

INSURANCE CO. SUES YOGI BHAJAN ORGANIZATIONS

By Wheeler Cowperthwaite Special to the SUN Jul 6, 2024 0

An insurance company is suing organizations set up by the late Yogi Bhajan, also known as Harbhajan Singh Khalsa, and asking a federal judge to rule that the insurance company does not have to defend the organizations, or pay out any claims, in relation to a series of sexual abuse claims and lawsuits.

The Cincinnati Insurance Company filed the lawsuit in federal district court on June 7, against the Siri Singh Sahib Corporation, Sikh Dharma International, Unto Infinity LLC and Siri Singh Sahib of Sikh Dharma.

At the heart of the dispute are three questions, surrounding multiple lawsuits filed in California, by people who allege they were abused by those in the organization, insurance attorney Nicholas Govea wrote in the complaint.

The questions

Does the insurance company have to represent the organizations (indemnify them) because in the original application, the organizations answered “no” to questions if anyone knew of claims that could be made against it, a violation of the policy.

Does the insurance company have to indemnify the organization and its members related to sexual abuse claims that involve

issues of employment, which one of the insurance policies was for.

Does the insurance company have to indemnify the organization and its members when its policy disallows claims related to “assault.”

The Siri Singh Sahib Corporation could not be reached for comment and has not yet responded to the lawsuit.

Prior knowledge?

In October 2019, prominent Bhajan student and former organizational leader Pamela Saharah Dyson made a website for her memoir to be released three months later, “Premka: White Bird in a Golden Cage: My Life with Yogi Bhajan,” on which she alleged Bhajan sexually abused her.

On Dec. 8, 2019, Siri Singh Sahib Corporation Executive Director Satwant Singh applied for the multiple insurance policies and checked the “no” boxes to questions about prior knowledge of any claims that could be made.

According to prior *SUN* reporting, allegations had been raised previously of Bhajan’s sexual misconduct, but the community began to see a torrent of abuse accounts after December 2019, after Dyson went public with her account of alleged abuse and a month before the release of the memoir.

After Dyson went public with her account of Bhajan's alleged sexual coercion, the "floodgates opened" for others to come forward, as former follower Suzanne Jordan said.

Jordan, who also alleges to have suffered abuse from Bhajan, left the community in 1984. She referred to the public reaction to Dyson's memoir as a "literal MeToo movement in the org."

Report on abuse

The Siri Singh Sahib Corporation, which oversees 3HO, Sikh Dharma International and other assets founded by the yogi, hired the independent group An Olive Branch in 2020 to investigate the allegations of abuse. In August 2020, the organization released a report on its findings, writing that "it is more likely than not that Yogi Bhajan engaged in several types of sexual misconduct and abused his power as a spiritual leader."

The report also stated that the organization was "embarking on a program of Compassionate Reconciliation based on the proven principles of Restorative Justice." That was over objections from the insurance company, Govea wrote.

More abuse

After forming a "Independent Healing and Reparations Program," the organizations forwarded over 440 claims to the insurance company, noting that they agreed to pay an unknown amount in

connection with the claims. The amount is redacted in the court filing.

Provisions

On Dec. 14, 2023, Kathleen Hayes, Sumpuran Khalsa, Mahan Kirn Khalsa and “others” filed a lawsuit against the various Siri Singh Sahib Corporation-related companies in California, alleging between 1984 and 2004, they “suffered exploitation and sexual abuse within Yogi Bhanjan’s network,” Govea wrote.

Bhanjan died in 2004.

“The Hayes Lawsuit alleges that Yogi Bhanjan maintained a group of women to be his close personal staff, including some who just turned 18, and that many of the women who worked on his staff were instructed to work at one or more of the entities, including several of the defendant entities, at Yogi Bhanjan’s direction,” Govea wrote. “According to the Hayes Plaintiffs, Yogi Bhanjan would select who worked for each entity and in which department within each entity.”

According to the lawsuit filed by Hayes , multiple women alleged Bhanjan raped them.

The insurance company denied coverage for this employment claim under its assault exclusion provision.

History

Harbhajan Singh Khalsa, or Yogi Bajan, gained thousands of followers as a spiritual leader and yoga teacher after emigrating to the U.S. from India in 1968. His unique teachings of Sikhism and Hindu-influenced kundalini yoga appealed to Western audiences at the height of the hippie era. Along with a new American Sikh community, Bajan established the nonprofit 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization) as well as many other businesses and organizations over the years, including Yogi Tea, Akal Security and Sikh Dharma International.

In the later years of his life, the yogi lived on the ranch and ashram called Hacienda de Guru Ram Das on State Road 106 in Española. Following his death from heart complications in 2004, former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson ordered all flags in the state to be flown at half-mast. Two years later, the State Transportation Commission — the policymaking body of the Department of Transportation — voted unanimously to rename the three-quarter-mile-long highway in honor of Bajan.

Past SUN reporting was used in this story.