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**Cultivating a Yogic Theology of Collective Healing:  
A Yogini's Journey Disrupting White Supremacy, Hindu Fundamentalism, and Casteism**

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As a South Asian femme with Hindu roots, my journey in practicing and offering yoga has been ancestral, healing, restorative and enlightening; it has also been complicated, contradictory and heartbreaking. My initial experiences practicing yoga with organized religious and spiritual institutions affirmed a healing space for my brown body: I was just beginning to question the internalization of white supremacy and colonization on my assimilated mind, body, and spirit. Unfortunately, the Hindu leaders affiliated with these institutions simultaneously introduced me to oppressive ideologies such as Islamophobia, casteism and nationalism. In searching for truth, I uncovered the intersecting, oppressive legacy that capitalism, colonization, Brahmanical casteism, and nationalism have had on yoga. Although I believe yoga philosophy – when rooted in a diversity of Indigenous philosophies – is grounded in living a life in tune with all beings' liberation, yoga's core principles are misappropriated and commodified for agendas that exacerbate oppression. Hindus and Western yogis perpetuate the violence of yoga through bypassing the moral tenets for a disembodied, posture-heavy practice that presents a surface-level understanding of humanity's interconnectedness in suffering and liberation. This autobiographical piece encourages yogis – including myself – to go beyond the surface-level condemnation of white supremacy and Western cultural appropriation to also explore Hinduism's oppressive role in appropriating yoga. By holding space for the complicated ways that people of color perpetuate injustice, we make room for birthing a yogic spirituality that can be rooted in the interconnectivity of all beings. Healing justice practitioners are already incorporating mindfulness and yoga to sustain resilience, morality and spiritual discipline in social movements. Accordingly, it's imperative that we cultivate a 'yogic theology of collective healing' – a philosophy grounded in manifesting freedom for our communities through authentic, "radical healing" models (Ginwright 2009).

**Biji**

The first time I practiced yoga, I was 13. I was visiting my paternal grandmother Kailash Parvati Sood, whom our family lovingly called Biji, in Panchkula, India. Beyond the physical barriers of vast oceans and continental landmasses, the linguistic boundary between Biji and me challenged how we communicated with each other. My brother, Sundeep, and I were born and raised in the U.S. South in the 1980s when South Asians had a growing but small presence in the United States. Our parents employed a cultural assimilation strategy that involved speaking in Punjabi to each other and in English to us. When Biji introduced me to breathing techniques, prayers and chanting, it became our language for bonding. On sunny mornings in India, over papaya, mango, parathas and chai as I swatted away thirsty mosquitos, Biji chanted mantras –

affirmations of power and healing. I responded line-by-line as she corrected my assimilated tongue's butchered pronunciation, reminding me of the significance of precise pronunciation.



Figure 1 – My Biji (center), Brother (right) and Me in our Ancestral Garden. Morinda, Punjab, India, 2004 (Photo Credit: Savitri Devi).

Initially, I enjoyed chanting because the ritual of memorizing affirmations in Sanskrit connected me to my culture and ancestry. Over time, I began to appreciate mantras for the sacred connection they bridged between my breath, lungs and tongue, emitting poetic prayer in syllabic rhythm in an estranged but familiar dialect. I did not grow up in a devout Hindu household; my moral and ethical compass came from my parents' mostly secular lessons. However, Biji inspired me to cultivate a practice of devotion to Hinduism and *bhakti* yoga by sharing mantras that connected me to my ancestry. Since the West emphasizes *Raja* yoga or *asana*, the modern postural practice, we rarely learn other dimensions, such as *karma* (service), *jnana* (philosophy), and *bhakti* (devotional) yoga. In truth, *bhakti* yoga – this devotional path of building faith within myself to honor divinity – is what brought me to a practice of yoga.

### Hinduism and Oppression: Unearthing Truth

When I was 19, I attended a meditation workshop by The Art of Living Foundation (AoL), an international non-profit organization founded by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. AoL deepened

my *bhakti* practice: bonding with my breath strengthened my awareness to the present moment. The meditations and mantras energized me with confidence, patience and endurance: I felt a difference in my capacity to focus on projects and care for my body after beginning each day with practice. I joined AoL just as I was acquiring a language of decolonization to unpack my experience as a racialized brown skin woman in the U.S. South's dominant white, Christian culture. Several of my AoL teachers were Indian and spoke openly about their families' memories of colonization and partition, which encouraged me to deepen my relationship to Hinduism and Indian culture. I joined my college's Hindu Students Council (HSC) chapter. AoL and HSC gave me a means of relating to my religiously-racialized ethnic identity, an identity I subconsciously disembodied to fit into a white cultural norm. The philosophy, *pranayama* (breath retention techniques), and mantras that my ancestors developed offered the refreshing sense of belonging I longed for as a culturally confused Desi daughter of immigrants. The practices affirmed a healing space for my brown body as it was learning to discard internalized white supremacist colonization on my assimilated being.

Despite their awareness of the history of decolonization, my AoL and HSC peers are the ones who re-introduced me to the Islamophobic, casteist and nationalist agendas of Hindu philosophy. At HSC annual meetings, executive committee members fed me and other Hindu Americans one-sided narratives of the Hindu-Muslim conflict in South Asia. In the morning and evening, we practiced yoga and learned mantras, performed *pujas* (prayer rituals), and bonded over Bollywood films and bhangra (Punjabi folk dance). In the afternoon, we were taught that *casteism* was a natural way for societies to group themselves though HSC leaders defensively denied that the hierarchical, oppressive elements of the *Savarna* caste system had any vestiges in modern-day Hinduism and India. They indoctrinated us into the religious-political conflicts in Kashmir, Ayodhya, Gujarat, Narmada and other South Asian areas through an upper-caste Hindu supremacist lens. I felt the tentacles of Hindutva sucking me into a web of fictitious claims of the "innocence" of upper-caste Hindus. These leaders selectively discarded narratives about the communal and militarized violence that Hindus and government officials perpetrated toward Dalits, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and Indigenous communities along formerly colonized and re-colonized borders. Each time the mostly Brahmin and male-identifying HSC national members discussed the history of Hindu civilization and the religious conflicts in South Asia, my entire being felt at odds with the teachings.

As my studies in Hindu-Muslim conflicts, decolonization, and anti-oppression evolved, I began to question the moral and political values of the Art of Living and Hindu Students Council. In response to my inquiries about how mindfulness addressed structural violence that poor and marginalized communities faced, my teachers offered unrealistic solutions, such as a strong work ethic, meditation, and prayer, as remedies to oppressive hardships. The AoL teachers taught their courses to prisoners across the globe but refused to acknowledge how their elitist philosophies perpetrated violence against communities most impacted by carceral policies. My mind, heart and body knew these struggles were more complicated than the one-sided, simplistic fables I was being fed. The experience echoed primary school memories of reading whitewashed reports of the Civil War and Civil Rights Movement – the versions that applauded white saviors like Abraham Lincoln and Lyndon Johnson at the expense of self-determined abolitionists and freedom fighters like Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, and Ella Baker. I became more critical of HSC and AoL for their unwillingness to acknowledge the unique form of suffering oppressed communities faced and for their reluctance to incorporate it in their spiritual philosophies. Although I was prepared to reject their teachings, I felt conflicted

about letting go of my meditative rituals and daily practice that had, for so long, served as ancestral healing medicine to my soul.

Then, I learned about the 2002 Gujarat riots, or the Gujarat pogrom, that resulted in the murder of over 2,000 Muslim mothers, families, and children by Hindu nationalist gangs. Ample evidence pointed to the role that Gujarat state authorities and Chief Minister Narendra Modi (now Prime Minister of India) played in instigating and condoning the orchestrated mass murder of Muslim families. Once again seeking answers from an organization that promoted humanitarian values of peace, I searched for AoL leader Sri Sri's responses. Instead, I found testimonials defending Modi. Sri Sri has since written about his conversations with Modi:

As soon as we settled down for our meeting, I looked into his eyes and asked him, 'Did you do all that was in your capacity to stop these riots?' The directness of my question surprised him. After regaining his composure, he replied with moist eyes, 'Guruji, do you also believe in this propaganda?'

Nothing much was spoken after that. I knew he could not have played a role in the riots. Why would a chief minister paint his face black and destroy his own reputation? It didn't make any sense. We sat in silence for few minutes. I assured him that the truth was on his side and one day the whole nation would recognize him (Shankar 2014).

Sri Sri's testimony supporting Modi left me feeling betrayed. How could he praise a government and leader that condoned hatred and unjust violence? Human Rights Watch (2012) has documented how, a decade after the anti-Muslim riots, Gujarat state and police officials continue to deny and obstruct justice in the investigations. Sri Sri's actions exemplified how religious nationalism finds alliances and validation in spiritual leaders who promote peace and justice through passive liberalism. Sri Sri's use of spirituality to bypass the contradictions of Hindu nationalism were telling: in turning a blind eye to Hindutva's violent political agenda, he encouraged me to question my place in spirituality as well as my place in HSC and AoL; I was no longer willing to trust their theological doctrines. In my mind-heart, they were complicit in justifying hatred, violence, oppression, and inequality. The experience validated the tension I had with my faith. Although I came to these communities with a desire for belonging and ancestral wisdom, I was fed dangerously, manipulative propaganda about South Asian social history through Hindu elitist perspectives. I felt a deep desire to disrupt their violently oppressive agendas.

Three years after re-connecting with yoga through the Art of Living, I found myself retreating away from my yoga practice and religious extremism; I distanced myself from any affiliation to AoL and Hinduism. Although distancing myself from the meditative and postural yoga practices caused me to care less for my physical and spiritual well-being, the sense of betrayal and bitterness prevented me from recognizing disembodiment and suffering. Rather than accept philosophical systems that avoid truth due to fear of conflict or an unwillingness to acknowledge systemic oppression, I chose to engage the world for its violently, oppressive truths. I immersed myself in the teachings of leftist scholars and activists who offered frames for understanding white supremacy, class struggles, racial injustice, and fundamentalist organizations like Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh, Vishwa Hindu Parishad of America and Hindu Student Council. The sharp analyses of bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Vijay Prashad, Assata Shakur, Arundhati Roy, and Malcolm X supplied me with terminology to understand injustice through grassroots social movements that critiqued imperialism, neoliberal economics, and racial oppression.





Figure 2 – Finding Connection to my Warrior Goddess Self at the Oceanfront (Photo Credit: Vinay Bhatia).

### **Making Yoga My Own: Liberation as Interconnected**

The next few years, I had almost no practice of spirituality. Then, in winter 2010, in the company of my friend Jardana, I attended a yoga and social justice workshop held in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at The Stone House in Mebane, North Carolina. The facilitators curated a day of yoga asana and mindfulness; they offered meditative, reflective and partner activities, encouraging us to contemplate the implications of Dr. King’s anti-imperialist, anti-fascist, anti-capitalist, and anti-racist values in our lives. By the end of the day, I was sobbing. Although I couldn’t explain my tears, my soul stirred. It later dawned on me: that was the first time I was able to bring my entire radical spirit, open heart, and freedom-struggling self to my yoga practice without feeling politically compromised. I still questioned my relationship with spirituality, but the journey back home to a devotional path of self- and Goddess-love had begun. I felt reconnected to my faith and purpose in liberation struggles; I found a new way of relating to yoga by making it about humanity’s interconnected thirst for freedom.

I recommitted myself to yoga asana by practicing with online videos and attending classes at studios. At studios, I often left feeling awkward and angered about how unwelcome I felt practicing in such culturally appropriated yogic settings. Aside from the commodified extraction of South Asian culture and the mispronunciation of Sanskrit mantras, it upset me that instructors made the practice more about egoistic performance than self-growth. Still, I

appreciated how the physical practice strengthened my body and sense of self-awareness. It was the medicine I needed as I started a new chapter of my life at graduate school in Philadelphia.

After my first year in Philly, I decided to enroll in a yoga teacher-training program. My gut told me not to train in Philadelphia, where I knew the culturally appropriative setting would challenge my ability to remain compassionate, but I had also been forewarned about possibly having a white teacher in India. Soft whispers within, possibly my Biji's ancestral spirit, steered me to *Kailash Tribal School* in McLeodganj, India, where a South Asian instructor, Yogi Sivadas (Guru-ji), led month-long trainings. Unsure what to expect from Guru-ji's cultural lens, I took a courageous leap of open-hearted faith and enrolled in July 2011.

Initially, being in the company of all white students in my motherland had me on edge. To be reminded daily of South Asia's brutal history of colonization while training with Westernized whites (and Israelis) eager to capitalize on the practice rather than be radically transformed by it was its own neocolonial experience. However, I recalled my intention: I crossed continents for this training to invite healing into my and my community's lives. Instead of centering the whiteness surrounding me, I focused on self-transformation, Guru-ji's teachings, my beloved community, and my relationship with a higher being. We explored the relationship between mindfulness, liberation and justice. Referencing yogic texts, Guru-ji affirmed how, at its core, yoga philosophy sees an individual's liberation as divinely connected to humanity's liberation.

Guru-ji explained how the philosophical dimensions of yoga that connect us to human liberation cannot be credited to orthodox religions: he stressed that yoga is rooted in Indigenous belief systems and rituals. Prachi Patankar, a lower-caste Bahujan activist, maintains that a diversity of Indigenous South Asian cultures actually contributed to what's advertised as a monolithic yoga culture (2014). Guru-ji confirmed that due to migration, Indigenous knowledge systems, worldwide, have always influenced each other's spiritual philosophies. His teachings affirmed my departure from The Art of Living and Hindu fundamentalist groups. Finding an Indian guru who validated that yoga cannot be owned reconnected me to a more authentic way of embodying the philosophy. By crediting the teachings of yoga to Indigenous cultures, Guru-ji helped me understand how spiritual and religious fanatics dishonor healing practices by using them to bypass truth, homogenize culture and further embed oppression. I realized I did not need to abandon spirituality altogether; I needed a practice of applied spirituality, an ideology that promoted and affirmed the resistance struggles and humanity of oppressed peoples. I needed a yogic version of "liberation theology" (Cone 2010).

Guru-ji encouraged us to be skeptical of spiritual teachers who promote unquestioning adherence to orthodox traditions. He also shared that his goal was not for us to return to him for teachings. Yoga is not about spiritual manipulation and giving a leader control over your path; it's about finding liberation within self because all humans have a right to self-determined freedom. Unlike organized religious traditions that want to manipulate followers, Guru-ji wanted us to be our own guru, to be self-determined in our journey toward universal truth and human history. It is through this experience – of my Guru-ji serving as a vessel to a more liberating, yogic philosophy – that I learned to build a pillar of faith, a foundation of love and strength, a connectedness to humanity, my ancestors, all living beings, and nature. I gained a deeper sense of purpose in connecting my healing work to collective liberation. I felt my spiritual and leftist political identities peacefully co-exist. I began to embody spirituality as an ever-renewing source of fuel for my activism and hope. Today, my spiritual practice serves as a necessary

contemplative space to dismantle capitalism, white supremacy, religious nationalism, casteism, patriarchy, and homophobia both internally and externally.

In a section of his writing where he explores Mahatma Gandhi's words, Vijay Prashad offers Gandhi's position on religion: "religious traditions are resources to guide us, as social individuals, through the difficulties and opportunities of our lives. They are not dogmas to tear people apart from each other... Let tradition be a studied resource, not a set of inflexible, unchanging rules" (2012, 161). I feel similarly about my journey with yoga. Upper-caste Hindus appropriated yogic philosophy from Indigenous cultures and molded it to construct philosophies that justify institutionalized oppression against Muslims, Christians, Dalits, Adivasis, Bahujans, Sikhs, and poor communities. Having a spiritual foundation encourages me to explore suffering and oppression on a deeper dimension. It sustains my hope and involvement in struggles for human rights. This conversation is my attempt to discuss and dismantle the oppressive, elitist, casteist values embedded in yoga to make room for a yogic theology rooted in social justice values. Practitioners often reference the root term "yoke" in defining yoga as the union of the mind, body and spirit. For me, "yoking" has been about bridging my individual and universal soul and recognizing all of humanity as divinely connected to a universal sense of consciousness. My spiritual practice motivates me to radically imagine, inspired by Ginwright's "radical healing" concept, how we – as a human family – can experience a more honest way of healing collectively in this structurally violent society (Ginwright 2009, 2015).

### **“Radical Healing” in Philly**

After leaving Kailash yoga school in India, I taught at Àse Yoga, a Black-owned studio whose owner Dr. Alston showed me what centering Black healing looks like in Philadelphia. Dr. Alston inspired me to organize “Yogini Sistahs for Liberation: A Youth-focused Yoga Journey into Afro-Asian Mythology.” This workshop, funded by the Leeway Foundation, allowed 9 young women of color to see themselves and their ancestors in a spiritual practice often marketed to a different audience. That same year, a collective of social justice yogis and I offered an 8-month yoga fundraiser series called “Free Your Mind, Free Mumia, Free Them All”; it was designed to cultivate awareness about the interconnectedness of all beings, especially political prisoners, in the struggle for liberation.

I am learning to share yoga in a non-hierarchical manner and to center the leadership of working-class women of color. When offering free sessions in working-class communities of color, I do not expect to heal and liberate people. I do not have all the knowledge about healing; in fact, communities that have experienced suffering due to systemic oppression are more equipped than me to define their healing path. Humbling myself to build deep, honest relationships and to not be seen as the healing savior when I hold space for collective healing is an ongoing reflective part of my practice.

We live in frightening times. Yogis – especially those who hope to offer yoga as a tool for fueling resilience and resistance in our movements – must be critical of the trendy popularization of yoga. Yoga circulates as a global commodity through white supremacy, neoliberalism and capitalism. We, namely those whose families consciously or subconsciously participate in *Savarna* casteist ideologies, must also be critical of how religious fundamentalism and casteist oppression are embedded in yoga. Accordingly, as damaging as the whitewashing of yoga feels to us, our solution to make yoga accessible by offering “people of color” sessions may still promote harm. There is so much diversity within people of color communities; chanting





**Figure 3 – Grateful for Yogi Sivadas who Teaches Me to Find the Guru Within. Kailash Tribal School, Himachal Pradesh India, 2013 (Photo Credit: Khushi Ram).**

mantras in Sanskrit may still inflict harm on Indigenous South Asian families who have experienced violence from Hindus. Brown yogis have a unique duty to intersect our critiques and go beyond condemning Western cultural appropriation. We must follow the lead of Dalit activists and challenge Hindu nationalist attempts to claim yoga as India’s ancient practice. Prime Minister Modi, supported by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, was the architect behind “International Day of Yoga,” the contemporary United Nations holiday that credits a homogenized Indian culture as the source of yoga. The ripple effect of this symbolic holiday is that many Western and South Asian yogis’ celebration of “Yoga Day” validates the dangerous and culturally nationalist Hindutva machine. Naming these contradictions engages Black, brown and white yogis in a deeper understanding of what healing and liberation means for all of us; it encourages us to embed new, radical meaning in our collective offering of yoga.

Community healers, trauma-care workers, and yoga practitioners face a critical moment. Structural violence continues to erode our communities’ well-being and sense of hope. We operate in what Ginwright identifies as Persistent Traumatic Stress Environments (PTSE), where collective trauma is historical, ongoing and disruptive to our daily lives (2015). In craving spiritual balance and restoration of hope and justice, community-based healers are incorporating yoga into models of collective care. This moment invites us to cultivate a radical tradition of yogic theology that embraces the universal mission of interconnected liberation and

acknowledges the complicated historical context that permitted a particular style of commodified, compartmentalized, oppressive yoga to flourish in the West.

In her Afro-futuristic science-fiction series *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, Octavia Butler proposes an inspiring proverb: “God is Change” (2000). Further, Andrea Jain’s research on the commodification of yoga posits that, given yoga’s malleability to social context, yoga is not a monolith, and there is no *right* way to practice yoga(s) (2014). Cultivating a yogic theology of collective healing that is grounded in transformative change is an emerging shift on the horizon. I believe we can build a radical yogic philosophy through deepening the interconnectivity of our relationships and struggles, and through cultivating a philosophy that is accountable to the liberation of the most marginalized in our communities. In addition to embracing a “radical healing” framework that recognizes collective trauma, suffering, and systemic oppression, one that develops people’s capacity to see themselves as healers, we can also do the spiritual work of calling on our enlightened ancestral guides. Undeniably, being open to the ancestral guidance of Biji’s whispers is what led me toward repurposing yoga for collective liberation.

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