

## **Supervisor's review of the Bachelor's Thesis**

**Candidate:** Sofiya Khovanskaia – Vasenkina

**Title of the thesis:** Ethnography of ISKCON ritual performances in Prague with special attention to gender practices

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

My review of Sofiya Vasenkina's thesis (which has been already thoroughly presented at this point of the defense) is based on my understanding of the role and limits of ethnography in a BA thesis written for an international study programme Liberal Arts and Humanities, i.e. not for a study programme solely focused on social and cultural anthropology.

In the fall of 2021, after attending my course Anthropology of Ritual, Sofiya Vasenkina decided to conduct research on an ISKCON community and its rituals, as the course made her reflect on her experience of being raised in the Moscow branch of this Neo-Hindu movement. As the main research method, she chose ethnography (for which we provide one course of a length of one semester, and which she attended as well). Due to the autumn wave of the COVID-19 pandemics as well as the location of her study programme in the Czech Republic, she had a limited choice in choosing the location of her fieldwork. Although Sofiya is a foreign national with a basic knowledge of Czech, the Prague ISKCON community was a feasible choice for her. As an insider, she already had a practical knowledge of the ISKCON's version of the Vaiṣṇava religious practices and its main ritual texts in Sanskrit, as well as extensive contacts in this transnational movement where English is used widely.

As I have been shortly involved in researching this community eleven years ago (Jurková and Seidlová 2011), I suggested the regular harināma procession to start with. Already during her first participant observation in October, Sofiya immediately made rapport with Russian-speaking female members of the community, who became her gatekeepers. She followed these women to different ISKCON events and decided to give special attention to gender practices during the observed rituals and communal gatherings. In the course of the next seven months, she conducted ten participant observations (including informal interviews) of ISKCON religious events, specifically of three regular harināma processions in the Prague city center, three morning services, three nāmahatta congregational gatherings with singing holy names and one irregular dāmodarāṣṭakam chanting done only during one month of the Vaiṣṇava calendar. These events have been organized by two Prague ISKCON centers and one informal Russian-speaking group as interconnected. Nevertheless, in her fieldwork, Sofiya discovered, that although the centers and events were connected, with members freely moving among them, it was possible to observe three (sub)communities with subtle differences in gender practices. Her extensive field notes, which yielded enough data for an undergraduate thesis, became the basis of her work.

Her thesis is structured typically: the introduction (6-8), where she situates herself as a researcher for the first time, is followed by the chapter on the theoretical and methodological frameworks (9-24). The theory is slightly underdeveloped, and the concepts of ritual and gender should have been linked

together. On the other hand, it should be appreciated that Sofiya attempted to understand and present the Czech academic writings on the ISCKON movement in the Czech Republic. Further, she formulates her research problem: “How is ritual performance negotiated within selected ISCKON communities of the Czech Republic? How do gender practices differ between communities as part of this negotiation?” (18). It should be mentioned that the heterogeneity of the Prague ISCKON community was rather one of the work's findings than its original standpoint. The methodology is described sufficiently, including ethical concerns and further consideration of the positionality of the researcher – mainly as a woman with limited access to the perspective of male members of this religious group with gender norms inspired by Hindu norms – thus presenting limits of her research. On the other hand, in the context of Czech ISCKON research, led dominantly by Czech men with limited access to perspectives of ISCKON female members, her research position was also an advantage, enhanced by her access to the Russian-speaking ISCKON's minority.

The core of the thesis, the empirical part, is divided thoughtfully into five subchapters according to the main topics present in her data (25-52). Mainly, we read about the emic terms of gender, gendered visual appearance, physical separation of genders in the ritual space, and gendered ritual roles. The data are presented mainly in the form of numerous detailed ethnographic vignettes containing quotes from the informal interviews, interspersed with the author's attempts at interpretation. Overall, the empirical part is descriptive, extensive, and engaging, further summarized in the conclusion (53-55). In sum, Sofiya Vasenkina's work yielded new, interesting data and insights.

Concerning the formal requirements, the reviewed work is acceptable, with some very minor issues, e.g. there are some minor inconsistencies in the transliteration of Sanskrit terms (I would have preferred the IAST transliteration scheme), and some inconsistencies in the bibliographical norm.

#### **The final assessment of the bachelor's thesis**

After reviewing Sofiya Vasenkina's bachelor's thesis, I recommend it for defense and suggest evaluating it either as Excellent or Very good, depending on the result of the defense.

In Hradec Králové, September 11, 2022.

Mgr. Veronika Seidlová, Ph.D.