# India

**Nicole Karapanagiotis, *Branding Bhakti: Krishna Consciousness and the Makeover of a Movement***

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021. Xii+270 pages, 56 illustrations. Hardcover, $85.00; paperback, $32.00; eBook, $31.99. ISBN 9780253054883 (hardcover), 9780253054890 (paperback), 9780253054920 (eBook).

In this accessibly and engagingly written monograph, Nicole Karapanagiotis makes several excellent contributions to the study of Hindu and Hindu-inspired movements in the United States and the study of religion more generally. In terms of the study of Hindu movements in America, this work addresses a very central, timely, and controversial issue: namely, the relationship between those practitioners who were born to a Hindu tradition and who are primarily of Indian or other South Asian descent and those practitioners who have come to the tradition from outside and who are non-Indian. In discussing these two sub-groups within Hindu and Hindu-inspired movements in America, it quickly becomes evident that there is a great deal of awkwardness, as well as capacity for causing offense, in describing these groups simply as "Indian" and "non-Indian," or "Indian" and "Western." Given that a growing number of these movements are multigenerational (including the subject of this study, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, or ISKCON), there are, today, non-Indian practitioners who were born into and grew up with their tradition, no less so than those practitioners who may have immigrated from India. For the same reason, practitioners are also present in these movements who were born and who grew up in America and who may never have been to India but whose parents or grandparents were Indian immigrants. Are these practitioners "Indians" or "Westerners"? Are they not, in some sense, both? Amanda Lucia (2014), in her work on the devotees of Mata Amritanandamayi—popularly known as Amma—has helpfully coined the terms "adopters" and "inheritors" to refer to the respective groups we are discussing. These terms help to identify these two quite distinct sub-groups while at the same time avoiding the awkward and often inaccurate—and perhaps even inadvertently racist, or at least racially insensitive—designations of "Indian" and "Western" devotees.

In *Branding Bhakti*, Nicole Karapanagiotis delves into this issue as it is being worked out in real-time in the contemporary ISKCON community in America, in all its messiness and its very real potential offensiveness. Specifically, Karapanagiotis's book is focused on a conscious trend among certain ISKCON practitioners to make their movement more ethnically diverse. She traces the history of ISKCON, a Vaishnava organization established by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in the 1960s, from its founding to the present. In the early years of ISKCON, most members were not of Indian descent. Indeed, Swami Prabhupada saw his mission as being primarily to bring Krishna consciousness to Westerners. However, as Indian immigration to the United States grew, so did the number of ISKCON members who were devotees of Indian descent: Hindus who had grown up with Vaishnava devotion and who found a home in ISKCON that enabled them to adapt to living in a foreign land. As Karapanagiotis narrates, these Indian devotees did a great deal to help the organization survive when it fell on hard times after the passing of its founder. They also helped to normalize ISKCON and enabled it to be seen as a more

mainstream part of American religious life, in contrast with earlier perceptions of it as a "cult" involved in the "brainwashing" of its American adherents.

The sense that ISKCON needs to be more diverse (i.e., less Indian) is of course one that can easily come across as racist (and that, in some cases, may be precisely true as Karapanagiotis shows). At the same time, as the author also shows, this sense is also rooted deeply in the way that Swami Prabhupada conceived of his mission: as an outreach beyond India to the Western world.

In terms of the study of religion more broadly, this book's contribution, as its title indicates, is an illuminating study of the ways in which religious communities "brand" and "market" their ideas and practices. This way of speaking, in terms of religions having a "business model," may sound crass to many. At the same time, however, it has always been the case that religious leaders have sought to present their traditions in ways that are appealing to others, either to win adherents or to be accepted in the wider society in which they exist (or, in the case of ISKCON, both). Karapanagiotis thus documents the ways in which ISKCON has gone from an organization that is associated with people dressed as medieval Bengali Vaishnava devotees, with shaved heads and orange robes, loudly chanting "Hare Krishna, Hare Rama" on street corners and airports and trying to sell books, to an organization that teaches meditation and mindfulness in order to help people to cope with the stresses of contemporary life, with its adherents dressed in conventional Western business attire. The core theology of *bhakti*, of ecstatic devotion to Lord Krishna, has not changed. What has changed is its outward appearance: the way in which it is *marketed* to a wider public.

Karapanagiotis covers these fascinating and important topics in a way that manages to be both empathetic and critical. Her book is a model of anthropological engagement. She describes her methodology of participant observation clearly and consistently, bringing in her first-person experiences as appropriate. She writes with sensitivity while simultaneously utilizing her critical theoretical tools to maximum effect. There is very little, if anything, to criticize about this book. It is worth noting that Karapanagiotis's own positionality with regard to the material does not intrude into her account. While this is admirable given that she does speak of her active participation in the ISKCON communities that form the topic of her book, it would have been interesting to know how she conceives of this participation beyond its scholarly uses. Is she a Krishna devotee? What are her views on the controversies that she recounts so clearly and so well? Or would knowing the answers to these questions perhaps create an appearance of bias (or a suspicion thereof in the mind of the reader)?

All in all, this is an excellent book that will be useful to the research scholar, student, interested lay reader, and even, one suspects, to the ISKCON community itself. It is, in many ways, a model work for anthropologists of religion who are engaged in participant observation.

## References

Lucia, Amanda J. 2014. *Reflections of Amma: Devotees in a Global Embrace*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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