although this could also be used as a form of control: Bhajan forbade Dyson from having a child despite her deep desire to do so. At a certain stage 3HO women went to the Espanola location to give birth where they would be looked after for the first 40 days of the child's life. Bhajan "sanctified" two male interviewees at an early age, stating to the parents that they were to be raised to become saints. In one case he said the child was really his, not the actual father's (who Bhajan claimed was merely "used" as a physical instrument). Bhajan said of one child that he did not need his mother to be a mother, and to let others raise him.

This "sanctification" went along with more general and frequent statements from Bhajan that it was better for children to live apart from parents so that the parents did not pass on their "neuroses" to their children. Parents found themselves heavily pressured in various ways to leave their children with other families or at the various schools, both directly from Bhajan, but also indirectly by the 3HO community norms that developed over time. This separation could start when the child was as young as 18 months, and might last for their entire childhood with only sporadic contact with their parents.

While children were away the parents were freed up to work and contribute to the community. This work may be voluntary or very low paid. Some parents had their own businesses that would either be owned by 3HO, or that Bhajan would try to take over to include in the 3HO portfolio of businesses – known as "family" or, later, "Dharmic" businesses.

Interviewees', and other accounts, make clear that many (perhaps most) parents did not want to leave their children and felt great loss in doing so, but believed it must be the right thing to do if Bhajan said so. Sometimes the same parents that left their children with other families, then took in another family's child.

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<sup>11</sup> Dyson, Pamela Saharah. 2019. *Premka: White Bird in a Golden Cage: My Life with Yogi Bhajan: Eyes Wide Publishing.*

## The Experiences of the Children

### Separation from Parents

As indicated above, children were separated from their parents for long periods from as young as 18 months as directed either by Bhajan, due to responsibilities of 3HO work, or supposedly to remove the child from the parents' "neuroses". The child might be sent to another family (usually this was for the younger children), some of which families might have more than one of these "swapped" children to look after at a time. Children were sent to other ashrams or "guardians" for two or more years at a time. One interviewee was left at the children's ashram in Phoenix at the age of seven, and again had long separations from this time on. She was told this was because her brother was "acting out" and so they needed to be sent away. This interviewee told me she was led to understand later that: "You know, parents are neurotic with their children, and sort of can't see through that because of their emotional attachments. And that's kind of the, the philosophy behind it." This reasoning was repeated to me multiple times in interviews.

Older children were sent to the various schools in India. In the earlier years children sent to India did not go back in summer, and so many had years at a time of not seeing their parents at all. One interviewee was sent to an Indian school at seven years old and saw his mother only once in four years, and then only for a week when she dropped his brother off there as well. This person referred to the school as a "pseudo orphanage", but "for children who still had parents [...] I had rescue fantasies with my parents strolling down the path and saving me from this horrible place".

Even in holidays (in later years) when many of the children at the schools in India were able to go back to the US, they were still separated from their parents for much of that time by being placed in 3HO children's camps for at least half the holiday period. Children were moved frequently from one place to another and so their lives were severely disrupted and lacked continuity of care and stability.

### Neglect

All the people I interviewed described extreme levels of neglect at the various 3HO institutions. This is supported by numerous other accounts. One interviewee reported that money donated or paid by parents for the 3HO school, Miri Piri Academy, was embezzled instead of going to the school, adding to the material shortages described below. Meanwhile Bhajan was constantly fundraising and spending lavish amounts of money on external shows of his increasing wealth.

#### Emotional neglect

First and foremost, whether placed with other families, in ashrams, or in schools, children lacked the security and comfort of their parents from early ages and for long periods. Comfort and caring from other sources, with a few temporary exceptions, was also lacking. Interviewees

felt they had no one to turn to for comfort or help: "...When I was 8, 9, 10, I didn't feel like I could cry with someone or feel cared for you know. It was like total, yeah, isolation".

One person said "I was never abused, but I can also tell you that I was never loved. [...] I wasn't abused, and that's by sheer dumb luck". Further, when sent to India, children as young as seven were put on planes without either of their parents, among a group of children for a long flight to a foreign country and an uncaring environment. On one occasion the parents did not even know where the children were going nor who would care for them on arrival.

#### Food

Seven of the eight interviewees reported extreme problems with the quality and quantity of food available in the 3HO institutions (including the children's camps). These reports ranged from statements such as: "[I was for] months massively malnourished borderline, starving for months on end [...] like emaciated. I'd go to the garden, and I'd eat rose petals, drink water just to make myself feel full" to "Food was gold". At best the food lacked variety and was served in limited amounts, and at worst the food "was disgusting" and contained bugs, worms, cigarette butts and other foreign objects. One person reported an angry worker putting needles in the food. Bugs and worms in the food were reported by six of eight interviewees.

Individual families might impose dietary restrictions as suggested by Bhajan. This included in one case eating only wheatberry-based dishes one day a week. In another case students might voluntarily choose a diet of, say, only mung beans, rice and vegetables for 40 days in a row. Withholding food or imposing restricted diets could also be mandated as both individual and collective punishment in the schools. On the other hand, no accommodations were provided for children who had serious food allergies. Even when school staff presented Bhajan with modest requests for increases in the food budget this was ignored or turned down.

#### Sleep

Children in the 3HO schools lacked adequate sleep. I saw one schedule from the Miri Piri Academy that had wake up time at 5.00 am and lights out at 11.00 pm, allowing for at best six hours of sleep: "a very long tiring day" as reported by this former student. Others reported being woken as small children at 4.00 am to be taken to morning rituals, and yet others from ten years old waking at 1.30 am for 40 days in a row, to clean floors at the Golden Temple in another ritual. They then could go back to sleep from 5.00 am to 7.00 am. Local non-3HO Sikh children were not subject to this regime.

#### Hygiene

All interviewees reported that access to basic hygiene was missing in the 3HO institutions:

There were not adequate systems [...] When you're three, four, five, at [children's] camp you can't take care of yourself, you can't bathe yourself. And then in India it reached kind of like epic proportions of neglect, epic proportions of neglect....How, the, how they would bathe us, especially when I went over at seven. You know, lining us all up in one gigantic stall, and only using cold water and someone else scrubbing your body.

There were no showers (until much more recently) and washing was by bucket and mug. Hot water was either unavailable or in short supply, even in recent years. The younger children might be washed very roughly by strangers, in groups of 40 or 50. One person reported being scrubbed until they bled by someone trying to wash off their freckles. Those who avoided bathing could be physically punished.

Children were expected to supply their own toilet paper at the Indian schools. Latrines were often filthy and scary to children. One person said there were no facilities to dispose of menstrual pads which in one case were simply left on top of the toilet dividers. Small children were expected to wash their own underwear – not knowing how to do so meant their clothes became filthy. All interviewees reported that the lack of hygiene resulted in the children constantly dealing with lice, boils, diarrhea, parasites, or wounds that took months to heal. One man reported that as a child he beat his head against the wall to try to stop the lice itching. Lice shampoo was not available.

#### Medical and mental health neglect

While there was generally some kind of nurse onsite, supplies were very basic. Again, simple care was also absent in most cases. One child who had a serious back injury was offered bodywork but not taken to a doctor or x-rayed. Another had a much delayed diagnosis of appendicitis. A student described being bed-ridden with Dengue fever for three days before any staff noticed and organized medical care. Two interviewees were seriously ill as children and were sent back to their parents who then paid for their care and looked after them. Being ill therefore meant a child could have time with their parents and one interviewee saw this as the reason for his breaking his arm – as a means to get much-needed attention and care.

Mental health care was entirely absent. Several of my interviewees reported having suicidal thoughts while at the schools and having no-one to talk to about this. The response to psychological distress in the children was: “It was like disciplinary stuff, but there was never any like I mean, it's kinda like what they say about the whole police system. It's like if, if someone's having a mental health issue, you don't throw them in jail you try and help them.” In other words: ignore or punish those suffering from psychological distress.

#### Child endangerment

A consistent lack of adult supervision meant that children were exposed to a variety of dangers. For example, groups of children were allowed to go to local towns in India with no accompanying adult. Older children were supposed to look after the younger ones. This exposed the girls to molestation by local men and sometimes meant boys physically fought these men while trying to protect the girls. Children rode on the top of busses and played dangerous games without supervision (swinging on vines in the jungle, rock throwing battles, fireworks that caused injury, etc.). Students attempted to heat water with dangerous electric elements, exposing them to electric shocks and injury. In one case students were taken on a 50

hour bus trip through dangerous territory and had to hide from bandits, leaving them feeling fearful and unprotected.

Interviewees reported constant, unrestrained bullying due to this lack of adult monitoring. Three different people described the school situations as being so out of control and unsupervised that it was like “Lord of the Flies”.

#### Educational deprivation

Students might attend five or six or more different schools so experienced considerable lack of continuity and disruption in their educations. One interviewee went to a different school for every year of their educational life. At a certain point the 3HO school was in chaos with no building, scattered housing, and even no teachers, leaving 16 year old students to take correspondence courses. A student sent to work at one of the schools in their 20's said “I was woefully not qualified, with no oversight”. According to one account, even in more recent years MPA was hiring staff who were:

Just like super angry, and they were also kids, too. They were like 20, 21, 23, so they were also kids, having to deal with, you know, all of these issues, and just not being patient, and not having the experience. They just like, you know, shouted at us, hit us. Made us feel bad, like just not, you know, cared for.

Interviewees described much rote learning in the Indian-run schools where teachers might not speak any, or little, English. In the 3HO-run school Kundalini Yoga, Bhajan's life, and spiritual education were privileged over other subjects. The arts were ignored, other than, for some, the chance to learn two traditional Sikh instruments used for religious worship. Importantly, there was no focus on moving on to college or help to do so. One year students organized themselves to take the SATS in Delhi in the absence of other support. College was actively discouraged, especially by Bhajan. Several people discussed wanting to further their education but being explicitly told not to.

#### Cultural deprivation

As above, arts education was largely absent from the curriculum. One quote paints a picture regarding the poverty of extra-curricula access:

We had 70 girls in our room, and in the middle of the room there was a, just some rug on the floor and a TV, and we had *My Fair Lady*, *Sound of Music* and some movie about animals, and so every once in a while we'd watch like a local TV show but other than that like, we would just watch those movies every weekend if we wanted to watch something.

Older students did later bring in their own Walkmans and tapes, but cultural inputs were not organized by 3HO unless they were, as above, old and few, or 3HO-related.

Children felt culturally alienated when they would return to the US in summer, or at the end of their schooling. They were at pains to know how to operate in the mainstream culture and this

added to their sense of isolation from that culture. As one person said: "Cultural integration was hard – just [understanding] the everyday shit that teenagers do". This was particularly the case before they had access to the internet in the early 2000's.

## Abuse

### Physical abuse

Physical abuse at the schools included harsh canings for often minor infractions, (sometimes administered unjustly). These canings could leave welts – meaning that this punishment went far beyond simple discipline. Other injuries resulted from staff and peer abuse. Multiple hard slaps were also reported, as well as beatings with hockey sticks. One woman reported physical abuse of herself and her brother when they were small children in one of the US ashrams. Staff contorted them into extreme positions and they were each held down by three staff members – "It was literally torture for me and it happened a couple of times".

Punishments included being made to hold uncomfortable positions for long periods of time, such as with arms up in the air or kneeling on gravel. These physical punishments could be inflicted on children in front of the whole school, thus adding public humiliation. Running laps or military-style extreme calisthenics for long periods was another punishment. This was known as getting "smoked". An interviewee described his experience of getting "smoked" as a 13 year-old:

Staff took me out to the, the mud field where we do our wrestling and made me and my friend carry around a 200lb rock for three hours, and we had to plow the field, and we had to do pushups, and if we stopped for anything they would like hit us, or shout at us and make us, make us do all the exercises again and they did that for like three hours, you know [we were] basically just crying the whole time.

In later years a punishment was "room arrest" where students were only allowed out of their rooms for mandatory activities. This could last up to two weeks at a time. There was also collective punishment - such as missing a meal - of the whole class or school for one person's infraction.

Among other reports of Bhajan's violence he also instructed one of the teachers to "kick a 12-year old boy as hard as he could [...] and to do that every day" because his father wanted to take him out of the school.

There was unrestrained physical bullying among the boys with constant fights. One person said that he became so used to the constant "drumbeat" of violence that he once choked another boy into unconsciousness. There were:

kids hitting other kids with hockey sticks, or you know, people getting caned, or fights, or, it was, it was so pervasive that it was unremarkable [...] and anytime there is a fight everyone will gather around and cheer on whoever they wanted to win.

I also consider the extreme use of “formations” to be physically abusive. This was where, from 5.00 am in the morning and seven times throughout the day, students in MPA during one phase, had to instantly “fall in” to straight lines in military style – failure to do so led to punishments such as push-ups, running laps or standing at attention for extended periods, and all of these done publicly so as to humiliate the child.

#### Verbal abuse and humiliation

Interviewees reported how Bhajan used verbal abuse to humiliate children. One interviewee related how Bhajan shouted at him after he complained of being separated from his parents:

This huge guy towering over me, just started yelling and screaming and waving his arms and spitting, and just telling me to suck it up and be a man and love is making me weak and they're not my parents [...they] need to be the spiritual figureheads.

He told one 17 year-old she was a “whore” and a “slut”. Another talked about Bhajan many times “truly berating me and calling me names and everything like that”. Teachers or carers could also be verbally and emotionally abusive.

#### Sexual abuse of children

Sexual abuse occurred among the boys in the schools, including “pranks” of a sexual nature that were very upsetting and confusing to victims. Teachers also teased young naked boys in a deeply humiliating manner. One boy was sexually abused over a period of time by an older boy; with no trusted or caring adult available, it fell to a peer to protect him by explaining that it was wrong. Older children physically sexually assaulted younger children. Children as young as nine were being shown pornography by other students. One interviewee reported being sexually abused at the age of 13 by an American staff member.

There were rumors of two carers who were known pedophiles and one former convict being sent to take care of the children who were then abused. Bhajan’s own sexually abusive practices are documented elsewhere, and include sexual abuse of children<sup>12</sup>. He taught that: "...man matures at twenty one. Woman matures at sixteen. Man is marriageable at twenty five, woman is marriageable at eighteen"<sup>13</sup>. Despite this he attempted to arrange the marriages of 16 to 18 year-old teenage girls. One interviewee said: “I can talk about how many times I dodged being arranged in marriage before I was 18”.

On the other hand, there were 3HO teachings stating that sexuality was bad and that “sex would damage [...] your aura”. As one interviewee said “Sex was taboo”, and any holding hands, or dating with peers forbidden. In later years at MPA, staff: “Made it like taboo, and they made it like a literal game of hunting us down and putting up spotlights and treating us badly because

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<sup>12</sup> See Olive Branch Report, and, for examples of child sexual abuse: <https://abuse-in-kundalini-yoga.com/abuse-and-misconduct-stories/child-abuse/> retrieved 5 Nov 2022.

<sup>13</sup> July 14, 1976 KWTC, *Yogi Bhajan Library of Teachings*.

<https://www.libraryofteachings.com/lecture.xqy?q=sexual%20sixteen%20sort:relevance&id=6e3d43e9-0153-c835-ea3d-feae30be1802&title=KWTC---Women%27s-Course> Retrieved 31 Oct. 2022.

we were in couples. And like, yeah, just telling us how bad sex was". Bhajan told one teenaged boy that it was "better to have sex with a dog than to masturbate." In this atmosphere of disallowing any talk or education about sex, children gained no knowledge of how to protect themselves from sexual abuse nor about what might constitute healthy, age-appropriate sexual or dating activity.

### Coercion

Coercively controlling practices were common in the children's lives. The children were raised to see Bhajan as the central figure in their lives who could read their auras. Interviewees felt intimidated and sometimes fearful of him: "When I was young I was terrified. He was big and imposing." Bhajan insinuated himself into young people's identity and consciousness. Children and adults felt Bhajan could see into their minds which one person described as "invasive". As this interviewee put it: "There's a really deep entanglement between Yogi Bhajan and me...". He went on to describe how when he was a child: "[I was] told by everyone how blessed I was and how lucky I was, what a great destiny I had, and how lucky I was to literally be yelled at by my teacher [Bhajan]." This is simply a form of gaslighting and a denial of the child's experience.

As with the parents, so the children were told that attachment to their parents was weakness and weakness was to be fought against. Yogi Bhajan would say "pressure creates diamonds, you know, you have to learn grit you have to like persevere through hard times." And: "I don't care if every student is destroyed, as long as one superhuman is created".

Bhajan also was responsible for naming children (and adults). He seemed to pick the names somewhat at random – apparently based on astrology - in a kind of ritual of control and "ownership" of others' identities, thus not allowing the parents that task. What is unusual is that there was a very limited set of names used. In one case two siblings were given the same name. In another case a husband and wife were anointed with the same name. All women have the same middle name and last name, and all men similarly, thus further limiting the set of individual names.

Children were very likely to have been subtly coerced into "wanting" to go to India. It stood out that most of my interviewees stated that even from as young as six or seven they "wanted" to go to school in India, thus being separated from their parents. Of course as young children they did not realistically have the capacity to understand this. One person stated that as an eight year-old they wanted to go to MPA, while also saying that his parents "just kind of wanted to send me just to get rid of me". Statements from Yogi Bhajan, peer pressure on both parents and children, and painting a rosy picture of life in India likely all played a role in children "making" this decision.

"Seva" or the Sikh concept of service, could also be used coercively when children were involved in free child labour. One example is when children as young as ten years old were doing manual construction tasks (moving bricks) for two hours at a time, several times a month,

during the building of a new school: “It was explained as: ‘This is selfless service’. It wasn’t voluntary [...] it was a required activity” for which the children would miss entire days of school.

### [Isolation from the mainstream](#)

Children’s relationships with their extended families were impoverished. Often their parents were already alienated from their families of origin due to their joining 3HO and moving away from their families both physically and psychologically, or too busy to engage much with them anymore. As the children were also far from grandparents and other extended family they grew up with weak connections to their family networks. Lacking adult support and care, children’s only source of support became their peers.

As detailed above, children were physically set apart from the mainstream, and exposure to mainstream culture was limited. When in public schools in the US, the wearing of turbans could result in being bullied. 3HO practices and schedules meant that children had little opportunity to engage with non-3HO peers or others, or with aspects of other cultures. To some extent this also separated them from mainstream Sikhism.

Dating and marriage remained within the group thus further limiting exposure to the non-3HO world. Similarly work and jobs within the group (as detailed further below) also limited exposure to outside influences.

### [Grooming for adult roles](#)

There were many practices that fit under this heading of *Grooming for adult roles*. Beyond those already discussed above, children were raised with the expectation that Bhajan would make major decisions for them. “I would cry to him like, ‘I don’t want to go back to India’ and he’d make me go back. Like he was always making every decision in my childhood.”

A female interviewee reported that as a child she would do cleaning and laundry for Bhajan:

Which is a very detailed thing where you literally, there’s a checklist and you have to like dust everything in his bedroom and refresh the water of his flowers and like everything’s perfect [...] They made it sound like it’s this honor – you get to be in his room and clean all of his things...

Some students at MPA graduated with a certification in Kundalini Yoga but several of my interviewees were unsure of what academic qualification they graduated with. On graduation Bhajan would advise them on next steps. He consistently discouraged them from their aspirations to go to college. His advice would be to work in one of the 3HO businesses, or affiliates, which all eight interviewees did (one starting at 15). These businesses included Yogi Tea, Akal Security, Sikhnet and Miri Piri Academy.

This quote details the effect on life choices that this grooming process had:

The way I was raised because I was separated from my parents, because my sense of safety, and worth, and value were always about, you know, how good of a Sikh, and yogi and student and everything I was, and [...] him saying all these things, and my parents parroting all them. It was like my life was never my own. My purpose was not my own, my career, my destiny. My purpose was his. It was to spread his lineage all over the world. I had three missions in my mind that were my life's purpose: spread Kundalini Yoga meditation all over the world, [be a ] unifying bridge and unify the east and west Sikh communities, and under one [...] Sikh representation and grow and elevate our community businesses to just, you know, grow them. And so, so they could serve and be bigger and bigger and bigger. That was my life's purpose. Up until a few years ago.

Another interviewee was sent to work (for substandard wages) at Miri Piri Academy immediately after graduating from that same school. When I asked about pay and benefits for the position he said: "The primary thing was not take care of myself, and make sure I have enough money for my future. The primary thing was the mission. You know, something greater than myself." In another case a young woman working for Yogi Tea was overtly paid less than a non-3HO employee and told it was because she was "serving the mission". Of my eight interviewees all but the youngest continued to work in 3HO businesses for years – some up to the present time – often for substandard pay, benefits and work conditions.

Along with working in 3HO "family" businesses or affiliates, some of these young people were also married to other group members, thus keeping a second generation confined within the limited world of 3HO. One woman who was in college briefly, wanted to go on to medical school. However Bhajan "Got a hold of me and arranged my marriage to a man [...] I had said 'No' many, many times, but then you know, his pressure was immense, and pressure from the community was immense ...". The marriage did not work, leading to Bhajan intervening in various ways, including directing the couple's sexual life. It was after this that Bhajan began grooming the woman for sexual purposes using methods he had perfected with first generation women, and already documented in the Olive Branch report.

Leaving the community was extremely difficult. Where could these young people go? Their entire lives were bound up in the community – their social network, marriages, jobs, beliefs and housing. And when people left they were likely to be demonised, or at least looked down upon as failures, or that their "karma" would mean they would "come back as cockroaches" in the next life.

## Effects in Childhood, and Impacts on Life Chances in Adulthood

Interviewees and other accounts reported numerous negative impacts they experienced as children. These include emotional, physical and sexual abuse; physical and emotional neglect, housing and schooling instability, and suicidal thoughts. Depression, loneliness and deep feelings of loss were added to hunger, disease and injury, lack of sleep and lack of educational opportunities. Three interviewees reported that as children they had suicidal feelings due to conditions of 3HO life, and others also had such thoughts as adults. One interviewee stated

that: "I learned from seven on to be a gray man. I disappeared". Long separations from parents often made reconnecting with parents difficult even when children were reunited with them.

### Health impacts

As indicated by attachment and adverse child experiences studies<sup>14</sup> these types of chronic stresses in childhood can lead in adulthood to numerous poor outcomes in health and wellbeing. Those who grew up in 3HO reported ongoing health problems as adults such as parasites; neck, back and other muscular skeletal problems; dental disease; and migraines. They also expressed concerns about consequences of heavy exposure to DDT in the schools in India, along with dangerous levels of air pollution in Amritsar and other unknown pollutants. Lung problems, allergies and weak immunity are also felt to be results of these exposures and the hygiene and food problems at the schools.

Interviewees reported suicidal thoughts in adulthood, feelings of "indifference" to living or dying, depression, anxiety, fear, food anxiety and other symptoms of mental ill-health. Nearly all interviewees were in therapy and several are on anti-depressants. I heard reports of others who grew up in 3HO who had taken their own lives, had psychotic episodes, or had serious drug addiction. Another person is in prison for the murder of their father.

Several people described ongoing dissociation or feelings of alienation: "I can kind of exit my body if I am uncomfortable". Distress at feeling "numb" and being unable to access "the feeling part" was also discussed. That is, some people found it hard to be in touch with their feelings, or be able to describe them. They described being shut down and unable to show their emotions, or "We don't even know if we're upset". One participant stated: "I didn't learn how to take care of myself, my physical health, my mental health, my relationships. I had no positive role models for any of that".

Four interviewees had been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or Complex PTSD. One person said: "I live with the effects every day [...] I have so much to offer the world, and I don't know how to do it." This person has been unable to work due to mental health difficulties. Another struggles with imposter syndrome, though she said she had been successful in her work "despite" her 3HO upbringing. Panic attacks, self-esteem issues, trouble with one's "inner critic", and hypervigilance were all mentioned.

Beyond these issues are problems of re-establishing a sense of safety in the world – both psychological and physical – and coming to terms with Bhajan's manipulation and deceit. As one interviewee said, regarding the public revelations of Bhajan's abuses:

It was like a whole slew of traumatized people talking to a whole bunch of traumatized people, and it became very dangerous. I mean, like I felt unsafe in that. It was just like, oh my God, our whole life is a lie. This is all horrible, like nothing is good, so I don't see

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example: Pietromonaco, P. R. and L. A. Beck. 2019. "Adult Attachment and Physical Health." *Curr Opin Psychol* 25:115-20., and: Chang, X., X. Jiang, T. Mkandarwire and M. Shen. 2019. "Associations between Adverse Childhood Experiences and Health Outcomes in Adults Aged 18-59 Years." *PLoS One* 14(2):e0211850.

that as like the truth has been set free, and we're all now better for it – it was like a giant car accident that lasted years or months or years.

Some also struggle with the ideas of exceptionalism and elitism that the group promoted. This feeling is in tension with feelings that anything one wants to do for oneself is selfish, “being in your ego” and therefore self-care is laden with guilt and shame.

### Educational impacts

There was a consistent message from Bhajan and the community not to go to college, unless it was to study accounting or some other skill useful for the “family” businesses. Some people managed to go to community college for a year or two, but even then they might be called back to work for 3HO businesses or for the schools. Educational goals that people had that were blocked or ignored – either at the school or college levels – included music and the arts, philosophy, history, psychology, and science. Getting a certification in Kundalini Yoga or business skills were considered more important goals over anything else. There does not seem to have been any consideration or conditions set for people, either as children or young adults, as to what their own interests and strengths might be, and therefore what educational pathways would support those.

One former student said that any preparation in terms of general work and life skills was missing, and that he had to learn the basics of looking after himself, cooking, or getting and holding down a job, on his own after leaving the 3HO school. For those that went to college they felt unsupported and unprepared: “I wasn’t taught the skills to manage myself”. For those who went to college and gained degrees, this was delayed by several years. Educational delays and deprivation then of course lead to occupational losses later on.

### Occupational impacts

Occupational goals were equally thwarted unless of use to Bhajan. These desired goals that interviewees expressed to me included becoming a doctor, a musician, a professional athlete, joining the military, or becoming a teacher or psychologist. As above, in 3HO specific vocational interests were ignored at best and denied at worst. People used expressions such as that they were “steered” or “funnelled” into the family businesses rather than following their own interests. These 3HO businesses included Yogi Tea, Akal Security, Sikhnet and the schools, among other affiliated businesses. The measure people used in making job decisions was often what was “best for the community” or based on concern about how the community would view them. People were assigned to, and moved around the different businesses usually with little or no choice in the matter. Some have been employed in a “family business” until recently and are only now having the opportunity to consider what they might choose for themselves.

I was also told that the belief system promoted the idea that as long as one meditated and became enlightened, or “somehow spiritually achieved”, and just focussed on God, then

everything would fall into place. “We are better than everybody else because we have this technology”, so pushing for a particular educational or career goal was viewed as really beside the point.

One person I interviewed is now not able to work due to mental health issues, while others are underemployed. Only one of my interviewees seems to have found work in a field of their own interest and feels satisfied with it. Another felt he had worked for many years in dangerous situations due to the need to prove himself as a man, resulting from his interactions with Bhajan. (He also felt however that there were certain strengths that resulted from that.) Others regret lost or delayed chances to develop careers that they feel they would have enjoyed and been successful at.

### Financial impacts

Due to under- or unemployment many who grew up in 3HO have experienced serious financial impacts. Some of the 3HO businesses paid health insurance and made contributions to retirement plans but often this was not the case. In some instances where people were shuffled from one business to another, or were working for Bhajan directly but paid from the various businesses, then these benefits would not be paid. Low pay was generally the order of the day and this will have long term effects in terms of the amount contributed to Social Security. In some cases pay was so low that 3HO parents subsidized their young adult children’s housing and living expenses. Of course, extensive volunteer work (seva) was not paid at all.

In some cases, a person might have developed a business independently. Where these were successful Bhajan proposed taking them over with written agreements on profit sharing or payments to that person. These agreements were, however, routinely broken with no payments ever forthcoming.

Overall, with a couple of exceptions, people have little or no savings and inadequate retirement plans. Further, their occupational and educational delays or deficits make it hard to ever make these up. As one middle-aged interviewee said: “I just wish, I have regrets, and I wish that somebody had encouraged me at the time, because I could have done it, and I wouldn’t have to worry financially”. This person is now old enough that the career they wanted, along with the resulting financial security, is no longer feasible for them.

### Attachments and Relationships

#### Trust

Gaslighting has been a consistent element of life in 3HO. The purpose of gaslighting is to cause people to question their own perceptions of reality. Gaslighting in 3HO was fundamentally due to a disconnect between Bhajan’s statements and reputation with the reality of his behavior and leadership of the group. The most obvious example is Bhajan’s claim of celibacy while coercing his secretaries into having sex with him. Though there were rumors about this, they

were not taken seriously until the recent revelations. The random naming of people (sometimes duplicating exact same names in the same family) and Bhajan brushing off questions about this, claiming it is the named persons' "soul identity", is another type of gaslighting. One person talked about hearing Bhajan often lie directly in public meetings, but being unable to challenge him:

He would just sort of let you believe something. And you're like, what is he going on about? That's not true. But you're not gonna stand up in front of everybody and go "You're full of shit". [...] I think by the time I came along there was such a culture that that would have been very difficult to stand up in a room full of... in the middle of that organization.

In general the gap between 3HO children's experience and the narrative of how special they and the community were is also a form of gaslighting. Separation from parents was justified by, as in one case, "Their spiritual teacher [Bhajan] told [my parents] I was this great being. I had this purpose, and they were screwing me up," thereby necessitating his removal to India. The reality of harsh childhoods was erased by this cloak of spiritual superiority creating long-term cognitive dissonance.

The ability to trust others is severely weakened by neglect and abuse, and by breaking family bonds. How do you trust again when you have had a lack of trusting relationships as a child and when as an adult those you thought were trustworthy are shown not to be? This now puts people who grew up in 3HO in the position of questioning everything in their environment and having to re-evaluate their relationship to it.

#### [Independence vs. interdependence](#)

Several interviewees highlighted what they consider their excessive independence and self-reliance. Two people said they have a very hard time asking for help. This is an expected result from a childhood of neglect, where there was no-one to trust, to seek comfort from or to ask for help. While ultra self-reliance was a useful survival strategy in a 3HO childhood, it later impedes developing healthy relationships of interdependence and trust in adulthood. As one interviewee said regarding his current relationships: "Receiving good care is difficult when you have really practiced ways of behaving that, that reject care".

The difficulties described earlier that 3HO adult children have in knowing and being able to share their feelings, contributes to this ultra independence. An interviewee stated that she has a hard time seeking emotional support as she feels like "I'm burdening people [...] how are they ever going to fathom what I'm talking about? [...] it's so heavy [...] I do feel very alone in that way". Later she said: "I'm the only one that can help me, that's ever there for me. Like, I don't need you [...] I have myself."

#### [Friendship networks](#)

Interviewees expressed how close they were to other 3HO adult children, and how they knew they could rely on them when in need: "I am bonded with my [3HO] friends for life, especially

over India, because they became my family". What is more difficult for them is to form new friendships outside of 3HO. As one said, there is "still a fear of the greater world that limits me, you know, as far as making new friends. [...] How do you... it's an unusual background shall we say. How do you introduce that to your new friends?"

This quote is an example of one person's struggle with social relationships after leaving 3HO:

I was very, very guarded, and and also, I got so many comments like I didn't realize this at all, but people tell me that I was unapproachable, or that they thought I didn't like them. It was shocking to me because I thought I was the sweetest kindest person and warm with everyone. Meanwhile, everyone thought that I didn't like them, or that I was you know, annoyed, [...] and I actually kind of trained, myself and now it's natural, but it took me a while to smile at people when I say hello and you know, I was very stoic and very emotionless."

Another person reported:

I have a very difficult time making and keeping friends. Part of that is mental health and part of that is being able to trust people, and part of that is actually knowing the culture. I've had to learn culturally appropriate ways to make and maintain friends.

#### Marriages and romantic relationships

The process of being arranged in a marriage by Bhajan could be traumatic:

Yogi Bhajan on three different occasions pushed real hard for me to marry this woman, and I said, "No", and I finally gave in. Everybody around me leaned in and said "You gotta do this. He knows best. He sees your destiny." You know, all the spiritual tropes that you can imagine. They're all there. And that broke me, that broke my free will. That broke, that broke my ability to speak up. I lost my voice. For years I felt such a deep sense of shame that I didn't stand up for myself, that I wasn't a man.

Two interviewees are now dealing with the breakdown of their marriages that were arranged within 3HO, and others have previously done so. This has been "The single most painful episode of my life" said one person. As with any divorce this is very stressful – but undoubtedly more so than usual given all the additional adjustments people are making after the Bhajan abuse revelations. Other married couples (to those also from 3HO) are in couples therapy and working on their relationships. Only one person is now in a relationship with someone not from 3HO.

A single woman in her forties said her longest relationship has only been for one year and "I feel like I was numb, and I had a few boyfriends, but I don't think I ever really opened up to them, or like even felt strongly about them." She feels the emotional closedness she learned as a child has directly contributed to her not having had a long-term relationship.

Romantic preferences were largely ignored or deliberately thwarted in 3HO with Bhajan often rejecting a person's request to marry someone of their own choosing. He might then, somewhat sadistically, marry the desired partner off to that person's friend. Sexual orientation also posed an obstacle to relationships in 3HO, with separation and sexual abuse as

punishments, thus delaying the coming out process and the ability to have the relationship of one's choice.

### Children

The attachment difficulties – due to neglect and abuse – experienced by this population necessarily raises the question of how they themselves will parent. An interviewee said that she deliberately chose to have children. She now sees that what happened to her as a child “wasn’t an accident [...] it shouldn’t happen to any child, not even one of those things that happened to me. And they all happened to me”. She said that looking after her own children is her most important job and she takes this job “seriously with them, I’m trying to be a better parent, and trying to build responsible, caring, kind humans.” She is doing this while struggling with both a thin social network and with the recovery process from her own suffering in the wake of her 3HO childhood.

One man said that he felt very worried about being a bad father due to his 3HO experiences. Others have stayed in unhappy marriages for their children. And yet others face difficult custody decisions. The divorces from arranged marriages put additional pressure on these parents’ efforts to raise their children well and without the neglect and stresses they endured.

Critically, those who grew up in these conditions have very poor or absent models of parenting and healthy family systems. This, combined with the struggle to recover from their own traumatic experiences, places a huge burden and challenge on these parents not to pass on this trauma to their children and to raise them in a healthy manner.

### Parents and Extended Family

Some parents of the adult children I interviewed now express great regret about abandoning their children to such extended separations and harsh childhoods. Adult children Interviewees, and others, described how they were working on repairing these relationships with their parents. Where the adult child has left 3HO and the parent has not, this presents yet more difficulties, as the parent might still not be able to acknowledge the damage done to their child.

Despite early abandonment, some have managed to feel that their parents always loved them – “They were loving and caring [...] but the rules were the rules” – and have managed to feel an ongoing connection to them. “One of the most challenging things for me is that my parents are actually very loving and very caring.”

One interviewee said that, though he is trying to repair his relationship with his immediate family, it is really his MPA peers who he still feels are more like family to him. He described how when he was 12, in great distress he asked his parents to let him leave MPA and come home. They refused to bring him home and so: “After that last experience I never missed my parents again, and I have kind of just cut that feeling inside me, and [...] from that point on kind of everyone in India became my family”.

Generally speaking those brought up in 3HO have weakened or estranged relationships with extended family. Some are trying to mend and develop those relationships but there is often not much history on which to build. In many cases grandparents have now died and so the opportunity to get to know them is gone. There is also a sense that these weakened family ties means parts of the family history are lost.

### Cognitive, identity and spiritual confusion

People who grew up in 3HO are left with a lifetime of experiences that require review and re-evaluation. Even understanding what would be a moderately healthy upbringing and adult life can be difficult. During a group meeting with me, two people said “We don’t know what’s normal”. Some people talked about their school experience in India as being simply the same as a typical British boarding school of that era. This is, however, demonstrably false – no British boarding school in the modern world would have the lack of hygiene and resulting diseases of 3HO schools, nor the impoverished nutrition, nor the quantity of physical punishment while at the same time having an utter lack of adult supervision.

Untangling the positive and negative experiences of living in the 3HO environment remains a challenge. People value the feeling of community, their close relationships with their childhood peers who shared their experiences, and some value their deep connection to the Sikh faith and the traditions they grew up with. At the same time complicated feelings and entanglements present difficulties.

In some accounts there is a minimizing or understandably confused narrative about their difficult experiences. Several interviewees – after describing abuse, neglect and being “broken” by Bhajan – would then minimize this by saying things like “It was worse for the younger children” or in one case: “It’s better than a kid growing up in a refugee camp in Darfur”.

Minimization in this way is a known sign of trauma, as it can be overwhelming to acknowledge all that has happened<sup>15</sup>. Other signs of confused narratives are when interviewees struggle to balance “good”/“bad” evaluations, sometimes using the language of the group to describe both sides. For instance one person still appreciates “some of the philosophies [...] the concept of learning and growing” while earlier describing how Bhajan used the same ideas to push her into breaching her self-protective boundaries in order for him to abuse her. This then creates traumatic confusion which is difficult and can be slow to resolve.

Untangling deeply held beliefs from manipulation can be equally problematic: “I still feel very ingrained about it. I believed it so gung ho. Everything he ever said [...believeing] he will strike me dead you know, somehow my soul will not be liberated. [...] The spiritual side is much more ingrained.” The question people face is: What to believe now? What to keep and what to discard? Thus there is predictably much cognitive confusion that still may require working out and that can be deeply unsettling for those experiencing it.

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<sup>15</sup> Main, M. and R. Goldwyn. 1998. "Adult Attachment Scoring and Classification Systems." in *U.C. Berkeley*.

Maintaining relationships with the 3HO community can also be difficult once people have left or loosened their relationship to it. People describe the tension this creates. One person who has cut his hair felt “trepidation” about going to a wedding in the 3HO community, saying they were scared of the judgement they might get from friends there. Another would get a tight chest when visiting his parents in their 3HO ashram home. The relationship with the current 3HO community is thrown into question. “My whole life has completely been decimated. So there's not anything else that anyone in this community can do to me that like, there's... I don't have any vulnerability left, it's all gone.”

Deeply personal elements of identity are also in question. A person to whom Bhajan had given a very common Sikh name said:

I was thinking about my name [...] and I'm not ready to change my name to anything. I wouldn't know what to change it to. I care about so many of the relationships that were built as I evaluate the real, like impact of the community on my life. I see value and so... It's really painful. I see so much pain and harm, and you know, abuse and neglect and like hypocrisy.

One person said that in the group he “never really had an identity. I kind of just conformed to their idea of how I should be,” and “I felt like people would abandon me if I went and did those things” such as cutting his hair, and expressing himself as he now feels able to. Yet he still feels anxious and uncomfortable being around the 3HO community, and his 3HO grandparents who still “make mean comments that hurt my feelings”.

Whether or not to continue the long-held practices of the group is part of this. Meditation or yoga may be felt to be helpful on the one hand, but on the other, harmful to a person’s current mental health. Becoming an “ordinary” person and not a special member of a world-saving elite, also requires an adjustment to one’s identity. The fundamental betrayal of trust by Bhajan throws so many things up in the air and requires time and hard work to review and establish new or modified beliefs – this is a long-term, not a short-term, process. As one interviewee said about an earlier stage of disaffection with Bhajan: “I see what he did to manipulate me, and I see how he broke me, and it took me a decade to put myself back together”.

### Resistance

It is important to note that people were not simply Bhajan’s passive subjects and did try to resist at certain points, where and when they could, both as children and adults. One person starting resisting in school and this took the form of deliberately failing scholastically as a show of personal agency. Of course this then had later negative effects on his education, but for him it was a statement that he wasn’t going to be controlled. A young woman “just kind of like eased out” of the group and stopped wearing a turban or going to Gurdwara. Interviewees resisted undesired arranged marriages as much as they could, sometimes only giving in after a great deal of pressure.

Bhajan wanted one 17 year old woman to stay and work with him in Espanola – she resisted, and wanted to keep her 3HO job in another state. After viciously verbally abusing her, Bhajan brought in “witnesses of [her] character” to say what a bad person she was. But in this case she was able to hold her ground.

An interviewee described himself as a child holding on to his inner self:

I didn't quite break in that way. I would just occasionally pick something random to be super stubborn about, and, like, cross my arms and just go “No, no, no!” Just to remind myself that I had a capacity. [...] and that kept me from being broken.

In more recent years, and after Bhajan's death, students at MPA have tried not to perpetuate the bullying culture, and to make the school a safer place for younger children.

Forms of resistance had a cost, often in verbal or physical abuse, but show that even for children there was a desire for autonomy and they did the best they could to assert this within severely limited options.

## 3HO as a Cultic Group

While I understand that former and current members hold a variety of views of the organization, having now studied it in some depth (and having been previously made aware of it in past years) I conclude that 3HO as led by Bhajan does fit within the definition of a cultic group that I use in my work. This is not to imply that everything about people's experience with the group was negative. Within such systems human beings can and do find ways and “niches” of positive experiences, within what is essentially a top-down, exploitative environment. Furthermore cults *must* have some positive features otherwise there would be no appeal by which to recruit followers. In fact it is this mix of positive and negative – within a fundamentally exploitative system – that can make untangling the cult experience so challenging.

I have observed the following evidence that warrants describing Yogi Bhajan's 3HO as a cult. Note that after his death the group has apparently loosened up and may now be moving away from at least some of the elements listed. However, though there have been some incremental improvements, many of the same elements of neglect, abuse, coercion and isolation from the mainstream as noted above have persisted at least until 2019.

### Definition of a cult.

**Charismatic and authoritarian leader.** Bhajan clearly fits this key attribute. He alternated from showing a loving, connecting and attentive side of his personality to flipping into intimidation, abuse and violence.

**Isolating, hierarchical and closed structure.** 3HO was generally quite physically isolated – whether clustered in neighborhoods, in ashrams, or at the schools. Although followers

might have some outside jobs, most of their lives were lived within the social, spiritual and psychologically isolating realm of 3HO.

**Absolute, exclusive belief system emanating from the leader.** Bhajan created his own version of Sikhism and he was the ultimate authority on it. The belief system was used to justify his authority, and to isolate followers, to a large extent even from mainstream Sikhs. The belief system is based on fictional accounts of Bhajan's powers and promotes a supposedly world-saving goal. 3HO followers were considered to be an elite, and superior to outsiders.

**Processes of coercive control (also known as coercive persuasion, thought reform or brainwashing).** This process of coercive control involves destabilizing followers' critical thinking through isolation from the outside world, engulfing followers within a closed system, and then alternating benevolent "love" and positive reinforcement with fear and stress-inducing stimuli. Bhajan's personality demonstrated these two elements which then became institutionalized in 3HO. For example, followers might experience warmth and belonging in the community while also experiencing abuse and neglect.

### **Outcomes**

Cults exist to serve the needs of the leader. The leader intuitively, or by learning from other groups or experiences, understands how to control others for their own benefit. They may or may not believe their own narratives or have awareness of their excessive needs for control. However, the result of a cultic system is that the leader gains deployable followers who will do what the leader requires, regardless of their own survival interests, or those of their loved ones. In 3HO Bhajan manipulated parents to send their children away so that the adults would have more time to devote to the group. 3HO followers consistently subordinated their own interests to those determined by Bhajan while he profited in numerous ways: in having power over others, and reaping associated sexual and financial benefits.

### [\*\*Born/Raised in a Cultic Group\*\*](#)

Those born or raised within 3HO were not recruited, but instead were groomed from childhood to be the next generation of deployable followers. This was quite successful while Bhajan was alive, and before the 2019 revelations. In essence the treatment of children resulted in the successful reproduction of the next generation of exploitable cult followers. This provided Bhajan with new young women to sexually abuse, a controllable and cheap workforce for the "family" businesses, and volunteer labor to maintain the group's institutions and practices.

Because of this grooming process of the children it is difficult to draw a clear line between the traumatic experiences they suffered as children with the ongoing abuse they then suffered as adults (although this latter has not much been focussed on in this report). Being groomed to give up their autonomy and agency to the group meant it was extremely difficult to develop such autonomy and agency in healthy ways as might be the case for young people in a non-cultic environment. Becoming independent for 3HO-raised people means leaving the entire

world, belief system, and almost all the relationships they have known throughout their life. In healthy, non-cultic development this is not the case – one might break from one part of one's upbringing but not bring down the whole edifice of one's life.

It is this phenomenon that makes recovery particularly difficult for people born or raised in 3HO. They must make adjustments in all areas of life. Unlike a person who was recruited in adulthood, someone born or raised inside a closed system has few to no non-cult touchstones to rely on. They have no “pre-cult identity” or beliefs, weak or absent non-cult social relationships, absent or often impoverished family relationships, a poor education, and little cultural and social knowledge of how to operate in mainstream society.

### [Attachment repercussions in adulthood](#)

In cults there is a “third party” standing in between parents and their children<sup>16</sup> – in this case it was Bhajan making the important decisions about children’s lives and positioning himself as their primary attachment figure. This is a predictor of attachment problems. Attachment theory suggests that the neglect and abuse summarized above is likely to produce adults with a primarily disorganized attachment status, often with a secondary status of dismissing<sup>17</sup>. That is: these adults will be dealing with unresolved trauma and loss due to unpredictability, instability, fear, abuse and neglect in childhood. In addition, the high levels of neglect experienced by 3HO children would suggest that in adulthood many will struggle to connect to their own feelings, or to be able to feel safe with others and share those feelings with them. However, attachment theory also suggests this unresolved fear and disconnection can be resolved later on in life with the benefit of later safe, secure and predictable relationships and environments<sup>18</sup>.

### [Recovery](#)

As discussed above, recovery or readjustment for those born or raised in 3HO is an enormous task. And when a whole group is dealing with a kind of implosion effect – due in this case to the 2019 revelations – it can feel, as quoted above, like “a giant car accident that last[s] for years”. Not only does each individual face recovery, but they are doing so within the context of the whole group re-evaluating their history. On the one hand this can be helpful as the secrets are unveiled and experiences shared. On the other it can be overwhelming and risk preserving a kind of ongoing bubble effect, slowing down integration into other parts of society.

Recovery can generally take three main, overlapping phases, according to Judith Herman<sup>19</sup>, an expert on recovery from long-term trauma and CPTSD. The first phase is *establishing safety*. This refers to physical and psychological safety, and can also include ensuring financial and housing stability. It is very hard to proceed a lot further without first having this sense of safety in place.

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<sup>16</sup> Singer, M.T. and J. Lalich. 1995. *Cults in Our Midst: The Hidden Menace in Our Everyday Lives*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

<sup>17</sup> Main, M. and R. Goldwyn. 1998. "Adult Attachment Scoring and Classification Systems." in *U.C. Berkeley*.

<sup>18</sup> Bowlby, John. 1980. *Attachment and Loss, Loss*, Vol. 3. New York: Basic Books.

<sup>19</sup> Herman, Judith. 1992. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books

The second phase is *remembrance and mourning* which refers to a longer process of reviewing the experience of long-term trauma within a non-judgemental and safe relationship or environment. This may be talk therapy, writing, or simply with a trusted friend or partner. It is in this phase that what I refer to as the “untangling” takes place – What was positive? What was negative? Why did these things happen? And indeed, what else happened that was previously hidden? This phase is part of consigning the trauma to the past – not forgetting it, but integrating it and developing a coherent narrative that places the experience as a part, but not the whole, of one’s life course.

The final phase is *reconnection with ordinary life* – which for those born or raised in 3HO should be considered *connection with ordinary life*. This phase involves building new, healthier and more open friendship, family and work networks. It also involves developing one’s own thought-through set of beliefs, exploring new activities and interests, understanding one’s own temperament and preferences, and exploring an autonomous and comfortable identity.

## Conclusion

There can be no denying the trauma of the children of 3HO, and the ongoing impact of their childhoods on their lives as adults. Every area of life has been affected. Integrating into non-3HO parts of society and moving forward to develop wellbeing presents an enormous challenge for those affected. I find that the treatment of these children was part of a systematic process set in motion by Bhajan in order to maximise the exploitability of their parents, and to groom the children for their later exploitability as teenagers and adults. The patterns I have detailed here are not unique to 3HO but are recognizable as being part of cultic control. The result is generations of adults who have suffered abuse and had their future life chances severely jeopardized. While their childhood suffering cannot be erased, with significant and appropriate support, these adults can move forward to have safer and more satisfying lives in the future.