



# **“Ethnography of ISKCON ritual performances in Prague with special attention to gender practices”.**

Ethnographic Case Study of Prague ISKCON

*Sofiya Khovanskaia – Vasenkina*  
*Bachelor's Thesis*

*Supervisor: Mgr. Veronika Seidlová, Ph.D*  
*Prague, 2022*

I declare that I have written this Bachelor Diploma Paper myself and on my own. I have duly referenced and quoted all the material and sources that I used in it. This Paper has not yet been submitted to obtain any degree.

V Praze dne ..... (in Prague, date)

..... Podpis (Signature)

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## Abstract

This thesis presents results of ethnographic research of ritual performances within several ISKCON communities in Prague, Czech Republic. The participant-observation was carried out with the positionality of a partial insider due to my upbringing as a member of ISKCON in Russia. There are differences in ritual practices in relation to gender, based on which the communities construct themselves differently, sometimes in opposition to each other. ISKCON is not homogenous: it consists of constructed sub-communities, and the differences are performed within rituals and that is why they are observable.

Keywords: ISKCON, ritual, the Czech Republic, gender, ethnography

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## Introduction

*The maha-mantra  
Hare Kṛṣṇa Hare Kṛṣṇa  
Kṛṣṇa Kṛṣṇa Hare Hare  
Hare Rāma Hare Rāma  
Rāma Rāma Hare Hare*

The first quote is the maha-mantra – the most important mantra within Gaudiya Vaishnavism, monotheistic religion that can be put under the umbrella-term “hinduism” . This Vaishnava mantra, composed of three Sanskrit words - "Krishna", "Rama" and Hare, is mentioned already in the Kali-Santarana Upanishad (Beck 1993, p. 199). From the 15th century, it rose to importance in the Bhakti movement following the teachings of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Indian saint who is described as one of Krishna’s avatars (Caitanya Caritamrita: Adi, 7.11). That’s the mantra one can hear on the streets, when Hare Krishnas are dancing through the city; that’s the mantra one can hear in the temple or in a home of an adept of this religion; it can also be heard in ritual performances. The focus of this paper is on a religious organization called International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) that abides by the principles of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. For me personally, this organization is significant because I was raised in it.

In 2017, I moved to the Czech Republic to pursue the Bachelor’s degree in Liberal Arts and Humanities. Before attending a class called “Introduction to Anthropology”, my idea of anthropology was vague and mainly based on the tv-show called “Bones”. Also, in my first year, I attended a course called “Gender and Body”, that locked me into the state of fascination and inspiration by the field of Gender Studies. In my second year of study, I attended a course called “Anthropology of Ritual” taught by Veronika Seidlová. During this course I kept coming back to my experiences in ISKCON and mentioning them in the class. By the end of the course I asked Dr. Seidlová to be my thesis supervisor, and during a discussion we realized that ISKCON was a subject that we had in common, as she has conducted ethnomusicological research on the Hare Krishnas in Prague, and a decision was made that I would be writing my thesis on ISKCON in the Czech Republic because of my positionality that could prove very valuable in such a research project.

ISKCON was founded in 1966 in New York by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (Satsvarūpa Dās Gosvāmī, 2002). The theological aspect of the movement takes its origins from the tradition of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. The main body of theological texts consists of Bhagavad Gita As It Is, Srimad Bhagavatam and Caitanya Caritamrita. Practicing Krishna Consciousness was illegal on the territory of Czechoslovakia until the Velvet Revolution in 1989. ISKCON became officially recognized as a religious organization in the Czech

Republic in 2002 (e.g., Klepal, 2005 and Schlichtsová, 2019). As of right now, there are multiple ISKCON centers on the territory of the Czech Republic.

Over the course of my life I have attended ISKCON temples and centers in many cities and countries:

- Moscow, Russia
- Krasnodar, Russia
- Sochi, Russia
- Gelendzhik, Russia
- Dnipro, Ukraine
- Almaty, Kazakhstan
- Bereke, Kazakhstan
- Durbuy, Belgium
- London, UK
- Watford, UK
- Amsterdam, Netherlands
- Berlin, Germany
- Albettone, Italy
- San Casciano in Val di Pesa, Italy
- Mumbai, India
- Delhi, India
- Vrindavan, India
- Brno, the Czech Republic,
- Prague, the Czech Republic
- Luzce, the Czech Republic

Such extend of experience provided me with internalized sense of what is “normal” in a temple and what stands out. At the age of 17-19 I started distancing myself from the religious practices of ISKCON in favor of my other developing interests in life. As a result, when time came to conduct research, I had a position of a semi-insider: on the one hand, I was raised in ISKCON and very well familiar with it, and on the other hand, I have developed a critical distance towards it on which I was relying as a researcher. Furthermore, I had a low level of familiarity with ISKCON in the Czech Republic.

In ISKCON, rituals play a significant role: they take place daily several times per day. The main purpose of the ISKCON rituals is to practice *seva* (Sanskrit term for ‘selfless service’, e.g., Jacobsen, 2015) and *bhakti* (Sanskrit term for ‘devotional love’, e.g., Britannica, 2022).



There are different kinds of rituals: services to the images or deities of divine figures, communal recital and discussion of the Vedic scriptures, collective consumption of food, and singing the maha-mantra in different types of setting. Overall, ISKCON has been studied in the Czech Republic by scholars of religion and several anthropologists, but most of them presented ISKCON as a homogenous organization.

I attempted to study the differences in negotiations of ritual performance with special attention to gender practices in ISKCON in Prague and its surroundings. For that, I reviewed the previous ethnographical and theoretical research done on ISKCON in the Czech Republic.

I conducted ethnographic study between October 2021 and June 2022. During this time, I was a participant in the ritual performances and used participant observation to deepen the available information on the topology of ISKCON's communities in the Czech Republic. In my research, I specifically concentrated on ritual as a performance and paid special attention to the gender practices involved in this process. I tried to show in a detailed way that the ritual performance is negotiated differently in three ISKCON communities in Prague and its vicinity with references to the ISKCON community in Brno that was talked about by the members of Prague communities on multiple occasions, and the Brno devotees also came to Prague for a visit on one occasion.

In the chapter of theoretical framework, I explain the main concepts that I used for analyzing the data. To familiarize the reader with ISKCON, I present a brief history of ISKCON in the Czech Republic. I also speak about the history of ISKCON in Russia to better contextualize my own positionality of a person who was raised in ISKCON in Russia. I give an overview of research on ISKCON in the Czech Republic and mainly concentrated on research based on ethnographical data.

In the chapter on methodology, I explain chosen participant-observation technique and ways of acquiring supplementary data. I also explain my positionality and ethical issues and concerns.

I present my findings on the topology of ISKCON in the Czech Republic with most concentration on Prague, where I mainly conducted my participant-observation. My empirical data includes discussion of emic terms of gender, gendered visual appearance, physical separation of genders within ritual space, and gendered ritual roles.

In Prague, there are different sub-communities and people/ISKCON members have a choice to make which community to join. There are the same rituals performed within the communities, but each of them presents nuanced differences in the actual ritual

performances which could only be ethnographically observed. Based on the occurring differences of negotiations of the ritual performances and gender practices, these communities construct themselves differently, or even in opposition to some other ISKCON communities.

## 1.Theoretical and Methodological Framework

### 1.1 Anthropology of Religion and Ritual

My main source of inspiration for the theoretical framework of this work is the field of anthropology, specifically anthropology of religion and ritual. I study ISKCON as a religious organization, where the religious aspect of it can be defined in accordance with Eriksen's definition of religion: having similarities with any other ideology, religion must simultaneously legitimate a political order and provide a meaningful world view for its adherents, such as a reconciliation with one's own inevitable death (Eriksen, 2001). Furthermore, it is important to highlight two more definitions that Eriksen himself references:

- creating solidarity and integration through rituals and 'collective representations' and belonging to the sacred domain, while essentially being a form of society's worship of itself (Durkheim, cited in Eriksen 2001)
- a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz, cited in Eriksen 2001)

ISKCON indeed provides its adherents with a meaning worldview, while creating solidarity through an elaborate system of rituals and daily practices that are related to the sacred domain, and it also presents a system of symbols both tangible and intangible that establish moods and motivations through formulation of a general order of existence.

Furthermore, Eriksen makes a distinction between oral and written religions. Written religions are those that are based on texts and within their tradition every member is supposed to have some degree of familiarity with the text, while the oral religions are locally confined and tend to be more tightly connected to the social practices of the given society. ISKCON's interpretation of Gaudiya Vaishnavism is a "written religion" as the philosophy is drawn from a list of scriptures: *Bhagavad Gita As It Is* (Prabhupāda, 2001), *Srimad*

*Bhagavatam*<sup>1</sup>, *Caitanya Caritamrita*<sup>2</sup>, and others. All books used within ISKCON are published by the official ISKCON publishing house, the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust (further mentioned as BBT). The members' familiarity with the text is facilitated through most temples holding two lectures based on the scriptures per day.

Based on these definitions, I want to establish that this work treats ISKCON as a religious organization and rituals within this organization will be analyzed. There's also a discourse within which ISKCON is treated as a New Religious Movement, which will be discussed later as well. The fundamental postulates of the scriptures can be very well defined as "conceptions of a general order of existence" and they are presented as "facts", because they are supposedly the words of God, thus they are transcendental and non-negotiable<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, according to my observations negotiations do take place – within rituals. For this sentence to make sense, it is necessary to elaborate on definition of ritual and negotiations.

Rituals as such and in relation to religious organizations have been given a lot of attention by social and cultural anthropologists. Eriksen claims that rituals simultaneously legitimate power, and are thus important vehicles of ideology, while at the same time giving strong emotional experience to the participants of the ritual (Eriksen, 2001). In the same title, Eriksen (2001) also introduces the performance theorist Richard Schechner, who worked closely with symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner. Schechner and Turner suggested a new theoretical concept of ritual. They state that ritual is a genre of cultural performance, in which performance is a spectrum of ritualisation that begins with "greetings, displays of emotion, family scenes, professional roles" and ends with "theatre, dance, ceremonies, rites" and so on (Schechner, 1988) and thus propose to approach study of ritual as that of a performance in contrast to other existing approaches of studying ritual.

Drawing on Schechner and Turner, cultural anthropologist Ute Hüsken and scholar of religion Neubert provide an exhaustive definition of ritual in the book "Negotiating rites":

*"Ritual is a repetitive, formally stylized behavior based on scripts or models that is perceived as different from everyday behavior; separated through a frame; invested with meaning that is not necessarily connected to the action performed; referring to and making use of symbols; consisting of*

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<sup>1</sup> One of Hinduism's eighteen major Puranas (Zaehner and Goodall, 1996)

<sup>2</sup> Three-part scripture on the life and teachings of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu translated and published over several years by BBT (bbt.org, 2016)

<sup>3</sup> Within the theology of Gaudiya Vaishnavism the words of Krishna are considered to be Krishna himself as well

*building blocks; being traditionally sanctioned; taking place at specific places and/or times; rehearsed, structured, patterned, ordered, sequenced and rule governed” (Hüsken and Neubert, 2012, p. 2)*

In addition, they argue for a characteristic feature present in any ritual – negotiations that they define as processes of interaction during which differing positions are debated and/or acted out. The concept of negotiations is useful for contemporary ritual analysis because it deepens the “understanding of how the poles of stability/ change, structure/ performance, and tradition/innovation are mediated in social encounters” (Hüsken and Neubert, 2012, p. 2). Also, “negotiations” as a concept makes an emphasis on the fluidity and processual character of social interaction rather than presenting the ritual as something stable. To link these definitions to my previous statement that ISKCON rituals (as any rituals) are negotiated, it is important to say that rituals play a significant role in ISKCON: they take place on a daily basis several times per day. The main purpose of the ISKCON rituals is to practice *seva* (Sanskrit term for ‘selfless service’, e.g., Jacobsen, 2015) and *bhakti* (Sanskrit term for ‘devotional love’, e.g., Britannica, 2022) in accordance with one of the most famous statements of *Caitanya Mahāprabhu*, a 15th century Indian saint, the founder of Gaudiya Vaishnavism: a devotee is “the servant of the servant of the servant of the Lord Sri Krishna ...” as said in *Caitanya Caritamrita* 13.80.

Within the ISKCON rituals, the position of the servant is performed by variations of the roles people assume within the ritual: the *pūjari* (the ritual specialist), the lead singer, music instrument player, or a common member who just recites the text of the prayer in response to the call of the lead singer. The structure of the rituals is mainly defined by the prescribed sequence of the texts of the selected mantras (chanted sacred formulas in Sanskrit language) performed. In 1972, BBT published a book called “Songs of the Vaishnava Acaryas”, that provides the mantras for most of the ISKCON temple rituals, while the complementary religious music performances (*kīrtana*) and the religious procession (*Harināma*) revolve around the repetition of the main ISKCON mantra, the Hare Krishna mantra, also referred to reverentially as the *mahā-mantra* (“Great Mantra”). This Vaishnava mantra, composed of three Sanskrit words - “Krishna”, “Rama” and Hare, is mentioned already in the *Kali-Santarana Upanishad* (Beck 1993, p. 199). From the 15th century, it rose to importance in the Bhakti movement following the teachings of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. The structure of rituals in ISKCON in the Czech Republic is discussed in more detail in the empirical part. In ISKCON, the ritual practices - negotiated and performed - are highly gendered (see Klepal, 2005). Therefore, in my work, I look at ritual performance with attention to specific gender practices, which I will explain in detail below.

## 1.2 Anthropology of Gender

Within the discourse of anthropology, gender is perceived and defined by the process of social construction. To be more specific, Ernestine Friedl, who served as the president of American Ethnological Society, and then American Anthropological Association, spoke of the relationship between gender and sex in the following way:

“The biological nature of men and women [should be seen] not as a narrow enclosure limiting the human organism, but rather as a broad base upon which a variety of structures can be built” (Friedl cited in Kottak, 2009).

Furthermore, Conrad Phillip Kottak, an American anthropologist who has written several textbooks that are used in various universities across the world, highlights the constructed nature of gender in the following way: “Gender refers to the cultural construction of whether one is female, male, or something else” (Kottak, 2009).

In relation to ISKCON, it is important to notice that from emic perspective they abide by “Vedic Culture” (see Klepal, 2005). However, the question of “Vedic Culture” as a concept is a debated one (see Fahy, 2018). Therefore, with gender being socially and culturally constructed it is safe to say that the ISKCON social movement, seen as a minority religion in the Czech Republic, or a specific religious subculture, constructs gender in a specific way, which is different from the dominant constructions of gender in the Czech society. There is a certain level of standardization within ISKCON ritual performance that requires men and women not to mix with each other physically and sometimes to separate themselves timewise (see Klepal, 2005). Nevertheless, I have observed that the actual performance of this norm in a ritual somewhat differs between the ISKCON communities. To better conceptualize the occurring difference, it is fruitful to draw on the idea of gender practices.

One of the approaches currently discussed within the field of gender studies is that of theory of gender practices. In an editorial to the journal of Gender Work and Organization, Gender studies scholar Barbara Poggio outlines the necessity for a shift in focus to the way in which activities are performed in organizations, specifically in relation to gender. Such approach would uphold the view of gender defined as “situated social practice, or, in other words, something actualized through social interaction” (Poggio, 2006). It implies that gender is “constantly redefined and negotiated in the everyday practices through which individuals interact; how men and women ‘do gender’ and how they contribute to the construction of gender identities by engaging in a process of reciprocal positioning”. Regarding methodology, analyzing gender practices means for Poggio mainly conducting ethnography. (Poggio, 2006).

Another concept that was crucial for my analysis was that of heteronormativity that can be defined as heterosexuality being compulsory and conceptual erasure of anything beyond the male/female binary. Heteronormativity implies alignment between biological sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity and roles ( Rich, 1980; Warner, 1991).

To conclude, within this work I consider ISKCON as a religious organization, within which it is possible to study negotiations that take place within ritual performance with special attention to gender practices. Thus, it is my intention to build up on the above-mentioned studies in terms of furthering ethnographic data on topics of ritual negotiations and gender practices.

### 1.3 ISKCON: The Meaning of and Historical Context

As stated earlier, ISKCON stands for International Society for Krishna Consciousness - a religious movement founded in 1966 in New York by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (Satsvarūpa Dās Gosvāmī, 2002). The theological aspect of the movement takes its origins from the tradition of Gaudiya Vaishnavism - monotheistic religion that can be put under the umbrella-term “hinduism”. The main body of theological texts consists of Bhagavad Gita As It Is, Srimad Bhagavatam and Chaitanya Charitamrita. Within the ISKCON movement all the literature is issued by an in-house publisher Bhaktivedanta Book Trust that operates globally (bbt.org, 2016).

There are debates about how to categorize ISKCON as a religious organization. On the one hand, ISKCON can be considered a Neo-Hinduistic religious movement. A Dictionary of Hinduism from Oxford University press defines Neo-Hinduism as a term deriving from redefinition of Hindu Dharma<sup>4</sup> as a universal and ethical ‘religion’, that has non-violence and compassion principles as its basis. It also opposes the approach of stricter societal division based on the principal of duty (Johnson, 2010). According to this definition within academic literature, ISKCON *is* a Neo-Hindu religious movement.

Be that as it may, academics from both inside and outside of ISKCON have criticized the term for various reasons. Let us take Howard J. Resnick as an example. He received his Ph.D in Sanskrit and Indian Studies at Harvard University in 1996 but he is also a disciple of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, and is known in ISKCON as Hridayananda Dasa Goswami. In one of his articles, he discusses both terms “Neo-Hinduism” and Hinduism and arrives at the conclusion that, in fact, both terms are problematic as “Neo-Hinduism” has greater association with monistic and impersonalistic theologies, while Gaudiya

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<sup>4</sup> the religious and moral law governing individual conduct and is one of the four ends of life” (Britannica, 2022).

Vaishnavism is a strictly personalistic philosophy. At the same time, “Hinduism”, as a predecessor of “Neo-Hinduism”, bears the same problem of not reflecting the main ideas of Vaishnavism, and it is also a term constructed within Orientalist and Colonialist discourses (Resnick, 1999). In line of argumentation regarding the colonial and oriental nature of the term Resnick references a non-ISKCON German Indologist Wilhelm Halbfass, who also points out that the prefix Neo- may baselessly imply inauthenticity (Halbfass, 2007). Therefore, Resnick defines ISKCON as belonging to the Vaisnava tradition (Resnick, 1999).

There exists another terminological discourse within which ISKCON is talked about as of a New Religious Movement. The Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements (Clarke, 2006) features several articles about ISKCON and A.C.Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. However, similarly to Klepal (2005), I will not be using the term of New Religious Movement for methodological reasons as research in relation to ISKCON as a New Religious Movement is not ethnographically oriented. Having addressed the issues of terminology, it is now possible to move onto the history development of ISKCON in the Czech Republic and, also, Russia.

The history of ISKCON in the Czech Republic begins in 1980s, when Turya Das from Sweden began smuggling ISKCON literature into Czechoslovakia. Under the pressure from the police, some of the devotees decided to leave the country. In 1987, however, a group of ISKCON devotees acquired an old house in Lanšperk in Eastern Bohemia, which then became the first ISKCON center in Czechoslovakia (ISKCON News, 2012). Nevertheless, practicing Krishna Consciousness was illegal on the territory of Czechoslovakia until the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

ISKCON became officially recognized as a religious organization in the Czech Republic in 2002 (e.g., Klepal, 2005 and Schlichtsová, 2019). As of right now, there are several ISKCON centers on the territory of the Czech Republic. Additionally, there is an ongoing weekly Harinam procession in Prague (iskcon.org, 2012), which has also been studied by Veronika Seidlova, and the ethnographical snapshots from her ethnography can be found in the chapter “Harinam in Prague Streets” by Zuzana Jurková and Veronika Seidlová in the book “Prague Soundscapes” (Jurková et al., 2014). The research on ISKCON in the Czech Republic will be discussed in more detail below.

According to my observations, a lot of members of the Prague community are Russian-speaking migrants from the former Soviet Union. Thus, it is also important to understand the history of ISKCON in Russia, as Russian-speaking and Russian devotees are directly influenced by the preaching taking place in Russia. For example, a girl from the Russian-speaking nama-hatta in Prague stated that she joined ISKCON here, in Prague, after

listening to lectures from Torsunov, who presents himself to the public as a “specialist of public well-being” (torsunov.ru, 2022), yet he is a member of Russian ISKCON - a known fact within the Russian community based on my experience. Other Russian-speaking devotees first joined ISKCON, and then migrated to the Czech Republic for a various number of personal reasons. Also, ISKCON first appeared on the territory of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and only then started developing in other republics of USSR, which is the reason why I am providing history of ISKCON only in Russia and not other states of the former Soviet Union.

The history of ISKCON in Russia begins in 1971, when Srila Prabhupāda visited Moscow for 5 days (Satsvarūpa Dās Gosvāmī, 2002). During his visit, he met a man called Anatoliy Pinayev, who became the first ISKCON devotee in Russia (Ivanenko, 2008). In the 1980s the ISKCON movement went through a very difficult period of repressions from the Soviet government. The personal stories of imprisonments and tortures are described in detail in the book called “Salted Bread” by Buniatyan (2007). If described shortly, the communist government considered ISKCON to be an “anticommunist sect” conducting “ideological diversion” inspired by the US secret services (Ivanenko, 2012). Yuriy Andropov, chairman of the KGB at the time, characterized ISKCON as “the most radical of all mystical Eastern groups in the West” and that ISKCON “sets as its goal the denial of communist ideology and the socialist agenda, fighting it, and leading its members away from the participation in the socio-political and working life to mysticism” (Ivanenko, 2012). In 1992, after the Soviet Union’s collapse, however, ISKCON acquired official registration on the territory of the Russian Federation as the “Center of communities of Krishna Consciousness in Russia” (Ivanenko, 1998).

## 1.4 Review of Previous Research on ISKCON

Globally, many books and academic articles have been written on ISKCON. In the previous section, I have referenced Sergey Ivanenko, a Russian scholar of religious studies who has written multiple books on ISKCON in Russia. Nonetheless, in this section, I want to concentrate on the review of literature relating only to the Czech Republic.

In the Czech Republic, ISKCON has been mainly researched in the discourse of religious studies. Jitka Schlichtsová published a master’s thesis titled “Výchova a Vzdělání v Hnutí Hare Kršna (Upbringing and Education in the Hare Krishna Movement)” at the Protestant



Theological Faculty of Charles University (Schlichtsová, 2013). Her main methodology was that of historical and comparative analysis. She concluded that the potential source of issues with gurukuls in ISKCON globally was connected to failure of applying the Vaishnav tradition of education onto a western background; positions of teachers in gurukuls were being assigned to those who failed in other departments of service; general orientation of ISKCON's agenda towards preaching resulted in negligence towards gurukuls until the situation deteriorated completely. She does highlight that later on research had been conducted on the issue by E. Burke Rochford, and the ISKCON Communications Journal contributed to the solution of the problem along with the GBC. Within the Czech Republic she concentrated on one location - Kršňův dvůr.

Several academic papers on ISKCON and specifically ISKCON in the Czech Republic were published by Martin Fárek (Fárek, 2001;2004; 2006a; 2006b; 2008a; 2008b). He covered the topics of education for children in ISKCON, and then published several papers and books on the theological questions in relation to ISKCON and Hinduism. His works mainly relate to the discourse of the New Religious Movements and are theory- and literature-based, while not being primarily grounded in ethnographical research. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Fárek used to be a member of ISKCON in the Czech Republic in the 1990s (Schlichtsová, 2012), which led to him being interviewed for a thesis mentioned earlier in the chapter.

In 2009, Milan Fujda and Dušan Lužný published a book called "Oddaní Kršny. Hnutí Haré Kršna v pohledu sociálních věd"<sup>5</sup> (Fujda and Lužný, 2010). The book has three main topics: description of the practice of Bhakti in ISKCON; the history of ISKCON in the west and in the Czech Republic, which draws on fieldwork conducted by Lužný in the 1990s at the Kršňův Dvůr farm; the Hare Krishna movement in the context of the broader issues of cultural exchange, change and transmission. Their work seems to be the first instance of ethnographical research being conducted on ISKCON in the Czech Republic, but it also concentrated on one location - Kršňův dvůr, and ethnographical data dates back to 1990s.

More recent anthropological research includes the article titled "Hare Krishna Mantra in Prague Streets: the sacred, music and trance" by Zuzana Jurkova and Veronika Seidlova (2014). It was a part of a larger ethnomusicological research of Prague soundscapes. Harinam procession in Prague was ethnographically described, analysed and interpreted in the wider context of music as an "integral part of religious rituals and/or holidays" (Jurková and Seidlová, 2014). The study was based on short-term ethnographical research and

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<sup>5</sup> "Krishna devotees. Hare Krishna movement in the social sciences"

concentrated on the musical aspect of the ritual and its connection to cultural conceptualizations of music. However, the article mentions patterns of physical separation between the devotees during the ritual performance of Harinam.

Most notably for the purposes of this thesis, in 2005, Jaroslav Klepal defended his Master's thesis at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University under the title "Nejsem Toto Tělo: Tělo a posvátné já u členů hnutí Haré Kršna v České republice"<sup>6</sup>. Klepal collected his ethnographical data between 2001 and 2004. He discussed "how experience, practice and discourse of members of the Hare Krishna movement regarding bodies and embodiment are constitutional for their sacred self" (Klepal, 2005). Gender division within the community was a topic that he specifically paid attention to. He came to the conclusion that daily life in ISKCON preserves strict division based on sex, and the anatomy of the human body plays the most important role in the process of gender division. Men and women rarely come into contact with each other, except for public collective occasions such as rituals and holidays. In centers, single men and women live in separate lodgings. During the services, rituals, or certain other practices of service to Krishna, men and women are separate without regard to their marital status, according to his observations. The division by sex was also evident in the words used to address each other within the community. Male devotees of Krishna were addressed as prabhuh, which means "master", while female devotees of Krishna were addressed as mataji, which means "mother". He interpreted it as "Mataji" not only referring to the role, for which the woman's body is "designed", but directly putting a taboo onto a woman, especially for men upholding celibacy. According to quotes from his informants, a woman represents "the danger of the greatest sense gratification", while for others a woman was created to be a test of sincerity and determination on the spiritual path of a man in Krishna consciousness.

In the course of his research, especially when he participated in the observation, it was desirable for him to observe this division based on sex. Similarly, to my experience, he was instructed by a member of the community to stand in a specific area of the temple room as "it was customary for men and women to be separated". He was told that with acknowledgment of his non-member status, but the reality of his sex was paramount to his status as an outsider. He also highlighted that during his research he had very limited access to the perspective of the women in ISKCON. Based on that pattern, his research was oriented towards the male population of ISKCON. He also stressed that even though there may be hundreds of supporters and sympathizers of ISKCON in the Czech Republic, the number of Krishna devotees in centers can be counted in dozens.

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<sup>6</sup> "I Am not this Body": Body and Sacred Self among Hare Krishnas in the Czech Republic

## 1.5 Research Question

Entering the field with a position of partial insider, it was my aim to observe negotiations that take place within ritual performances with special attention to gender practices. My main question was:

**How is ritual performance negotiated within selected ISKCON communities of the Czech Republic? How do gender practices differ between communities as part of this negotiation?**

## 1.6 Methodology

### 1.6.1 Ethnography

As an ethnographical researcher (Angrosino, 2007), I was primarily concerned with the ritual performance in ISKCON communities in Prague and its vicinities. My field consisted of 5 different locations described below in more detail. In this field, I observed three different ISKCON communities, the boundaries of which were recorded and described during research. The main ethnographical methods were those of participant-observation (Emerson, 2020) and informal unstructured interviews (Punch, 2014). Research was conducted between October 2021 and June 2022. My primary data consists of fieldnotes that were then analyzed and coded (Emerson, 2020). I triangulated the data methodologically and environmentally. Environmental triangulation implies that I attended the same ritual in the same location multiple times, with exception of one location (Guion, Diehl and McDonald, 2011). I gathered supplementary data for my research from Facebook groups and websites of the studied communities. I was also added to several WhatsApp group chats, which helped me navigate the specific dates and times of my fieldwork. For better contextualization, I used materials published by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada and BBT.

### Participant-observation

Participant-observation was used as a strategic method of collecting data by participating in the communities' rituals and experiencing them first-hand (Bernard, 2017). I studied the following rituals:

## 1. Morning service that includes 6 different rituals

### a. Mangala-arati

First appearance of the deities that are still dressed in their night-gowns. Starts with the chanting of Sri Sri Gurvastakam – praising the guru for accompanying one on the path of spiritual development. Finished with the recital of Nrsimha prayer – proclamation of surrender to the Lord Nrsimhadev who killed a demon called Hiranyakashipu.

### b. Tulsi Arati

A prayer to Tulsi – the most sacred plant as it is the favourite plant of the Lord Krishna.

### c. Darshan Arati

At that point the deities' clothes are changed into their daytime clothes and are now being greeted by the devotes. Prayer is typically not sung but played on a loudspeaker.

### d. Guru-puja

Puja offered to Prabhupāda, the founder of ISKCON. Accompanied by chanting a prayer glorifying the position of a guru.

### e. Lecture on the scriptures

A lecture given by a preacher on the topic of one verse from the scriptures

### f. Prasadam taking

Taking food that was offered to the deities. Before eating a mantra is recited that expresses gratitude to Krishna for providing food

## 2. Damodarastakam service

The ritual consists of singing of a prayer describing the early childhood story of Krishna ([krishna.com](http://krishna.com), 2021). The main point of the prayer is in the idea that God cannot be bound by logic or material energy but only by love. In addition to singing, the ritual is accompanied by people offering a burning lantern to the altar. First, the lead singer begins singing the damodarastakam prayer, then people start offering the lanterns, the prayer is usually followed by a kirtan of various length.

### 3. **Harinama**

Procession that usually takes place outside is a form of public ritual during which only the maha-mantra is sung for the sake of the devotees and for the sake of the public. It is considered that the sound of the maha-mantra is all powerful and hearing it will purify the consciousness of even those who do not believe in it (Prabhupāda, 1968). The script of the Harinama is very simple – it is a procession that moves through space in a unified manner while simultaneously singing the maha-mantra.

### 4. **Kirtan**

A ritual of communal singing and dancing that can take place anywhere. It is an act of praising or glorifying divinity in a call and response singing manner (Allard, 2021). Overall, harinama can be considered a form of kirtan, but not every kirtan is a harinama. The script of kirtan in ISKCON follows 4 basic steps: singing a pranama-mantra to the guru, singing a Pancha-Tattva maha-mantra<sup>7</sup>, singing of the maha-mantra for an unspecified period of time, ending with praising A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda.

#### 1.6.2 Informal Interviews

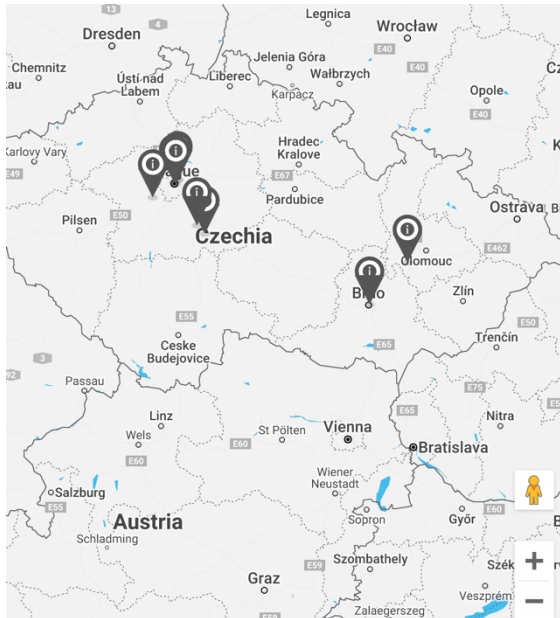
The interviews were conducted in an informal and unstructured way (Punch, 2014). They were conducted with members of the communities on site. I made attempts of scheduling semi-structured interviews with members of the community, but I was redirected to the “leaders of the community” as they were more “qualified” for that purpose. In the end, the time constrictions and schedule disparity made me decide to save up semi-structured in-depth interviews for future research.

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<sup>7</sup> Mantra praising Lord Chaitanya and his expansions

## 1.7 Setting the field: Topology of ISKCON in the Czech Republic

I was able to comprise a topology of communities in the Czech Republic mainly through the means of netnography, but the data was then enriched and gained nuance from observations during participation. The initial source was the website [centres.iskcon.org](https://centres.iskcon.org) that provides an interactive map of communities all over the world.



Screenshot from the webpage <https://centres.iskcon.org/centre-region/czech-republic/>

1. Harinam Mandir Center (Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze according to the website of the center, so it will be referred to as such from now on) , Prague 8
2. Govinda Restaurant, Prague 8
3. Govinda Restaurant, Prague 1
4. Balarama Restaurant, Prague 3
5. Šrí Šrí Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir, Lužce
6. Govinda Benešov Restaurant, Benešov
7. Krišnův Dvůr Farm, Postupice
8. Prabhupad Bhavan Czech Republic, Brno
9. Cakra, Lutotín

The map does not feature any reference to a Russian-speaking Nama-Hatta that is held in Prague 8. Furthermore, after speaking with several Russian-speaking devotees and exchanging contacts, I was added to group chats in Whatsapp dedicated to news updates and sharing of information between the members of the community. The biggest chat has slightly less than 100 participants, and it is fully Russian speaking. Occasionally, some

messages in Czech or English languages are forwarded to the chat, and then they are translated into Russian. From this chat, I learned of another restaurant associated with ISKCON in Prague – Gouranga. I asked one of the members of the Russian-speaking community about this restaurant, and she said that it was just a restaurant owned by a Czech devotee who regularly attended the Russian-speaking nama-hatta. Furthermore, upon visiting the website of the Šrī Šrī Nitāi Navadvīpačandra mandir, I discovered that there is a second ISKCON farm apart from Krišnův Dvůr Farm. Thus, it is possible to add to the list 3 more locations know to me:

10. Gouranga Restaurant, Prague 3
11. Nava Gokula Farm, Morkovice-Slížany
12. Private house that serves as a regular location for the Russian-speaking nama-hatta , Prague 8

I was able to attend 10 events:

Table 1

Date	Location	Category
31/10/2021	Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze, Prague 8	Damodarastakam
08/12/2021	Prague 1	Harinama
12/03/2022	Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze, Prague 8	Morning Service
18/03/2022	Šrī Šrī Nitāi Navadvīpačandra mandir, Lužce	Morning Service
26/03/2022	Private Home, Prague 8	Russian-Speaking Nama-Hatta
9/04/2022	Private Home, Prague 8	Russian-Speaking Nama-Hatta
4/05/2022	Prague 1	Harinama
7/05/2022	Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze, Prague 8	Morning Service
7/05/2022	Private Home, Prague 8	Russian-Speaking Nama-Hatta

Date	Location	Category
8/06/2022	Prague 1 + Govinda Restaurant in Prague 1	Harinama + Kirtan

## 1.8 Limits of research and positionality

There are many reasons for why I decided to pursue this research. To begin with, I spent my childhood in Moscow, Russia attending ISKCON temples on a regular basis. My mother would often take me along with her to ISKCON house programs, nama-hattas. Most of my friends in early childhood were other ISKCON members' children. When I turned 11, my family moved to Kazakhstan, where we continued attending ISKCON temples and nama-hattas, some of which were even held in my parents' house. It is important to notice, that it is my mother who is part of IKSCON, while my father is an atheist, which resulted in me hearing alternative views towards religion and philosophy throughout my childhood and teenage years and not be confined to strictly religious upbringing. My father, being a non-ISKCON member, still read most of the books that are considered fundamental in ISKCON in order to understand my mother better.

At the age of 16 I became conscious about limitations imposed on women, when I started noticing that during rituals in Moscow temple women would get pushed back behind the men during some of the services. I was feeling angry because I couldn't comprehend why was my access to the altar limited? However, throughout my teenage hood I also participated in yearly conferences on ISKCON communications with my mother during which I was able to experience a more egalitarian approach towards gender practices and communication in general. I concluded at that time that practicing strictness was a choice people made, and it was not a non-negotiable stance.

I entered my research with approach of cultural relativism meaning that I acknowledge my direct relationship to the subject of the research, noting that even though I am a second-generation devotee, my previous exposure to specifically ISKCON of the Czech Republic was minimal. When studying gender practices and ritual performance, I did my best to describe behaviors within the emic terms and refrain from imposition of moral judgment that would be a natural consequence of my identity as a feminist. To untangle my perceptions as a feminist, as a partial insider and a researcher, I regularly attended sessions of cognitive behavioral therapy.



I would like to add that in terms of research on ISKCON in the Czech Republic, my positionality seems to be unique to a degree. There were two people who conducted extensive ethnographical research on the ISKCON community – Klepal (2005) and Lužny, both of whom are men. The only woman who conducted similar research was my academic supervisor, Veronika Seidlová, but as mentioned earlier – it was short-term. Gender was a topic discussed in Seidlova's (2014) and Klepal's (2005) works. Klepal (2005) stated that he had a very limited access to the perspective of women, and he was also an outsider to the community. In my case, because of my gender, I mainly had access to the women's perspective, and I had a position of a partial insider: due to my upbringing in ISKCON, I had a high degree of familiarity with the organization in general but was also quite new to the community here in Prague. Another important aspect of my positionality that proved instrumental in my research was me being a Russian native speaker. Klepal (2005) does not mention anything about Russian-speaking devotees as a part of the ISKCON of the Czech Republic or as a form of sub-community, while during my research it emerged as very distinct and present, and acknowledged by other Czech devotees, and I had access to this community because of me speaking the language. When I was attending the Czech Speaking communities, I communicated with people in English.

## 1.9 Ethical issues and concerns

In the course of my research, I was abiding by the ethical principles of the American Anthropological Association (Americananthro.org, 2012). I kept in mind the principles of doing no harm to the dignity, bodily and material well-being of the researched communities. I was open about the fact that I was conducting research for my bachelor's thesis. I was unable to secure informed consent for using personal or spiritual names, so I anonymized my sources in names and their descriptions, except for two people: Vidya Vacaspati and Atmadarshani. Vidya Vacaspati is the lead singer in the Harinam procession, and he is a public figure whose name is mentioned openly on websites related to Harinam. Atmadarshini is the leader of the Russian-speaking nama-hatta, and she provided me with an informed consent in the form of an audio-message in a personal chat. Due to my positionality of a second-generation ISKCON devotee, it was only natural that over the course of my visits I established some friendships that involved a degree of personal intimacy that included sharing deeply personal information in relation to feeling and experiences of life. I consider this information private and confidential and thus do not mention it in this work.

All of the visual materials that I used in this work was either taken by me in a public setting, where I was not the only one recording or taking pictures, or they were taken from Facebook groups or websites that are fully open to the public.

## 2. Empirical part

To set the scene, I will first present two short vignettes from the very beginning of my fieldwork, when I was only getting familiar with the community in Prague:

*I went to the Centrum Hare Kriřna v Praze in Prague 8 on a Sunday night (31.10.21) at 18:30 to attend the singing of Damodarastakam<sup>8</sup>. The altar room is not particularly big - approximately 50 m<sup>2</sup>. There are some shelves with scriptures near the entrance, like Srimad Bhagavatam, Bhagavat Gita As It Is and Chaytanya Charitamrita, and then an open floor in front of the altar for people to sit on. There were 8 people, including me, at the ritual- 4 men and 4 women. The altar is not exactly an altar, and the temple is not officially a temple because there are no installed deities - it is a cultural center, but it functions as a place of worship just the same. For the purpose of the ritual of offering fire to the “altar”, there was a small table in front of the altar with a small cup and a spoon, fire sticks (wooden sticks covered with cotton and soaked in Ghee - melted butter) and a lantern from which the devotees lightened the sticks for offering. In this temple, men offered the fire first, and when all of them finished offering, only then it was the turn for women to do the same.*

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*On another occasion, I was going to the center of the city - Náměstí Republiky on 8.12.21. A mataji at the Centrum Hare Kriřna v Praze suggested to attend the Harinam. She informed me that it happened twice a week: Wednesdays and Fridays at 16:00. By 16:10 we started moving in the direction of the Václavské Náměstí. The harmonium started its first note and soon after the mridangam<sup>9</sup> joined in, together with karatals<sup>10</sup>. The harinam had a stable structure that held out throughout most of its duration: at the very front, prabhu<sup>11</sup> was leading the procession with a loudspeaker attached to a holder with wheels, then other prabhus followed in pairs. The front pair consisted of the leader with a portable microphone attached to his head that was connected to the*



<sup>8</sup> A song describing the early childhood story of Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead ([krishna.com](http://krishna.com), 2021)

<sup>9</sup> percussion musical instrument

<sup>10</sup> traditional Indian hand cymbals

<sup>11</sup> word used for addressing a man in ISKCON, which in Sanskrit means “master”

*loudspeaker, he was playing the portable harmonium and singing, next to him was walking a prabhu with the mridangam. They were followed by three pairs of men, and only one of them had a musical instrument - karatal, the others were clapping their hands and singing along. In total it made 9 men leading the Harinam. They were, only then, followed by matajis<sup>12</sup>, two of them were dancing while moving forward and other matajis were just walking behind, including me - 5 women in total.*

Already these two participant-observations revealed explicit patterns of physical and temporal gender-based division within ritual performance. However, it took more time to be able to elaborate on the differences between communities. In order to do it more clearly, I will add information from my observations on the topology of communities in Prague and their relation to other communities in the Czech Republic.

## 2.1 Entering the field: Further findings on the topology of ISKCON communities in the Czech Republic

Before I began my research in the Czech Republic, I was familiar with a following setting: in Moscow, there is one temple, and it serves like a hub for everyone. Sometimes up to 700 people gather there at once. Then there are nama-hattas, during which people gather in smaller numbers and have more time to interact on a personal level. People connect less to the devotees from other cities, unless they travel on a regular basis. In Russia, different festivals are held throughout the year, during which devotees from all over Russia and other post-soviet countries gather. Such festivals can be attended by more than 10 000 people at once. The communities in Prague and in Czech Republic are geographically closer to each other, but I observed a distinct divide between them based on the words of the members themselves, and this divide was then also apparent in the ways ritual performances and gender practices within them were negotiated.

I do want to emphasize that members of observed communities persistently intersect, yet people consistently presented themselves as members of specific communities and emphasized that there were “other” communities. I came up with two criteria of categorization of the communities: geographical and linguistic.<sup>13</sup> In geographical terms there are 4 communities tied to a location that were discussed by my informants in Prague:

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<sup>12</sup> word used for addressing a woman in ISKCON, which in Sanskrit means “mother” interesting terminology – should be discussed in main text, as it relates to your main concerns

<sup>13</sup> The members of the community themselves describe the divide based on the “mood” of each given community and approach to preaching and devotional practice.

1. Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze
2. Šrí Šrí Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir, Lužce
3. Krišnův Dvůr Farm, Postupice
4. Prabhupad Bhavan Czech Republic, Brno

I was able to physically attend programs at the Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze and Šrí Šrí Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir. However, I have been to Prabhupad Bhavan one time in 2017, but did not visit it during this research, but the devotees from there came to Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze for a visit, and different devotees from the communities in Prague talked about them in general on multiple occasions.

The “core” of each community consists of the people, who live in these locations permanently. In terms of the communities 1-3, due to them being located within a geographical circle of 80 km in diameter, they intersect the most. However, devotees from Brno come to Prague with visits, and I was able to witness one of such visits on 12.03.22. In terms of linguistics – all 4 of these communities mainly consist of people from the Czech Republic and the preaching is conducted in the Czech language with exceptions when English-speaking preachers are visiting, then lectures are translated from English into Czech.

There is one more community that is present in Prague but is very difficult to be named or categorized. It is possible to regard it by two names: the post-Soviet community, as one of the members of it called it, and the Russian-speaking community, as it was regarded by several devotees from the Czech-speaking communities. There is an issue with both terms. This community gathers biweekly in the apartment in Prague 8 to hold nama-hattas together. The program’s leader is Atmadrshini mataji, whose native language is Russian. Linguistic categorization is problematic because, on the one hand, the lectures are given in Russian, the absolute majority of people who go there are Russian-speakers, but every single lecture there is translated into the Czech language for several Czech-speaking devotees who go there regularly. For the same reason, it is also difficult to call it the post-Soviet community as, yes, the majority of people there come from either Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova or other countries of the former USSR, but there are people from the Czech Republic that are part of this community, and they are members of it just as much as the representatives of the majority. Having all that in mind, because Russian is the primary language of the lectures and of communication between the devotees in the WhatsApp group chat is Russian, I decided to refer to them as the Russian-speaking community.

To conclude, I gathered primary data from 3 different communities:

1. Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze (Prague 8)
2. Šrí Šrí Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir (Lužce)
3. The Russian-speaking community (Multiple locations)

I also included descriptions of the Prabhupad Bhavan (Brno) community based on the descriptions of the devotees from the researched communities.

Talking about the intersections between the mentioned communities, the community of Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze intersects with the community in Krisnov Dvůr: devotees from the Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze to the farm in Postupice (Krisnov Dvůr) for big celebrations. However, the devotees who run the Harinam programs in Prague 1 live in Šrí Šrí Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir, Lužce, and travel to Prague several times a week to lead the chanting procession in the center of Prague. One member of the Russian-speaking community said that initially the people from Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze and Šrí Šrí Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir, Lužce, all lived and preached together for several years, but then a divide happened based on the views on preaching. The question how their approaches differ remains unclear to me, as no one talked about the issue openly. Nevertheless, one of the devotees pointed out that Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze never schedules events for times when there's an event in Šrí Šrí Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir, Lužce and vice versa. This system seems to be working without any communication between the communities, but it is my assumption that schedules are compared based on the Facebook group announcements and the websites.

Furthermore, both Govinda restaurants and Balaram restaurant in Prague are all run by the same people who live in Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir Lužce temple, as when I was visiting it, an announcement was made about the volume of prasadam and books distributed in those 3 restaurants and it was presented as "we distributed".

There is a certain amount of intersection happening between Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir and Krišnův Dvůr Farm communities: the devotees from Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir seem to be well acquainted with the devotees from Krišnův Dvůr Farm based on the conversations with the devotees from Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir. The Russian-speaking devotees, however, seem to appear in all geographical locations mentioned. I've seen them attending the Harinam in Prague 1, and there are regular visitors to Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze. Furthermore, several people talked about their visits to Krišnův Dvůr Farm, and I have personally met many devotees from the Russian-speaking community in the Lužce temple during my visit there, but as I have already mentioned, they also gather during the biweekly nama-hatta program.

When I asked one of the devotees from the Czech community what was her opinion about the Russian-speaking devotees organizing a separate program, she said that they were separating themselves because they had a different “mood” and it was not something unusual. The word “mood” is an emic term that I didn’t even perceive as such when she was using it, but upon further reflection, I realized that it was due to me being so used to the usage of it. As a result, I did not ask her to define the meaning of it during the conversation, but I am able to provide some context based on my experience. “Mood” is usually used with reference to the Sanskrit “Bhava” which means “state/emotion/attitude” (Oxford Reference, 2021). Thus, “mood” has the meaning of the totality of attitudes and prevailing concentrations in the community. Here’s a short vignette from my ethnographical notes on the conversation:

*She then talked about Russian-speaking community wanting to study the scriptures all the time, and that their “mood” is different, as in the Czech community, for example, it’s very important who’s an older devotee. She mentioned that if someone joined ISKCON two months earlier than she did, then she still should really show a lot of respect for that person. She then said that Russians study shastras<sup>14</sup> so much, and they have these study groups, and she’s been in ISKCON for so many years and she has never completed any shastras course. “I don’t understand. Are you saying that Russians like to study shastras more, and with Czech devotees, they stress the hierarchy more, and Russians don’t really enjoy that?” She answered affirmatively but wanted to explain better. She really stressed that it’s just her vision of things. She talked about Atmadarshani, how she’s a really nice preacher, and she talks about shastras all the time. She then shifted the topic to other communities to explain what she meant better. Talking about Krišṇīṅ Dvůr, she said that devotees there are “mature” (it is a term that I heard used a lot in Russia as well, to refer to devotees, who have been in the movement long enough to shake off superficial enthusiasm characteristic of the first years of being in ISKCON). In Czech speaking community, if you join the community, you really join it, and commit to the projects and service. In Lužce they all live together, and Krišṇīṅ dvůr is a very big community, about 60 families live there, and it is all really nice. But Russians, they live their lives on their own, they come whenever they want and they go whenever they want, they don’t live in temples full-time.*

This vignette provides an example of the Czech-speaking community member establishing a distinction between the communities and characterizing them in a different way than the main criteria for differentiation that she uses is the emic term “mood”. She highlights that differences between the communities come from Russian-speaking community paying more

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<sup>14</sup> scriptures

attention to theological education, whereas the Czech-speaking communities [Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze ; Šrí Šrí Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir; Krišnův Dvůr Farm] pay greater attention to the abidance to the norm of social hierarchy established in ISKCON on a general level.

I followed up on this topic of borders between the communities by speaking with a mataji from the Russian-speaking community. The following vignette is translated from Russian:

- *Sofiya: I will try my best to make it there. So the Bhakti-center [I was referring to the new location of Gouranga restaurant as a new additional site for the Russian-speaking programs, of which I was aware from the WhatsApp group chat] programs are going to be Russian-speaking, right?*
- *Mataji: Well.. Yes, but it's for everyone as there will be translation into the Czech language as usual.*
- *Sofiya: You know, I noticed that thing that everyone is kind of on their own, Harinam Mandir [Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze], the Russian-speaking community, Lužce [Šrí Šrí Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir].*
- *Mataji: Oh well, the people from the former Soviet Union are not on their own, we go everywhere, and we are just friendly, so we gather together all the time, everyone knows everyone, and everyone knows what happens with everyone else. The Czech Speaking communities just really like their distance, they have their own approach, and then there's the distance between the Harinam Mandir [Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze] and Lužce[[Šrí Šrí Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir] because they have different views on preaching.*

This conversation further confirmed existence of boundaries between the communities based on the criteria of the “mood” or approach and factors of geographical and linguistic differences were acknowledged.

## 2.2 Emic terms of gender

To being with descriptions of gender practices , I want to draw the reader’s attention to the emic terms of gendered address between the members of communities. Usage of this language is present during rituals and outside of them, meaning in ISKCON on a global level. There are three pairs of phrases by which people are differentiated on the basis of gender:

*Mataji vs Prabhu*

*Das vs Devi Dasi*

*Bhakta vs Bhaktin*

As was mentioned earlier, “Mataji” stands for “Mother”, while “Prabhu” stands for “Master”. “Das” means “Servant [male] of ...”, and “Devi Dasi” stands for “servant [female] of ...”. Bhakta and Bhaktin translate as “a religious devotee or worshipper” (Merriam-webster.com, 2022), where Bhakta is used to address men, while Bhaktin is used to address women. Bhakta and Bhaktin are usually used by people to present themselves or address others who have not gone through the ritual of initiation – formal acceptance of a guru (spiritual master) that is accompanied by chanting of mantras around a fire. The ritual also involves making vows by the disciple to his or her guru.

“Mataji” and “Prabhu” are used to address someone else, “Das” and “Devi Dasi” are used by people to introduce themselves or to sign letters, but only those who have received spiritual names after the first initiation. It is important to note that ISKCON developed a practice of asking gurus for a child’s spiritual name, it is not the same as receiving a spiritual name during the initiation ritual because the child does not make vows and does not go through the ritual itself. Thus, I also have a spiritual name – Sitarani.

Klepal interprets this differentiation by names and, specifically, calling women “mataji” as not only referring to the role, for which the woman’s body is “designed”, but directly putting a taboo onto a woman, especially for men upholding celibacy. According to quotes from his informants, a woman represents “the danger of the greatest sense gratification”, while for others a woman was created to be a test of sincerity and determination on the spiritual path of a man in Krishna consciousness.

Although there are ongoing discussions of LGBTQ+ members of ISKCON (Wilhelm, 2014), I have not observed any practices or discussions in the ISKCON in the Czech Republic that would touch upon this sensitive for ISKCON topic with exception of one instance: a had one very implicit exchange with another girl. She was telling a story that I interpreted as her implying a lesbian relationship at some point in the past. When I indicated in a very subtle and implicit manner that I understood the nature of the relationship she was describing and was not judgmental of it, she burst into tears with words: “Sitarani, how is it possible that you are so perceptive?”, and then we hugged.

Overall, during every single participation in observation I was addressed if not by my spiritual name, then as “mataji”. In the online communities such as WhatsApp chats people address each other as “matajis” and “prabhus”. When someone signed their name, it would be using their spiritual name ending with Devi Dasi or Das, or Bhakta/Bhaktin. In the



Facebook groups of both Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze and Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir people are addressed as “Dear devotees,...”. I am interpreting usage of these emic terms of gender as part of the gender practice within ISKCON, while at the same time addressing someone by their spiritual name as a reification of the position of a “servant of the servant of the servant of Krishna”. such addresses are used within the ritual performances I studied in order to resolve logistical questions, but this language goes beyond the ritual and can also be considered as part of the “every-day” practice of ISKCON devotees.

Nevertheless, even though it is not directly related to the research question, I want to mention an instance of this pattern being broken. It happened in Russia during a visit of several female disciples of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada. They stepped away from the norm of addressing each other and other women as “mataji”, instead they used “prabhu”. I am going to present my recount of such occurrence with Mondakini Devi Dasi in a short vignette based on my diary entries from when I was 16 years old:

*In the summer of 2015, the temple in Moscow on Kuusinena street was holding a cooking master class that was led by Mondakini, during which she was going to explain how to make luglu – sweets that she used to make for Prabhupad as a form of service. Another mataji was the translator and I was asked to take photographs for them to be later posted along with the recipe itself. Already from the previous day I noticed Mondakini addressing everyone as “prabhu” and never using “mataji” but didn’t ask for reasons even though I was really curious. There were no men present in the masterclass. While the masterclass was progressing, Mondakini would repeatedly ask the translator for some assistance: “Prabhu, could you pass me that spoon”, “Prabhu, do you know where the sugar is?”. I could see the translator look nervously, but with curiosity at Mondakini every time it happened. When the cooking part of the masterclass was over, it was time for the audience to ask questions, and one of the first questions was “Mondakini mataji, why do you keep addressing women as prabhus?”. Her answer was: “We always did that in Prbahupad’s times, everyone was a prabhu, because it is the respectful way to address a person, what difference does sex make? We are not the body”. The conversation then very quickly switched to the intricacies of the earlier presented recipe and Mondakini’s memory of Prabhupāda.”*

Mondakini was referencing the view of not being the body as grounds for not differentiating between devotees based on their sex and, according to her, that was a practice she acquired in the early years of ISKCON’s existence. It is also an instance of negotiation of a gender practice by the members of ISKCON communities.

Veronika Seidlová noted in her work on a female-monk in Rishikesh (Seidlová, 2013) that “mataji” was used in India to address older women. It is important to notice that I do not have children, neither I am an older woman to be addressed in such a manner, yet in ISKCON I have been addressed as mataji from the age of approximately 13 or 14, and during all observations I conducted other women around me were addressed as “mataji” by women and men alike, which confirms Klepal’s data on gendered language within ISKCON in the Czech Republic. It also seems to be solely ISKCON standard to address *all* women as matajis based on comparison to Seidlova’s (2013) data from studying activities of a female monk in India.

Furthermore, based on my data studied ISKCON communities in the Czech Republic linguistically only know two genders, even though there are debates within ISKCON in other countries on exactly that topic (see Wilhelm, 2014). According to my observations no stepping away from heteronormativity within language practices occurred.

### 2.3 Gendered visual appearance

In terms of the clothing that is characteristic of members of the ISKCON communities, there are things shared by men and women, and things that divide them and outwardly signify them as men or women. Most of the people, who participated in the rituals wear a tilak - a clay symbol on their foreheads, and wear kanthimalas: beads made from the Tulsi tree and worn on the neck. Normative clothes in ISKCON in the Czech Republic based on my observation are traditional Indian clothes: men wear dhotis (2–3-meter piece of fabric usually in white or saffron color that covers the lower part of the body), while women wear saris (a 4,5-meter piece of fabric that covers the entire body). Under the sari women usually put an underskirt and a choli - something like a crop-top. The sari is usually secured around the underskirt and the front of the body is completely covered by the fabric. What a woman does to the “tail” of the sari is often up to her: she either leaves it hanging behind her back; wraps it around her and tucks the end of the “tail” into the waistline of the skirt at the front; uses the edge of the tail to cover her hair, forming a hood out of the tail. In terms of hair, most men wear shikha – a lock of hair left at the top of a shaved head, which goes in accordance to Seidlová’s data (2014). In terms of women that I observed during my research - every single one of them had long hair that was always put into braids or ponytail.

The negotiation of these standards of dress-code occurs through combining traditional Indian clothes with western clothes. Men may tie their dhotis around their waste, but add shirts, T-shirts, hoodies, and other pieces of western clothes on top. Women sometimes wear western clothes as a complete substitute for saris: long skirts with blouses or t-shirts, or very long tunics. Alternatively, they wear a sari, but a western jacket or blouse on top.

Additionally, there is another standard that has to be and is upheld consistently throughout ISKCON globally and in the Czech Republic: dress code for brahmacharis (monks) and sannyasis (people who reached full renunciation and received final, third, sannyasa initiation). Both groups wear solely saffron clothes that consist of dhotis and kurtas (long shirt). Sannyasis have to carry a danda – a long stick that consists of three rods joined together (Srimad Bhagavatam: 1.13.30). In case of specifically sannyasis, wearing saffron clothes and carrying a danda can be interpreted as a symbolic expression of their higher status of renunciation within ISKCON. During my research, I have not observed any woman wear saffron clothes, but, based on videos in the Facebook group of Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze<sup>15</sup>, Malati Dasi, who is Prabhupad's disciple from the US, was wearing saffron when she gave lecture in Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze 3 years ago. These data can be related to a broader discourse within ISKCON of whether women can or cannot be gurus or sannyasinis (see Kaunteya Das, 2013). In 2019 GBC issued a resolution that allowed women to become gurus, but only if they are at least 55 years of age and living under protection of “a husband, elder son or son-in-law, qualified householder couple or senior Vaisnava or Vaisnavi sanga” (ISKCON News, 2019), but even though a woman can become a guru she cannot become a sannyasini. Thus, clothes reflect and further construct socially hierarchal relationships between genders, within which only men progress to the highest stage of renunciation.

In terms of non-normative clothing for ISKCON based on my observation, it is difficult to say what it would be for men, as I have observed men fully dressed in western clothes during programs on several occasions: jeans with t-shirts or shirts, or medium length shorts in the hot weather. However, it is easier for me to say what would be non-normative clothes for women based on my observations in the Czech Republic and drawing from my experience. Such would be very tight and revealing clothes: a blouse with a deep neck-cut, skirt above the knee, tight leggings that would fully reveal the shape of woman's legs and glutes. I specifically draw this conclusion from this experience during one of the naha-hattas:

*I walked into the elevator of the house in Prague 8 with a man whom I've already seen two times during these programs. He was accompanied by a girl, who seemed to be not a devotee because she was not wearing kanthimalas. My assumption was later confirmed by her not being able to participate in call and response recitals of mantras other than maha-mantra, because she would start repeating mantras with everyone else, but then get lost in the texts. The situation was resolved by another woman giving her a book with texts of the mantras. Another thing that caught my attention was her wearing a skirt that ended just above her knee. I was very curious to see how it would be taken by*

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/harinama.mandir/videos>

*other people during the program. The following happened: 20-30 minutes into kirtan she was given a scarf with which she then covered her knees and legs.*

Another observation that caught my attention is the transparency of the clothes. On several occasions, I could tell with precision what was the color of the men's underwear, because their white dhotis were partially transparent. On absolutely no occasion, did I witness something similar in women. Not only women's clothes are more layered, but the fabric was always dense and non-transparent, which can be interpreted as women's bodies being more tabooed in comparison to that of men on the level of clothing, which can be tied to Klepal's (2005) interpretation of a taboo being put on women linguistically and further this interpretation onto the level of visual appearance.

There is one more ethnographical detail that needs to be mentioned: how women dress in the Brno temple. It was brought to my attention during an interview that in comparison to Prague, where women dress "more simply", women in Brno look like "apsaras"<sup>16</sup>, which meant that their saris are always extra bright, combined with a lot of jewelry. My informant pointed out the irony: "We look like this \*she waved at her sari\* and can dance, but they look like apsaras, but are not allowed to dance". When I asked about the potential reason for that, the answer was simple "I guess, it's just fashion there".

The general pattern that I observed was that when people attended the Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze or the Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir, the majority of people wore saris and dhotis, while when attending the Harinam and Nama-Hatta it was more common to see people wearing western clothes. However, during the Harinam, members of the Czech-speaking communities wore saris more often than the members of the Russian-speaking community. Thus the dress-code is followed mostly in more public locations, while in a semi-private setting, nama-hatta, people stepped away from it more. Also, although there are gender neutral symbols of expressing ISKCON identity, tilak and kanthimals, clothes specifically further reify heteronormativity within ISKCON of the Czech Republic, as the dress code does not provide any options for dressing-up in a gender neutral way, according to my observations. Furthermore, clothes reflect and further construct socially hierarchical relationships between genders, within which only men progress to the highest stages of renunciation.

## 2.4 Physical separation of genders in the ritual space

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<sup>16</sup> Divinely beautiful female spirits or creatures

Going further, another negotiated practice within ritual performance is that of physical separation between male and female members of the communities, in certain cases physical separation went along with temporal division as well. This pattern showed a lot of variability in the way people negotiated the norm of not mixing with each other physically in the space where a ritual is performed.

Before going into details, I want to present a vignette describing a situation when the monks from Brno temple stayed in the Centrum Hare Kriřna v Praze and led the morning service:

*It was the 12th of March, I woke up nervous that I overslept. I still had good 2 hours of sleep left, so I blissfully closed my eyes. Nevertheless, I woke up before my alarm rang - at 5:48, and the service was supposed to start at 7:00 a.m. in the Centrum Hare Kriřna v Praze in Prague 8*

...

*I entered the altar room, which was filled with a smooth buzz of at least a dozen of people chanting their rounds<sup>17</sup>, and the altar was closed. I took a quick bow and was trying to find a familiar face in the room, but I couldn't. I quickly counted people in the room - there were definitely more people there, than I thought at first - 23 people myself included: 18 men, 4 women and one child. Some of the men were wearing bright saffron dhotis, which meant they were bramacharis<sup>18</sup> and I've never seen them in this temple before. The moment the altar opened every- one got down to take a bow on the floor. As we all got up and one bramachari began singing, I noticed that I was alone in front of the altar - one mataji was about 2 m behind me and the other one was standing even farther away, the fourth mataji was at the altar performing the arati. I took notice, but quickly forgot all about it as it came the time to follow the morning prayer. I was moving slowly to the rhythm of the mantra, but not really dancing, but when the kirtan started, I calmly started moving in pace with it - 2 steps forward, 2 steps back. At that point, being the only woman in front of the altar started drawing more of my attention. Why was it this way?*

*The kirtan ended, the altar was closed again, a small picture of Tulsi Devi<sup>19</sup> was placed on a high stool into the center of the altar room, thus Tulsi arati began. When the 6th verse of the prayer began, people started going in circles around the image of Tulsi finishing it with a small water offering from a cup, standing in front of the image. Here I made a mistake. I thought hard, trying to remember how we did this arati in Moscow. We had two Tulsi trees standing in the altar room - that's how. I*

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<sup>17</sup> Chanting rounds referee to repetition of the Hare Krishna mantra on the beads that have 108 knobs. One round amounts to repeating the mantra 108 time. The common standard in ISKCON is chanting 16 rounds per day

<sup>18</sup> Monks

<sup>19</sup> Krishna's favorite plant. Tulasi's wood is carved into the japa beads on which devotees chant Krishna's name. Devotees wear strands of Tulasi beads around their necks. Her leaves and flowers decorate the Deity of Krishna in the temple and are placed on food offered to Him. She has taken the form of a tree so that everyone, even the poorest person, can offer something wonderful to Krishna. (krishna.com, 2021)

remembered. I was trying to think what I am supposed to do. After some consideration I decided that I can go with everyone else, but I quickly realized that “everyone else” were men only, and one of the matajis standing at the back of the altar room was already waving me to come back and wait for the mataji’s turn. I felt my cheeks redden a bit. I stood there, waiting for men to finish going around the picture of Tulsi and only then other women and I started our circles. Next came the guru puja. The offering was made to the image of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda at the opposite end of the altar room. As the leading prabhu was done with the lyrics of the prayer, a regular kirtan with “Hare Krishna” mantra began and everyone turned around to the altar once again. The kirtan was quite intense, so I got back to my previous position in front of the altar and was dancing once again. However, it didn’t last for long. Only several minutes later I felt someone gently place their hand on my waist. I turned around to face a girl with fair hair and wearing pale green sari. “Mataji, do you speak Russian?”, she asked me. The following dialogue is translated from Russian to English

- Sofiya: Yes, I do.
- Mataji: I feel uncomfortable asking you this, but the senior mataji told me to ask you to stand with other matajis. She waved her hand in the direction of the back of the altar room.
- Sofiya: Why?
- Mataji: It’s difficult to explain. We have prabhhus here today, who are very strict
- Sofiya: Okay, sure. What prabhhus?
- Mataji: I’ll explain later
- Sofiya : Sure

So I went and stayed with them at the back of the altar room, behind the prabhhus. Once the kirtan was finished, everyone sat themselves down for the Srimad Bhagavatam lecture that lasted for about an hour. Then it was the time to take prasadam<sup>21</sup>. Everyone got up and the carpet on which everyone was sitting during the lecture was rolled to the side and plastic square mats were laid out on the floor in three lines. My friend was not in the room at that point and the Russian-speaking girl was occupied, I went to stand by the wall to assess the situation once more - where will I as a mataji be allowed to sit this time. I saw where all the matajis were preparing to sit down and headed there - by the wall closer to the entrance, while prabhhus were occupying two rows in front of them. And the row of seats that was in front of us was occupied by the lecturer and other prabhhus from Brno as well as the temple president and they were sitting with their backs towards us, women. I sat myself down next to the Russian-speaking girl and started to speak with her (we were speaking in Russian ) :

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<sup>21</sup> food offered to the deities

- Sofiya: *So, you promised to tell me about the strict prabhus, what 's up with that?*
  
- Mataji: *Ah, yeah. So, they are bramacharis from Brno, they are all Bhakti Vikasha Swami 's disciples and their community is extremely strict. Like matajis always stand behind the prbhus during the services in their temple, never next to them. And also, Matajis are not allowed to dance in the temple.*
  
- Sofiya: *Not allowed to dance? I hear something like that for the first time!*
  
- Mataji: *Yeah... You know, I really didn't enjoy asking you to go to the back of the room, but I was just relaying what the senior mataji asked me to tell you. But I myself would have never asked anything like that.*
  
- Sofiya: *Of course, I understand, it's not a problem. I mean it is a problem, but not that she asked me, but that the need for it even arose.*
  
- Mataji: *Yes, I totally agree. In our Russian temple we never had things like that. I then saw a friend of mine, whom I met during the Harinam and she called me to sit next to her, which I did after excusing myself to the Russian-speaking girl. As everyone finished eating, I saw that the senior mataji was sitting in the corner of the room, so I decided to use this opportunity to discuss with her the morning request for me. I waited for a pause in her conversation with another person in the Czech language and greeted her with a hug. We exchanged pleasantries. She began the conversation about the prabhus from Brno herself:*
  
- Senior mataji: *I asked to call you to the back of the room because you were standing too close to them. You had a lot of space next to the wall, but you were standing too close when you were dancing.*
  
- Sofiya: *But how was I close; I was just standing in front of the altar the way it would be done in any other temple*
  
- Senior mataji: *Yes, yes, but it was just like you were standing with them. Matajis are supposed to stand on one side and prabhus on the other.*
  
- Sofiya: *But why should I be standing in the back? In other ISKCON temples: in Moscow, in Italy, in Belgium, in the UK and in India matajis do not stand behind the prabhus*
  
- Senior mataji: *Well. First of all, during Prabhupāda's times matajis would stand behind the prabhus. And about India - you 're simply wrong. In India matajis stand behind the prabhus*

*I thought to myself that maybe I was wrong about something. My experience comes from visiting northern temples, maybe she was referring to central India, where there are also a lot of large ISKCON temples. I listened on:*

*- Senior mataji: But yes, today was special because prabhush from Brno were here. They are very strict about matajis and whenever they come, they want to find a reason to criticize us, because they think our Prague temple is too liberal. And we do understand that now we live in different time. And we are trying to be more feminist, but you have to understand that it's all very simple: you have a female body, and they have a male body, and those go separately in the temple. Yes, one may argue that in Bhagavad Gita it says that we are not the bodies, but eternal souls. But we are still in the material world, and we are conditioned by it and we have to accept it. Whichever soul if you look at them and look at yourself the difference is obvious. But we have to remember that we are trying to practice Vedic culture and Vedic culture is such that men and women should be separate in the temple. This is the culture that actually helps our spiritual practice. Do you think they \*waves her hand sideways\* are happy with the way they are living their lives?*

*- Sofiya: I mean... yes, sure... wait they - people in the temple, or they people not in ISKCON?*

*- Senior mataji: No, no I mean general people, who don't have spiritual practice in their lives, who are so liberal in their relationships. What does it give them? Are they happy? ... No! Because they are deep in Maya and are conditioned by their bodies, and it makes them very very unhappy. And we have spiritual practice, and this spiritual practice prescribes very direct and simple rules. At that point a prabhu approached us and offered to take flowers from the puja and we all got distracted by it and then he asked matajis to help with cleaning up the room after prasadam. It was already 10:35 and I was supposed to teach a class at 11:00. We said Hare Krishna to each other and embraced and I ran to the tram.*

This vignette provides an instance of a person from within the community referring to the “Vedic Culture”, that was also mentioned by Klepal (2005) in his research. Within this conversation, the senior mataji felt appropriate to interfere and correct my ritual performance due to her seniority, and in the moment of I did not resist it not only because I wanted to see how it all played out, but also because for me it was a given that I should abide by her request as she has a higher hierarchal position. Vedic Culture served to legitimize the practice of physical separation of genders and establishing hierarchy of seniority among women, and to also position herself in opposition to the “majority” of society.

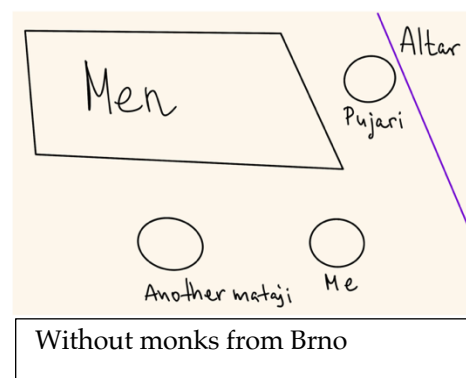
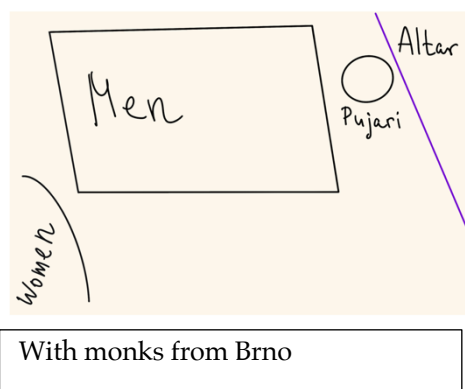
Also, even though the term “gender” was used in this conversation, it was not used with the meaning of something socially and culturally constructed, but closer to the word “sex”, because of the mataji's reference to the physical differences of the male and female bodies. It is also interesting to notice how this situation to a degree mirrors the situation when



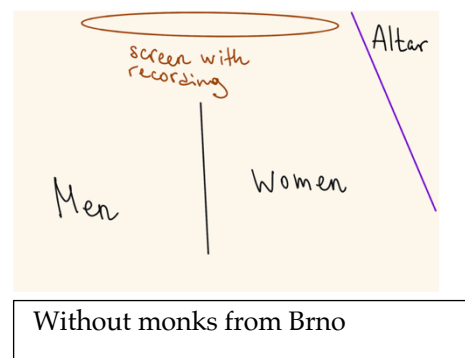
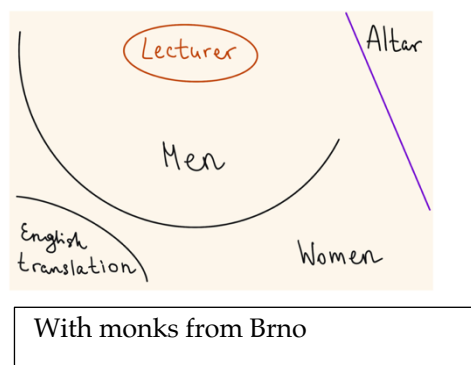
Klepal (2005) was explained and told to stand with other prabhus. Important detail in comparing those situations is that he was approached by a man to be corrected, while I was approached by a woman, which confirms the importance of my positionality as a woman during this research. Furthermore, an argument is presented that such gender-based separation has a further function of securing “spiritual” safety of people involved in the practice, and the “threat” comes, according to the mataji, from being too liberal, even though she is saying that their community is attempting being liberal, which is definitely true when compared to the Brno community of women not being allowed to dance and their physical position being strictly secured “behind the men”. Nevertheless, there are more communities in Prague and the Czech Republic besides the Brno and Centrum Hare Kriřna v Praze, and further comparison to how ritual performance is negotiated is possible.

I made a series of schemes presenting the physical positions maintained throughout rituals in different locations I attended. Here I will analyze and compare them.

Centrum Hare Kriřna v Praze: the scheme of physical separation on occasions when the monks from Brno were attending the ritual performance, and when only regular members from Prague were present.



The difference was present in other rituals as well: the Srimad Bhagavatam Lecture



However, it is important to notice that in the case when only devotees from Prague were present during the ritual, there were no live lecturer, but a recording of a lecture was played from Nama Hata Summer Camp, Protivanov, Czech Republic 24.06.2013 available at

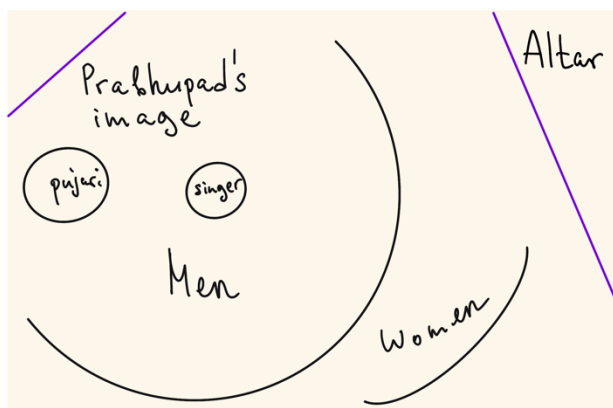
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSe4KadjSlg&t=1s> (Antardvip Das KKS, 2013). It is possible to argue that the position of the people during that lecture was related to the usage of projector and absence of a live speaker, but upon looking in the albums of the Facebook page Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze, it is possible to find the following image from a lecture:



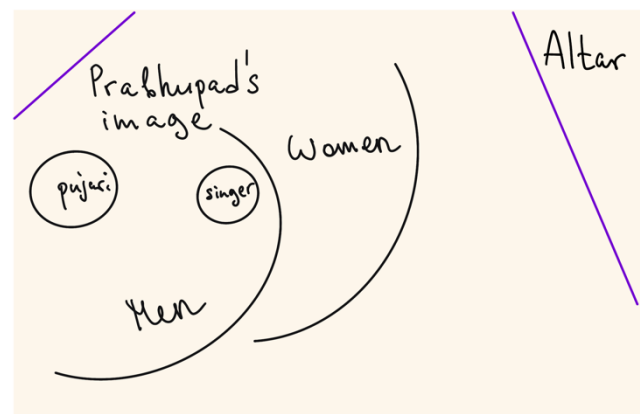
Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze, 2020

Here we can see that women and men are sitting separately, but women are not behind the men. To summarize, presence of the brahmacaris from Brno seem to have resulted in women having to stand behind the men during the aratis and sit behind them during the lecture. However, on both occasions the pujari was a woman, but this detail will be discussed more elaborately in the section on negotiated roles.

Moving forward, here are the schemes of differences of the Guru-Puja ritual performance on those two dates in the Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze:



With monks from Brno



Without monks from Brno

On the one hand, when monks from Brno were visiting, there were physically more men in the altar room, but the physical position of the women was explicitly behind the men. When they were not there, women were still more behind the men, but physically closer to the image of Prabhupāda.

Furthermore, the ritual of taking Prasad also differed. Besides the schemes, I will present two short vignettes:

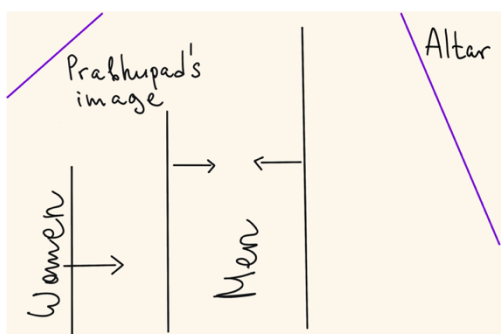
12.03.2022 – Centrum *Hare Kriřna v Praze Morning Service – Visit from the Brno monks*

*Then it was the time to take prasadam. Everyone got up and the carpet on which everyone was sitting was rolled to the side and plastic square mats were laid out on the floor in three lines. My friend was not in the room at that point and Katya was occupied, I went to stand by the wall to once more assess the situation - where will I as a mataji be allowed to sit this time.... I saw where all of the matajis were taking seats and headed in their direction - by the wall closer to the entrance, while prabhhus were occupying two rows in front of us. And the row of seats that was in front of us was occupied by the lecturer and other prabhhus from Brno as well as the temple president and they were sitting with their backs towards us, women.*

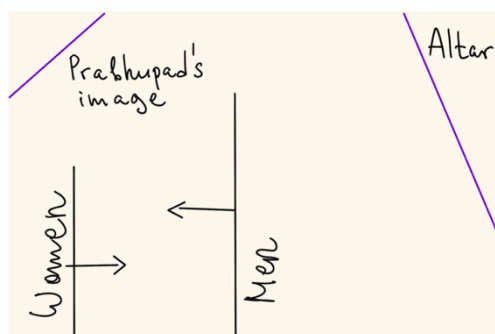
7.05.2022 – Centrum *Hare Kriřna v Praze Morning service*

*What caught my attention during the prasadam, is that this time, the prabhhus sat down facing the matajis. Absence of the Brno devotees definitely made the whole thing more relaxed and liberal at least based on my feeling. The same Russian-speaking girl from the last time sat next to me and we had a brief conversation.*

People were sitting in the following way:

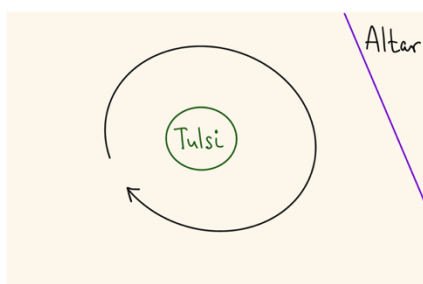


With monks from Brno

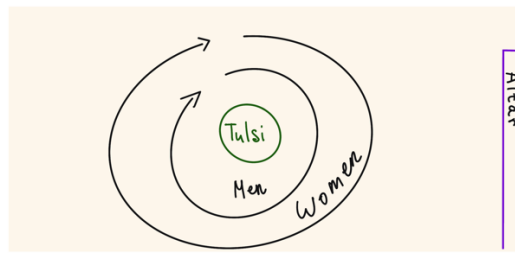


Without monks from Brno

In the illustrations, the arrows indicate the direction which the people in line were facing.



The separation between men and women was maintained on both occasions but it differed.



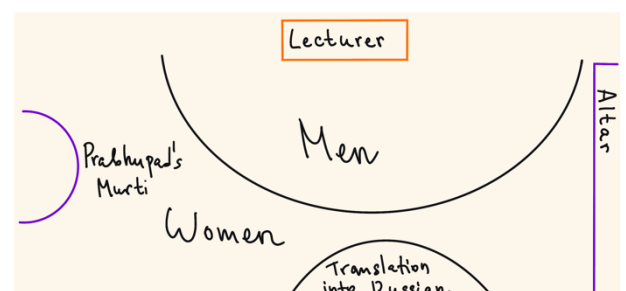
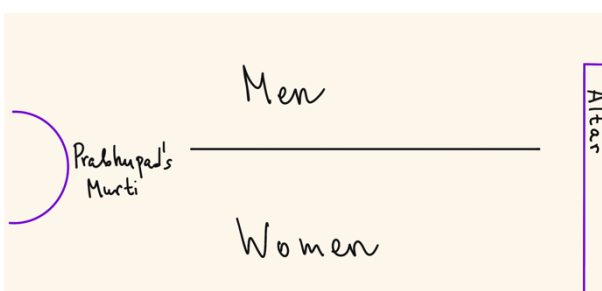
There was one ritual that was performed in the same way during both observations: Tulsi Arati. In Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze, the division is not only spatial, but also temporal:

The illustration shows the position of the Tulsi image in the altar room and the direction of movement around the image. The ritual was described in more detail in the first vignette of this section of the thesis. To reiterate, first the image was circled by men, and only then by women.

To introduce comparison with other communities, I want to present the scheme of how this same ritual was performed in Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir:

The illustration presents that the women were not at the side of the altar room, waiting for men to finish, but were performing the ritual simultaneously – there was no temporal separation. Also, Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir had an actual tree placed into the center of the altar room, and not an image of it. Men and women were walking around the Tulsi tree together, but two rings were formed - men were walking around the Tulsi tree itself, while women were walking in the 'outer' ring: around men.

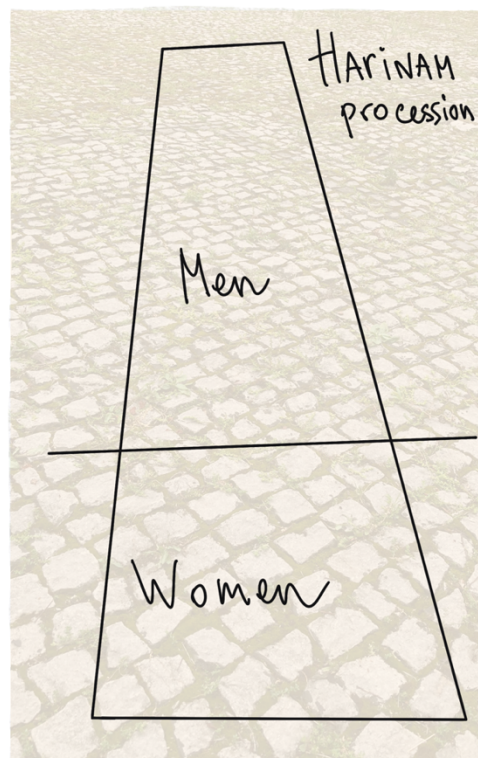
To further the data on Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir. I drew one scheme for both Darshan Arati and Guru-Puja, and a scheme for the Morning Lecture (on the day of my visit, it was



the celebration of Gaura Purnima<sup>22</sup>, and the lecture was not on Srimad Bhagavatam, but on the Caitanya Caritamrita. For the same reason, there was no prasadam, as people were fasting on that day).

During both Darshan Arati and Guru-Puja, the line between men and women was maintained in the middle of the room. During the Darshan Arati, everyone was standing closer to the altar, while for guru-puja people shifted closer to Prabhupāda's Murti<sup>23</sup>. The separation between men and women during the lecture matched the one in Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze's when the Brno Monks were there. Additionally, a group of women, me included, were sitting together to hear the translation of the lecture into Russian language.

Moving on to a space and ritual within which the intersection of the communities is more explicit – the Harinam Ritual. As mentioned in the topology section, the leader of the Harinam, Vidya Vachaspati Prabhu, and other most regular members all reside in Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir and travel to Prague to hold the ritual in the center of Prague. They are then joined by members of other communities. The Harinam Ritual includes the practice of men and women being separated, which was also observed by Veronika Seidlová (2014) during her ethnographic research. Men lead the procession and are then followed by women.

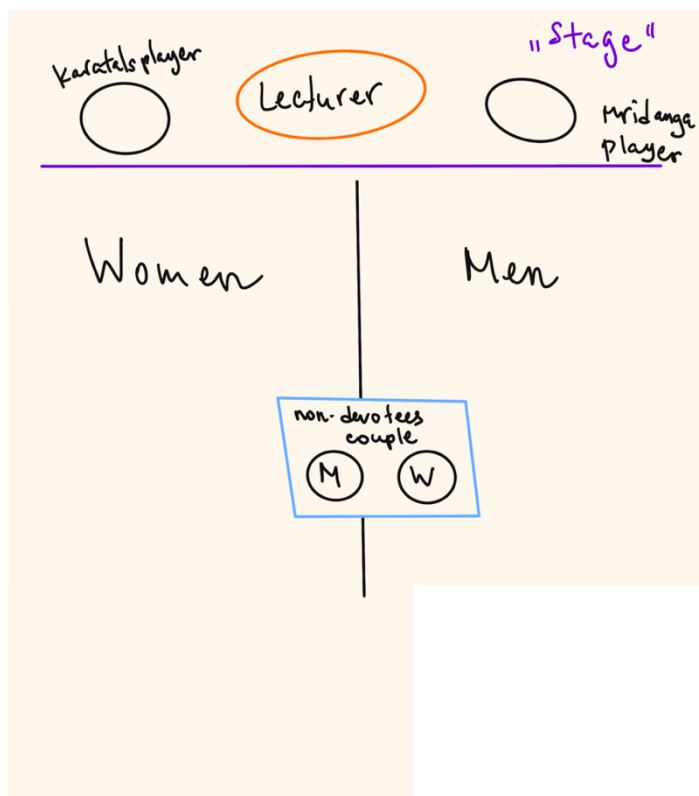


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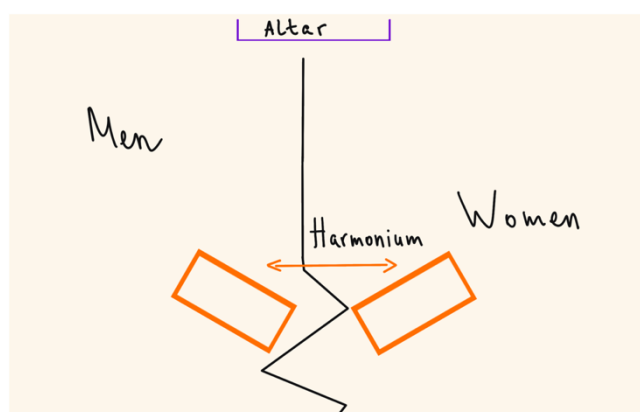
<sup>22</sup> The day of Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu's appearance

<sup>23</sup> Statue

The Harinams on Wednesdays are usually followed by a kirtan and a small lecture in the Govinda restaurant in Prague 1. On one occasion, I followed the devotees to the kirtan to the restaurant to see members of which communities were present and how was the kirtan ritual was negotiated in that location. Separation between men and women was maintained, but with an outlier in the form of a couple, who by external signs of being dressed in non-devotional clothes and not wearing kanthimalas<sup>24</sup> on their necks were not members of ISKCON. The karatals player was a woman, and she was sitting to right of the lecturer – same as other women apart from the mentioned couple.



The last community and location where I studied the negotiation of the ritual performance and gender practices was the Russian-speaking nama-hatta in Prague 8. Nama-hatta seems

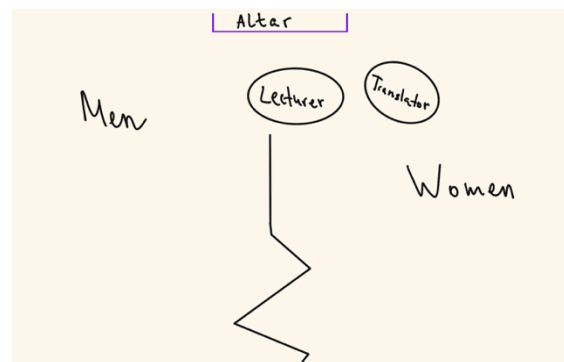


<sup>24</sup> Beads made out of Tulsi are worn by the devotees of Krishna

to be a more private event as it takes place in the apartment of the leader of the Russian-speaking community – Atmadarshani. As part of the nama-hatta program, 3 rituals of interest for me are performed: kirtan, lecture on the scriptures, and prasadam taking. I present separate schemes of negotiated gender practices within these rituals. Apart from the physical position of men and women in the space, negotiation of the ritual performance was observable in the instruments used in kirtan, which is discussed in more detail in the section on gendered ritual roles.

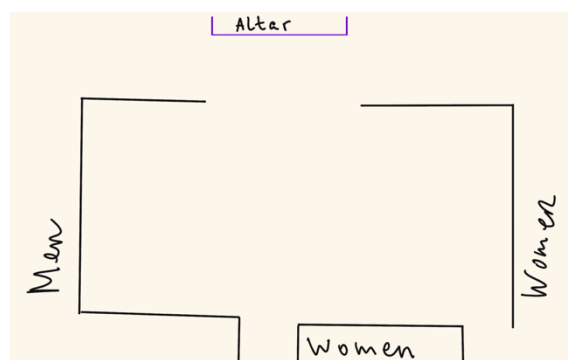
During Kirtan, the leader of the kirtan usually sat closer to the back of the room and depending on whether the kirtan was led by a man or a woman, the Harmonium was shifted between the men's and women's "sides". On the occasions of my observing participation, the lecture was always given by Atmadarshini and the translator, a woman, was sitting next to her on the women's side, but the section of the lecture when questions were asked, the people participated in an active way and public exchange of opinions on the questions of scriptures was happening between all present members, also follow up question were asked. It is different from the Czech-speaking communities, where usually a question was asked without an opportunity of a follow-up commentary from the person asking the question.

During the prasadam taking ritual, people usually rearranged themselves in the following way:



There was space left in the middle of the room, so that there would be space for those distributing the food to the other members who were sitting down.

Physical separation and positions of genders within spaces further implies that social hierarchy of genders is established and performed. Also, women coming second physically and sometimes temporally can be interpreted as a symbolical expression of this hierarchy.



## 2.4 Gendered ritual roles

As mentioned in the theoretical framework section – there are several categories of roles during the ritual performances:

- Pujari  
Can be described as the temple priest – the person who performs the arati in front of the altar by offering food, fire, flowers etc. to the altar.  
This role usually requires qualification– this person is supposed to have a double initiation, although in certain places due to various circumstances the standard can be either lowered to having one initiation, or to having been a regular member for a prolonged period and having obtained the knowledge of the script and standards of performing a puja.
- Preacher  
It is the person who gives lectures at the temple during the ritual of holding a lecture on the scriptures, which means that such person has to be very well familiar with the sacred texts. Such position is usually given to either sannyasis, disciples of Prabhupāda, or senior devotees.
- Lead Singer  
This person takes charge of singing the mantras during aratis, pujas, kirtans or harinams. Lead singer recites a line from the mantra as a soloist, and everyone else responds to it by repeating the mantra line collectively. Also, usually this is the person playing the harmonium.



- Supporting instrument player  
Usually, there are several supporting instrument players, who use karatalas, mridanga or tambourine.
- General participant  
The person who repeats the lines of the mantra after the lead singer and sometimes dances during kirtan. General participants take part in rituals of Tulsi arati by each offering water to the image of the Tulsi tree, offering rose petals to Prabhupad's image or murti during guru-puja, and offering fire to the altar during the damodarastakam arati.

Some patterns in relation to gender have emerged during my participant-observation research. The following page contains a table with the collected data.

Table 2

Date	Location	Ritual	Pujari	Preacher	Lead Singer	Supporting Instrument Player	General Participants
31/10/2021	Centrum Hare Kriřna v Praze, Prague 8	Damodarastakam Arati	X	X	Man	2 Men	Men and Women
08/12/2021	Prague 1	Harinam	X	X	Man	3 Men and 1 Woman <sup>25</sup>	Men and Women
12/03/2022	Centrum Hare Kriřna v Praze, Prague 8	Mangala-Arati	Woman	X	Man	3 Men	Men and Women
		Tulsi-Arati	X	X	Man	Man	Men and Women
		Guru-puja	Woman	X	Man	2 Men	Men and Women
		Lecture	X	Man	Same Man	3 Men	Men and Women
		Prasadam	X	X	Man	X	Men and Women
18/03/2022	řrđ řrđ Nitái Navadvđpaćandra mandir, Luřce	Tulsi-Arati	X	X	Man	1 Man	Men and Women
		Guru-puja	Woman	X	Man	3 Men	Men and Women
		Lecture	X	Man	Same Man	3 Men	Men and Women
26/03/2022	Private Home, Prague 8	Kirtan	X	X	2 Men and 3 Women <sup>26</sup>	4 Men and 1 woman	Men and Women
		Lecture	X	Woman	Same Woman	4 Men and 1 woman	Men and Women

<sup>25</sup> That particular woman was me, and I took on initiative to play karatalas myself

<sup>26</sup> The kirtan would feature lead singers changing several times in the course of the ritual

		Prasadam	X	X	Man	X	Men and Women
9/04/2022	Private Home, Prague 8	Kirtan	X	X	2 Men and 2 Women	3 Men and 2 women	Men and Women
		Lecture	X	Woman	Same Woman	3 Men and 2 women	Men and Women
		Prasadam	X	X	Woman	X	Men and Women
4/05/2022	Prague 1	Harinam	X	X	Man	3 Men	Men and Women
7/05/2022	Centrum Hare Krišana v Praze, Prague 8	Mangala-Arati	Woman	X	Man	2 Men	Men and Women
		Tulsi-Arati	X	X	Man	1 Man	Men and Women
		Guru-puja	Man	X	Man	2 Men	Men and Women
		Lecture	X	Recording of a Man	X	X	Men and Women
		Prasadam	X	X	Man	X	Men and Women
7/05/2022	Private Home, Prague 8	Kirtan	Kirtan	X	1 Man and 2 Women	4 Men and 2 Women	Men and Women
		Lecture	X	Woman	Same Woman	2 Men and 1 woman	Men and Women
		Prasadam	X	X	Man	X	Men and Women
8/06/2022	Prague 1 + Govinda	Harinam	X	X	Man	4 Men	Men and Women
	Restaurant in Prague 1	Kirtan	X	X	Man	1 Man and 1 Woman	Men and Women

Overall, men took over the positions of Preachers and Lead singers in the Czech Speaking communities, while in the Russian-speaking nama-hatta the position of the Preacher was always performed by a woman, while the role of the lead singer during Kirtan was shared between men and women. Predominantly women were pujaris in both Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir. The “X” in the table means that this particular role was not part of the ritual performance. So, during the nama-hattas no pujas or aratis were conducted, so observing this ritual performance in this community was circumstantially impossible.

In the Czech-speaking communities men were favoring the positions of lecturers and singers, which made it seem like being a pujari was less prestigious. I am coming to that interpretation based on Schlichtsova’s description of the hierarchy of prestigiousness of roles in the ISKCON communities in the Czech Republic, where being a preacher was considered the most prestigious one.

Also, it is necessary to mention menstruation as a contextual detail of ritual performance in ISKCON. Based on my observations, within ISKCON in the Czech Republic question of menstruation seem to be concealed as I haven't observed it being brought up. I took particular notice to that because it was a regular experience for me in Russia to be asked by another woman if I was menstruating at that time before I would be allowed to participate in making an offering during Tulsi Arati, Guru puja or Damodarastakam arati. Nothing of that sorts happened during my research in the Czech Republic. Even though it was not discussed with me by any of my informants, I know that it is ISKCON standard world-wide that a woman is not allowed to serve in the kitchen or perform the role of pujari if she is menstruating. Klepal (2005) couldn't have presented data on that aspect due to his positionality as a man. These data provide further nuance and dynamic picture of gender construction and practice.

Within this section I would also like to pay special attention to kirtan and harinam. Chanting maha-mantra is the most sacred and important practice according to ISKCON preachings with reference to Caitanya Caritamrita's famous verse 6.242:

*harer nāma harer nāma  
harer nāmaiva kevalam  
kalau nāsty eva nāsty eva  
nāsty eva gatir anyathā*

*Translation:* In this age of quarrel and hypocrisy, the only means of deliverance is the chanting of the holy names of the Lord. There is no other way. There is no other way. There is no other way (Prabhupada, 1972). This quote and its translation contextualize the importance of chanting of Hare Krishna maha-mantra within ISKCON.

Because of the importance of this quote within ISKCON, it can be said that ISKCON kirtan means something slightly different than kirtan in general, which is understood more in terms of religious music-making (Jurková and Seidlová, 2014). In ISKCON, kirtan is a ritual of communal chanting of the Hare Krishna maha-mantra, and it is performed for the sake of the community members, meaning that chanting maha-mantra is a way for liberation of one's soul from the material illusion and relates to the assumption of the position of the servant of the servant of the servant of Krishna. Harinam is also a form of communal chanting of the Hare-Krishna maha-mantra, but more for the sake of the general public in the form of exposing them to the sacred sounds of maha-mantra by chanting the mantra on the streets while moving as a procession. Thus, Harinam and Kirtan are different rituals because the position of the servant is performed with nuanced difference of who is being served by the performance of chanting maha-mantra.

Kirtan was another negotiated ritual, and gender practices also differed between the communities. Women led the kirtan as lead-singers only in one setting – the Russian-speaking nama-hatta, while in the Czech-speaking centers I have not witnessed women being the lead-singers first-hand, although there is some evidence of women leading kirtans based on the pictures from the Facebook group of Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze , yet even in the digital setting of a facebook kirtan is simply kirtan, but if a mataji is leading it, then it is presented as a phenomenon of its own – mataji kirtan<sup>27</sup>.

The performance of kirtan ritual is sometimes accompanied by dancing. In the temple rituals and during the Harinam ritual members of the community are traditionally dancing. If the kirtan is performed with participants sitting down, then dancing takes place only if someone individually decides to stand up and dance. So, it becomes more of an individual negotiation rather than collective. My observation was that men seem to be “freer” in how expressive they are during dancing. Also, women and men never dance together. On that topic, I would like to add a vignette from participant-observation during a Harinam procession in Prague 1 on 4.05.22 :

*Now that I have written it, another thing comes to my mind. When women dance, it is quite “modest”. What I mean by that - the range of movements is somewhat limited: the base of the dance is one step forward, then one step back. I witnessed a certain variety of hand movements: holding the hands up; lifting hands when taking a step forward, then lowering them when taking a step back. Sometimes women move the hands diagonally, sometimes from side to side, but what unifies all of those movements - the range within which their bodies move is very limited, and the movements seem controlled. When I say controlled, I say it in contrast to prabhush's movements that range in styles and dynamics.*

*We stopped in front of the clocks. Women were standing several meters away from prabhush and formed a line to dance, and I was dancing with them. I was watching prabhush and they were so spontaneous in their dancing, they would jump, swiftly sit down and then jump up taking one leg to the side when they were in the air, they would run around chaotically with each other. The term that I want to use is very common in ISKCON vocabulary - ecstatic. They seemed ecstatic, not bound by anything, singing the names of Krishna and Rama, opening, and closing their eyes, swaying, slowing down and then gaining speed again. When I was looking at matajis - I was not seeing ecstasy, I was seeing them enjoying the process for sure, but also being very aware of the surroundings. On that*

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.2072264232889815&type=3>

*specific occasion matajis also seemed tired, which was very understandable in lieu of the temperature being +22 Celcius according to my phone, but it felt much hotter.*

This was exactly the occasion from which I came to the interpretation of men being “freer” in their dancing expressivity during the ritual of Harinam. Put next to the quotes from several devotees in Prague from different communities of women not being allowed to dance in the Brno temple, and then me being corrected for dancing too close to men in the the Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze, it is my conclusion that in the Czech speaking communities that I observed and the Brno community of which I heard so much, dancing is negotiated in a more strict way. However, even within the Czech speaking community there are variations as, for example, I encountered issues with dancing when devotees from Brno were in the Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze, but none when they were not there. Women were dancing in the Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir during ritual performance of the morning service.

Here's an encounter from the same occasion:

*I want to draw attention to a specific chain of events. When we stopped, as I said earlier, matajis formed a line, and were moving back and forth to the beat of the Harinam. The mataji in the yellow dress jumped at a tourist lady (and when I say jumped at her, I really mean it), locked their elbows, and roused her into a spin. I cannot precisely say that the tourist lady was enthusiastic about it (which is, again, a speculative interpretation of someone else's emotions), but she went and span along. While it was happening, the rest of the matajis were still dancing in the line, and another mataji was standing behind us, as her daughter in the stroller couldn't be left alone. Moments later, the tourist lady untangled herself from the mataji, who then decided to carry on with her enthusiasm: she decided it's a good idea to form a line and run around the harinam following a circular trajectory. She ran up to matajis and started taking them by hands, while explaining her intentions. I swiftly stepped back, not to be swirled into this procession, as it was hot in general, I was already quite hot from dancing more intensely than while we were walking and had no desire to get even more hot and sweaty. I was not the only one. Half of the matajis also non-verbally declined the invitation and remained dancing where they were. 5 or 6 matajis were in the line and they started picking up tourists along the way, who, this time, were more than happy to join in into something more collective. There was another swift, but very distinct moment. About 10 meters from me I spotted a couple, who were really into the music of the Harinam. They were both dancing and waving at devotees. When the matajis were approaching them, the guy wanted to join in, but he was just ignored. And it is possible to specifically say that he was ignored, and not that the mataji at the front just didn't notice him, because only few seconds later she took the girl from this couple by hand and invited her into the line, and she did join in, while the guy was just left standing at the side alone and, in my interpretation, slightly confused.*

This vignette points to an instance where self-restraint and control of the dancing set-up was exercised by a member of the community. Unfortunately, it is impossible to compare the aspect of negotiation of dancing within the ritual performance to the Russian-speaking community as during nama-hattas all of the kirtans are performed while remaining seated.

Another aspect of negotiations that takes place in the ritual of kirtan is that of the variety of the music instruments. In the Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze, Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir and during Harinam the same musical instruments are used: harmonium, mridanga, karatals and occasionally a tambourine. During Harinam a portable harmonium is used for it to be possible to play it on the go. Nama-hattas did feature all of the mentioned instruments, but with some additions: they also used shakers and on one occasion a large metal chimes. Since in the Russian-speaking nama-hatta kirtans were regularly led by different women, I observed women playing the harmonium. In terms of the supporting instruments, I have only witnessed women playing karatals, shakers, or a tambourine, and never a mridanga. Thus it is possible to interpret it that across all the studied communities, mridanga is used primarily by men.

### 3. Conclusion

To summarize, in my thesis I have attempted to show that ISKCON in the Czech Republic is not a homogenous unit, but it consists of constructed sub-communities. The differences are very well observable within ritual performances. In the chapter of theoretical framework, I explained the main concepts that I used for analyzing the data. To familiarize the reader with ISKCON, I presented a brief history of ISKCON in the Czech Republic. I also spoke about the history of ISKCON in Russia to better contextualize my own positionality of a person who was raised in ISKCON in Russia. I gave an overview of research on ISKCON in the Czech Republic and mainly concentrated on the research based on ethnographical data. In the empirical part, I first contextualized the field by presenting findings on the topology of ISKCON communities in the Czech Republic. In the sub-chapter on emic terms of gender, I have tried to show that their usage is a part of the gender practice within ISKCON, while at the same time addressing someone by their spiritual name serves as a reification of the position of a “servant of the servant of the servant of Krishna”. Such addresses are used within the ritual performances to resolve logistical questions, but this language goes beyond the ritual and can also be considered as part of the “every-day” practice of ISKCON devotees. My observations on the usage of terms “mataji” and “prabhu” confirm Klepal’s (2005) data on gendered language within ISKCON in the Czech Republic. It also seems to be solely ISKCON standard to address *all* women (even those who don’t have children as well

as girls) as matajis (mothers) based on comparison to Seidlova's (2013) data from studying activities of a female monk in India. Furthermore, based on my data, the studied ISKCON communities in the Czech Republic linguistically only know two genders, even though there are debates within ISKCON in other countries on exactly that topic (see Wilhelm, 2014). According to my observations no stepping away from heteronormativity within language practices occurred.

In the subchapter on gendered visual appearance, the general pattern that I observed was that when people attended the Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze or the Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir, the majority of people wore saris and dhotis, while when attending the Harinam and Nama-Hatta, it was more common to see people wearing western clothes. However, during the Harinam, members of the Czech-speaking communities wore saris more often than the members of the Russian-speaking community. Based on these observations I tried to explain the normative dress-code within ISKCON in the Czech Republic for men and women. In case of specifically sannyasis, wearing saffron clothes and carrying a danda can be interpreted as a symbolic expression of their higher status of renunciation within ISKCON. Thus, clothes reflect and construct socially hierarchal relationships between the members of ISKCON, within which only men progress to the highest stage of renunciation, i.e. the highest social status within ISKCON. Another important observation I described was women's clothes being more layered, and the fabric being always dense and non-transparent in comparison to men who occasionally wore semi-transparent clothes, which can be interpreted as women's bodies being more tabooed in comparison to that of men on the level of clothing, which can be tied to Klepal's (2005) interpretation of a taboo being put on women linguistically and further this interpretation onto the level of visual appearance.

Then I elaborated on the physical separation of genders within ritual performance in ISKCON in the Czech Republic. Physical separation of genders has a function of securing the "spiritual" safety of people involved in the practice, and the "threat" comes, according to one of the informants, from being too liberal in terms of interaction of men and women. The variations in this aspect of ritual performance occurred with variations between different communities, which was well visible in the differences of ritual performance in the Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze, which was visited by the members of the Brno ISKCON community on one occasion. Their presence, according to my observations and quotes from a member, had direct impact on alteration of the physical separation of genders. This observation shows in detail how ritual performance in ISKCON in the Czech Republic is negotiated. Physical separation and positions of genders within spaces further imply that social hierarchy of genders is established and performed. Also, women coming second physically and sometimes temporally can be interpreted as a symbolical expression of this hierarchy. Vedic

Culture served to legitimize the practice of physical separation of genders and establishing hierarchy of seniority among women, and to also establish a position in opposition to the “majority” of society. Usage of the “Vedic Culture” as a legitimization tool is consistent with Klepal’s data (2005).

In the subchapter on Gendered ritual roles, I showed that during my research men always took over the positions of Preachers and Lead singers in the Czech Speaking communities, while in the Russian-speaking nama-hatta the position of the Preacher was always performed by a woman, and the role of the lead singer during Kirtan was shared between men and women. Predominantly women were pujaris in both Nitái Navadvípačandra mandir and Centrum Hare Krišna v Praze . During the nama-hattas no pujas or aratis were conducted, so observing this ritual performance in this community was circumstantially impossible. As in the Czech-speaking communities men always took the positions of preachers and singers, while the pujari was a ritual role predominantly given to women, I am inclined to agree with Schlichtsova’s (2013) interpretation that in the ISKCON community in the Czech Republic being a preacher is considered the most prestigious role. Additionally, as my data showed, the hierarchy of ritual roles is gendered. With regard to maintaining ritual purity through exclusion of women from certain roles in ritual performance due to them menstruating: Klepal (2005) couldn’t have presented data on that aspect due to his positionality as a man. These data provide further nuance and dynamic picture of gender construction and practice. For future research, it would be beneficial to use the methods of semi-structured interview to further the understanding of the emic perspective of the members of ISKCON of the Czech Republic, and to conduct further ethnographical research in the Brno temple and other IKSCON communities in other cities of the Czech Republic.



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