



'DON'T KILL HIM: THE STORY OF MY LIFE WITH BHAGWAN RAJNEESH' BY MA ANAND SHEELA: CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

Ma Anand Sheela is one of the most controversial women in the history of USA and India, causing one of the biggest bio-terror attacks in America. She helped Bhagwan Osho build an empire and etched her name in world history. The book 'Don't Kill Him!' is a memoir of her life with Bhagwan Osho, as her personal secretary. She explains her every rebellious act that she performed as the empress of her reign. This paper tries to critically assess her views, in her memoir. A comparison is also made to her recent interview for the OTT platform series called the 'Wild Wild Country'.

Keywords: Bhagwan Rajneesh, Bio-terror attack, Ma Anand Sheela, Osho, Sannyasins, Wild Wild Country

'Don't Kill Him: The Story of my Life with Bhagwan Rajneesh'

'Don't kill him' is the controversial memoir by one of the most controversial women in the history of America and India; '*tough titties*' as she liked to call herself: Ma Anand Sheela. She was the ex-leader, spokesperson of religious cult famously known as the 'Rajneeshees', and was also the private secretary to their religious guru: Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, a.k.a. Osho.

Born as Sheela Ambalal Patel on December 28, 1949, Ma Anand Sheela moved to the USA for higher studies. She moved to India, with her dying first husband, Mr. Silverman, in search of spirituality in 1972 and became disciples of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. Sheela describes when she first saw Rajneesh as 'love at first sight' like that of a schoolgirl and also describes being aw-struck by his charming personality. Soon she took the position of Bhagwan's then secretary and then ultimately decided to move the Ashram to 'The Big Muddy

Ranch', Oregon, USA (64,0000-acres) during the unfavourable conditions for the Ashram in Mrs Gandhi's government. Sheela was the woman who took her love, Bhagwan, from being the god of Slum-dogs to the god of millionaires and then began Osho's Oregon experiment; '*Rajneeshpuram*'.

The memoir focuses on Ma Anand Sheela's life as a shadow of Bhagwan Rajneesh and the aftermath of the controversial Oregon incident. The book is translated from German to English by Ma Anand Anupamo (Christel Hahn), who had also been an immanent part of the religious cult of the Rajneeshees. In this book, Ma Anand Sheela has tried to put her perspective, of the events that followed in Oregon, into the picture. After being accused of attempted murder, bio-terror, corruption, immigration fraud, assault, mismanagement, by her beloved, Osho, himself, and the 39 month term in prison, it had become necessary for her to clear the filthy speck on her image; and the result was this book. Even after being rewarded with the infamous image, she requests

Rajneeshees to keep Bhagwan's legacy, his truth going about the 'beautiful Oregon experiment' going and to not let it die. The controversy took off once again with the launch of Netflix Original Documentary called the 'Wild Wild Country' in 2018.

'Don't Kill Him' departs from most of the memoirs written in the sense it is biographical as well as auto-biographical. This memoir captures the rise and fall of a 'NeverLand', a dreamy empire. The book and the incidents stated in it portray a painful truth of a person who was always enjoyed the spotlight, was loved as much Bhagwan himself and was suddenly made the villain of the 'Neverland'. It captures an account of the incidents that most 'Sannyasins' refuse to put in the life story of their Master. Ma Anand Sheela in her memoir explains various events of her life in no particular order, the story line moves back and forth.

Ma Anand Sheela begins the book by 'My Khidr Had Spoken', it actually begins when she is fed up of being the lieutenant and the in charge of the commune that was now, no more limited to a religious group. She claims that she was the heart of the commune and Bhagwan was the soul and they were a team: inseparable. She writes in the memoir, that at that point of time (1985) "*He has lost interest in us as a community... Moreover, I no more wanted to deal with his constant, crazy demands.*"ⁱ

Ma Anand Sheela was born as Sheela Ambalal Patel on 28 December 1949. She went to the United States to study arts in a small college in Montclair in New Jersey, where she fell in love and married a young man named, Marc Silverman. Mr Silverman was suffering from cancer of lymphatic system, soon the disease became fatal and they moved to India in 1972, to pursue spiritual studies, the time when she met Bhagwan. She describes her first meeting with Bhagwan very vividly, like a fairy-tale, not missing out a single detail, which is sufficient to understand her passionate love for Bhagwan. She describes her first experience as, "*I let myself fall into his arms, full of joy...It seemed like an eternity.*"ⁱⁱ She describes being drowned in his eyes like some magic had been cast on her and love at first site. It was the time, when she herself and her husband became more actively involved in the activities of the Ashram,

while the Ashram was still in Pune. Bhagwan Rajneesh renamed Sheela as 'Ma Anand Sheela' and Mr Silverman as 'Chinmaya', as per the tradition of the spiritual (at that point of time) cult. The name changing ceremony, symbolized leaving behind one's past, family and begin once again with a new family of 'Sannyasins'. All of them were also instructed to wear only shades of red, as they were the colours of the sunset, the most peaceful time of the day for meditating. The 'Sannyasins' also wore a necklace around their neck, made of beads with a picture of their Master.

Everything went well in the Ashram, Pune, until the tax scam came in limelight. Osho wanted to move the Ashram from Pune. The master had given, his the secretary, Laxmi the task of finding other suitable land to make an Ashram. The time of Mrs Gandhi's and later Morarji Desai's government had become quite challenging for the 'Sannyasins' that were already a part of the community and who were moving to India to seek refuge in their Master's arms. Sheela, in 1981 became Bhagwan's personal secretary by replacing Laxmi, and was able to convince Bhagwan to move to America, for the survival of the community and his own self, for she felt that Bhagwan was really unsafe in Pune, India. Sheela bought a 64,000 acre Big Muddy Ranch in Wasco County, Oregon. Sheela also became the president of 'Rajneesh Foundation International' Soon, the experiment of a big commune, *Rajneeshpuram*, started.

The Master was not only a spiritual leader, but also a master-mind. He knew how to regulate money within the commune. When the Ashram was in Pune, the Master always gave non-Indian 'Sannyasins', particularly who came from Europe or the USA, more attention as they bought more money, making the economy of the Ashram even stronger. When the Ashram was in the USA, and the Master needed money for the ranch, for his Rolexes, his Rolls Royce, he would declare a few 'Sannyasins', enlightened so they renounced all their riches in favour of the Ashram. In my opinion, it was hoax. Sheela has admitted about the con in the book as well as in an interview with BBCⁱⁱⁱ. Now the question is was she a part of the hoax or a victim to it?

It can be deduced from Sheela's book that she was in a sense of regret, exploiting all these innocent 'Sannyasins', who saw nothing, but only their Master: Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh Osho. Sheela many a times wrote letter Bhagwan that she is no longer able to continue with it, her shoulder couldn't bear more, but Rajneesh always took advantage of her emotional vulnerabilities. She had no option left, she always stood by Bhagwan's side like a soldier. It is very evident, from the pictures clicked, pictures of the media, her love for Bhagwan, it was genuine sense of love and compassion.

The commune was prospering, they had their own shopping centres, own eateries, a bank, and even an air transport system with 'Air Rajneesh'. They even had houses for the 'Sannyasins', a luxury hotel for the overseas visitors, a huge area for meditation, and a lavish and a luxurious living place for the Bhagwan himself. Along with this all, Bhagwan also desired luxurious things like Rolexes, Rolls Royce, designer clothes, etc. He had a dazzling collection of ninety-one Rolls Royce! And watches from Swiss Military and Rolex and many other lavish brands worth millions of dollars. But from where did such a whopping amount of money come in? It was the 'Sannyasins' that were exploited. The spiritual group now had become a religious cult and new ways of exploiting the followers were practiced. The 'Sannyasins' from the USA and Europe had always been the major source of money and were continuously exploited.

Sheela was the queen and as any queen would want she too wanted to expand her reign. She wanted to buy the houses of the town of Antelope, which was home to only a population of 42 (approximately) people. It was a town of elderly people, who were living a retired, ranch life. She wanted to buy those houses for her 'Sannyasins'. Many of them started acquiring the citizenship of Antelope, soon they outran the number of local residents and even elected their Mayor. The Sheriff was also, now, one of the religious cult. The people of Antelope were imposed on with hefty taxes, the laws were made stricter. The houses that 'Sannyasins' had bought already, had bizarre sex therapies going on in them, people were spied on etc. People of Antelope felt bullied and at last many

of them, willing went on for selling their ranches. It was a huge win for Sheela against the residents. The town of Antelope was ultimately in the commune's control and they renamed it as 'Rajneeshpuram'. She also wrote a book 'the book of Rajneeshism', she was the one who made Bhagwan an international phenomena. She preached love, the sense of community, she was a leader of this huge commune, how did her inner self not nudge her while she was doing all of this injustice to the people of Antelope. Her love had blinded her. The fame of the master has also crept into the world of Hollywood. Many young, rich, filthy rich, actors, directors, personalities and their families were joining the commune. Françoise Ruddy, the wife of the famous producer of 'The Godfather': Albert S. Ruddy, also became a part of the commune. She would take Bhagwan into the world of Hollywood by taking him home, to Hollywood parties, and would present to him expensive gifts. She brought to Bhagwan the taste of designer and classy, elegant clothing and expensive watches. She was renamed as 'Ma Prem Hasya'. Sheela described all these people as the people who had made Bhagwan a 'Spoilt little boy'.

The queen could see her position declining in the presence of Ma Prem Hasya. Her possessive nature towards Bhagwan and Ma Prem Hasya's growing intimacy with him made Sheela grow more and more aggressive in public appearances. She fiercely involved herself in debates with television anchors, using 'substandard language'. It feels like she lost control over herself and actions, the commune which was lovingly nurtured by her, was taught fierce actions. Thus, took place what is infamously known as the "Rajneesh Bioterror attack" in 1984.

The conflict of the commune, with the local residents grew larger and larger. Sheela bussed homeless people into the commune, to increase the majority. Hundreds of homeless people were becoming 'Sannyasins' everyday, because they were promised equality, love compassion and a family. Sheela clearly wanted to influence and win the two open seats of Wasco County's November, 1984 elections. She also wanted to make them registered voters, but her effort went in vain and her plan failed. Allegedly, in reiterating her strength and

courage, she along with some other members, conspired to inflict the voters with Salmonella so they could not vote. More than ten restaurants were infected, leaving near about 800 voters ill. She denies all these accusation in her book. She says: *"...accusation of poisoning 750 people in Dalles, Oregon, with salmonella bacteria. Such a pointless and heartless action wouldn't have served any purpose. The whole Rajneesh community was accused."*^{iv} She also adds, *"In those days, it had become almost customary to blame Rajneeshees for all disasters in Oregon as well as in other parts of the world where we were concentrated."*^v

It also came into her notice that Bhagwan had been put on drugs by his personal doctor with the conspiracy of Prem Hasya. Bhagwan also administered laughing-gas dosages every day. She loved him to the extent that she and one of her associated even tried killing Bhagwan's doctor, Devraj, and the next morning she fled from the commune along with a few associates in 'Air Rajneesh'. The FBI also raided the commune to look for any illegal material and weapons.

This was the point when the ugly battle between Bhagwan and Sheela started. Bhagwan accused her of corruption, stealing money and attempted murder. Sheela openly talked about the hoax that the commune was. Bhagwan too replied with full zeal, he also foully portrayed her love, in an interview with 60 minutes Australia, Bhagwan said, *"I had never made love to her, that much is certain. Perhaps, that is the jealousy! She always wanted it but I have made it a point that never make love to a secretary."*^{vi} Such controversial statements from both the sides made matters worse. She was so used to the attention that she got that she even posed naked for a magazine, which went viral, even in the time when there was no Instagram! People, mainly the 'Sannyasins' had begun to sympathise with her, their love and dedication had transferred to Sheela from Bhagwan, over the time. For a group of Sannyasins, she was Supreme, they even fled the ranch with her and stayed loyal and devoted to her. They believed she was indeed, a tigress! After she fled from the ranch, Ma Prem Hasya became Bhagwan's personal secretary, the Sannyasins left in the commune, burnt her remaining stuff and her

book of 'Rajneeshism', they marked her end by this ceremony.

Sheela was caught by the USA authorities in West Germany in 1986, faced trials and was in prison for about 39 months and ultimately moved to Switzerland, where her husband belonged, and from where she could not be extradited. After struggling for a while, Sheela started a new life in Switzerland, where she opened two retirement homes, after her husband and parents passed away. She looks after people of all age groups, and take care of them and makes sure that they feel like they have a family. She still believes in 'Existence' and her unconditional love for Bhagwan remains unaltered, even after his death.

This book is her side of the story. Sheela must have wished to clarify all the stains on her image and reputation and she also has a message for the present day 'Sannyasins'. She was this fierce soldier who took care of the commune and Bhagwan himself, like her children. It is a memoir of a person who was placed under the continuous scrutiny of Bhagwan, the commune, media and people worldwide. In aftermath of the Oregon experiment, she was labelled as the 'villain'. Even when the Ashram was closed and the commune had to move back to India, and even when Bhagwan died, she never wanted to return to the commune.

Sheela was the queen, she had this glorious reign. It can be deduced that, it was Ma Prem Hasya's presence that made her highly vulnerable. She could see her reign, her people slipping away by a whisker. She made all possible attempts to stay relevant, to still be in the limelight. She was highly possessive about Bhagwan and could not share him with any other, his intimacy with others would make her go mad, her aggression would come out all on either the journalists or her in her fierce debates and actions.

It can also be deduced that she was equally a part of the hoax created by Bhagwan, and not a victim to it. She could clearly deny exploiting the 'Bhakt Sannyasins' and their riches, instead she devised new plans to regulate their money like opening in-commune banks, shopping centres, eateries, etc. she was a master-mind in all these

plans and money making. It cannot be fully accepted the fact, when she said she never wanted to do exploit Sannyasins, but she did it all for Bhagwan. Had she really followed the right path, she would never had done it. It can be concluded that she led and presided over the hoax created by Bhagwan Rajneesh.

Sheela also had a perspective of self, she had the courage to leave the commune and then say the truth in front of the world. She did many controversial interviews too. Sheela was greatly influenced by Bhagwan, most part of her youthful and prime years of life had been in his shadow. She viewed him as any other man. She says that he was no different than any other man.

Bhagwan had this woman, named Vivek, who lived with him as his wife. Vivek once got pregnant and Sheela had to arrange for an abortion for Vivek so the world could never know that Bhagwan was not a 'celibate'. Bhagwan's regular disputes with Vivek also made his grumpy and irritated all the time. She helped Bhagwan in keeping his God-like figure i.e. keeping away from sex, materialistic things, which clearly Bhagwan was really fond of. Sheela also mentions that such things would really be controversial if known to the worlds, especially the Indians. In my opinion, she clearly deceived the people who invested their trust in her and Bhagwan. First the 'team' deceived the 'Sannyasins' in the Pune, India Ashram, then the people of the commune were misled many times during the Wasco County Election 1984. In my opinion, they used their 'Sannyasins' as their shield from the world and to escape into their 'NEVERLAND' and also exploited their riches touching their vulnerabilities. But it is also commendable that the team gave the concept of modern spirituality, where people could experiment with themselves, with their bodies, their sexuality. The commune was a Platonic place of living, away from sorrows. Bhagwan and Sheela questioned primitive and orthodox ways of

References

ⁱ Sheela, Ma Anand, "Don't Kill Him! The story of my life with Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh", FingerPrint, 2012. p.33

ⁱⁱ *Id.* p.117

ⁱⁱⁱ BBC Stories, 'Wild Wild Country: What Happened to Sheela? BBC Stories', Youtube, 20 Jul. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsRgwDRaQkE> accessed on 8 Nov. 2019.

spirituality and gave them a new meaning. Also it is highly appreciated by critics that people from all races and backgrounds were welcomed to the commune. Sheela was also a woman with a great mind, for Bhagwan: 'Beauty with Brains'. She was this 'woke' woman, who questioned the authorities and fought for her rights. She questioned the sham in the face of liberty provided by the USA.

Sheela says that she has been quite honest in her memoir. She accepted the fact that she and some of her associates had wanted to kill Bhagwan's personal doctor. But she denies the immigration fraud and the bioterror attack. In reality, she pleaded guilty to most of the crimes she committed, in 1986. This contradiction leaves vacuum for disbelief in the memoir that she says is actually the truth.

Her love for Bhagwan is actually unconditional, till date. Even after receiving all the bad comments, allegations, her love and devotion for him remains unaltered. She cherishes all the good memories that she had with him. She disagrees with the way Bhagwan's death rituals were performed after he passed away in 1990, she says that they were totally against his life, death and teachings. Sheela also disagrees how the Sannyasins, leave the part of the Oregon experiment and many other important aspects of his life out of Bhagwan's biographies and other documentations. She wants the legacy of her master, her beloved Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh to continue unaltered. She says that the "His discourses as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh were divine, even if some of his actions as a fallible human beings were flawed. In order to be complete, history needs to note both."^{vii} She ends the book by saying, "these empty rituals kill him. Please stop them. His soul left his body in 1990. Now please don't kill him!"^{viii} Sheela has put forward her point of view, her side of the story in her memoir as well as the Netflix Original documentary called "Wild Wild Country".

^{iv} *Ibid.* p.53

^v *Ibid.* p.53

^{vi} 60 Minutes Australia, "Wild Country Cult leaders on building their 'con empire'." *Youtube*, 17 Oct. 2019.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jni0v3PIPHM> accessed on 10 Nov. 2019.

^{vii} *Ibid.* p.286

^{viii} *Ibid.* p.286