

Yogi Bhanan, 75, 'Boss' of Worlds Spiritual and Capitalistic, Dies

By DOUGLAS MARTIN OCT. 9, 2004

Yogi Bhanan, a former customs inspector at the Delhi airport who became both the spiritual leader to Americans following his version of the ancient Sikh religion and a highly successful entrepreneur, died Wednesday at his home in Española, N.M. He was 75.

The cause was complications from heart failure, Sikh Dharma, his spiritual community, announced.

Yogi Bhanan, whose full name was Harbhajan Singh Khalsa Yogiji, introduced an ancient and arduous form of Indian yoga, Kundalini yoga, to Americans. It is more active than the more common Hatha yoga and is practiced by thousands of people across America.

He also introduced Sikhism to this country, but with twists that startled Indian Sikhs. For one thing, yoga is a Hindu practice, not a Sikh one. For another, he insisted that his followers be vegetarians, though Sikhs are renowned as meat eaters.

But he more than retained the Sikh tradition of being superb warriors: he mobilized his followers into a security company that guards federal courthouses and Army bases and takes in more than \$1 billion a year.

Others of the 17 businesses he helped create included yoga centers and real estate concerns, as well as his Golden Temple natural foods company, Yogi herbal teas operation, Soothing Touch health and beauty products and Peace natural cereals. One of his nicknames was "the boss," The Miami Herald reported in 1998. "The whole point of all these ventures is not for an individual to get rich, but to perpetuate the mission of the community," Avtar Hari Singh Khalsa, chief executive of Yogi Bhanan's 3HO Foundation, said in an interview with The New York Times last month.

Mr. Khalsa had previously been a television executive in Hollywood, home to not a few of the guru's disciples. One of them, Gurmukh Kaur Khalsa, has drawn attention for teaching Kundalini yoga to pregnant celebrities like Madonna, Rosanna Arquette, Melissa Etheridge and Cindy Crawford.

Partly because of his great visibility, Yogi Bajan inspired critics, including traditional Sikhs; the cult expert Rick A. Ross, who called him an "absolute authoritarian figure"; and people concerned with his sometimes explicit sexual instructions.

Sikhism originated in the Punjab in the 15th century and preaches the commonality of all religions, the virtue of hard work and a belief in one god. Sikh men in India carry side swords, and so do Yogi Bajan's disciples, most of whom are Americans not of Indian descent.

Yogi Bajan met with two popes, two archbishops of Canterbury and the Dalai Lama. In New Mexico, he was important not least as a substantial contributor to both the Democratic and Republican parties; Gov. Bill Richardson ordered flags flown at half-staff in his honor.

Harbhajan Singh Puri was born on Aug. 26, 1929, in the town of Gujrawala in what is now Pakistan. (He legally changed his name when he became a United States citizen in 1976.) The son of a medical doctor, he graduated from Punjab University with an economics degree in 1954, then worked for 15 years as a customs official.

He told The Miami Herald that he had learned Kundalini yoga by having a helicopter lower him into the mouth of a cave in the Himalayas, where he kneeled for three days until the yogi master inside consented to teach him. He later claimed to be the only living master of Tantrism, a sexual form of yoga that men and woman practice together.

He left India for Canada in 1968 and taught yoga in Toronto. He soon moved to Los Angeles, where he was attracted to youths caught up in psychedelic drugs. He called them "searching souls" and persuaded many of them to substitute meditation for LSD. Later, he set up a more general program to treat drug abusers.

Yogi Bajan founded Sikh Dharma, his center in New Mexico's Española Valley, in the late 1960's. Time magazine reported in 1977 that he required his disciples to work 12 hours a day on low salaries and skimpy diets. Similar reports appeared elsewhere over the years.

His followers say that his strictures transform their lives in a positive way and that any sacrifices are voluntary.

Yogi Bhajan is survived by his wife, Inderjit Kaur; his sons, Ranbir Singh and Kulbir Singh; his daughter, Kamaljit Kaur; and five grandchildren.

He also left other families behind. He believed he could match couples by sensing the energy surrounding them as well as foreseeing their future. *New West* magazine in 1980 reported that sometimes in the middle of a lecture, he interrupted himself and declared to a pair of audience members, "Oh, you two people are engaged."

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