



CENTRE FOR ASIAN AND  
TRANSCULTURAL STUDIES  
SOUTH ASIA INSTITUTE



UNIVERSITÄT  
HEIDELBERG  
ZUKUNFT  
SEIT 1386



# ***Searching for a Master Plan***

***An Overview of the Art of Living Foundation and  
an Excursion into Its Social Initiatives***

David Alexander Plessy

***WATER FOOD DIABETES AYURVEDA GENETICS POVERTY YOGA STDS HISTORY SEX  
SOCIETY FAMILY PLANNING CASTE GENDER RIOTS RELIGION HEALTH DEMOCRACY  
FLOODING WASTE-MANAGEMENT UNANI PSYCHOLOGY FOLK MEDICINE  
AFFIRMATIVE ACTION GLOBALISATION BIOCHEMISTRY OLD AGE REPRODUCTIVE  
HEALTH MALARIA POLICY HIV AIDS WHO MEDICOSCAPES COLONIALISM PHARMACY  
RELIGION LEPROSY BOTOX DEHYDRATION NGOs AYUSH...***

Master's Thesis

# Searching for a Master Plan: An Overview of the Art of Living Foundation and an Excursion into Its Social Initiatives



Submitted to the South Asia Institute  
of Heidelberg University  
in partial fulfilment for the degree:  
Master of Arts

Written by: David Alexander Plessy  
Submitted on: October 31st, 2019

Study programme: Health and Society in South Asia

1st Supervisor: Professor Dr. Daniel Münster  
2nd Supervisor: Professor Dr. William Sax

Words (Word limit): 21,395 (22,000)

## Table of Contents

<b>Declaration of Authorship</b> .....	3
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	4
<b>Introduction</b> .....	5
<b>Chapter One – The Art of Living Foundation: Overview of a Transnational Network</b> .....	15
1.1 Narrative of an Art of Living Course .....	15
1.2 Sri Sri Ravi Shankar .....	18
1.3 “It Works”: SKY, Legitimization Strategies, and Dissent .....	19
1.4 Critique of Art of Living and Spirituality .....	22
1.5 Institutions and Public Relations .....	28
<b>Chapter Two - Overview of Social Initiatives and the International Headquarters</b> .....	31
2.1 Overview .....	31
2.2 Ashram Initiatives .....	32
2.3 Sri Sri Rural Development Program .....	32
2.4 River Rejuvenation.....	33
2.5 The Sri Sri Institute of Agricultural Sciences & Technology Trust.....	35
2.6 Interview with CEO of SSIAST .....	37
<b>Chapter Three – Meeting the Faces of SSIAST</b> .....	39
3.1 Meeting with Sangeeta .....	39
3.2 Rachana in Noida .....	40
3.3 Ethnography with Prem Sharma .....	43
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	56
<b>References</b> .....	59

## Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare that my thesis with the title:

---

---

---

1. is the result of my own independent work,
2. makes use of no sources or materials other than those referenced,
3. that quotations and paraphrases obtained from the work of others are indicated as such,
4. and that I have followed the rules and recommendations stated in Heidelberg University's guidelines on „Verantwortung in der Wissenschaft (Responsibility in Science)“.

Heidelberg \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my excellent colleagues and friends for their enduring support throughout the process of writing this thesis—at times both lively and grueling. In the many conversations I had, I am most grateful for the patience and sincerity of thoughts and comments that I received from all the wonderful people around me and close to me. I am also grateful for all of the assistance I received from the many friendly Art of Living participants whom I met throughout my field work. I would especially like to thank and acknowledge my supervisor, Daniel Münster. It has been an incredible delight and privilege having Daniel's consistent, friendly, discerning support and guidance throughout my research and the writing process.

## Introduction

The Art of Living foundation (AOLF) was created in 1981 by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (not to be confused with the famous sitar player of the same name). It began as a small, tight-knit community of followers around Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (SSRS) in Bangalore, India. Over time, it has grown into a considerably large international organization, claiming to offer “effective educational and self-development programs and tools that facilitate the elimination of stress and foster deep and profound inner peace, happiness and well-being for all individuals” (Art of Living Foundation 2019a). According to their website, Art of Living “operates globally in 154 countries and has touched the lives of over 370 million people” (Art of Living Foundation 2017a). It is difficult to make an estimate as to their annual revenue, but it is enough to maintain their operations, pay their course teachers and management teams, and purchase lands and build meditation centers on them. The organization has even rented spaces like the Jakkur airfield near Bangalore in 2006 and the Berlin Olympic Stadium in 2011 for their large-scale events.

The Art of Living (AOL) international headquarters near Bangalore is another space which regularly hosts large-scale AOL courses and events. It lies just outside the Bangalore city limits in India, on a sprawling property of over 200 acres, with many other smaller plots in the surrounding area. Besides events and courses, the international headquarters also houses dozens of buildings which act as headquarters for AOL-related projects, such as the Sri Sri Institute of Agricultural Sciences and Technology Trust and the Sri Sri Rural Development Program Trust, as well as a human resources department and a travel agency specializing in airport shuttles and luxury yoga retreats. According to one resident of the international headquarters, roughly 60,000 people live there permanently.

The organization appears to be very large in scale, and widespread throughout the world—however, surprisingly little is known about them. Besides the information that can be found in the various websites and social media accounts linked to AOL, as well as in Indian news articles, I was only able to find a handful of academic works related to organization.

\*\*\*

When I began to research the AOLF, I sat down behind my computer and, like any other MA student, searched Google Scholar for any relevant literature. I knew the AOL as a widely popular, international spiritual organization that is mostly known for its breathing technique,

Sudarshan Kriya Yoga. I learned the technique for the first time in 2013, and I found it to be particularly effective in alleviating anxiety. This technique is what struck me most about the organization, so I decided to search the term “Sudarshan Kriya Yoga” first.

*Sudarshan Kriya Yoga [Enter]*

I was delighted to find several pages of articles with the topic “Sudarshan Kriya Yoga” in the title. However, the articles had titles like: “Antidepressant efficacy of Sudarshan Kriya Yoga (SKY) in melancholia: a randomized comparison with electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and imipramine,” published in 2000, or “Sudarshan Kriya Yoga improves cardiac autonomic control in patients with anxiety-depression disorders,” published in 2017.

Despite my background in biology and chemistry, some of these terms were quite foreign to me, and I would be hard-pressed to understand the details of specialized medical research. Nevertheless, I downloaded several articles and moved on to the next search.

*Art of Living Foundation [Enter]*

This time, the results were mixed. Many articles and books had nothing to do with the Art of Living Foundation at all, but rather came from philosophical works ranging from Socrates to Michel Foucault. Other results came from various spiritual leaders who published similar titles, like the Dalai Lama’s “The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living.” How could it be that such a large, wide-spread organization had so little published on it? The Art of Living claims to operate in 154 countries and to have “touched the lives of over 370 million people,” and yet I could only find a few academic articles and a single book published on the Art of Living Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

Although I was originally most interested in Sudarshan Kriya Yoga, as my research progressed I quickly realized that it would be difficult to find a clear research question relating to the social dynamics around the technique, as it is a highly individualized practice by its nature. I

---

<sup>1</sup> At first, I could only find one MA thesis that dealt specifically with Art of Living, written by a Norwegian scholar named Inga Bårdsen Tøllefsen. After searching through a number of databases, Tøllefsen’s MA thesis, along with one of her articles, proved to be the most useful in leading me to the only other academic sources related to AOL that I could find. These sources consisted for two different chapters in separate edited volumes, a few more articles, and a book by Stephen Jacobs, a scholar at the University of Wolverhampton, UK.

then decided to focus more on the social dynamics around the AOLF. My first challenge was to try to accurately describe what type of an organization the Art of Living Foundation is.

The basic description that the Art of Living Foundation gives itself on its main website is as a “non-profit, educational and humanitarian organization founded in 1981 by the world-renowned humanitarian and spiritual teacher Sri Sri Ravi Shankar” (Art of Living 2019a). Already, the organization paints a picture of itself as secular in its aims, and yet founded by a ‘spiritual teacher.’ A description of AOL courses is then given: “AOLF offers numerous highly effective educational and self-development programs and tools that facilitate the elimination of stress and foster deep and profound inner peace, happiness and well-being for all individuals” (ibid.). Again, the aims are described as both secular in its description of eliminating stress, and spiritual, or at least related to subjective well-being in its mention of profound inner peace and happiness.

These claims are reinforced in a secular, scientific way by the various independent studies of Sudarshan Kriya Yoga and other AOL breathing techniques. These studies consistently grow in number, now totaling over 70, according to the AOL main website (Art of Living Foundation 2017c). AOL courses are a cornerstone of the organization, and the claim to foster well-being for all individuals resonates with one of their overarching mottos, that they “serve society by strengthening the individual” (Art of Living Foundation 2019a).

At this point, AOL seems to be a spiritual, or perhaps religious, humanitarian organization committed to the well-being of all individuals. The suggestion of religious inclination is further implied in the name and character of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. The prefix Sri before Ravi Shankar’s name comes from a Sanskrit word which is popularly used throughout India as an honorific title. It has historically been used when addressing Hindu saints, gods/goddesses, and other religious figures, as well as revered non-religious figures in contemporary India. The Sri before Ravi Shankar’s name is doubled (Sri Sri), implying Ravi Shankar to be an exceptionally honorable person.

There is some speculation as to the origins of how his title came to be doubled, although Shankar suggests that it was his followers who chose the name for him, and that he had no preference or objection to it (Jacobs 2015, 77). In any case, the name has a Hindu religious overtone, which is further amplified by Shankar’s image and behavior which resemble a typical



Hindu saint. Shankar wears long white robes, a red bhindi on his forehead, long hair with a beard, and regularly performs Hindu rituals. Nevertheless, I have heard numerous AOL participants claim that AOL is ‘spiritual, not religious.’ Shankar himself emphasizes this point, and distinguishes between the two in one of his most commonly quoted aphorisms: “religion is like the banana skin and spirituality is the banana” (Ališauskienė 2012, 357). The implication is that AOL and other forms of spirituality practice something that is universal to all human experience, and that religions represent traditions and cultural contexts that surround universal spiritual experiences.

Besides the emphasis on spirituality and the religious overtones, AOL also partially resembles a business. The standard price for a basic AOL course runs around 300 USD, depending on the location and eligibility for discounts, like a student discount, ‘course repeater’ discount, or an ‘early bird’ discount. AOL participants are encouraged to maintain active participation by repeating courses, taking advanced courses, and encouraging friends and family to take a basic course. This is not to mention the plethora of various Art of Living books, media, and events, and even their own brand of household products and Ayurvedic medicine, Sri Sri Tattva. Besides all of this, AOL places a trademark on their technique (Sudarshan Kriya Yoga™).<sup>2</sup> When I first learned SKY, the teacher even described it as a “secret pin code that gives you unlimited access to an ATM [automated teller machine] of happiness.”

Considering all of this, it seems clear that AOL openly embraces its business-like components, and that its business model succeeds in generating a considerable amount of income. However, AOL justifies all of its economic activity as both ethical and not-for-profit by claiming that, besides the health benefits that it offers to course participants, the proceeds of its courses and products are used to fund its humanitarian projects and social initiatives, like global disaster relief efforts and free schools for rural children in India (Art of Living Foundation 2019a).

One question I continued to come across in the academic literature, as well as in a basic google search of Art of Living Foundation, was whether or not Art of Living is a cult.

---

<sup>2</sup> Sudarshan Kriya Yoga was first patented in 1993, then again in 2006, and is classified internationally as “[e]ducation; providing of training; entertainment; sporting and cultural activities” (Justia Trademarks 2 2018; Justia Trademarks 1 2018).

Throughout my research, I have occasionally been asked the same question as I explain my topic to various friends, family, and acquaintances. The difficulty with the term ‘cult’ is its deliberately negative portrayal in news media and popular culture. Many people immediately think of Jim Jones, mass suicide, and the exploitation of vulnerable people.

Art of Living does fit many of the credentials of a cult, as outlined in the Entrepreneur Model of Cult Innovation by Bainbridge and Stark (1979).<sup>3</sup> It certainly operates to some degree as a business, selling a novel product (SKY), and receiving payment in return. Ravi Shankar could be considered as a religious entrepreneur who has repackaged old meditation techniques to be marketed in a contemporary setting. He is also at the top of the AOL hierarchy, and his words and decisions are usually taken to be the ultimate authority among devotees. After learning Sudarshan Kriya Yoga, I once told a senior AOL teacher that I started to experiment with some of my own variations of the technique. She replied that I shouldn’t alter the technique at all, stating that “it comes straight from Sri Sri, which means it’s perfect.” Besides these elements of selling a novel product and reverence or worship of the guru, the AOL places considerable emphasis on recruiting new people for their courses. The recruiting tactics are sometimes arguably aggressive, though not always.

Although the Art of Living does, in several ways, fit the Bainbridge and Stark definition of an entrepreneurial cult, some of the criteria are met rather loosely. AOL undoubtedly generates considerable profits, but it is not clear if this can be considered the main driving force behind its actions. In my research, I found that many AOL participants seemed to be primarily concerned with benefitting local communities and society as a whole, and genuinely believed that participation in AOL was the best way to do that—not only by reducing stress in individuals, but also through the various social initiatives of AOL.

It is also important to recognize that ‘the motivations of AOL’ cannot be so easily equated with just the motivations of Shankar. Every AOL participant has his/her own reasons for doing so, and the emphasis on personal experience as a source of authority sometimes loosens the hierarchical structure of the organization. This gives participants a certain degree of freedom in how they relate to the organization as a whole. For example, guru worship and other Hindu

---

<sup>3</sup> I draw my comparison of AOL to an entrepreneurial cult almost entirely from the work of Tøllefsen, who outlines this comparison in section 3.4 of her MA thesis (2012).

elements of AOL are generally more socially acceptable in India, for example, but these may be deemphasized in ‘western’ countries in order to fit into existing circuits spirituality that emphasize one’s own personal experience. The AOL curriculum might even be further adapted to fit more flexibly into varying cultural contexts—like in Norway, for example, where Sudarshan Kriya Yoga has been combined with tango dancing (Tøllefsen 2012, 30).

Despite the above example of SSRS’s knowledge being considered ‘perfect,’ I found that many participants typically downplay dogma—a finding mirrored by another study of the AOL (Jacobs 2015, 4). AOL also tends to be relatively inclusive—open to a diversity of people from different cultures and religious backgrounds or belief systems. And although there is a certain pressure to recruit new followers and to maintain active participation, some AOL members who choose to leave the organization do so without fear of harassment or excessive pressure to remain involved (Jacobs 2015, 152).

At this point in my research, the image of AOL as a hierarchical structure did not fully match my observations. Parts of AOL appeared to be decentralized, and it began to make more sense to think of AOL as a network with many nodes and interconnections. These nodes could be individual new age spiritual seekers, ayurvedic business niches, government consultancy contracts, or various AOL centers throughout India, Europe, and the Americas. The nodes could also be the social initiatives both inside of India and in various other countries. This classification of Art of Living as a network, rather than a singular organization, fell exactly in line with the conclusion that another author had made about classifying Art of Living (Jacobs 2015, 9). A clearer picture was beginning to form as to what kind of a framework AOL might best be represented with.

Thinking of AOL as a network, rather than as a singular hierarchical structure, helped me to trace through some of its flexible branches back to its main body—an organization which offers courses in yoga and meditation techniques based on the teachings of SSRS. Towards the beginning of my research, I chose to focus on the social initiatives of AOL, since I had seen almost no information about them in the few pieces of academic literature that I could find about the organization.

As time went on, however, it became complicated to try to draw a clear picture of these social initiatives. The boundaries between AOL and its various sister organizations are often

unclear. Before going to do my field research, I could only find information about any of these sister programs from their own websites and pamphlets. When I met with one farmer/devotee during my field research, it was unclear to me to what degree he was an active participant of AOL yoga courses, and to what degree he was a part of the AOL network through which he learned Sri Sri Natural Farming techniques and sold and distributed a significant portion of his produce to fellow AOL members.

Trying to draw a clear picture of Art of Living social initiatives continued to challenge me throughout my field research. I was able to meet with several leaders of various projects of AOL initiatives during my fieldwork. One leader described a community-driven, volunteer-based project which cooperated with experts to orchestrate the rejuvenation of a river in Northern India. I was similarly impressed with a suburban gardener who told me that her two-acre organic farm was capturing the interest of the surrounding farmers whose soils had become sterile from the excessive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

I had also read impressive reports of the improved mental health of prisoner inmates in various countries where AOL offered Prison SMART programs that taught inmates to manage their emotions using SKY<sup>4</sup>—and at the same time, I felt a tension in the absence of any systemic critique of prisons and the structural social injustices that still lead to a disproportionate number of minorities suffering from incarceration in the USA, and the likelihood of similar circumstances in the other countries in which AOL give Prison SMART workshops (Nellis 2016). I am also uncertain of how ‘natural farming’ practices are defined and integrated into Indian agriculture, as I observed plots of land with mostly monocropped acres of fields and some plant diversity along the boundaries. I wonder how much these techniques compromise sustainability with profitability (although I do not blame the individual farmers for trying to make a living).

All the while, the Sri Sri Tattva branch of AOL hovers awkwardly to the side in my thoughts, like a sort of dissonant, out of pitch tone in this story of ‘serving society.’ Although the brand claims social responsibility, and proudly supports the AOL social initiatives with its

---

<sup>4</sup> Brown, Richard P., and Patricia L. Gerbarg. 2005. “Sudarshan Kriya Yogic Breathing in the Treatment of Stress, Anxiety, and Depression. Part II--Clinical Applications and Guidelines.” *Journal of alternative and complementary medicine* (New York, N.Y.) 11 (4): 711–17. doi:10.1089/acm.2005.11.711.

proceeds, many of its products seem to be questionable in their compromise between quality, trustworthy necessities, and revenue-generating, consumption-oriented products. They seem too shady in the ecological impact of the ingredients of their cleaning products, too sugar-heavy and in their Ojasvita ‘health drinks’ with artificial flavors and preservatives, and too shiny and artificial in their plastic packaging for each individual package of cookies—which regularly get shipped out to Sri Sri Tattva outlets in one of 447 locations in India, or in one of at least 33 countries where Sri Sri Tattva products are shipped (Sri Sri Tattva 2019c).

The strange mixture between reducing stress in individuals and marketing AOL courses affected me on a personal level. I had benefitting from SKY when I learned it. I felt that it helped me through a stage of debilitating anxiety in my life in a way that no other therapy was able to. At the same time, I was uncomfortable with the feeling that I was being sold something, and I was especially uncomfortable with the pressure to encourage friends and family to invest in a basic course. My research presented me with a similar tension. Some of the social initiative projects seemed promising in their structure and execution. On the other hand, there is reason for suspicion in the methods of financing those projects and the way in which these projects conveniently provide a visual example of ‘serving society.’

As my research progressed into its advanced stages, the data which I collected continued to be confusing and, at times, contradicting. I began to wonder, why is it so difficult to make sense of all this data? And how can it be that such a large organization has so little published on it? This drove me inevitably towards the single, clear question: *why is it so difficult to draw a clear picture of the Art of Living Foundation?*

A part of the answer was already clear to me—that there are so many different things that can either be described as a part of AOL, or at least connected to it. Another major challenge of classifying AOL into a category is that its boundaries as an organization are often blurry and grafted at its many intersections with both its sister organizations and the activities and identities of those who claim to have some connection to AOL. The AOL network is more than just its courses and events. It functions in part as an identity which allows for its members to connect, interact, and collaborate.

In order to further answer this question, I conducted three months of field research between September-October 2018. During this time, I was enrolled as a part-time student at

Jawaharlal Nehru University, where I was living in a student hostel on campus. This acted as a base throughout my research. My first point of contact with AOL during this time was with a senior AOL participant and SSIASST teacher named Sangeeta. I found her telephone number through an advertisement on the SSIASST website for a six-day ‘Agri Teacher Training’ workshop in Delhi. Although I did not attend this workshop, I did meet Sangeeta at her home in Delhi, where I was able to ask about her involvement with AOL and SSIASST. She put me in touch with a local farmer and a gardener who were also involved with AOL and SSIASST.

Besides conducting a literature review, my research was based on informal interviews with AOL participants. During my fieldwork, I met for an afternoon with a suburban gardener named Rachana<sup>5</sup> on her two-acre plot of land near Noida, south east of Delhi. I also met with a farmer from Haryana named Prem on several occasions at two different Delhi farmer’s markets. I later spent two days and one night at his 12-acre farm, about 100km West of Delhi.

In October 2018, I spent one week at the AOL international headquarters near Bangalore. During this time, I met with the heads of several AOL sister organizations such as SSIASST, Art of Living Schools, and the Sri Sri Rural Development Program. I also met several of the leaders of sustainability projects around the ashram, like paper-recycling, plastic recycling, and bio-gas production. Collectively, my observations and interviews illustrate several examples of the difficulties around drawing a clear picture of the organization and its initiatives.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I review the limited amount of literature that I found on AOL from academic databases and internet searches. Here, I describe the origins of AOL and the narrative around it as a spiritual organization with social service initiatives. The second chapter provides an overview of some of the various AOL social initiatives, according to the information that is available on their websites, as well as information that I collected first-hand in October 2018 during a one-week trip to the AOL international ashram near Bangalore, India. This chapter also includes a more in-depth look at the Sri Sri Institute of Agricultural Sciences and Technology Trust (SSIASST) according to an interview I had at the international ashram with the CEO of the SSIASST, as well as the information available through their website.

---

<sup>5</sup> All the names of interlocutors have been anonymized in this thesis, except for Venkatesh S.R., the ‘CEO’ of SSIASST (introduced in section 2.6).

The third chapter presents my meetings with Rachana and Prem on their respective farms, and reveals some of the ways in which their farming activities are connected to AOL and SSIAST. I conclude this thesis by pointing to the multiplicity of organizational structures and philosophies of AOL and the occasional ensuing contradictions as the primary challenges that make it difficult to draw a clear picture of the organization.

## Chapter One – The Art of Living Foundation: Overview of a Transnational Network

### 1.1 Narrative of an Art of Living Course

My first encounter with an AOL basic course took place in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, in 2012. I had heard about the course several months before at the Bonaroo music festival in Manchester, Tennessee. One day during the festival, I came upon a guided meditation being offered by an American AOL teacher named Sam. After participating in the guided meditation, I spoke with him about how I felt that meditation and yoga helped to alleviate my anxiety.

After describing my mental state at length to Sam, he seemed more and more convinced that a basic AOL course would be a great thing for me; however, I was skeptical because of the price. Even with the special discount being offered to anyone who signed up immediately at Bonaroo, the price was still 175 USD, rather than 300 USD. We discussed further, and at a certain point, Sam told me that he was “100% convinced” that the AOL course was “the perfect thing for me,” and that he was “even willing to financially back me up” to do the course. At that point, I trusted him enough to sign up for the course, although I turned down his generous offer to support me financially.

Several months later, the AOL basic course took place in a large, carpeted room on the ground floor of a multi-story building in suburban Atlanta. The exact course being offered was called *YES+*. The name stood for Youth Empowerment Seminar, with the plus sign indicating that the course was meant for 18-30-year-old participants, rather than the *YES!* course, which caters to youth under the age of 18. We were a group of approximately 10 participants, led by two teachers—an Indian man and a Japanese-American woman. The room was relatively empty, except for some cushions on the ground and a small, lifted platform with a few chairs. In one of the chairs rested a portrait of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.

We first met for a few hours on Friday evening, then the whole day on Saturday, and again on Sunday morning, until the late afternoon. The first day of the course mostly consisted of group activities to familiarize everyone with each other, as well as learning some basic postures that we would practice throughout the workshop. On the second day of the course, I and several other participants were guided through our first Sudarshan Kriya Yoga. Throughout the breathing techniques, several people laughed, others cried, and some seemed relatively



unaffected. I was personally strongly affected, and I felt I was able to release a great deal of emotional trauma.

On the third day, we met for some more group activities and discussed our experiences with each other. By late afternoon, the course was completed. I felt a relief that after years of struggling daily with anxiety, I had finally experienced something that directly affected that feeling which was always troubling me. I was impressed and content with the technique, and with the teachers. I also felt that I had built a sense of trust with the other participants, and with the teachers. Before leaving the course on the final day, one of the teachers, named Venkat, came to me and asked,

“David, do you have five people in your life who trust you completely?”

I thought for a moment about my closest friends and replied “well, yes, I think so.”

“Would these five people do anything you ask of them? Without asking questions?”

I felt a tension rise in me as I imagined compromising the trust of my friends whom I had known for years for the request of a man whom I had only met and begun to trust just two days ago.

“Well, I don’t know, maybe.”

He paused for a moment, then told me what I was hoping he wouldn’t say.

“David, I want you to convince five of your friends to take the basic course.”

I hesitated to speak, and looked at the floor for a moment. My discomfort was visible to Venkat.

“Didn’t this course do something good for you?” he asked me.

“Yes”

“Don’t you want to share this experience with others? So that they can have something good too?”

I could see his logic, but I was still uncomfortable with the idea. It made me nervous to think of insisting to those closest to me that they should take such an expensive course that they had never heard anything about. It felt strange to imagine pressuring those who trust me to make

such a spontaneous, expensive commitment, which might not have the same impact as it did on me.

“OK, I will think about it.”

In the end, I mentioned the course to two friends who I thought might be interested in it, but I could not bring myself to pressure them to join. Both of them seemed genuinely interested, and I thought that learning SKY could be significantly helpful to those two individuals. Having them join a basic course would also meet Venkat’s request. But the stark price of taking a beginner’s course combined with the uncomfortable pressure I felt when Venkat asked me to recruit five friends did not make me feel that I could demand such a thing of my friends in good faith. Although both friends initially expressed interest, I never followed up with them about it, and, as far as I know, they never took the course.

\*\*\*

In February 2019, I checked the Art of Living homepage to see how popular AOL courses were in Germany, where I was living at the time of writing this thesis. In a single week alone, the Art of Living Foundation held over 20 courses throughout Germany— in Mannheim, Tübingen, Frankfurt, Berlin, and over a dozen other locations (Art of Living Foundation 2019c). Their most popular course is an introductory one called The Happiness Program, a workshop that usually lasts three days, which teaches “powerful breathing techniques [i.e., SKY]” and “mind mastery” (Art of Living E-Learning 2019).

The Happiness Course is not the only course offered by AOL. Other courses include: Silence Retreat; Health and Happiness Workshop; Sahaj Samadhi Meditation Course; Yoga, Ayurveda and Meditation; and many others. At the core of many of these courses is the breathing technique called Sudarshan Kriya Yoga, which “eliminates stress, fatigue and negative emotions such as anger, frustration and depression, leaving you calm yet energized, focused yet relaxed” (Art of Living Foundation 2017e). The emphasis on ‘mind mastery’ and ‘eliminating stress’ using Sudarshan Kriya Yoga reflects the core philosophy of AOL: “We Serve Society by Strengthening the Individual” (Art of Living Foundation 2019a).

Many of these AOL courses take place in city or suburban spaces that are rented out for that purpose.<sup>6</sup> Some AOL participants are also able to volunteer their own properties for AOL courses and events on occasions. This was the case for a two-acre organic farm near Delhi, India, which was owned by an AOL devotee whom I met in the fall of 2018. She told me that AOL events were held on her property on several occasions. Large-scale courses and events are also held in ashrams and other buildings that are exclusively owned by AOL—such as the Ved Niketan ashram, a property of almost two acres in Rishikesh, India.<sup>7</sup> Some AOL events have attracted crowds in the hundreds of thousands or even millions, and required the temporary use of large, outdoor locations.<sup>8</sup>

## 1.2 Sri Sri Ravi Shankar

Before founding the Art of Living, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar spent a period of time in the mid-1970s with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of Transcendental Meditation (TM). (Jacobs 2015, 70). There are a few different accounts of how SSRS left the Transcendental Meditation movement. Most of the accounts from within the organization suggest that the reason was to establish a Vedic school in Bangalore, and that Sri Sri departed the TM movement on more or

---

<sup>6</sup> In 2014 in the suburbs of Hyderabad, India, I took another introductory course with about eight other people in the rented activity room of a gated community.

<sup>7</sup> During a brief stay in Rishikesh in September 2018, I heard an interesting story from two unrelated interlocutors about the appropriation of the Ved Niketan ashram by Art of Living. The ashram was supposedly nearing a transition of ownership in the last decade as the founding swami, Shri Vishwaguru Maharaj, was nearing the end of his life. Apparently there was some confusion and controversy as to who was to rightfully take possession of the ashram. Maharaj had supposedly chosen his disciple Mataji Santosh Bharti to take over, but after his death the ashram was seized by a different disciple. Mataji was unable to reclaim the ashram for herself, and sought the support of AOL in reclaiming it (I imagine this could mean legal and financial support, although the details were unclear to me). As the story goes, once Mataji was able to reclaim the ashram with AOL's support, the AOL then took control of the ashram for their own purposes. I was able to spend an hour in this ashram one afternoon, where a third interlocutor who was temporarily living there told me that I had just missed a group of several hundred AOL devotees who had stayed over the weekend for an AOL course.

<sup>8</sup> Besides using the Jakkur airfield near Bangalore in 2006 and the Berlin Olympic Stadium in 2011, AOL held a three-day World Culture Festival in the floodplain of the Yamuna river near Delhi in March of 2016. The event drew a considerable amount of media attention in a controversy centered around demands that AOL take responsibility for its impact on the local ecology of the flood plain.

The festival was expected to draw more than 3.5 million people in attendance. As plans were being made to build the necessary infrastructure, the massive scale of the event became a cause of concern for the Indian National Green Tribunal (NGT). Just a few weeks before the event, it was reported that Sri Sri Ravi Shankar suggested hundreds of thousands of people should release “enzymes” into 17 drains joining the Yamuna River in order to clean the water, which stank of sewage. Less than a year after the World Culture Festival, the NGT made a verdict that AOL should have to pay 50 million INR for restoration work (Ghosh 2017). The AOL responded with a statement that they do not agree with the verdict, and that they would appeal to the Indian Supreme Court (ibid.).

less positive, or at least neutral terms. In any case, it is clear that in 1981, he discontinued his association with Mahesh Yogi and founded the Art of Living Foundation.

Shortly after this, in 1982, SSRS went into a ten-day period of silence, in which he developed the Sudarshan Kriya technique. According to Shankar, he was searching for a more effective way to spread happiness when he developed the technique:

I had already travelled around the world. I had taught yoga and meditation. But still I was concerned about how to help people live a happy life. I felt there was something that was lacking. (Art of Living Foundation 2017b)

He suggests that the technique came to him like an inspiration. Up until 1989, Shankar was the only one to teach the course. In January 1989, he recorded an audiotape with his basic guidance for the SKY technique and trained some of his early followers to be the first teachers who would spread out into different parts of the world (Jacobs 2015, 76). This step has been an important factor in creating the global network that it has become today.

### 1.3 “It Works”: SKY, Legitimization Strategies, and Dissent

Sudarshan Kriya Yoga is one of the main tenants of the AOLF. The main website champions this technique as “a simple yet powerful rhythmic breathing technique that de-stresses, and cleanses at the cellular level, and effectively draws you into a deep state of meditation” (Art of Living Foundation 2017d). It is also considered “the cornerstone of all Art of Living courses” (Art of Living Foundation 2017b). The Happiness program centers around SKY, while other courses, like the Youth Leadership Training Program, focus on other topics but include SKY in the training.

Sudarshan Kriya Yoga consists of cycles of slow, medium, and fast paced breathing (Tøllefsen 2012, 107). These are preceded by a series of pranayamas (yogic breath control exercises). Although SKY emphasizes the breath, it is not itself referred to as a pranayama.

Since the 1990s, a sizeable number of scientific articles have been published on the health-related effects of SKY. The Art of Living website claims over 70 independent studies on SKY, and lists at least 33 of them on their web page (Art of Living Foundation 2017c). Brown

and Gerbarg (2005) conducted an comprehensive analysis of many of the clinical studies related to SKY up to 2005, including some of their own studies. They concluded that:

there is now sufficient evidence to consider *Sudarshan Kriya* Yoga as a potentially beneficial, low-risk adjunct for the treatment of stress, anxiety, PTSD, depression, stress-related medical illnesses, and substance abuse, and for the rehabilitation of criminal offenders. (Brown and Gerbarg 2005, 715)

Science plays an important role in legitimizing SKY and AOL, but perhaps the most important legitimizing factor is the individual experience of participants themselves. Dr. Michael E. Nielsen explains it well in an interview with *Yoga Journal*:

What Shankar is emphasizing is the experiential component of religion... Its advantage is that you can have the results right away... You do the practice and the stress leaves you and you feel better. It promises a very satisfying and immediate thing. You can feel better without relying on someone else to explain it rationally and without relying on the promise of heaven later. What Shankar is teaching is very appealing to people for this reason. (Salkin 2007)

Stephen Jacobs gives more specific evidence of this:

Many active participants suggest that it is the subjective experiential aspect which is fundamental to their continued involvement with AOL. For example a part time volunteer teacher indicated that the practices of AOL created within her a 'feeling of stillness inside'. A participant on an Art of Silence Course indicated that his involvement with AOL provided 'experiences which cannot be expressed in words' and that it gave him 'peace of mind'. (2015, 21)

When asking a senior teacher who now travels around the world why she thought that AOL managed to attract people from very different cultures, she replied:

Because it [the techniques of AOL] works. Fundamentally it is universal knowledge, universal values. The whole thing is based on universal wisdom and essential human values. All cultures, creeds and whatever have a resonance with that. (Jacobs 2014, 875)

Besides being able to experience the effects of SKY firsthand, its legitimacy as a transformative technique is tied back into scientific authority in the important claim about how breathing is connected to our emotional state:

Because the breath corresponds to emotions, the organization's teachings proffer that this can be reversed; one can utilize the breath to change emotions. 'It (Sudarshan Kriya) flushes our anger, anxiety and worry; leaving the mind completely relaxed and energized'. (Tøllefsen 2012, 67)

This is a very interesting point made by AOL. Although it excludes social, economic, and political factors that may contribute to one's emotional state, it is, from a psychological perspective, a scientifically sound claim. According to Ronald Ley, a behavioral scientist, "changes in breathing follow changes in emotion and cognition... changes in breathing can [also] lead to changes in emotion and cognition" (1999, 470).

SKY is accessible to all AOL participants in the form of basic courses. The only restrictions to its access are in the availability of courses with a certified teacher within one's region—and, of course, one's ability to pay the course fee. In some circumstances, AOL courses are likely paid for by government consultancy contracts in their attempts to rehabilitate traumatized war veterans, or by research institutions conducting studies on SKY.

AOL courses are widely available across multiple continents, and certified teachers can travel anywhere to give a course as long as there is a space for it with enough participants. Learning SKY is an essential first step in the process of becoming an AOL participant. It also acts to establish one's own personal experience with SKY as the driving force in one's decision to maintain involvement with AOL. In this way, SKY is similar to many New Age practices, in that people become disillusioned with external authority and turn to their own subjective experience as a source of validation. But the existence of SSRS as an external authority also stands in contrast to many New Age sub-cultures:

Active participants in AOL clearly regard Sri Sri Ravi Shankar as the source of authoritative knowledge. In other words there seems to be a tension between the internal experiential validation of AOL and the role attributed to Sri Sri Ravi Shankar as a source of wisdom and authority. (Jacobs 2015, 22)

This tension between internal experiential validation and SSRS as the sole source of wisdom presents a challenge to the organization. One of the stated goals of SSRS is a "stress-free, violence-free society," yet the tension between different sources of authority in AOL inherently contradict that goal (International Association for Human Values 2019b).

When these tensions become too much to bear, some AOL participants become ex-participants. There exist a number of anti-AOL blogs (Beyond the Art of Living, Leaving the Art of Living, etc.). Some of these people were upset with the way that they were treated. Others claimed the techniques have negatively impacted their health. Below we can see an example of someone describing their experiences in both physiological and emotional terms:

To turn hyperventilating into a panacea, as if it somehow cleanses the emotions or energy system, is naive to say the least. Breathing practices in spiritual systems also require specific knowledge about what an individual person needs at different times... Franchising practices and making one technique into a panacea is out of touch with life. It is also devoid of real compassion, because compassion must be rooted in a deep acceptance of human nature, which means there are no overly simplistic solutions to all problems. When a spiritual technique is sold as a universal solution to all problems, most people will fail to get to the promised results... (Humble Witness 2018).

The group of people who speak so critically against the AOL appear to be a minority, but nonetheless an important one. Although the AOL courses follow specific rubrics, there seems to be a certain amount of flexibility and randomness in the teachers that are assigned to the courses, and in the groups that end up taking them. For this reason, and presumably many others, the experiences of those who get involved in AOL seem to vary.

It is also worth mentioning that not all participants who leave the AOL do so on bad terms. Jacobs summarizes the story of an interlocutor whom he calls Eleanor. Eleanor was involved in AOL for a number of years, eventually becoming a teacher herself. After becoming pregnant and giving birth to a son:

her son's needs took priority, and after three years of being very actively involved in AOL she decided that it was too time-consuming. Eleanor suggested, 'I kind of drifted away'. She continued going to satsangs... but gradually stopped doing the *kriya*. However, her overall assessment of AOL remains positive (Jacobs 2015, 152).

#### 1.4 Critique of Art of Living and Spirituality

Besides online blogs and news articles, some of the more direct critiques of AOL can be drawn from the discourse around New Age spiritualities and how they discourage critical

thinking and, at times, even defend and promote corporate capitalism and all of the social and economic inequalities that come along with it.

Jeremy Carrette and Richard King have severely criticized many aspects of modern spiritualities and psycho-physical techniques, which “seek to pacify feelings of anxiety and disquiet at the individual level rather than seeking to challenge the social, political and economic inequalities that cause such distress” (2005, 34).

Elements of these accusations are undoubtedly present in the AOL. AOL participants are often eager to tell of the miracles that they have experienced through SKY—regarding stress, anxiety, peace of mind, and other emotional and psychological states. In an educational video describing SKY and how it works, the narrator states that “published research from Sweden shows that SKY significantly reduces the stress, anxiety and depression we face under the demands of everyday living” (Jacobs 2015, 104). There is, however, a potential contradiction here in what is considered to be the *root cause* of stress, in the context of ‘everyday living.’

Both the anecdotes of AOL participants and the scientific studies of how SKY affects the human body give plenty of evidence to suggest that SKY has a significant impact on the levels of stress hormones and subjective well-being for those who practice it; but these figures do not account for those whose ‘everyday living’ is more of a struggle for survival, rather than a search for meaning and an escape from stress.

Carrette and King summarize this contradiction very well in the context of a new age health practitioner:

... the arising of any state of mind that is disturbed by the status quo is immediately dismissed as ‘negative’ and reduced to the level of an individual health problem: ‘To feel dissatisfied is not usually so much to do with your situation as it is to do with having deficient spleen chi’ (Russell, 2002: 180). At one level this is an attempt by a holistic health practitioner to encourage westerners to take seriously traditional Chinese medical diagnosis as a helpful aid in their busy lives. At the social level, however, it is little more than a recipe for mind-control... Where, we might ask in such accounts, is the recognition of the value of experiencing *dissatisfaction* with the world and the wider social and political context of oppression? Should our reaction to outrages like Auschwitz really be to promote a philosophy of ‘grin and bear it’? What we find in such works is an extreme *individualisation* of suffering and oppression (it is always *your* problem, deal



with yourself, not with society)... It is ‘feel good’ spirituality for the urban and the affluent and it has nothing to say to the poor and the marginalised in society, other than offering them a regime of compliance, a new ‘opiate for the masses’. (2005, 119)

To give some more specific details of structural inequality, besides the extreme example of Auschwitz, the authors cite some statistics relating to global poverty. Although the statistics are somewhat outdated, they are still very much relevant to the state of global inequality today:

According to the UN report on Human Development for 1999, 1.3 billion people survive on less than one US dollar a day and whereas the richest 20% of the world’s population enjoy 86% of its consumption, the poorest 20% consume only 1.3%. Between 1960 and 1989, the gulf between rich and poor nations has doubled. The gulf between the rich and the poor in general continued to increase throughout the 1990s. However, in the carefree and affluent worlds of writers like Russell and Chopra such statistics have no bearing or impact. There is no mention of dealing with poverty, social injustice or inequality, except insofar as these are seen as a condition of the modern individual’s own *self-imposed* oppression and limitation. (2005, 119)

In their book, Carrette and King generalize these conclusions toward a few major figures of the New Age movement. This critique is nevertheless a valid one that the AOL must face if they are to take the idea of a ‘stress-free, violence-free society’ seriously. It is true that AOL supports a number of social initiatives, but much of the AOL public image and its institutions still revolve around the trademarked technique (Sudarshan Kriya Yoga™) for stress reduction that is almost exclusively taught behind the pay-walls of certified AOL courses.

One of the few academic articles on AOL that I could find comes from Nandini Gooptu, a professor of South Asian Studies at St Antony’s College, University of Oxford. Although I could only find a single article by Gooptu related to AOL, she does an excellent job of applying the individualist critique of spirituality to the context of AOL, and I will proceed to quote her article extensively in the next few pages.

According to Gooptu, in many large Indian cities—like Bangalore, Mumbai and Delhi—“Art of Living’s following is known to be largely concentrated in the private corporate sector or the IT industry and hence concerned mainly with workplace well-being and business or corporate practice” (2016, 944). For this reason, Gooptu chose to conduct her research in the less business/IT-developed city of Calcutta, where “Art of Living practitioners are, therefore, drawn

from a wider cross-section of the middle classes, along with some from the poorer sections of the population living in slums, where Art of Living members have been active in promoting spirituality” (2016, 944).

Gooptu found that many AOL practitioners were nevertheless convinced that stress within each person is the key cause that creates greater social issues, and that the best course of action would therefore be to address stress on an individual level, rather than taking a critical stance on political issues and social structures. Gooptu had a number of interesting observations in her article:

All the Art of Living members I spoke to believed that the social problems, violence, and crime that afflict such disadvantaged people originate mainly from the stress of deprivation and insecurity, and so can be reduced by engendering mental calmness, equilibrium, and contentment, of which they have a deficit. (2016, 954)

A highly active Art of Living member, who frequently travels to areas affected by natural calamities such as floods or cyclones, expounded the importance of spiritual intervention as distinct from developmental aid or humanitarian disaster relief: “Relief cannot solve the problem, unless they [the victims of disaster] deal with their fear, terror, trauma—memory of the terrifying event. This has to be from within [not external aid] and sudarshan kriya and pranayam help exactly with this.” (2016, 957; brackets in the original)

Gooptu then gives another example:

Similarly, another Art of Living member, who coordinates Art of Living’s work with children, young people, and women in a number of Calcutta slums, explained that employment generation schemes and the provision of other support and services by the state were not sufficient, both because they breed dependence and because they fail to address the root cause, which is the mind. What is needed is to ‘make them [inwardly, spiritually, mentally] strong and responsible to enable them to take up community issues—making them independent and committed.’ (ibid.; brackets in the original)

These quotes illustrate a strict emphasis on individuals’ suffering as dependent on their own states of mind, combined with a distrust of state-level intervention plans. They also demonstrate the contradicting logic of social service that is uninformed about the social causes of poverty and crime, such as discrimination and economic exploitation, and how these social

circumstances ensue desperation that manifests in the form of crime and other desperate acts of poverty.

Gooptu further illustrates this point by quoting a specific AOL member on the topic of poverty and employment:

We do pro-health campaigns in slums, not about disease treatment, but about staying healthy—90 per cent of diseases start from the mind, we can address the root cause of the problem, so we teach techniques to have a healthy mind . . . And about work—we first ask them what their problems are and when they talk about lack of ability to work, we tell them how to tackle the problem by looking after the mind . . . We give them something better than jobs— we can teach them self-confidence and personal power and inner strength and then they will be able to work; they will think their problems are less serious . . . Well look, I have changed in my own professional work—huge change—every day sadhana<sup>9</sup> brings courage, centred-ness, confidence, inner strength, inside balance, not too much affected by outside conditions, I can think calmly . . . (Gooptu 2016, 957)

She later comments on the implications of this approach to solving poverty:

such problems as poverty or violence can be seen to be overcome through human will, in turn encouraging an inclination to offer spiritual help to the deprived and the violent, or to hold them culpable for failing to surmount their own predicament and exploitation through mental effort. (2016, 969)

Coming back to this contradiction of where to locate the *root causes* of stress, Gooptu gives another example of an AOL member suggesting that the root cause of stress is limited to the mind, without considering wider social and political contexts:

One of the young people emphatically insisted that he had no faith in taking an active part in politics, let alone political parties, and that he thought the best way to tackle one's problems, find personal satisfaction, and indeed also to contribute to the 'country' was to improve one's own self in every way, to focus on one's own work, and to do the best one can for one's family and oneself, rather than ruin the country through politics. (2016, 968)

This 'innocent', intuitive, and experiential orientation not only breeds a comfortable political insouciance, but also discourages—even precludes—critical social enquiry. It buttresses a

---

<sup>9</sup> A term loosely referring to spiritual practice.

subjective, psychological approach to the social world and its problems, solutions to which are sought in personal spiritual transformation... valorization of spiritual values and practices as the ideal mode of reform of the individual person, which is then expected to ensure societal and political stability and peace. (2016, 968–69)

Gooptu describes the contradiction of apolitical spirituality, with its obsessive focus on mental stress as “homing in on the symptom rather than the cause” (2016, 969).

And finally, coming back to Carrette and King’s point about “the value of experiencing *dissatisfaction* with the world and the wider social and political context of oppression,” and if we should really just ‘grin and bear it,’ Gooptu comments on the danger of promoting such an apolitical stance:

contentious politics stand the risk of being denied legitimacy due to the tendency to characterize them as supposedly stress-driven and negativity-induced conflictual, confrontational, or aggressive behaviour and action. Instead, much premium is placed on political consensus and accommodation through an emphasis on acceptance, forgiveness, and ‘letting go’, along with the valorization of spiritual values and practices as the ideal mode of reform of the individual person, which is then expected to ensure societal and political stability and peace. (Gooptu 2016, 969)

When calling into question this ‘grin and bear it’ philosophy, Carrette and King give the example of Auschwitz. Although WWII and the holocaust are several generations apart from us now, violent nationalism and institutionalized racism are still very much alive today in a variety of different cultural contexts throughout the world, including India<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, the economic inequalities and injustices described in Carrette and King’s book are more easily juxtaposed against this ‘letting go’ philosophy in the context of AOL and Indian society.

Besides the questions around AOL as an individualized spirituality, there is evidence that AOLF places a particular emphasis on participants being engaged with society. One of the main ways that the AOLF encourages members to engage with society is through *sewa* (service). This can mean volunteering at any AOL center to help maintain the facilities, or to assist with AOL courses, or to help with any AOL social project. Although *sewa* in its AOL form is meant to be a

---

<sup>10</sup> Tøllefsen gives a brief account of several examples that tie AOL and SSRS both directly and indirectly to the “Hindutva” right-wing religious nationalist politics of India’s ruling political party (2016).

way in which members can directly work to benefit society, it is still framed as “a means to one’s individual spiritual development,” rather than strictly as an act of compassionate altruism for the sake of others (Jacobs 2015, 116).

### 1.5 Institutions and Public Relations

AOL contrasts its individualistic focus with its image of social responsibility through various social initiatives. These social initiatives could be seen as genuine efforts to improve society, but they could also be seen as an effort to justify and balance out some of the questionable, rough edges of their organization—like the high course fees, the appeal to upper-middle class consumers, and some of the various other accusations that Carrette and King have highlighted about consumer spiritualities in general.

Throughout India, one can find not only dozens of AOL course centers, but also many facilities, institutions, and banners bearing the names of various AOL sister organizations related to its various social initiatives. The Art of Living Free Schools organization claims “435 schools across 20 states in India providing free holistic education, food, clothing and other supplies to over 58,000 children... whose parents cannot afford to send them to school” (Art of Living Schools 2019). The Art of Living Water Projects organization claims to be reviving 30 rivers, effecting 3,000 villages and benefitting over 5,000,000 people (Art of Living Water Projects 2019a). The SSIAST claims that “[m]ore than 2 million farmers & youths from 19 states have been trained in spread [sic] effect of Sri Sri Natural Farming technique,” which emphasizes sustainable farming practices and forbids the use of chemicals (Sri Sri Institute of Agricultural Sciences & Technology Trust 2019a).

Besides these handful of initiatives, the International Association for Human Values, one of AOL’s oldest sister organizations, currently organizes various AOL global charitable projects. These include disaster relief, trauma relief, organic farming, youth leadership, and a few others projects across four continents (International Association for Human Values 2019b).

And all the while, the AOL markets its own products and Ayurvedic services under the brand name of Sri Sri Tattva. They sell basic groceries, cooking ingredients, soap, skin creams, health supplements, laundry detergent, clothing, and a few other varieties of products. Sri Sri

Tattva promotes its “certified range of Organic Products... [as] part of our continued endeavor to present high quality products for wholesome and healthful living” (Sri Sri Tattva 2019a). Their most clearly stated goal on their webpage is “promoting health and wellness to every household,” and they address social responsibility as follows:

[t]he brand presents a strong commitment to social responsibility and proudly supports the Art of Living foundation’s rural and social welfare projects. Over the years, the goodwill earned is a result of our attention to bringing across safe, effective, high quality and responsible products. (ibid.)

Besides the financial support that Sri Sri Tattva provides to the AOL charitable initiatives, the details of this “strong commitment” to social responsibility are left unclear. Unfortunately, little more can be inferred from their website about the sustainability of their ingredients or commitments to fair trade policies and labor practices. The only other information I made note of from their website was the biography of the Managing Director of Sri Sri Tattva:

An eminent industrialist, an Ayurveda enthusiast and a successful entrepreneur, Mr. Arvind Varchaswi currently serves as a Managing Director of Sri Sri Tattva, an organisation committed to seeing a healthy, happy, modern world, through the ancient science of life and well-being... Under his able leadership, Sri Sri Tattva has grown into a large organization with the brand presence in 33 countries across 6 continents... Arvind has been a featured speaker in several global business and leadership forums... He has also served on the Board of Organizers of the International Conference on Corporate Culture & Spirituality in 2004. (Sri Sri Tattva 2019b)

It is unfortunate that I was not able to research more deeply into Sri Sri Tattva. The quote above illustrates perhaps more clearly than anything else the fundamental contradiction with which AOL contends. It appears that the hegemonic economic and social system of corporate-capitalist is simply taken for granted by AOL. Any challenge to that system, or even any critical approach to the ways in which that system is directly responsible for various forms of social inequality and exploitation, as well as for environmental destruction appear to go unnoticed or ignored by most AOL participants.

Putting Sri Sri Tattva to the side, another important dynamic of the AOL is how it represents itself as engaged with global conflict resolution. In 2014, Shankar was invited by a Colombian delegate to participate in the Colombian peace process between the government and

the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). After two years, a bilateral ceasefire was declared, which AOL sources suggest were significantly orchestrated by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (Art of Living 2019b).

The degree to which Shankar actually orchestrated this ceasefire could warrant its own research, considering that the conflict had been going on for over 50 years and, like most contemporary armed conflicts, consisted of complicated social, political, and economic dynamics; but in 2016, both the Peace delegation FARC leader Iván Márquez and the Colombian president at the time, Juan Manuel Santos, issued statements of appreciation and gratitude towards Sri Sri Ravi Shankar for the role that he played in the negotiations. Both leaders give praise for Shankar's role in facilitating peace, and specifically for his role in promoting the "Gandhian principle of non-violence" (Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar 2016; El Arte de Vivir Colombia 2016).

It is difficult to interpret all of the implications of these interactions, and the degree to which Shankar really played a decisive role in creating peace in Colombia. In the very least, it brings the image of Shankar and the AOLF as an international humanitarian organization more to the forefront. He continues to meet regularly with world leaders, spreading his charisma and guiding meditations in front of audiences of thousands, with many thousands more watching live streams and reading news articles.

So far I have provided an overview of the AOLF and its actions. The SKY technique that is offered in AOL courses, and the image of SSRS as an international humanitarian leader both play a critical role in constructing the identity of AOL. However, it remains unclear how these two elements of AOL translate into progress towards the goal of a 'stress-free, violence-free society.' Instead, most of the attention regarding the social impacts of AOL appears to be directed at its social initiative projects.

## Chapter Two - Overview of Social Initiatives and the International Headquarters

### 2.1 Overview

The International Association for Human Values (IAHV) is one of the earliest established sister organizations of AOL social initiatives, originally founded in 1997. According to the website,

The International Association for Human Values was created in Geneva in 1997 by His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar as a global platform for humanitarian initiatives that solve problems by uplifting human values. (International Association for Human Values 2019a)

Some of their more commonly known programs include trauma relief for victims of natural disaster, war veterans, and prisoners. They also run programs for rejuvenating rivers, women's empowerment, and youth empowerment in schools. It would seem logical that IAHV acts as an overarching organization that oversees all of the other AOL projects and sister organizations—but this structure was not evident from what I observed.

It is difficult to distinguish the boundaries between the various projects and sister organizations of the AOL. Many of their service projects are listed on their more up-to-date website (Art of Living Foundation 2019d). Here, one can find more detailed information about some of the highlighted projects, as well as some of the 'global achievements' that AOL claims responsibility for, such as "*10,000,000 trees* planted around the world...*5,688,000 people* benefited through free stress-relief workshops...*200,000 inmates* transformed... *40,000 villages* reached with 5H program... *6,000 farmers* trained in organic farming..." (Art of Living Foundation 2019d; italics in the original). Again, one sees the same programs listed as above, as well as rural development and environmental sustainability. Under the environmental sustainability link, we find more claims of huge numbers of trees planted (Mission Green Earth), farmers trained in natural farming, tons of waste cleaned up, rivers rejuvenated, etc..

Under the 'spreading natural farming practices' subheading, AOL claims "[m]ore than 2,000,000 farmers across India, including those in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan now have the expertise to resuscitate soil fertility and the bounty of their crops" (Art of Living Foundation 2019b). Early on in my research, I intended to focus my field research on the topic of



‘natural farming practices’, considering that there are a plethora of other projects going on under the AOL heading—over half of which I have not even yet mentioned. I will go more into detail later about how AOL engages with farmers, but first I will cover a few more of the social initiatives I was exposed to in my field work.

## 2.2 Ashram Initiatives

In October 2018, I spent one week at the AOL international headquarters near Bangalore, Karnataka. Of course, one week could hardly be called an ethnography, but it was still a kind of excursion into the world of AOL at its most abstracted level—with all of its projects, daily Satsangs, and thousands of devotees. A number of sustainability projects also exist on the property, including a biodiesel reactor (for recycling plastic), a Biogas reactor (for recycling food waste and kitchen scraps), a paper recycling plant, and a seven-acre permaculture farm.

Before going to Bangalore, I made contact with many AOL members in Delhi. One highly involved member put me in touch with several key contacts at the ashram, including a devotee who allowed me to stay in his apartment for a few days, as well as with the Executive Director of the Sri Sri Institute for Advanced Research. After arriving in Bangalore, my first task was to meet with this Executive Director at her request and explain my intentions and my research proposal before she would determine what level of access to give me during my stay.

By the end of our meeting, she had called for another highly involved member of the ashram to come, then introduced us. She instructed him to take me by scooter wherever I wanted to go around the headquarters and to put me in touch with whomever I wanted to meet, according to my research interests, and with time permitting. For the level of access that I was granted in that week, I am very grateful. Although my time at the AOL headquarters was short, it was very eventful—packed with meetings, tours, activities, interviews, and discussions; and still with complete freedom to wander alone as I wished.

## 2.3 Sri Sri Rural Development Program

The Sri Sri Rural Development Program (SSRDP), established in 2001, is an effort to empower Rural India by “bringing together the best global practices, corporate thinking and

accountability, [and] the highest standards of corporate governance and transparency to create a model of sustainable development” (Sri Sri Rural Development Program 2019b). To give an idea of how this philosophy renders, I will list some examples of their initiatives below.

Light A Home claims to have ‘lit up’ over 9000 homes using solar power, which can also be used for cooking, and as water pumps (Sri Sri Rural Development Program 2019c). This program emphasizes the importance of illumination for school children to study, and for livelihood, women entrepreneurs, and night-time medical emergencies.

The Community of Rural Enterprise is meant to “develop village level infrastructure” by “provid[ing] adequate opportunities and income generating activities to young people in their villages... [using] technologies like Areccanut Plate Making, Smokeless Chulahas, Agarbatti Rolling, Bio Gas Making, Screen Printing, Charcoal Briquetting & Renewable Energy” (Sri Sri Rural Development Program 2019a).

The Shakti Women Empowerment Programs seem similar, with slight variation and more directed towards women:

Rural women were trained in different skills like stitching, cutting, embroidery, bead work, for jute bags. A variety of jute bags have been manufactured ranging from fancy ladies handbags to utility bags. Agarbatti rolling provides another convenient and simple means for rural women to earn their livelihood. Rural women trained at SSRDP have participated in stalls and fairs at a national level and are well trained to handle bulk orders. Various corporate organizations have supported SSRDP in the past with this program. (Sri Sri Rural Development Program 2019d)

It is interesting that this program has been used to fill corporate bulk orders. In theory, there is nothing wrong with keeping the value of these products close to the producers, but it would be interesting to see how evenly distributed the profits of their labor are. Unfortunately, an exploration of this topic was beyond the scope of my research, but still warrants mentioning.

## 2.4 River Rejuvenation

It is no surprise that the lack of water availability in many parts of India presents a common challenge to be tackled by the Indian government and NGOs like AOL. The River Rejuvenation Project is AOL’s response to this challenge. This project began in 2013 and now

claims to have revived 33 dying rivers (Art of Living Water Projects 2019b). During my visit to the AOL headquarters, I had the opportunity to interview Abhishek, one of many project coordinators representing a river rejuvenation project.

Abhishek identified deforestation to be one of the main causes reducing river flow, since trees help to store water in the soil, which would otherwise evaporate or flood out. Unfortunately, I did not clarify with him how he proposed to deal with the issue of deforestation.

Abhishek described one of the major actions toward rejuvenating rivers as removing silt from the rivers and ponds, making it easier for these sources of water to penetrate into the water table—in turn recharging wells and water availability in general, as well as replenishing soils. He considered empowering community control over their local water sources as one of the main tenets of the River Rejuvenation project.

Abhishek considered mobilizing people to be his main work, as up to 70 volunteers may be needed in a given project. Besides the encouragement of community involvement, Abhishek mentioned the collaboration of geo-mapping experts and the use of satellite imaging software developed by the Indian Space Research Organisation when planning and monitoring river rejuvenation projects.

One of the most important outcomes of these efforts is to increase access to water amongst Indian farmers. The AOL Water Projects website specifically claims to have “augmented farmers’ incomes through improved agricultural yields and increased the number of crops per year, directly reducing farmer suicides” (Art of Living Water Projects 2019b).

Although increased access to water would doubtless be welcomed in drought-stricken areas, the issue of farmer suicide in India is a complex one, and can hardly be reduced to an issue of income and access to water. The overwhelming strain of price fluctuations in the global economy, as well as the efforts of seed and fertilizer companies to take advantage of the Indian domestic market lead to vicious cycles of moneylending and debt that often play a key role in farmer desperation and suicides (Dhanagare 2016, 148).

The AOL approach to farmer suicides can be further called into question by a quote from SSRS that was cited in an Indian news source:

To a question about farmer suicides in Maharashtra and elsewhere, the spiritual leader said, “We have done pad-yatra in 512 villages of Vidarbha, and on that basis we can say that poverty alone is not the reason behind the farmer suicides. They lack spirituality. Therefore, I appeal to all the people who work in this field (of spirituality) to reach out to farmers,” he said. Yoga and pranayam were essential to “remove suicidal tendencies” among the farmers, he said. (NDTV)

Although living in poverty undoubtedly causes stress for many, the opinion expressed in this quote places a misguided emphasis on individual responsibility. The quote equates the austerity of material and economic conditions of Indian farmers with a deficit of yoga and ‘spirituality’ as serious factors that drive many Indian farmers to commit suicide. The phrase ‘suicidal tendencies’ also suggests that the issue of farmer suicides in India is entirely a psychological, individual one, void of any social or economic context.

Despite the contradictions I found related to farmer suicides and Shankar’s statement, it seemed clear to me that certain AOL projects and social initiatives showed potential in their aims and their methods. My interview with Abhishek convinced me of that potential perhaps more than anything else I observed in my fieldwork. Abhishek’s description of community-based local action, and coordination with the necessary experts seemed both organized and effective to me. His character also struck me as genuine and professional.

Abhishek’s project seemed to be primarily focused on the welfare of both the local community and the environment, without any intent to profit economically from the project. Although the project benefitted the public image of AOL as a form of social work in action, this did not appear to be the main focus of the project. My understanding of his project was that it began through local organizing, and only at a later stage sought the support of AOL—although I unfortunately did not have the time to clarify the details of how AOL supported the project, and in what way it could be distinguished from a non-AOL water management project.

## 2.5 The Sri Sri Institute of Agricultural Sciences & Technology Trust

Before meeting any representatives of SSIASST, I searched through the official website for some basic information. The collection of information on the SSIASST website can be difficult to interpret in a linear way. There are so many sub-projects and education programs being offered by this one branch of AOL that make it difficult to discern a singular point of focus

of the SSIAST. Nonetheless, all of the activities of the SSIAST seem to revolve around agriculture, sustainability, and Indian farmers. The major objectives of all activities of the SSIAST are listed as follows:

- Propagate proven indigenous cow based sustainable methods
- Integrate agriculture with livestock
- Adoption of holistic cultivation practices
- Encouraging the idea of self-reliance
- Decreasing the dependence of farmer on market for inputs
- Demonstration of holistic, sustainable developmental models

More specifically, the SSIAST is:

established mainly for the relief of the poor and downtrodden in rural areas viz-small and marginal farmers by promoting agro technology and undertaking extension activities like training of farmers, creation of Seed Bank of indigenous varieties, undertaking plantation programs, collection of seeds and making nurseries for environmental improvement and economic benefit of small & marginal farmers. (Sri Sri Institute of Agricultural Sciences & Technology Trust 2019a)

The training of farmers is one of the major efforts by the SSIAST to achieve the objectives of “holistic cultivation” and “sustainable development models.” The website also lists more information on the various education programs (diplomas and certificates in water management, bee keeping, and organic farming), as well as ongoing projects like the Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY), an initiative to promote organic farming in the country (Sri Sri Institute of Agricultural Sciences & Technology Trust 2019c). The SSIAST also includes a type of exclusive membership it called Sri Sri Kisaan Manch. It appears to function as a networking tool:

Sri Sri Institute of Institute of Agricultural Sciences and Technology, a trust working under the guidance of His Holiness Sri Sri Ravishankar Guruji has initiated “Sri Sri Kisaan Manch” (SSKM). This is providing a unique platform for the farmers to get their problems solved through collective effort in the Globalized economy. Farmers of India can now represent [sic] through SSKVM and be confident of their problems being heard by the Government. (Sri Sri Institute of Agricultural Sciences & Technology Trust 2019b)

Unfortunately, I was unable to explore the SSKM element of SSIAST during my field research. It would be interesting to learn more details about how SSKM negotiates recognition and support from the Indian government.

## 2.6 Interview with CEO of SSIAST

Towards the end of my trip to the AOL international headquarters, I met with Venkatesh S.R., the ‘CEO’ of SSIAST. Venkatesh spent an hour telling me about SSIAST, and specifically about the activities on the 150 acres of farms surrounding the area of the ashram.

He told me that the farms produce 28 types of vegetables, yielding 5000kg of food per acre per crop, with a minimum of two harvests per year. From how he described the fields, it sounded like they were mostly mono cropped, with papaya or drumstick planted around the boundaries of each field. It is difficult to verify this without having seen it, but it was not uncommon to see fields planted in that way in the region. Shade nets, green houses, and hydroponics were also used for growing lettuce, and probably other crops too. During harvest season, crops are harvested one time per week for the ashram kitchen, and two times per week for Sri Sri Tattva products.

These farms were worked by some migrant laborers and some permanent laborers. Regarding the migrant laborers, Venkatesh mentioned that some *sewa* was involved, although it was unclear if this was referring to periods of unpaid labor, or to a more abstract sense of service to the spiritual community through their work. He did clearly mention that they were paid for their work, sheltered, and taught *sadhana* (spiritual practice), *sewa*, and *satsang*.

Venkatesh criticized the green revolution<sup>11</sup> in India and the effects of chemicals on soil fertility, as well as criticizing the white revolution<sup>12</sup> and its disenfranchisement of farmers who would previously provide their local communities with milk. He mentioned the seed bank project

---

<sup>11</sup> The “green revolution” commonly refers to the neoliberalization of the Indian agricultural economy. Although it succeeded in opening up the Indian economy to the global market, as well as bringing exceptional wealth to the select few who thrived under this transition, it is commonly criticized for its detrimental impact on local ecologies and the forms of violence which it imposed on many Indian farmers (Shiva 1991).

<sup>12</sup> A term similar to “green revolution,” but referring to the neoliberalization of milk and dairy products in India.

and how it is used to counter farmer suicides, who would otherwise be risking debt by taking out loans to buy seeds.

One of the most interesting parts of this interview came from Venkatesh's knowledge of the consultation contracts given to SSIAST by the Indian government. A number of policy initiatives have been enacted by the Indian government in an effort to support and promote organic farming in India. Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY) is one example of those initiatives. Under PKVY, "subsidies are given to promote organic farming in Indian states through a cluster-based approach" (Mukherjee et al. 2017, 3). Venkatesh mentioned to me that the SSIAST was selected among nine other NGOs in Karnataka as part of the PKVY scheme to act as agencies that educate farmers in organic farming. At the time of my visit, a group of 53 farmers were visiting the headquarters to be trained in natural farming under a different government scheme, called Agricultural Technology Management Agency (ATMA) scheme.

Besides this, Venkatesh purported the success of the ashram goshala,<sup>13</sup> which hosted 16 types of natural Indian breeds of cow at the time of my visit. He considered the native breeds of Indian cows to be at the base of Indian agriculture, and contrasted them to imported European cows by giving an example of the Indian Punganur cow, which produces milk with a higher concentration of fat, even if the quantity of milk produced might be comparably less to a European cow.

Venkatesh was a charismatic, older man, with a friendly but serious face that looked fit for both a rural farm and an urban bureaucratic setting. He had a personal goal to train 100,000 farmers in natural farming in the state of Karnataka alone. Our conversation ending with a respectful smile and handshake, then he moved on to his next order of business for the day.

---

<sup>13</sup> Goshala refers to a shelter for cows, especially ones who are no longer deemed economically viable.

## Chapter Three – Meeting the Faces of SSIAST

### 3.1 Meeting with Sangeeta

Finding and making contact with a SSIAST teacher proved to be relatively easy, as they keep a list of upcoming courses on their webpage. The soonest and nearest course I could find at the beginning of my field research was an Agri Teacher Training<sup>14</sup> workshop in Delhi, taught by a woman named Sangeeta. Unfortunately, I did not have time to attend this course, or any others during my time in India, but I was able to make contact with Sangeeta and meet her in person.

In late October, Sangeeta welcomed me to visit her at her home near the India Gate region of New Delhi. She invited me in, serving me magnificent sweets and snacks, and inquiring into my research and how I got involved with Art of Living.<sup>15</sup> After properly introducing myself and describing my research, I asked how she got involved with AOL and SSIAST.

Sangeeta was interested in yoga and spirituality for over two decades before finding AOL. For years, she had been helping orphans, schools, and rivers in rural areas through her own NGO initiatives. After becoming involved with AOL and SKY, she began organizing AOL programs like YLTP in rural areas, and later organizing AOL programs in urban areas. After taking an AOL advanced course, Sangeeta stayed with AOL for three more years before becoming an AOL teacher herself. She then continued working with AOL social initiatives, such as giving AOL courses to jail inmates, as well as teaching various techniques for home gardening.

---

<sup>14</sup> The Agri Teacher Training Program (TTP) included training in: Natural/ Organic farming; Vedic Agriculture Formulations such as Bio-enzymes, bio-fertilizers and bio-pesticides; Use of Indigenous seeds -their preparation and creating Desi Beej Kosh; and introduction to other agriculture-related skills. The course spanned eight days, with the choice to pay for accommodation, or to handle one's own accommodation independently, with a minimum course 'donation' of Rs. 6000 (roughly 77€). Eligibility to take the course was restricted to one of the four requirements: (1) Art of Living Teachers; (2) One who has done YLTP (Youth Leadership Training Program); (3) One who has completed Agri pre-TTP; (4) One who has completed 2 advanced AOL courses.

<sup>15</sup> Shortly after completing the YES+ course in 2012, I took an 'advanced course', called Art of Silence. Besides these two courses, I retook the basic course in October 2014 during a 5-month monsoon semester in Hyderabad, India. Having taken the basic course twice and an advanced course once, I was usually greeted with a level of openness and access from AOL participants whose first questions would often be: have you taken the basic course? Have you taken an advanced course? I felt privileged as a researcher to receive the level of access that I did.



After describing her involvement with AOL, Sangeeta then gave some details about SSIAST and the work of AOL with Indian farmers. Apparently, over 1,500 farmers had already been trained in Sri Sri Natural Farming,<sup>16</sup> and the AOL had received funding from the government of Andhra Pradesh to teach 17,000 more.

Sangeeta then began to think of anyone she could put me in touch with who might be helpful for my research. The first person who she thought to put me in touch with was Mr. Prem Sharma, a farmer from Haryana, the Indian state west of Delhi. She also gave me the contact of Rachana, a resident of Noida, one of the largest suburbs of Delhi. Several kilometers away from her home in Noida, Rachana held two acres of land in a more rural area, where she practiced natural farming.

After an hour of tea, conversation, and snacks, Sangeeta had other business to attend to. Besides the contacts near Delhi which she shared with me that day, she also strongly encouraged me to visit the ashram near Bangalore, and put me in touch with the many contacts who were integral to my stay there. I thanked Sangeeta for her time and hospitality, and left.

### 3.2 Rachana in Noida

In early November 2018, I met with Rachana at her small-scale farm near Noida, an industrial suburb south east of Delhi. The farm itself was a further seven kilometers south of the Noida city center. All of the information that I list here about Rachana and her farm are based on her own account that she generously shared with me over the course of two hours when I visited her that afternoon.

---

<sup>16</sup> Sri Sri Natural Farming is a term that somehow seemed to elude me during my field work. It is possible that the interlocutors with whom I met simply referred to it as ‘natural farming,’ but it can be difficult to distinguish the boundaries between various projects and concepts in AOL social initiatives.

According to the AOL website, Sri Sri Natural Farming refers to “a chemical-free way of sustainable eco-friendly integrated farming system which uses natural resources... Natural farming methods weave farming into pre-existing symbiotic relationships in nature” (Art of Living 2019c). One way in which this is accomplished is the use of Jeevamrut. It is a fermented concoction made from indigenous cow dung and urine, and used as a sort of natural fertilizer, or even as a pesticide when combined with neem leaves. Jeevamrut is not exclusive to Sri Sri Natural Farming, and could arguably be attributed to Zero Budget Natural Farming, which was popularized by Subhash Palekar as early as 2008 (Münster 2017, 27).

Rachana became involved with AOL around 2012. She was already interested in gardening, and after taking some AOL courses on “kitchen-oriented gardening and nutrition,” she became especially interested in gardening around the house and on her rooftop. Rachana was interested to experiment with gardening further, and had the idea to lease some land for a chemical-free, natural farming project. Her original idea was to lease just 1/10 of an acre, but she decided to accept an offer for 2 acres when it became available to her.

In 2016, Rachana leased this land and began her natural farming project. Her plot of land was surrounded on all sides by large-scale chemical farming plots. Rachana’s main objective was to introduce neighboring farmers to natural farming, and to change the dominant perception that chemicals are needed in order to farm. Besides that, this small plot would be a convenient way to provide healthy food to family and friends.

Before leasing the land, it was previously used for growing wheat, carrots, and radishes, and harvested twice a year. By the time Rachana leased the land, it was covered in weeds, and she described the soil as relatively barren. She told me with a smile on her face that when she first cleared her plot and began planting trees and vegetables, the local farmers politely told her “maam, you do not understand, the plants will not grow if you do not put chemicals on them,” but she continued with her project. Rachana and her family adopted two cows from a Goshala in order to improve the soil with their urine and dung. By a stroke of luck, or, “by Guruji’s blessing” as Rachana told me, both cows were unknowingly pregnant at the time of adoption, and both successfully gave birth, and produced milk for 6-7 months thereafter. This milk was shared among family and friends, and the two healthy calves were still there at the time of my visit.

Rachana told me that, after the first rain, her plot was the only soil around to have Earthworms. This distinct indicator of soil fertility sparked the interest of neighboring chemical farmers. They began to take natural farming more seriously, asking questions about it and considering the economic risks of switching to natural farming themselves.

Unfortunately, the economic risks of switching to natural farming are, according to Rachana, what prevents most farmers from switching who would otherwise like to make an exit from chemical farming. The open market does not pay well enough to sustain organic food production, and government subsidies were not available for small-scale farming. Rachana told

me that, although her neighbors had been convinced of the benefits of natural farming, they still lacked a dependable platform to sell organic produce at higher prices. Chemical farming reduces labor time, and allows them to invest in other means of supplementing their income. Besides the labor time, making natural pesticides also takes extra time.

Rachana tried selling at an open market for several months, but did not have much success. Natural farming is labor intensive, she told me, and the organic produce<sup>17</sup> must be sold at a higher price, which makes it an unpopular choice amongst consumers. Many buyers don't know about the difference in technique, and there is also the issue of trust when a vendor claims to be selling organic produce, and demanding a higher price. 'Frauds do exist, after all,' she said.

Rachana could hardly depend on her plot as a source of income, although that was not her main objective anyways. About 50% of the farm investment was recovered in the first year by selling to friends, family, and the market. When she first leased the land, she was doing everything alone with her family, but she now had to hire laborers to do much of the work, although she still came regularly with her family for planting, harvesting, etc. She had at least one permanent laborer who was trained in natural farming, as well as hiring several temporary laborers when needed. When I met her, she told me she was at a point where she could now recover at least the labor costs every year. She said it could possibly become totally financially sustainable with the hopes of a growing market and more government support as organic food might become more popular in society. Nevertheless, it was clear to her that farmers would not adopt it if it was not profitable.

Besides the role of Rachana's plot as a model of natural farming, the space would often be used for AOL activities such as meditation, silence retreats, and sewa opportunities, as well as

---

<sup>17</sup> Both Rachana and Prem Sharma used the terms 'natural farming' and 'organic farming' repeatedly, and perhaps even interchangeably. This created a certain degree of confusion in my research. The first point of confusion was that, despite hearing both Rachana and Prem refer to 'natural farming,' I never heard either of them use the term 'Sri Sri Natural Farming.' Besides this, the 'natural farming' which Rachana and Prem were practicing were obviously similar, yet notably different to the Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) of Subhash Palekar. Although Sri Sri Natural Farming appears to be at least partially based on, or inspired by Zero Budget Natural Farming, the increased cost of production and labor-intensive weeding practices contradict Palekar's model of ZBNF, which does not require weeding and is therefore less labor intensive and cheaper to produce.

The unclear distinction between 'natural farming' and 'organic farming' was a further point of confusion. While both Sri Sri Natural Farming and ZBNF place much emphasis on 'natural' farming techniques, the term 'organic farming' may simply refer to the quality of fertilizers and pesticides used. It is likely that 'natural farming' is a term more used in the context for farming techniques, and 'organic' in the context of marketing. Unfortunately, I did not clarify this distinction with Rachana or Prem during my research.

AOL childrens' courses like Art Excel (age 8-13 year) the YES course (age 13-18), which teach basic yoga and meditation, as well as the "Six Golden Keys to Success" and "[s]kills in friendship, leadership and teamwork" (ART Excel 2012).

She told me that she and several other locals also set up a school for the children of migrating agricultural laborers. These laborers did not have the opportunity to transport their children to and from school every day, and many of them were migrant laborers, spending only a part of the year in Noida. This meant that, since there would be no continuity in their children's schooling, the children were not permitted to attend government schools at all. Rachana and some others first began by teaching the children themselves, but they were now able to hire teachers, and they were searching for a room to rent as a school. Rachana described her vision of spirituality to me as community/society oriented, not only profit-focused.

On her plot, she grew sweet potato, potato, okra, onion, roses, bananas, peppers, echinacea, and much more. She had a laborer cut me two large bundles of lemongrass and tulsi and had them wrapped in newspaper for me before I left. She told me I was welcome to come back any time, even if she is not there and I just want to escape the city. Unfortunately, I did not make my way back to Rachana's farm, nor did I see her again after that.

### 3.3 Ethnography with Prem Sharma

In late October 2018, when I first went to meet Sangeeta, she gave me the contacts of Prem Sharma, Rachana, and many others. It was by chance that, on that very day, Prem Sharma was less than two kilometers away at the Women of India Organic Festival 2018. She told me I could walk there directly from her house to meet him. After leaving Sangeeta's house, I walked past the famous India Gate and through the Rajpath Sitting Park to arrive at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, where the festival was being held.

The festival was a spectacle in itself, with over a hundred vendors selling everything from food to fabrics, health products, and personal hygiene products. Most of the vendors were women, but there more than a few men selling too. It was an open-air festival with most of the space being occupied by the huge block of vendors, the food court, or the stage where concerts and speeches would be given. Hundreds of people were in attendance at any given time—mostly

Indians, with plenty of families and children, but I also recognized a few Europeans and Americans speaking English in the crowd.

I spent an hour exploring the grounds, drinking some incredibly sweet lychee juice, and buying some spices. I met several vendors who were friendly and happy to talk with me. Many others called me over and eagerly tried to sell me their product, or to have me endorse them. Most of the vendors were friendly, smiling, and gave an impression of authenticity with their piles of home-grown produce and handmade goods. Others were constantly peering out through the crowds, searching for customers while standing behind carts loaded with manufactured organic products in paper and plastic packaging.

After exploring the various areas of the festival, I came to Prem Sharma's table near the entrance of the festival. He was standing at a table with one other man and a SSIAST banner hanging in the tree behind them. Prem was swiftly taking halved oranges out of a pitcher, placing them in his juicer, and pulling down the lever that squeezed out the juice—then lifting it to reload the machine with a new half of an orange. The juice flowed into another pitcher, which he removed when full and emptied into several paper cups for the next group in line. There were several groups of people waiting in line, and he only had one other person working with him, so I stayed back for a while and observed, not wanting to interrupt them.

After serving all the customers in line, Prem got out his knife and cutting board and started restocking his supply of halved oranges. I approached him and asked for a cup of juice. He had enough juice leftover in the pitcher from the last orders to pour me a full cup. I mentioned that I had just met with Sangeeta, and how she told me about him and that I could find him here. He wasn't sure who I was talking about first, but after I clarified a bit, he smiled as he recognized who I meant.

Prem then started to tell me something in Hindi. At this point I realized why my teachers throughout my MA program had put so much emphasis on 'learning the language,' and I felt a doubled sense of commitment to the introductory Hindi course that I was taking at the time. Nevertheless, it was clear to me that it would be difficult to communicate with Prem. He realized it too.

Luckily, one woman from his group of Haryana farmers could speak both English and Hindi. She was at a neighboring stall, and he sent someone over to get her. It took some time, since she was also busy selling vegetables, and another wave of customers came to keep Prem occupied with his juicer for another 15 minutes. I was patiently observing the flow of people in and out of the market and watching the sun go down when she came to meet me.

Prithi was her name. She was very friendly and relaxed, and spoke very good English. She was curious who I was and what my research was about. I told her all about it, as best I could, since I was still figuring it out myself. She knew Prem from living in the same area and selling at the same markets. We continued to become acquainted as Prem's line of customers grew thin again.

Prithi and I were sitting next to Prem's juice table. When he finished serving the last customers, he came over to greet us. I introduced myself and explained that I was a student from Germany doing research on the Art of Living. He introduced himself as Prem Sharma, and we both sat there smiling and staring for a brief moment, waiting for something to happen. I then awkwardly eased my way into asking some questions about his involvement with AOL.

It took a few minutes to communicate clearly why I was there, and why I wanted to speak with him, but Prem and Prithi were patient, and no one seemed to be getting uncomfortable throughout the interaction. It took a good amount smiling, and eye-squinting from Prem, and occasionally glancing away on my part to rethink my questions, but we arrived at a steady conversation after I began to ask more clear, simple questions about his involvement with AOL and SSIASST.

Prem told me that he began chemical farming in 1990, but stopped in 2011 because of the frequent illnesses that his family was experiencing. By that time, he had heard of Subash Palekar's Zero-Budget Natural Farming, and was interested to try an alternative to chemical farming. Unfortunately, I was unable to clarify how much Prem experimented with Palekar's method before focusing more on the methods taught by SSIASST.

According to Prem, the SSIASST offered an appealing 'traditional' approach to farming, as well as introducing a whole new market platform of consumers through the AOL network. This includes personal orders from AOL individuals, restaurants owned by AOL devotees, Sri

Sri Tattva orders for manufacture, and AOL events—especially multi-day AOL courses which require meals for various-sized groups of people. The food provided by Prem Sharma and other SSIAST farmers also carries with it a healthy, spiritual, sustainable connotation, which benefits AOL on a material and aesthetic level. He also told me that Sri Sri Tattva as a company connects to thousands of farmers who provide raw material for their products. This would have been an interesting topic of research, but I unfortunately did not have the time, and I imagine that accessing knowledge about Sri Sri Tattva supply structures would have been more restricted and difficult.

Besides the AOL market platform that SSIAST provides to farmers, Prem told me that SSIAST offers farmers the opportunity to take courses on natural farming. He told me that free courses are offered every Sunday in Haryana, although I was unfortunately never able to attend one, or to learn more details about it.

I asked about the SSIAST banner behind him, and he replied that its purpose was to promote SSIAST courses. He also told me that, in the future, SSIAST aims to eliminate plastic from their banners, and that other AOL-based organizations aim to eliminate plastic too, like the plastic used for Sri Sri Tattva cookie wrappers, for example.

The sunlight was fading, and many of the vendors were beginning to pack up their supplies and close their booths. The man working with Prem had also begun to clean up their booth and take away the juiced oranges. I thanked Prem for his time. He smiled and put his hands together in front of his heart, gesturing a friendly goodbye. I did the same.

I stood up with Preethi and spoke with her awhile longer about the festival and about ourselves. I also thanked her many times for her help. She was very friendly, calm, and helpful the entire time. We did not expect it to be the last time that we would meet, as I said that I would surely come back to the festival before it ended. Preethi and I gestured goodbye, then she walked back to her booth. I packed away my notebook and headed to the Delhi metro.

\*\*\*

The Women of India Organic Festival lasted only one week, and I went back several times before it was over. Besides visiting a few other vendors, I would always spend some time with Prem, becoming more acquainted each time. Whenever no one was available to translate,

Prem would do his best to communicate in English, which was significantly better than my Hindi. Prem invited me to visit him at the Sushant Shopping Arcade farmer's market, which took place every Sunday morning until the afternoon. The Sushant Shopping Arcade can be accessed by taking the yellow line on Delhi metro all the way to its end at HUDA City Center. This metro stop lies just beyond the Southwestern extremity of Delhi, crossing over into the state of Haryana. The area belongs to a suburb of Delhi called Gurugram.

\*\*\*

In mid-November, I made my first trip to the Sushant Shopping Arcade farmer's market. After arriving at the HUDA City Center metro stop, I made my way to the street and crossed a few lanes of perpetually swarming traffic, then walked less than a kilometer to the Sushant Shopping Arcade. The shopping center was a large building with two levels above ground and one level below ground. Each level must have contained at least 100 shops, adding up to at least a few hundred in total throughout the entire shopping center. It took me some time to work through the maze of walkways and staircases, but I finally made my way to the back of the building, where a dozen farmers had their tables set up.

I first saw Prithi standing behind her tiny table with a few vegetables laying across it. We both smiled as we greeted each other. We made a bit of conversation as I looked around, observing all the different groups of farmers. Based on how everyone was looking at me, I got the feeling that it was uncommon for a foreigner to be present at this market. I then saw Prem Sharma behind his table, pouring a sack of potatoes into a plastic crate.

Prithi called out to Prem, who looked up from his work and smiled as he recognized me. He called out my name, "Davidji,"<sup>18</sup> and I walked over to greet him. He held out his hand and I gave him mine. "How are you?" he asked. "I am well, Premji, and you?"

Business was slow around that time, so Prem invited me to eat some dal and chapatti with him at the café just next to us, on the bottom floor of the shopping center. We walked down the stairs to an area with a small table and some stools. The café was run by a man who looked to be in his late twenties. He was well-groomed with a fine pair of glasses. On the back wall of his café hung a large portrait of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, and on the front of the cash register counter

---

<sup>18</sup> "Ji" is a suffix that is commonly added to a name when speaking Hindi to show respect.



were mounted the Hindi symbols श्री श्री (Sri Sri). I watched as a server opened a new plastic package of Sri Sri Tattva sugar-coated fennel seeds and emptied them into a small bowl at a table.

Prem spoke briefly with the owner and gave him our order. Prithi was able to join us and help with translation. We all sat down, and a cup of water was brought out for each one of us. After some small talk, I began to ask Prem more questions:

*So, Premji, remind me again, how is it that Art of Living gives you a platform to sell?*

Prem told me that he occasionally receives bulk orders from different regions, like Delhi and Noida. Sometimes the orders are for fresh fruits and vegetables, other times for dried items, oils, or other grocery items. The orders come from both restaurants and individual households. Prem and his collective of organic farmers in Haryana also share these orders amongst their group, contributing collectively to meet the demand for a diversity of items, and to share in the profits of the market platform.

Besides providing a platform to sell, Prem told me that his connection with AOL helps him to advertise his produce. One AOL member even helped produce a promotional video about Prem's organic oranges, and the orange juice that he sells. Prem told me that this was especially helpful, considering the issues around trust in the Indian market. It is difficult for take a stranger to take Prem for his word when buying organic produce, but after Prem's promotional video made a few rounds on social media, his name and his product became more well-known and trustworthy.

*Premji, what was the biggest order you received so far?*

Prem told me that, last month (October 2018), he received an order of Rs. 50,000 (roughly 650 €) from a residence of 6 people for household use. It was sometimes difficult to verify if my question was understood word-for-word, so I am not sure if this is the biggest order he ever received. Nonetheless, it reveals a considerable market benefit of being connected to the AOL network. Prem told me that selling to the AOL network accounted for about 20% of his monthly income at the time. This was a welcomed change to the previous year (2017), when sales through the AOL network were negligible for him. He had only begun selling to the AOL network in 2016, and that year the network provided a similarly negligible income to him. He

also told me that, at this year's Women of India Organic Festival, his sales went up 30% after hanging the SSIAST banner behind him and being connected with the AOL network.

*Are there any other ways that AOL and SSIAST give you a platform?*

Prem told me that, besides the market opportunities, AOL also offers training in yoga, meditation, and organic farming, as well as offering exposure for his produce through AOL events. Prem also specifically mentioned SKY, saying that he practices it 2-3 times per week.

By this time, the dal and chapatti had arrived. I put away my notebook, and we all began to eat right away. I observed how everyone else would break off a piece of chapatti just big enough to fold the ends and make a perfect shape for scooping up some dal and eating it. I did the same, and took my first bite. It was exceptionally delicious. Prem told me that all the ingredients come from regional organic farmers. I could certainly tell the difference in taste.

After finishing the meal, I thanked Prem and Preethi for their time, and they went back to their market stands to pack up and leave. I walked one more round through the market, buying a few apples and cucumbers to take back to my hostel. Before I left, Preethi walked over to me one more time and told me "David, Prem says you should go and visit him on his farm." I was excited to hear that, and I walked over to Prem to speak with him about it. He was also excited that I wanted to come, and we clarified a few details about my visit. The only timeframe that was available to both Prem and me would be two weeks later, during the weekend. We then said goodbye, until our next meeting in two weeks.

\*\*\*

In early December 2018, I met Prem at the farmers market behind Sushant Shopping Arcade. I rode with him in his small truck back to his village. The road to Prem's house took us through almost two hours of crowded Indian highways, then about a half-hour through unpaved roads surrounded by fields of crops and occasional villages. Prem gave a friendly wave whenever we passed by someone he knew. I began to notice a pattern that most people who saw us would stare at us as we passed by. Again, I suspected that it must be quite rare to see a foreigner here.

By late afternoon, we arrived at Prem's home in Sehlanga, almost 100km from Gurugram. Prem had a small, white Hindu temple outside the front of his home. He told me that his father built it, and showed me the small fenced area beside the temple where his father was buried after passing away. We left the car parked out front and entered through the gate into a small courtyard, where his wife and son were waiting to greet us.

Prem's farm was situated on a little less than 12 acres of land. Almost the entire perimeter of his land bordered chemical farms, with one portion of his perimeter bordered by the unpaved road that led to his house. Prem's home consisted of one main room where he and his wife and son slept, as well as a garage for storage and a space on the side of the house with a toilet and shower. They also had a shed for keeping their three cows and two calves, which appeared to be Punganur cattle, or some other native Indian breed.

Prem's wife, Lakshmi, began preparing dinner for everyone shortly after our arrival. She had already finished making dal and vegetable curry, and was now rapidly turning out chapattis using a small outdoor Chula built next to the house. Prem insisted that I sit with him while we wait for the food to be ready.

Lakshmi served us the dal, vegetables, and chapatti with generous portions of homemade ghee. It was perhaps the most delicious meal I ate during that three-month stay in India. Prem told me that all the grains and vegetables come from their own land, or from other organic farmers in the area. Over dinner, I had the opportunity to ask Prem about his home, his village, and his farm. This time, we did not have an interpreter, but Prem was nevertheless able to understand well enough and answer using simple English.

Prem told me that there are two organic farmers in this village and one in a neighboring village. He said he was one of eight farmers in a regional cooperative of organic farming. He told me that not very many local farmers are interested in organic farming, since there is not a good enough market to sell. He also told me that he personally asked the minister of agriculture of the state of Haryana to help organic farmers, and that the minister said he would, but still hadn't taken any action.

We also talked about our plans for the next day. In the early morning, Prem would show me his orchards, wheat fields, and vegetable gardens. He would then take me on a tour through

his village. We would come back to his house for lunch, and then finally we would go to meet the other farmers in his regional collective of organic farming.

I was stuffed from over-eating, and Lakshmi came to take the plates away. I tried to help clean the dishes, but Lakshmi insisted that we leave them for her. Prem took me on an evening walk down the road and back, and we all got ready for sleep, anticipating the big day ahead of us.

\*\*\*

The next morning, Prem walked me around his vegetable garden. This part of his land occupied about one half acre, and consisted of carrots, palak (spinach), white and red radish varieties, white and red turnips varieties, coriander, potato, pomegranate, garlic, onion, Indian Bael fruit, and Jammun, and probably several other vegetables that I did not identify. The crops were planted in mixed rows in order to reduce pests, according to Prem. He also uses a 'green manuring' technique of turning undecomposed green plant tissue into the soil to fertilize it. Besides this, Prem uses cow manure and urine, and the fermented mixture called *jivamrath* to fertilize the soil.

On either side of Prem's vegetable garden were orange tree orchards that extended to the Northern and Southern boundaries of his property. The Northern orchard covered slightly more than two acres, and the Southern orchard about four acres. Both orchards were lush with green leaves, which stood out against the mostly sandy and dusty surrounding plots. Prem walked me through the Southern orchard.

The trees had a few meters distance between them, which was mostly occupied by grasses. Ripe oranges lined the tree branches, as well as many rotting oranges on the ground beneath the trees. Prem also pointed out some citrus tree variants like musambi (sweet lime), and Kinnow, a high-yield mandarin.

Most of the trees were alive and healthy, but about one in every 50 or 60 showed some dead branches. Some trees had died altogether. Prem pointed out the black spots on the leaves and explained that a fungus began attacking some of his trees five years ago. Prem dealt with this by cutting back the infected branches, and sometimes applying organic fungicide, although the latter technique was more costly.

We then made our way to the eastern edge of the orchard to reveal a field of wheat. The wheat covered about two and a half acres, and extended to the boundaries of Prem's property on all sides, except where it ran back into the orange field on its West end. The wheat looked notably greener than the neighboring field of chemically-farmed wheat. Prem told us that he sowed wheat here the last two years, and that next year he will cover the area with orange trees.

The outer perimeter of Prem's property was lined by Neem, Karnanda, and other plants to set up a "green barrier." This was, apparently, the first step to becoming a certified organic grower. It served the purpose of preventing sprayed chemicals from neighboring farms from leeching into the soil and crops of an organic farm. It was difficult to maintain perfect coverage around the perimeter, and some holes in the green barrier are filled in with branch barricades.

We circled back around the southern boundary of the orchard to return to Prem's house. Prem's wife and son brought out some chairs for us to sit and rest for a while. Prem took out a binder filled with certificates and awards related to organic farming and showed them to me.<sup>19</sup>

\*\*\*

After lunch, Prem and I took his truck to go and visit some of his friends in the area who were also practicing organic farming. Our first stop was about 15 minutes away to the farm of Mr. Harvinder Sharma, a relative of Prem. Harvinder first began Organic farming in 2014, and by this time (2018) was receiving the same yields as he previously was from chemical farming. Harvinder also told me that he has no problem selling his produce, although I was not able to get detailed information about his marketing platform. He did tell me that he gives out samples of his produce, and that the noticeable difference in taste is a major factor that increases his customer base.

Harvinder's main complaint about organic farming was that it required considerably more work in weeding, which was done manually instead of chemically. He compared the price of manual weeding to be ten times as expensive as chemical weeding. It was unclear to me where

---

<sup>19</sup> Prem's first certificate was a training in organic farming, which he earned in 2013. Several of his other certificates were related to organic farming, or participation in organic food festivals in Delhi. He also received several certificates related to organic farming and agricultural leadership in the state of Haryana. Some of his certificates came from SSIASST. Others came from Indian governmental bodies, or independent organizations related to organic farming or agriculture.

the extra costs come from, but I suspect he was implying that the excess work hours put into weeding could otherwise be used more productively or profitably.

When I asked how Harvinder learned about Organic farming, he told me Prem played an important role in convincing him to try it out. Harvinder had already become skeptical of chemical farming, and associated it with the frequent diseases that occurred for him and other local farmers, as well as with the medical costs incurred from seeing doctors because of frequent illness. He told me that he observed a pattern of health issues in other local chemical farmers, including skin disorders, blurred eyesight, diabetes, and joint pain. At the time, Harvinder was aware of the financial risks of organic farming, but he decided that the health risks of chemical farming were greater.

Harvinder took an organic farming training program from the SSIAST, and transitioned into organic farming in 2014. To him, this meant using cow dung and urine to fertilize the soil, as well as practicing mixed cropping and crop rotation to improve and preserve the fertility of the soil. Unfortunately, I was only able to spend about one hour with Harvinder, which restricted me from learning more about his method of organic farming.

\*\*\*

By late afternoon, I rode with Prem in his truck to our final meeting with five of the eight farmers in the regional cooperative of SSIAST organic farmers. We arrived at the property of one of the farmers, where we would sit in a circle with chairs and talk for about one hour. The farmers were kind enough to prepare several pitchers of incredibly sweet, delicious fruit juice, which I didn't manage to copy down the name of.

I posed my first question to the group:

*What do other farmers think of your organic farming?*

The first man to respond focused first on the benefits of organic farming—how it protects farmers from disease, makes the soil healthy, and reduces water and air pollution in the environment. He told me that some farmers change their opinions about organic farming slowly, some eventually agreeing, while others never change because of economic reasons—they want more money.

*What is natural farming?*

A second man told me that natural farming means making one's own pesticides and fertilizers, using dung and urine, but never chemicals. He also told me that it meant more manpower, less machines, and low water usage, or rather conservation of water. He then told me that they had a monthly meeting of farmers, to discuss the rules of natural farming, as well as any problems that they have encountered.

*What are the Rules of Natural Farming?*

I gathered the responses from each person who added to the list:

- No burning of crop waste
- Implementing crop rotation
- Implementing mixed cropping
- Desi seeds only, no hybrid or genetically modified seeds
- No biofertilizers or pesticides
- No market fertilizers
- Use of *jivamrath* (fermented cow dung/urine, mixed with water and rich in bacterial flora that boost soil fertility)
- Use of green manuring
- Minimum of 10 trees per acre, which drop their leaves on the farm (and thereby increase the nutrient value of the soil)
- No water from other farms that could lead to chemical leeching. This involved the digging of trenches, as well as the use of green barriers to prevent chemicals from traveling through the air onto the organic farm

It is likely that there were more points than what I was able to gather. The list that I gathered could probably not be considered an authoritative list that qualifies one as a natural farmer according to their standards, but it nevertheless gives a guideline as to what natural farming means to this group of men.

I asked about their involvement with AOL, and they told me that they share the orders and the contacts of buyers within their group, including those that they receive through AOL networks. Besides that, each one of these farmers had taken SSIASST courses, but it was not clear to me how involved each one was with AOL outside of SSIASST.

It was almost time for me to leave. I drank one more cup of juice and thanked everyone for their time. We got into Prem's car and he drove me to a nearby town where I would catch the bus back to Delhi. When we arrived at the bus stop, Prem walked with me to the bus, where he would speak to the bus driver to be sure that this bus would take me where I needed to go.

Prem reassured us that this bus would take us to the Delhi metro. We smiled and shook hands one last time, and I told him thank you in Hindi several times. I then climbed aboard the bus and headed back to Delhi as the late evening turned into night.

\*\*\*

My time with Prem shed some light on how the SSIASST branch of AOL integrates itself into the farming practices and marketing networks of a few Indian farmers. At the same time, it revealed the many pockets of obscurity in just how far-reaching SSIASST really is in the lives of those farmers. The SSIASST courses and natural farming techniques, and the AOL consumer networks stood out clearly as examples of AOL involvement in Indian farming. However, the mixing of "natural" and "organic" farming techniques, and the ambiguity around whether SSIASST and AOL involvement go hand in hand further obfuscate the narrative around how SSIASST impacts Indian farmers. The use of an organic fungicide product and the pressure to grow the most profitable crops also reveal how "natural" farming techniques can be compromised when faced with the economic pressures to produce a profit, whether those profits are necessary for survival or otherwise.

At a first glance, it seems that SSIASST is clearly involved somehow with these Indian farmers. However upon further examination, the details and boundaries of that involvement seem unclear. This reinforced a major theme that I encountered throughout my research—that the channels of AOL involvement are, in one sense, set up by the organization; and at the same time, those boundaries of AOL involvement are to some degree negotiated by its participants in order to suit their own needs and conditions.



## Conclusion

This research project and my investigation of AOL were originally inspired by my experience with SKY and AOL many years ago. I felt an unresolved tension between the technique as an effective therapy for anxiety, and the organization as a mixture of well-being practices, expensive classes, and pressure to recruit new participants. Early on in my research, I chose to focus on the social dynamics and social initiatives around AOL. At that point, the tension between spiritual goals and social work in AOL stood at the center of my attention.

As my research progressed, the information that I gathered was not fitting neatly into a narrative around that tension, considering that certain social projects and spiritual goals seemed relatively independent from one another. When I was at the AOL international headquarters, one devotee said of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: “he is our spiritual master.” And yet, my time researching the AOLF revealed no discernable ‘master plan,’ no single over-arching ideology that clearly defines and dictates the activities of AOL at its core and its furthest appendages.

During my literature review, I discovered Jacobs’s description of the AOLF as a network. I found this description of AOL to fit my own observations quite accurately, given the multiplicity of AOL organizational structures. As I began to recognize the network-like structure of AOL, it made more sense to frame my research from that perspective. I reformulated the central question to focus on the difficulty of drawing any kind of a clear, over-arching picture of what AOL is. My research took shape as an exploration of the various branches of AOL and the challenge of tying them together neatly into a comprehensive whole. From this framework, I was able to draw two clear conclusions, along with a few remarks about AOL.

My first conclusion is that the multiplicity of organizational structures makes it difficult to characterize AOL as a single identity. The ashrams, course centers, and institutions resemble definitive nodes of the AOL network. At the same time, AOL members regularly participate in each other’s lives and collaborate in AOL events, as well as non-AOL events. This creates a whole network of AOL outside of its institutional framework. The blending of a spiritual, guru-led movement with humanitarian aid and a business model also leads to a number of confusing intersections between the branches of AOL and its overall character.

My second conclusion is that the absence of a critical social perspective within the AOLF leads to a number of confusing disjunctions between AOL philosophy and practice. This disjunction is made visible in part by the contradictions surrounding a highly individualized form of spirituality which locates the cause of stress to be within the mind, and seeks to pacify it using mind-body techniques, rather than acknowledging the social causes of stress and seeking to bring about social change.

Of course, the social initiatives of AOL are an attempt to bring about that social change, but these initiatives further illustrate the limitations that AOL faces without applying critical social perspectives. The uncritical, matter-of-fact acceptance of a capitalist business model as both an effective and ethical way of conducting social work distorts the image of AOL as committed to a stress-free, violence-free society. Within a capitalist business model, the value of human labor and natural resources must always be compromised with private profits, whether those profits are accumulated within the AOL framework or not. The resemblance of a business model in AOL recruiting practices for courses and events initially raises some cause for concern. Their uncritical acceptance of corporate culture as compatible with spirituality, along with the existence of the Sri Sri Tattva business push the limits of this contradiction even further.

I was unable to draw a clear conclusion about the topic of transparency in AOL. The challenges that I faced in my research seemed to stem mainly from the multiplicity of organizational structures and philosophies in AOL, rather than from a lack of transparency. In general, I was welcomed openly and assisted in my research by members of AOL. The main struggle in classifying and organizing all of the information which I gathered appeared to come from the sheer multiplicity of connections in the AOL network, with the added complication of how to determine the boundaries of what counts as AOL-related. It is nevertheless likely that a research project focused on more sensitive data, like finances in AOL, would face less transparency and more difficulty in gaining access to information.

It also became clear to me in my research that participation in AOL is not necessarily narcissistic or entrepreneurial. Concrete social projects can arise through the vast AOL network of volunteers and resources. Besides participants who are simply searching for wellness and therapy for stress, many people described community service and humanitarian work to be a driving motivation for participating in AOL. Although my field work was very limited, my

interviews and conversations with AOL project leaders suggested that certain AOL projects can empower local communities to conduct projects in education, sustainability and resource management.

My time researching AOL was challenging, but rewarding. Much of the information about AOL that I included in this thesis, I have not seen anywhere else in the academic literature. Although my perspective on AOL is at times critical, the aim of this thesis is not to try to paint a 'good' or 'bad' picture of AOL, but rather to reveal the methodological challenges of researching such a diverse network as the AOL. Any further investigation into AOL and its social initiatives would likely reveal both more clarity and more questions about the organization and how it contends with the conjugate of spiritual goals and social initiatives.

## References

- Ališauskienė, Milda. 2012. "Spirituality and Religiosity in the Art of Living Foundation in Lithuania and Denmark: Meanings, Contexts, and Relationships." In *Subcultures and New Religious Movements in Russia and East-Central Europe*, edited by George McKay, Christopher Williams, Michael Goddard, and Neil Foxlee. Oxford: Lang Peter AG Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften.
- ART Excel. 2012. "ART Excel Course (8 -13 Years)." Accessed October 10, 2019. <https://artoflivingcourses.wordpress.com/2012/07/17/art-excel-course-8-13-years/>.
- Art of Living. 2019a. "About the Organization." Accessed September 30, 2019. <https://www.artofliving.org/about-organization>.
- . 2019b. "Colombian President Hails Sri Sri's Role in the Historic Ending of the 52-Year-Old War Between FARC-Colombian Govt." Accessed February 14, 2019. <https://www.artofliving.org/colombian-president-farc-hails-sri-sri-role-historic-end-war>.
- . 2019c. "Sri Sri Natural Farming: Reviving Ancient Method for a Healthy Tomorrow!". Accessed July 11, 2019. <https://www.artofliving.org/in-en/environmental-sustainability/sri-sri-natural-farming>.
- Art of Living E-Learning. 2019. "The Breath of Happiness Online Course – Art of Living E-Learning." Accessed October 16, 2019.
- Art of Living Foundation. 2017a. "Art of Living - Overview." Accessed November 19, 2017. <https://www.artofliving.org/de-en/art-living-overview>.
- . 2017b. "Origin of Sudarshan Kriya." Accessed November 14, 2017. <https://www.artofliving.org/us-en/origin-sudarshan-kriya>.
- . 2017c. "Research on Sudarshan Kriya™ Yoga (SKY)." Accessed November 14, 2017. <https://www.artofliving.org/us-en/research-sudarshan-kriya>.
- . 2017d. "Sudarshan Kriya - Benefits." Accessed November 14, 2017. <https://www.artofliving.org/sudarshan-kriya-benefits>.
- . 2017e. "What Is Sudarshan Kriya?" Accessed November 14, 2017. <https://www.artofliving.org/de-en/what-sudarshan-kriya>.
- . 2019a. "About the Art of Living - Centers, Contacts, Press, Research and Service | the Art of Living Global." Accessed February 14, 2019. <https://www.artofliving.org/about-us>.
- . 2019b. "Environmental Sustainability." Accessed June 25, 2019. <https://www.artofliving.org/th-en/environmental-sustainability>.
- . 2019c. "Find a Course or Follow-up Near You | the Art of Living Germany." Accessed February 13, 2019. <https://www.artofliving.org/de-en/search/course#distance=10&sSearch=Germany&st=&lat=&lng=&ctype=&acol=0&c=&cc=&d1=&d2=>.

- . 2019d. “Service Projects.” Accessed June 25, 2019. <https://www.artofliving.org/th-en/service-projects>.
- Art of Living Schools. 2019. “Overview.” Accessed February 14, 2019. <https://www.artoflivingschools.org/about-us/art-of-living/>.
- Art of Living Water Projects. 2019a. “Art of Living Water Projects Homepage.” Accessed February 14, 2019. <https://www.water.artofliving.org/>.
- . 2019b. “River Rejuvenation Project.” Accessed July 08, 2019. <https://www.artofliving.org/environmental-sustainability/water-conservation/river-rejuvenation>.
- Bainbridge, William S., and Rodney Stark. 1979. “Cult Formation: Three Compatible Models.” *Sociol Relig* 40 (4): 283–95. doi:10.2307/3709958.
- Brown, Richard P., and Patricia L. Gerbarg. 2005. “Sudarshan Kriya Yogic Breathing in the Treatment of Stress, Anxiety, and Depression. Part II—Clinical Applications and Guidelines.” *Journal of alternative and complementary medicine (New York, N.Y.)* 11 (4): 711–17. doi:10.1089/acm.2005.11.711.
- Carrette, Jeremy R., and Richard King. 2005. *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Dhanagare, D. N. 2016. “Declining Credibility of the Neoliberal State and Agrarian Crisis in India: Some Observations.” In *Critical Perspectives on Agrarian Transition: India in the Global Debate*, edited by B. B. Mohanty. London: Taylor and Francis.
- El Arte de Vivir Colombia. 2016. “Juan Manuel Santos Saluda a Sri Sri Ravi Shankar - YouTube.” Accessed February 14, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krStr8x9GEU>.
- Ghosh, Shinjini. 2017. “Art of Living Damaged Yamuna Floodplains.” December 8. Accessed October 01, 2018. <https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/art-of-living-damaged-yamuna-floodplains/article21293539.ece>.
- Gooptu, Nandini. 2016. “New Spirituality, Politics of Self-Empowerment, Citizenship, and Democracy in Contemporary India.” *Mod. Asian Stud.* 50 (03): 934–74. doi:10.1017/S0026749X14000171.
- Gurudev Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. 2016. “FARC Leader Iván Márquez Thanks Sri Sri Ravi Shankar & Art of Living for Colombian Peace Initiative. - YouTube.” Accessed February 14, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bRAsRnj4iI>.
- Humble Witness. 2018. “Sudarshan Kriya: FREEING or FRYING the Mind? | LEAVING the ART of LIVING.” Accessed June 25, 2018. <https://artoflivingfree.blogspot.com/2009/12/sudarshan-kriya-is-it-freeing-or-frying.html>.
- International Association for Human Values. 2019b. “Programs Archive.” Accessed February 14, 2019. <http://www.iahv.org/program/>.

- . 2019a. “About IAHV - IAHV - International Association for Human Values (United States).” Accessed February 14, 2019. <http://www.iahv.org/about-us/>.
- . 2019b. “Sri Sri Ravi Shankar: Founder - IAHV - International Association for Human Values.” Accessed October 24, 2019. <http://www.iahv.org/about-us/sri-sri-ravi-shankar/>.
- Jacobs, Stephen. 2014. “Inner Peace and Global Harmony: Individual Wellbeing and Global Solutions in the Art of Living.” *CU* 6 (4): 873–89. doi:10.3384/cu.2000.1525.146873.
- . 2015. *The Art of Living Foundation: Spirituality and Wellbeing in the Global Context*. Ashgate new religions. Farnham Surrey, England, Burlington, VT, USA: Ashgate.
- Justia Trademarks 1. 2018. “Sudarshan Kriya - Trademark of the Art of Living Foundation 2006.” Accessed August 30, 2018. <https://trademarks.justia.com/770/33/sudarshan-77033509.html>.
- Justia Trademarks 2. 2018. “Sudarshan Kriya - Trademark of the Art of Living Foundation 1993.” Accessed August 30, 2018. <https://trademarks.justia.com/770/33/sudarshan-77033509.html>.
- Ley, Ronald. 1999. “The Modification of Breathing Behavior.” *Behav Modif* 23 (3): 441–79. doi:10.1177/0145445599233006.
- Mukherjee, Arpita, Souvik Dutta, Souvik Mendiratta, Avantika Kapoor, and Tanu M. Goyal. 2017. “Working\_Paper\_342.” ICRIER Working Papers, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations 342. Unpublished manuscript, last modified July 08, 2019. [https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/176369/1/Working\\_Paper\\_342.pdf](https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/176369/1/Working_Paper_342.pdf).
- Münster, Daniel. 2017. “Zero Budget Natural Farming and Bovine Entanglements in South India.”
- NDTV. “Lack of 'Spirituality' One of the Reasons for Farmer Suicides: Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.” Accessed June 18, 2019. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/lack-of-spirituality-one-of-the-reasons-for-farmer-suicides-sri-sri-ravi-shankar-1687330>.
- Nellis, Ashley. 2016. “The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons.”
- Salkin, Allen. 2007. “Emperor of Air.” Accessed August 30, 2018. <https://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/emperor-of-air>.
- Shiva, Vandana. 1991. *The Violence of the Green Revolution: Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics*.
- Sri Sri Institute of Agricultural Sciences & Technology Trust. 2019a. “Highlights & Achievements.” Accessed February 14, 2019. <http://www.ssiast.com/about/highlights.aspx>.
- . 2019b. “Kissan Manch.” Accessed October 07, 2019. <https://www.ssiast.com/kissan-manch/>.
- . 2019c. “Ongoing Projects.” Accessed October 07, 2019. <https://www.ssiast.com/projects/ongoing-projects.aspx>.

Sri Sri Rural Development Program. 2019a. "Community of Rural Enterprise." Accessed July 03, 2019. <http://ssrdp.org/community-of-rural-enterprise/>.

———. 2019b. "Home Page." Accessed July 03, 2019. <http://ssrdp.org/>.

———. 2019c. "Light a Home." Accessed July 03, 2019. <http://ssrdp.org/light-a-home-2/>.

———. 2019d. "Shakti." Accessed July 03, 2019. <http://ssrdp.org/shakti/>.

Sri Sri Tattva. 2019a. "About Us." Accessed February 14, 2019.

<https://www.srisritattva.com/en/about-us/>.

———. 2019b. "Arvind Varchaswi - Managing Director, Sri Sri Tattva." Accessed February 14, 2019. <https://www.srisritattva.com/en/arvind-varchaswi>.

———. 2019c. "Sri Sri Tattva - Store Locator." Accessed October 21, 2019. <https://stores.srisritattva.com/>.

Tøllefsen, Inga B. 2012. "A Study of the Art of Living Foundation." Master, Universitetet i Tromsø.

———. 2016. "Art of Living Foundation." Accessed June 27, 2018. <https://wrlldrels.org/2016/10/08/art-of-living-foundation/>.