

Review of Sofiya Khovanskaia – Vasenkina’s BA thesis “Ethnography of ISKCON ritual performances in Prague with special attention to gender practices”

Sofiya Khovanskaia – Vasenkina’s BA thesis offers some compelling ethnographic insights into gender issues within Czech ISKCON communities, but it also manifests several deficiencies, especially regarding theory, methodology, analysis, and structure.

Regarding the positive sides of the work, the student provides a great deal of relevant information about gender hierarchy and gender negotiation within Czech ISKCON communities, especially in relation to visual appearance, spatial and temporal separation of genders within different ritual practices and spaces, social and gender hierarchy within the community, and also draws attention ethnographically to differences in gender-related practices between different ISKCON communities in the Czech republic (mainly comparing Prague, Lužce, and Brno communities, as well as considering Russian-speaking practitioners in the Czech republic). I should also compliment the student on the visual materials accompanying ethnographic discussion (e.g., drawings and tables) which successfully enhance and clarify the main points.

In the way of critique, I would like to start with the theory part. First, the theory section in the introduction very briefly enumerates some very general theories about religion and gender (each of these separately), without discussing these issues together, and without properly linking them to the main research question. Second, and more importantly, the student ignores most of the existing academic literature on the issues most closely related to the thesis, i.e., not only general anthropological readings that examine the relation between gender and religion, but also academic works that deal either with ISKCON/Hindu communities in general, or specifically in relation to gender. The student only mentions one MA thesis in this regard (by Klepal), and two works by Veronika Seidlova (plus some additional works that deal mainly with terminology debates surrounding the concepts such as Neo-Hinduism, and New Religious Movements; and the rest of the bibliography are either journalistic, encyclopaedic, theological, or other similar works), but misses all the other academic and anthropological sources that would be necessary to consider for a more proper contextualization of the ethnographic data in the analysis part (see a list of some of this bibliography in Appendix, below). In addition, the introduction section also lacks some proper contextualization of discussions about gender issues within ISKCON community from a broader historical and global perspective. The student mentions only briefly (in four separate sentences), some global ISKCON debates on gender and sexuality in the analysis part (pages 34, 35, 54), and only in one sentence implies how some Hindu scriptures (e.g., Bhagavadgita) might have understood gender roles (39), but these issues that are necessary for the understanding of the broader context would need to be properly addressed in a separate part in the beginning of the thesis.

Next, the methodology section in the introduction lacks some necessary information. For example, it is not clear, and should be explained in this part, how much research, and what type of research, did the author conduct in relation to *each* of the three communities that she wanted to study. Specifically, how many observations, and how many interviews in each community, how many with women and how many with men, and also what kinds of questions was she asking (it is possible to extrapolate some of this data from the chapters, but not all of it)? This is very significant, since the reader needs to see how large was the sample

(of interviews and observations) for each of these communities, and therefore how valid might be the general conclusions regarding these communities (including conclusions regarding their differences). For example, we later learn that Lužce community was visited only once, and we don't know if there were also any interviews done with Lužce representatives (and what were their genders). We can also see that the sample of interviewed people and observed events was quite low for the other communities. Another problem in this relation is the high number of communities being compared (3-4), especially in relation to how low is the sample of people/events for each. It would be better if the student would focus more thoroughly on one, or maximum two communities (on which she would do some suitable number of observations and interviews).

Furthermore, all this is not only a problem in itself, but also carries consequences for the analysis part. For example, the student sometimes makes broad general conclusions that are not based on sufficient data, as in this observation:

The *general pattern* that I observed was that when people attended the Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze or the Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir [in Lužce], the majority of people wore saris and dhotis, while when attending the Harinam and Nama-Hatta [in Prague] it was more common to see people wearing western clothes. However, during the Harinam, members of the Czechspeaking communities wore saris more often than the members of the Russian-speaking community (page 35; emphasis added).

From only three visits to the Centrum Hare Krišna in Praze, and only one in Lužce, plus only three Harinamas, and three Nama-Hattas (the latter supposedly more Russian-speaking based), it is difficult to make such conclusions about “general patterns” (it is also unclear, the exact number of how many people, and of which genders, wore specific clothes at each event). Similarly, the student claims that preachers are “always” women at the Russian-speaking rituals (49), and that Czech communities (in Prague and Brno) are “more strict” (in relation to the dancing patterns of women, who dance more “modestly”, in contrast to men, who move in more “ecstatic” ways) (52). The indication here is also that Russian-speaking communities are therefore “less” strict (since the Czech communities are “more”), even though, it appears later in the thesis that the women within Russian-speaking communities also do not move much during dancing (because they are usually “seated”, 53). Therefore, it appears from these observations that there are problems here both with the logic of argumentation (and clarity of writing), as well as with the methodology of research (e.g., low sampling, and lack of sufficient data for generalization and comparison). Furthermore, when it comes to the observations regarding the ISKCON communities in Brno, the author mainly relies on one anecdotal evidence (35; one interview quote with unidentified person), and one (or two?) event visit(s) of Brno ISKCON community to Prague Centre (36), which is also not sufficient in order to make any valid generalizations regarding comparisons between Brno vs Prague ISKCON communities.

Before concluding, I need to add one more observation regarding the structure of the thesis, which is often confusing and fragmentary. For example, some sections would need to be discussed earlier in the work, in order to properly contextualize the analysis part (gender roles in ISKCON were discussed only at the very end of the thesis, instead of in the beginning; much of the general information about ISKCON was interspersed within various sections, including theory [11], and methodology sections [19], instead of coherently discussed in one). There were also some other issues (for example, I missed some discussion

about practicalities and difficulties of research, including in relation to the use of English language among Czech practitioners).

To conclude, considering all the advantages and shortcomings of the work, I evaluate the lack of theorization (and contextualization) in this thesis with grade 3, and the ethnography/methodology and analysis parts with grade 2, and I leave the rest to the discussion at the defence.

David Verbuč (opponent)

Appendix. List of literature that should be considered for the thesis (links to google scholar entries, according to selected keywords).

Anthropology + Krishna -

https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=anthropology+ISKCON&btnG=

Anthropology + gender + Hinduism –

https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=anthropology+gender+hinduism&btnG=

Anthropology + ISKCON + gender -

https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=anthropology+ISKCON+gender&btnG=

ISKCON + gender -

https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=ISKCON.+gender&btnG=&oi=ISKCON+gender

Vedas + gender:

https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=vedas+gender&btnG=

Academic readers (collections of articles) on gender and religion (selection):

Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader (E. Castelli, and R. Rodman, eds, Palgrave 2001)

The Bloomsbury Reader in Religion, Sexuality, and Gender (Donald L. Boisvert, Carly Daniel-Hughes, eds, Bloomsbury 2017)

Embodying Religion, Gender and Sexuality (Gendering the Study of Religion in the Social Sciences) (Sarah-Jane Page, Katy Pilcher, eds, Routledge 2020)