

---

*Branding Bhakti: Krishna Consciousness and the Makeover of a Movement.* Nicole Karapanagiotis. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021. Pp. 288.

Reviewed by Katie Khatereh Taher, *McGill University.*

---

In *Branding Bhakti: Krishna Consciousness and the Makeover of a Movement*, Nicole Karapanagiotis examines the International Society of Krishna Consciousness' (ISKCON) rebranding efforts, which aim to increase the presence of Westerners within the movement. Using qualitative methods – such as participant observation, multi-sited ethnography, interviews, and ethnographic research – Karapanagiotis offers an updated account of ISKCON, focusing on the period between 2014 and 2018. The author highlights the need for literature to consider newly branded ISKCON spaces, beyond the “traditional” ISKCON temples, and attempts to fill this gap by offering glimpses into ISKCON-affiliated centres and programs. Karapanagiotis' multi-sited ethnography covers Philadelphia's Mantra Lounge, New York's Bhakti Centre, and the Govardhan EcoVillage outside of Mumbai. Karapanagiotis shows that the high population of South Asian diasporic community members within ISKCON has led to “rebranding” efforts by non-South Asian members, who want to attract more Western participants. Supposedly, this plan aims to follow the mission of the Indian founder of ISKCON, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada. As the most recent major academic study on ISKCON, this book offers a thorough understanding of the organization while raising important questions regarding how transnational movements maintain their success and livelihood through various tactics, including competition, promotion, and – most importantly – rebranding.

ISKCON, colloquially referred to as the Hare Krishna movement, is perhaps best known for their adherents wearing orange

robes, having shaven heads, and for their chanting on the streets. Karapanagiotis gives a thorough analysis of ISKCON's history, describing the movement's beginnings in the 1960s in New York and detailing the "flux of lawsuits and legislation charges with accusations of brainwashing, child abuse, public nuisance, and even murder" (13). In her cohesive overview of the movement's beginnings, Karapanagiotis highlights the Indian founder Prabhupada's entry into the United States, his distinctive religious philosophy based in the Acintyabhedābeda school of Vedānta, and his ultimate agenda of spreading Krishna Consciousness to the West. Interestingly, Karapanagiotis avoids discussing devotees associated with the movement's beginnings and key public figures that contributed to its growth, such as George Harrison and Allen Ginsberg. Instead, she focuses on the succession of leadership following Prabhupada's death, unpacking the long list of lawsuits against ISKCON, as well as the role that "Indian Hindu community members" (41) have played in supporting ISKCON in the public arena both financially and in the form of public petitioning. This support is said to have shifted the public understanding of ISKCON from a cult to a credible religious movement supported by the Hindu diasporic community.

One wonders how Karapanagiotis decided on her ethnic terminology when referring to the South Asian diaspora involved in ISKCON – is it perhaps a reflection of previous scholarship's tendency to use terms such as "Indianness" (Vandeberg and Kniss 2008, 92) and "Hinduization" (Rochford 2007), or is it a conscious effort to emphasize the presence of attendees specifically from India rather than other areas of South Asia with prominent Hindu communities, such as Nepal or Sri Lanka? Karapanagiotis does not offer a clear justification for the terms used, nor does she explicitly discuss what is meant by a "Western audience," making the reader

question where, for example, people of colour from the “West,” or even third or fourth generation South Asian immigrants fit into her discussion.

Disregarding such distinctions, Karapanagiotis emphasizes and re-emphasizes Prabhupada’s focus on “reaching the Western audience” (Karapanagiotis 2021, 83), which is mirrored in ISKCON’s marketing techniques implemented by what she refers to as the “Krishna Branders” of the movement. Karapanagiotis shows how non-traditional temple spaces associated with ISKCON – such as Devamrita Swami’s Mantra Lounge, which aims to attract modern-day hipster city-dwellers, or Radhanath Swami’s destination retreats, aimed at certain socio-economic subgroups – ultimately work concurrently as ISKCON-run bridge centres attempting to expand the presence of Western devotees. Thus, two images are portrayed: the traditional temples that act as sites of Sunday worship, attracting a high number of South Asian attendees, and other locations such as lounges, resort spots, and even yoga studios, which aim to draw in so-called Western devotees. Karapanagiotis further introduces Krishna West, a sub-movement started by ISKCON guru Hridayananda Das Goswami with the aim of creating a “western” Hare Krishna movement, one which encourages jeans instead of sarees, pizza instead of *kicharī*, and guitars instead of harmoniums. Finally, Karapanagiotis raises important questions regarding ISKCON’s future. In particular, she considers how the Governing Body Commission of ISKCON will garner support for the Krishna Branders’ programs, and whether a single institution can continue to support the multiple forms of ISKCON.

This book, which highlights the heterogeneous diversity of ISKCON, marks a notable contribution to scholarly literature investigating the movement’s development. Karapanagiotis adds her voice to scholarship dealing with the marketing strategies associated

with religious movements, while also presenting the importance of “reenvisioning, reconceiving, and redesigning the spaces in which the movement is promoted” (231). Karapanagiotis’ multi-sited ethnography provides a thorough account of ISKCON’s current landscape, while her detailed descriptions make for a memorable ethnography. Yet, her account also omits key components of good ethnography – it lacks self-reflexivity, as well as an account her own relationship to the movement. The latter omission raises questions about Karapanagiotis’ status as a devotee, her relationship with the people she interviews, and her ethnic positionality within ISKCON’s sub-movements and traditional temple spaces (and how that positionality might have affected her research). Consideration of the experience of South Asian devotees involved with ISKCON is also missing; a gap that future scholarship can hopefully address, though Karapanagiotis does stress the need for scholars to represent ISKCON beyond the temple. The lack of explicit definition and theorization regarding key terms used throughout the book, such as “Western” and “Indian,” also raises questions regarding the complex identities and histories of those involved. Nevertheless, Karapanagiotis does demonstrate how multi-sited ethnography can offer a holistic account of the movement, and also adds to the scholarly literature concerning ISKCON, which has been generally dormant over the last decade. Overall, *Branding Bhakti: Krishna Consciousness and the Makeover of a Movement* is an important book for scholars of South Asian religions, especially for those interested in transnational religious movements, for cultural anthropologists curious about digital ethnography, and even for ISKCON devotees as they configure the future of their movement.