

Bhakti Belonging: An Ethnography of a South Asian Diasporic Community

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the influence of devotional (*bhakti*) yoga on notions of belonging for a South Asian diaspora in Montreal. Since 1967, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) has been a leading force in spreading the path of devotion to Krishna around the world. While ISKCON initially attracted North American youth interested in Asian philosophies, in recent decades, South Asian diaspora communities have been sustaining the movement. However, existing scholarship has not paid adequate attention to the experience of the South Asian diaspora within ISKCON. Thus, this study explores how ISKCON influences the perception of belonging among members of the South Asian diaspora who visit the ISKCON Montreal temple. It offers a historical overview of this transnational religious movement and examines the lived experience of first- and second-generation South Asian immigrants within ISKCON. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, it outlines three key contributing factors which cultivate feelings of belonging, namely blessed food (*prasāda*), home programs, and sacred viewing of deities (*darśan*). Through close analysis of everyday interactions, it argues that feelings of home are a great contributor to understandings of belonging, connected to a “homing desire” to cultivate a sense of home in Montreal and a relationship with the divine. Examining the concept of belonging within foundational ISKCON texts, this thesis argues that belonging serves as the cornerstone of the movement, as devotees are encouraged to anchor their sense of belonging to the divine. This thesis contributes to scholarship that considers global and local dynamics of ISKCON, while also formulating recommendations for future ethnographic research on diasporic experience of religious practice in Canada.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette thèse explore l'impact du yoga dévotionnel (*bhakti*) sur les perceptions de la notion d'appartenance d'une diaspora Sud-Asiatique à Montréal. Depuis 1967, la Société Internationale de la Conscience de Krishna (ISKCON) a joué un rôle moteur dans la diffusion du chemin de la dévotion à Krishna et ce à travers le monde. Alors qu'ISKCON attirait initialement les jeunes Nord-Américains intéressés par les philosophies asiatiques, ce sont les communautés de la diaspora Sud-Asiatique qui ont porté le mouvement ces dernières décennies. Cependant, les recherches existantes n'ont pas accordé une attention adéquate à l'expérience de ces communautés au sein d'ISKCON. Ainsi, cette étude explore comment ISKCON influence la perception d'appartenance parmi les membres de la diaspora Sud-Asiatique qui visitent le temple ISKCON à Montréal. Elle offre une présentation historique de ce mouvement religieux transnational et examine l'expérience vécue des immigrants Sud-Asiatiques de première et deuxième génération au sein d'ISKCON. Basée sur un travail ethnographique, elle décrit trois facteurs clés contribuant à cultiver le sentiment d'appartenance, à savoir la nourriture bénie (*prasāda*), les programmes à domicile et la vision sacrée des divinités (*darśan*). À travers une analyse approfondie des interactions quotidiennes, elle soutient que le sentiment de se sentir chez-soi est un grand contributeur à la compréhension de l'appartenance, liés à un désir de cultiver un sentiment de foyer à Montréal ainsi que pour le divin. En examinant le concept d'appartenance au sein des textes fondamentaux d'ISKCON, cette thèse soutient que l'appartenance est la pierre angulaire du mouvement, les fidèles étant encouragés à ancrer leur sentiment d'appartenance au divin. Cette thèse contribue aux recherches qui examinent les dynamiques mondiales et locales d'ISKCON, tout en formulant des recommandations pour de futures recherches ethnographiques sur l'expérience diasporique de la pratique religieuse au Canada.

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for devotees of all kinds and mamman-babba

“O Divine Mother, may everything I do be taken as Thy worship”

Introductions: Beginning with Bhakti

Radhashtami Festivities at Sri Sri Radha Manohara ISKCON Temple, Montreal, September 5, 2022.

On a September evening devotees gathered at the Sri Sri Radha Manohara temple in Montreal for Radhashtami, the celebration of Radharani's appearance day. Radhashtami, which occurs on the eighth day of the lunar month of Bhadrapada, pays attribute to Radharani, also known as Radha, who is a consort of the Hindu god Krishna and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness's (ISKCON) most eminent goddess. For ISKCON, Radha is the direct counterpart of Krishna and is the quintessential devotee, embodying unwavering devotion. On this night, ISKCON members gathered to demonstrate their own devotion and admirations for Radharani.

The temple prayer hall was filled with devotees chanting the *mahāmantra*¹ - *hare krishna hare krishna krishna krishna hare hare, hare rāma hare rāma rāma rāma hare hare*. Some stood in stillness as they repeated the sacred words while others followed the traditional dancing steps associated with the mantra, with their palms held up towards the deities who were all dressed up on the altar. The alter itself was dressed up too, with flowers framing the multiple deities which include Gaura and Nitai, Krishna and Radharani, as well as Jaganath, Baladeva, and Subhadra. The hundred attendees of the temple too, were dressed up for the occasion – many women and girls wearing colourful *sarees*,² men and boys in *dhotīs*³ and linen shirts. Energies were high as the chanting sped up and the space filled with the laughter and liveliness of devotees.

¹ The *mahāmantra* is ISKCON's key mantra. The uttering and recognition of the words are regarded as a vehicle for transcendence.

² A *saree* is a traditional garment draped around the body, often of cotton or silk with colourful patterns and jewels.

³ A *dhotī* is a garment worn on the lower portion of the body, most often by Hindu males.

Later, a calmer mood beamed through the space as participants sat on the temple floor, watching as two *pujarīs*⁴ poured divine liquid on idols of Krishna and Radha (Figure 1). On this evening, the male *pujarīs* offered a mixture of milk, ghee, honey, and sugar to the deities. A sense of stillness filled the room. My eyes scanned the hall, seeing smiles on faces, the closed eyes of some who focused on the uttering of the mantra, the focused gaze of the *pujarīs* who stood by the alter, the overflowing liquid that bathed the deities, and most tenderly, the gentle sight of my interlocutor and later, dear friend, Nandini, who kneeled at the front corner of the room, dressed in a beautiful green saree, slowly wiping tears away from her cheeks.



Figure 1. Pujarīs offering bath to deities. ISKCON Montreal website, <https://en.iskconmontral.ca/les-deities?lightbox=dataItem-kaa3cnih>

⁴ *Pujarī* is a designation given to temple priests at ISKCON who directly serve the deities. They are often responsible for dressing, bathing, and feeding the deities.

Research Questions and Scope

Bhakti-yoga, the path of devotion, stands as a fundamental pillar within the spiritual landscape of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). The narrative shared above, offering a glimpse into the 2022 Radhashtami celebration within ISKCON Montreal, acts as an introduction to the world of bhakti and ISKCON. It serves to emphasize the importance of worship, community, ritual, and the emotional waves present during moments of religious intimacy. These elements are indeed central to developing a foundational understanding of bhakti-yoga and its place within ISKCON.

When it comes to bhakti (devotion), which has been described as the “heart religion,”⁵ emotions are ever present. As John Stratton Hawley, one of the foremost scholars of the bhakti tradition, describes it, bhakti is:

“sometimes cool and quiescent but sometimes hot – the religion of participation, community, enthusiasm, song, and often of personal challenge.... [Bhakti] implies direct divine encounter, experienced in the lives of individual people.”⁶

These facets, particularly aspects of community, enthusiasm, and song, were prominently featured during the Radhashtami celebrations as devotees celebrated the goddess. However, what sets this account apart is not the presence of tears or the mere occurrence of such an event in Montreal. What truly distinguishes it is the diverse set of identities who gathered within the ever growing, and changing, Society of Krishna Consciousness.

Responding to Hawley’s assertion that bhakti concerns the lived experience of individual practitioners, this thesis examines the significance of bhakti as situated within the lived experience of devotees at one of the world’s most globally recognized organizations promoting

⁵ John Stratton Hawley, *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 2.

⁶ Hawley 2015, 2.

the path of bhakti: the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). As the name suggests, ISKCON specifically encourages *Krishna Consciousness*, or becoming aware of and connected to Lord Krishna in his various forms and incarnations. ISKCON traces its roots to the Acintyabhedābheda school of Gauḍīya Vaishnavism, stemming from sixteenth-century Bengali mystic Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486-1534). However, the current tradition has been shaped primarily by the life and teachings of A.C Bhaktivedanta Swami Srila Prabhupada (1896-1977). With a presence in Montreal since 1967 – during a time of political and social unrest – ISKCON initially attracted a high number of North American youth interested in Asian philosophies. In more recent decades, however, the South Asian diaspora has been sustaining the movement, particularly in North America.⁷ This has resulted in a series of changes within the movement and an emerging dynamic within ISKCON temples outside of India: in many cases, non-South Asian devotees who have converted to ISKCON preach to and lecture about this Hindu, Vaishnava tradition to South Asian immigrants.⁸

Transnational religious movements can alter the ways in which people connect with place and time, fostering profound changes in practitioners' sense of belonging.⁹ Despite the centrality of bhakti within ISKCON, however, scholarship has not focused on the relationship between devotional practices and a sense of belonging amongst South Asian diasporic groups who enter into the world of ISKCON. Instead, emphasis has generally been placed on the integration techniques employed by already-established temple devotees (Zaidman 2000), the significant

⁷ Burke E. Rochford, *Hare Krishna Transformed* (The New and Alternative Religious Series, New York: New York University Press, 2007).

⁸ Nurit Zaidman, "When Deities are Asleep: Processes of Change in an American Hare Krishna Temple," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 12, no. 3 (1997): 335.

⁹ Asha Persson, "Intimate Immensity: Phenomenology of Place and Space in an Australian Yoga Community," *American Ethnologist* 34, no.1 (2007): 48.

financial contributions made by South Asian immigrants (Vande Berg and Kniss 2008), and the series of rebranding movements initiated by ISKCON to encourage non-South Asian devotees to join the movement (Karapanagiotis 2021). This thesis responds to this gap by homing in on the personal experiences of first- and second-generation South Asian immigrants at ISKCON's Montreal temple. While this research includes reflections on other ISKCON sites including the New York Bhakti Centre and ISKCON New York temple, the analysis specifically focuses on the case of ISKCON Montreal, where the political landscape of the province raises new challenges for South Asian immigrants. Based on these reflections, the central questions this thesis investigates are: How are belonging and bhakti interlinked? In what ways do devotional practices influence South Asian diasporic understandings of belonging in Montreal?

While a comprehensive study of ISKCON Montreal and its influence on the South Asian diaspora is beyond the scope of this M.A. thesis, I offer insights into this understudied population within ISKCON through long-term ethnographic research. To approach such an analysis, I begin with this introductory chapter, followed by three core chapters and a brief conclusion. The current chapter offers an overview of the project and identifies and discusses key terminology such as 'diaspora' and 'bhakti.' It offers a review of literature regarding ISKCON as a movement, highlighting the lack of consideration and inquiry into the lived experience of South Asian devotees at ISKCON. By outlining the project's key methods of participant observation and semi-formal interviews, this chapter emphasizes the value of a narrative approach to ethnography and offers brief reflections on my positionality as a researcher.

Defining 'Diaspora'

While the central focus of this project is on the lived experience of devotees at ISKCON, it also engages with two main areas of scholarship related to the study of South Asian religions: bhakti

and diaspora. Following Krishnamurti and Lee's (2021) work on religion and diaspora as a guide, this thesis explores the stories of South Asian individuals within ISKCON Montreal. Here, I understand "diaspora" to mean "a community that is 'scattered' across one or more geographical locations [...] which, despite distance, maintains connections across borders and across time."¹⁰

It is important to note that the phrase "South Asian diaspora" is intentionally used to signify the diverse identities that enter into the world of ISKCON who are of South Asian heritage. This is employed with the awareness that many such attendees have lived their lives or have their cultural roots in a variety of areas within South Asia (e.g., Bangladesh) and may not have had a Hindu upbringing. Therefore, instead of following the footsteps of previous scholarship on ISKCON which has used designations such as "Indian" and "Hindu" (Karapanagiotis 2021; Rochford 2007; Vande Berg and Kniss 2008; Zaidman 1997) to describe this demographic, I opt for the phrase "South Asian diaspora" to account for the diverse backgrounds of these individuals. However, in some cases where devotees have migrated from places like Fiji, Guyana, or Mauritius, this terminology becomes even more convoluted. Indeed, there is great "complexity [in] framing configurations of 'South Asian' and 'Hindu' diaspora."¹¹ Nevertheless, qualitative studies have demonstrated the significance of the term "South Asian," which acts as a basis of expansive cultural coalition amongst Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Buddhist of South Asian ancestry (Krishnamurti 2021; Raychaudhuri 2018). This signifier has

¹⁰ Sailaja Krishnamurti and Becky R. Lee, *Relation and Resistance: Racialized Women, Religion, and Diaspora*, ed. Krishnamurti and Lee (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021), 6.

¹¹ Krishnamurti and Lee, 28.

further been used to establish a non-religious identity that actively avoids being constituted as religiously conservative.¹²

Moreover, Steven Vertovec's (1997) three distinct classifications of "diaspora" in relation to the practice of South Asian religions outside of South Asia is a fruitful framework for this analysis. These are (1) "diaspora as social form"¹³ structured through social relationships, political orientations and economic strategies; (2) "diaspora as a type of consciousness"¹⁴ concerning the variety of experience, awareness, and sense of identity; and (3) "diaspora as a mode of cultural production"¹⁵ regarding the production of hybrid cultural phenomena and restructured forms of socialization. Through these framings of "diaspora," I analyze ISKCON as a transnational religious movement that constitutes a diaspora in-and-of itself – scattered across geographical locations, though not absent from its initial place of origin in West Bengal (where ISKCON's headquarters is located), while welcoming members of the South Asian diaspora abroad. Nevertheless, few scholarly studies on ISKCON have examined how a movement jumpstarted by counter-culturists is now being sustained by, and is sustaining, migrants from the same region in which the movement has its cultural roots.

Moreover, it is important to highlight the terminology that has been used to categorize the South Asian diasporic identities within ISKCON. Most often, the term "Indian," "Indian-bodied," or "brown-bodied" were used to refer to such groups, particularly by core-temple¹⁶ devotees who are instrumental to the temple's daily functioning. Amongst research participants

¹² Krishnamurti and Lee, 29.

¹³ Steven Vertovec, "Three Meanings of 'Diaspora,' Exemplified among South Asian Religions," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 6, no.3 (1997): 278.

¹⁴ Vertovec, 281.

¹⁵ Vertovec, 289.

¹⁶ Throughout this thesis, I use the term "core" to signify those who play a pivotal role in the temple's operation, contributing significantly through their temple service and regular attendance at the temple.

who are of South Asian descent, “Indian” was the most common phrase used, even in circumstances when the individual’s family had immigrated from somewhere other than India. The phrase “brown-bodied” always stood out to me, particularly as I began to hear “white-bodied,” “black-bodied,” “female-bodied,” and “male-bodied” embedded in the everyday language of temple-core devotees. Travis Vande Berg (2005) similarly highlights the use of “-bodied” and its role in helping ISKCON devotees self-identify and to talk about those around them. This language is intimately tied to ISKCON’s anti-materialist philosophy which contends that humans are “not these bodies” but rather “spirit souls.” This concept is one that will be further analyzed in Chapter Three, as we explore the relationship between bhakti and belonging within the context of ISKCON’s philosophy and the importance of being “part and parcel” of Krishna. Here, however, I would like to underscore the significance of the identifying markers “brown-bodied” and “white-bodied” which will be used, albeit sparingly, throughout this thesis. These terms offer a sense of straightforwardness in situating individuals and research participants, while also paying homage to the everyday language used amongst core-temple ISKCON devotees.

Literature Review: Studying ISKCON

Early scholarly studies on ISKCON predominantly focused on the birth and growth of the movement in relation to the counterculture movement happening in the 1960s and 1970s (Burr 1984; Rochford 1985; Shinn 1987). These projects had the difficult task of gathering information on ISKCON at a time when very few scholarly studies and historical data on the organization existed. Following the death of the founder of ISKCON, A.C Bhaktivedanta Swami Srila Prabhupada (1896-1977), a wave of new research began to examine the difficulties and challenges faced by the movement and its followers. These studies often discussed the impact of

scandals and the general legitimacy of the movement, the anti-cult activities that were targeted towards ISKCON, and the recruitment strategies employed by ISKCON to ensure the movement's continuation (Bromely 1989; Fahy 2020; Knott 2000; Rochford 1985; Shinn 1987).

Some scholarship on ISKCON has considered the connection between the movement and South Asian community members. For example, in the chapter titled "East Meets West: ISKCON and the Asian Community in Britain," Angela Burr (1984) offers an overview of the complex relationship between these two communities, while emphasizing the significance of financial contributions to the movement made by the Asian community. Similarly, E. Burke Rochford (2007, 2018) discusses the significance of South Asian participation in ISKCON worldwide, explaining that their participation shifted the public understanding of ISKCON from a cult to a credible religious movement supported by the Hindu diasporic community, further framing this as the "Hinduization of ISKCON."¹⁷ Perhaps most importantly, in an ethnographic examination of the Philadelphia ISKCON temple, Nurjit Zaidman (1997, 2000) examines the consequences of new policies adopted by ISKCON toward South Asian congregations in the United States. This includes the development of rhetoric that justifies "deviation from ISKCON theology or philosophy,"¹⁸ further accommodating the needs and desire of the diaspora to worship Gods other than Krishna, and ISKCON Philadelphia's first celebration of Lord Rama Appearance Day, or Ram Navami, in April 1992.

Moreover, in a case study of the ISKCON temple in Chicago, Travis Vande Berg and Fred Kniss (2008) examine the process of conversion of "Indians"¹⁹ into ISKCON, identifying

¹⁷ Rochford 2007.

¹⁸ Zaidman 1997, 341.

¹⁹ Travis Vande Berg and Fred Kniss, "Iskcon and Immigrants: The Rise, Decline and Rise Again of a New Religious Movement," *The Sociological Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2008): 92.

South Asian devotees to be “both the target and the vehicle for the re-emergence of ISKCON as a movement.”²⁰ Considering the positioning of ISKCON in India, John Fahy’s (2020) examines the positioning of ISKCON in Mayapur, and recounts a shift in understandings of what it means to be a devotee within ISKCON.

The most recent major study of ISKCON, Nicole Karapanagiotis’ (2021) *Branding Bhakti: Krishna Consciousness and the Makeover of a Movement*, examines ISKCON’s “rebranding” efforts which cater to “westerners’ religio-cultural tastes and preferences.”²¹ Karapanagiotis argues that the high diasporic population within ISKCON is the driving force of these efforts which have led to ISKCON-affiliated centres, or ‘bridge-centres’ such as Philadelphia’s Mantra Lounge and New York’s Bhakti Centre. Noticeably, Karapanagiotis gives the title of ‘branding’ to these initiatives. Considering the diverse identities that enter into the word of ISKCON, I suggest a different set of terminology when referring to the adaptations occurring in how ISKCON presents itself to the world. Rather than framing it as a ‘branding’ process, it may be more apt to describe these efforts as a way of making the movement more *accessible*, and, ultimately, *palatable* to a diverse spectrum of individuals and identities, further ensuring that prospective devotees can readily find a sense of belonging into the bhakti tradition. This will be elaborated upon as we explore the idea of “multiple ISKCONs” coexisting in Montreal and beyond, and the vital role such spaces play in the growth and perpetuation of the movement and the nurturing of diverse individuals.

While almost all of the aforementioned scholarly studies have used ethnographic methods to examine ISKCON (Burr 1984; Fahy 2020; Karapanagiotis 2021; Rochford 2007; Vande Berg

²⁰ Vande Berg and Kniss, 91.

²¹ Nicole Karapanagiotis, *Branding Bhakti: Krishna Consciousness and the Makeover of a Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), 175.

and Kniss 2008; Zaidman 1997, 200), little attention has been paid to the influence of ISKCON on the *lived* experience of South Asian immigrants. Even Debora Baldelli (2018), who maps out the relationship between ISKCON Lisbon and Hindu communities to indicate how these groups appropriate public spaces and create a sense of belonging for migrants, neglects the complex relations and first-hand experience of the South Asian congregational members within ISKCON.

Just as it is important to examine the influence of the South Asian congregation on ISKCON, it is equally if not more important to examine the influence of ISKCON on the South Asian congregation globally. Indeed, this reoriented exploration of ISKCON toward the experience of first- and second-generation immigrants is vital to better understand the intersection of religion, migration, and transnational movements.

Methodology and Writing Culture

A qualitative approach supports the formulation of a cohesive understanding of any cultural practice, especially one located in a transnational movement. Therefore, the main approach of this project is ethnographic, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews. With great delight and at times some dismay, I have followed the hallmark praxis of social anthropology: participant observation. For 17 months between August 2022 and January 2024 I regularly visited the Sri Sri Radha Manohara temple (to be used interchangeably with “ISKCON Montreal temple”). During the first four months of my research I had not received ethics approval and thus my data set does not include private conversations or fieldnotes from these visits, but rather background information and sparse recollections from memory. The majority of my analysis comes from conversations, observations, and participation in various ISKCON events and activities between January 2023 and January 2024.

In addition to visiting the site for large events such as the Sunday Feast program and special events, I also regularly visited the temple to attend lectures and offer *sevā*.²² Sometimes, my *sevā* was in the company of others while, for example, making flower garlands with female devotees. Other times I was in solitude, mopping the temple floors, dusting the cabinets, and observing the daily happenings at the temple. In almost all occurrences, my role embodied the position of both a participant and an observer simultaneously. Only on very rare occasions was I only the observer, sitting at the very back of the temple hall or on the above floor, watching. This felt unnatural and I often felt like I was missing something important by being on the sidelines. Thus, this analysis engages *participation* as a central method of inquiry.

My frequent participation in temple events as well as my known status as “the graduate student with all the questions” quickly led to devotees inviting me to their homes for private celebrations and worship gatherings. I appreciated this gesture and, as a result, began feeling even more responsible to produce an honest and respectful analysis. This has felt especially important when considering the reception of ISKCON more broadly, particularly those concerning the lawsuits and allegations against various leading members of the movement on an international level.²³ Thus, this thesis uses methods that are simultaneously critical and sympathetic.

²² *Sevā* is self-less service.

²³ Throughout my research, I have deliberately avoided any discussions of the legislation charges held against ISKCON following the founder’s death. While the legal challenges and controversies faced by ISKCON are certainly a significant aspect of the organization’s history, they were not directly aligned with the core themes of my research. Avoiding such conversations proved to be very challenging, especially when speaking to the general public and non-devotees about my research. Nevertheless, I aimed to maintain the research’s thematic coherence and depth by emphasizing the aspects of ISKCON that directly related to the experiences and perceptions of research participants. For more insights into ISKCON’s legal issues and their implications, see Rochford 2007.

In addition to participant observation, my research involved semi-structured interviews with eleven ISKCON devotees and attendees. These formal interviews were with eight first- and second-generation immigrants, both men and women, as well as three non-South Asian heritage-identifying devotees, who are key members of the temple community. The interviews lasted between thirty and ninety minutes, and they were recorded and transcribed for analysis. In addition, my research involved informal conversations that were not audiotaped. I jotted fieldnotes during and immediately following these informal conversations.

Ethnographic writing has long incorporated literary qualities such as narrative and metaphor.²⁴ My thesis reflects this tendency in its composition by including fieldnotes to highlight how integral observations have been to the development of this research. In their anthology, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), James Clifford and George E. Marcus define ethnography as “writing culture” and make the obvious point that anthropologists *write*, further suggesting that ethnographies – the strange mixture of the travel account, memoir, and academic papers that anthropologists write – must be understood in terms of poetics *and* politics. Responding to this anthology, Lila Abu-Lughod (1996) writes that “‘culture’ operates in anthropological discourse to enforce separations that inevitably carry a sense of hierarchy.”²⁵ This often separates the researcher from the researched, creating a “self/other distinction.”²⁶ Abu-Lughod urges ethnographers to explore strategies for writing *against* culture, which concerns both the writing process and also the research procedures. These strategies include 1) organizing new practices that work against “the assumption of boundedness

²⁴James Clifford, “Introduction: Partial Truths,” In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 4.

²⁵ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture,” In *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard G. Fox (Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 1996): 138.

²⁶ Abu-Lughod 1996, 138.

[...] of the culture concept,”²⁷ 2) formulating research questions that focus on the “various connections and interconnections, historical and contemporary, between a community and the anthropologist”²⁸ as well as the world to which they belong, and 3) writing “ethnographies of the particular” which refuse to generalize, seek to subvert the process of “othering,” and focus on “telling stories about particular individuals in time and place.”²⁹ At its core, my thesis responds to Abu-Lughod’s call for “ethnographies of the particular,” while further making a shift in gaze to “include phenomena of connection”³⁰ between the South Asian diaspora, bhakti, and ISKCON. In this way, this thesis aligns with ethnographies that intertwine the researcher’s voice with that of localities and their critical insights in order to present theory and analysis in narrative registers (Srinivas 2018, Shah 2019, Uddin 2020). In doing so, I am not interested in what an “objective” analysis of this project would have to show. Instead, I understand my interpretation to be just that: an interpretation. Thus, in what follows I present “partial truths,”³¹ make “partial connections,”³² and write “positioned truths”³³ about myself, the field, and the relationship between bhakti and belonging.

On Reflexivity: Locating Myself

In order to properly respond to Abu-Lughod’s call for “connections” in ethnographic writing, I must first describe the worlds to which I belong. There are aspects of my identity which have undoubtedly influenced my decision to learn about the experience of the South Asian diaspora

²⁷ Abu-Lughod 1996, 148.

²⁸ Abu-Lughod 1996, 148.

²⁹ Abu-Lughod 1996, 153.

³⁰ Abu-Lughod 1996, 149.

³¹ Clifford, 7.

³² Marilyn Strathern, *Partial Connections* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004).

³³ Abu-Lughod 1996, 142.

within ISKCON. My experience immigrating from Iran to Canada at the young age of seven has certainly shaped my understanding of the diasporic experience and concepts such as exclusion, inclusion, and belonging. This aspect of my identity has provided me with valuable insights into the challenges and adaptations that come with cultural displacement, which I seek to illuminate through my research. Moreover, my exposures to ISKCON communities in India and Australia have played a pivotal role in shaping my research interests. These encounters have fuelled my interests about the inner workings of this international movement, its influence on participants, and its implications on understandings of place, belonging, and religiosity.

My initial encounters with ISKCON placed me in the position of a new student filled with a sense of wonder. After meeting Radhanath Swami (an ISKCON celebrity of sorts) in India and participating in my first ever *kirtan*³⁴, I felt the need to spend more time understanding the movement and its practices. This led me to stay at New Govardhan, a small ISKCON community in Australia, for a couple months in 2018. After that, my contact with ISKCON communities and members was minimal until the start of this field project in August of 2022. Yet my experiences with ISKCON Australia, along with my own personal connections to a different guru-based tradition, have provided me with certain cultural and religious learnings that have created more accessible pathways to enter the world of ISKCON Montreal. These pathways have made it so that I am able to connect with ISKCON devotees in a more intimate way – one that does not constitute an extensive sense of “othering” from my interlocutors, but rather allows us to bond, for instance, over stories of Krishna tricking the Gopīs³⁵ and chanting to Govinda.³⁶

³⁴ Kīrtan is congregational chanting, usually accompanied by music.

³⁵ Gopīs are female cowherds who are devotees of Krishna. Their past times are told in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

³⁶ Govinda is a name for Krishna.

In other words, though I am not an ISKCON devotee, my own personal interests have made it so that I am able to more easily participate in activities and engage with community members at ISKCON. This was especially apparent during one of my morning visits to the temple. As devotees were preparing for their daily two-hour communal chanting practice, one looked over at me, with a gaze that almost said, “What are we going to do with you?” I quickly pulled out my bag which held my 108-bead *mālā*³⁷ inside, pointing at it, assuring him that I will be occupied. A smile formed on his face as he nodded his head in acceptance.

Additionally, my Iranian identity and appearance has played an important role in helping me gain access into the field. On multiple occasions, ISKCON members, both of South Asian descent and not, have initially assumed that I have a South Asian background. Over the course of my fieldwork, it has not been uncommon for participants to greet or speak to me in a South Asian language, assuming that I would understand. While these interactions quickly led to the truth, namely that I am not of South Asian descent, they have served as great conversation starters and icebreakers. Thus, my “racial malleability”³⁸ has been fundamental in helping me enter into the world of ISKCON Montreal.

While some aspects of my identity have supported me in the field, there are other aspects of my identity that have limited my access to the ISKCON community. My female identity along with my limited comprehension in French and Hindi have been the most apparent points of limitation during my research. While English is the primary language spoken most widely amongst ISKCON communities worldwide, the case of the Montreal Sri Sri Radha Manohara temple is a bit different, as the bilingual status of the province of Quebec influences the inner

³⁷ *Mālā* is a string of often 108 beads used in prayer, similar to a rosary.

³⁸ Jennifer Roth-Gordon, “Racial Malleability and the Sensory Regime of Politically Conscious Brazilian Hip Hop,” *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 18, no.2 (2013): 296.

workings of the temple. Hindi is also widely spoken at the temple, and my status as only an intermediate Hindi speaker has certainly limited the types of interactions I am able to have with Hindi speakers at the temple.

Furthermore, my position as a woman has imposed certain limitations on my ability to access the world of male devotees at the temple. Early in my research, a female devotee explained that if I wanted to interview the male devotees, another female must be present. My gender identity also influenced how intimately I could interact with male devotees and attendees, particularly during festive events and communal meals. This, however, did not limit my interactions with administrative male staff, who were generally happy to have conversations with me.

Thesis Outline

Questions regarding the relationship between bhakti and belonging serve as the guiding thread that weaves this thesis together. This introductory chapter has provided an overview of research questions, themes, and methodologies. Subsequent chapters offer a window onto ISKCON, bhakti, and the lived experience of research participants. Chapter One traces the historical development of ISKCON and examines the philosophical dimensions of Krishna-bhakti, as situated within the movement. This chapter also examines the influence of South Asian participants and their religious conceptualizations of gods and goddesses, highlighting how the increasing participation of the South Asian diaspora in ISKCON has prompted the movement to adapt its traditions and incorporate celebrations of other Hindu deities within numerous temple spaces.

In Chapter Two the focus narrows to the specific context of ISKCON Montreal, describing the space of the temple and the unique political and cultural landscape of Quebec.

This chapter offers an overview of ISKCON Montreal by describing the daily schedule of the temple, emphasizing key concepts and practices that shape the lives of devotees, and introducing key research participants and community members. Chapter Three homes in on the central theme of belonging, both within the lives of the South Asian diaspora and through ISKCON's textual materials. Furthermore, this chapter emphasizes that ideas of "home" are central to feelings of belonging and outlines three significant factors which contribute to a sense of belonging among South Asian attendees at ISKCON. Simultaneously, it highlights aspects of ISKCON that pose challenges to individual identities and notions of belonging within the ISKCON community.

The Conclusion offers an overview of the research findings and the developed perspectives on ISKCON, bhakti, and belonging. This chapter presents the idea of "Many ISKCONs," echoing the titles of the edited volumes *Many Rāmāyaṇas* and *Many Mahābhāratas*, which assert that these traditions exist in multiplicity. Similarly, ISKCON exists in multiple forms: from the traditional setting of the temples located globally, to ISKCON-affiliated centres such as New York's Bhakti Centre, Montreal's Espace de Bhakti, and Quebec's Nandagram Ecovillage. Through studying the lived experience of the South Asian diaspora at ISKCON Montreal, I hope to contribute not just to the study of ISKCON as a transnational religious movement, but also to our understanding of the intimate and powerful correlation between bhakti and a sense of belonging.

Chapter 1:

A History of ISKCON and Krishna-Bhakti

To understand the inner workings of any movement it is important to consider where and how it first began. ISKCON traces its roots to the Acintyabhedābheda school of Gauḍīya Vaishnavism, stemming from the sixteenth-century Bengali mystic Caitanya Mahāprabhu (1486-1534). A unique aspect of the tradition is that Caitanya is understood to be an incarnation of Krishna; “Lord Caitanya is [viewed as] the master of all wealth [...] because he is Sri Krishna himself. [Within the tradition,] he is described as *pūrṇa*, or complete.”³⁹

However, ISKCON’s beginnings as an institution can be traced back to 1965 New York. Its founder, A.C Bhaktivedanta Swami Srila Prabhupada (1896-1977), stepped off a cargo carrier onto the New York Harbor, with the hope of spreading “Krishna Consciousness” to the West. Prabhupad (as he is most commonly known) was born in Kolkata, India and although an educated pharmacist with a family and children, he became a disciple of Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati (1847-1937) in 1922. From early on, Prabhupad was very much aligned with his guru’s dream of translating Caitanya’s teachings into English and spreading them outside of India, and he began doing just so. Eventually, Prabhupad received specific instructions from Bhaktisiddhanta to travel to the United States and introduce the practices he had learned. At the age of sixty-nine years old, Prabhupad acted on those instructions (Figure 2).

In 1965, Prabhupad frequently chanted the mahāmantra in Tompkins Square Park, New York, and attracted seekers who helped him establish a small temple at a storefront located on

³⁹ A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Śrī Caitanya-Caritāmṛta: Adī-līlā* (London: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1975), 94.

Second Avenue. Today, in Montreal, nearly seventy years after the start of the movement, ISKCON devotees still frequently chant the mahāmantra in public. Shortly after gaining a following, Prabhupad began hosting weekly lectures and chanting sessions at the temple. By 1966, ISKCON was legally registered as a non-profit organization, and within the next decade ISKCON established temples and centres “in thirty cities in the United States [...], six in Canada, eleven communities in western Europe, and twenty-nine in other parts of the world.”⁴⁰ The movement was eventually named as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, though members are colloquially referred to as “the Hare Krishnas.”



Figure 2. A figure of Prabhupad to which devotees pay obeisance. ISKCON Montreal temple. Photo taken by author, October 2022.

⁴⁰ Rochford 2007, 14.

The early growth of ISKCON in North America was undoubtedly “sustained by the 1960s political counterculture.”⁴¹ Yet, as the countercultural political activism waned by the mid-1970s, the movement’s leaders responded by “seeking a new constituent base, in hopes of bringing both people and financial resources into ISKCON’s temple communities.”⁴² From the beginning, the Hindu diaspora visited ISKCON temples and, according to Rochford (2018), “the western devotees generally ignored them [... because] Prabhupad did not want his movement identified with Hinduism.”⁴³ Still, immigrants continued to visit ISKCON temples and, eventually, ISKCON sought to build an “Indian Hindu membership”⁴⁴ in order to bring financial resources into its temple communities. As already discussed, the rise of Hindu involvement within ISKCON has played an important role in supporting the movement in the public arena, particularly during the series of lawsuits and legislation charges held against the movement (Burr 1984, Rochford 2007, 2018, Karapanagiotis 2021). Certain changes have also been implemented throughout ISKCON in order to make participation more appealing to the South Asian diaspora, which will be further discussed in an upcoming section.

Krishna-bhakti, or Loving Krishna as the Supreme

To understand the theological make-up of ISKCON and the changes that have been applied following the growth of the movement, it is first important to understand Krishna’s positioning within ISKCON. Perhaps it is as Alf Hiltebeitel (1992) says, that “Krishna is [...] ‘winking’ at all of these scholars who struggle to figure him out.”⁴⁵ In what follows, I take the

⁴¹ Burke E. Rochford, “Aligning Hare Krishna: Political Activists, Hippies, and Hindus,” *Nova Religion* 22, no.1 (2018): 47.

⁴² Rochford 2018, 47-48.

⁴³ Rochford 2018, 48.

⁴⁴ Rochford 2018, 48.

⁴⁵ Alf Hiltebeitel, “Mahābhārata,” In *Vaishnavism Contemporary Scholars Discuss the Gaudiya Tradition*, ed. Steven J. Rosen (Brooklyn: Folk Books, 1992), 52.

opportunity to join Krishna's *līlā*, literally 'sport, play,' in attempting to understand his significance within ISKCON's tradition. Generally, Vaishnava traditions celebrate and worship various incarnational forms of Vishnu.⁴⁶ Vaishnava traditions do not agree on a single supreme persona, rather, various traditions are devoted to various incarnations of Vishnu. For example, as Ramdas Lamb (1991) explains, the Ramnamis of Chhattisgarh are devoted to Rama and incorporate verses from Tulsidas's *Rāmcaritmānas* into their daily worship. Gauḍīya Vaishnavas are alternatively devoted to Krishna and follow Krishna-bhakti. Theologically, ISKCON considers Krishna to be the "Supreme Personality of Godhead"⁴⁷ (Figure 3).

Notably, Krishna-bhakti, or devotion to Krishna, is "not at all an individualistic sort of faith [...] but, on the contrary, is pervasively and enthusiastically interpersonal."⁴⁸ Indeed, the importance of having an intimate and personal relationship with Krishna is encouraged and is very much a vital component for devotees at the Montreal temple – particularly for "core devotees" who play an integral part in the daily functioning of the temple. For example, Nandini, a 29-year-old woman who has spent most of her 20s living at various ISKCON communities, once explained how close her relationship with Krishna is and what it is like for her to offer *sevā* (service) at the temple:

"When I engage my hands and my senses and my body, even though my mind [might be] troubled, my body would be engaged with Krishna's service, so slowly slowly that made me focus... so service here really healed me – Krishna allows me to touch him, dress him, serve him... all these things healed me."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Vishnu is generally considered to be one of the principle deities within Hinduism and is one of the *trimūrti*, the triple deity of divinity alongside Brahma, the creator, and Shiva the destroyer. In the *trimūrti*, Vishnu is known as the preserver.

⁴⁷ A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, 1972. *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is* Abridged ed., (New York: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust), 65.

⁴⁸ Joseph T. O'Connell, *Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism in Bengal: Social Impact and Historical Implications*, ed. Rembert Lutjeharms (Routledge Hindu Studies Series, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 14.

⁴⁹ February fieldnotes, 2023.



Figure 3. Krishna and the cows. “Lord Krishna is Known as Govinda,” Painting by Pariksit Dasa, Copyright the Bhaktivedanta Book Trust International, Accessed June 15, 2023, http://files.krishna.com/cgi-bin/ImageFolio42/imageFolio.cgi?action=view&link=Krishna_Conscious_Paintings&image=TA0111.jpg&img=340&tt=

The intimate relationship between devotees and Krishna is a foundational component of Krishna-bhakti. Here, it is important to expand on the meaning of “bhakti,” beyond the already established definition of “devotion.” An ISKCON devotee once explained that bhakti cannot be understood through the intellect and instead through the heart – it must be *felt* through experience:

“it is all based in the heart. And devotees, it’s like we have a television in our hearts that we take around with us. We see Krishna’s past-times. We act in the physical world but we do everything for Krishna and the television in our hearts replays Krishna’s glories.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ June 2023 fieldnotes.

This echoes sentiments that have spoken of bhakti as “the heart religion”⁵¹ or as something that “one does *and* an attitude that can suffuse all of one’s actions”⁵² (emphasis added). In this way, bhakti is not so much an idea as it is an experience – not so much theory as it is a practice.

The Sanskrit term “bhakti” itself is an action noun that derives “from the verbal root bhaj-, meaning broadly ‘to share, to possess.’”⁵³ Some scholars argue that the English word ‘devotion’ does not accurately encompass bhakti’s true meaning, rather suggesting that ‘participation’ more clearly signals the bhakta’s (those who practice bhakti) relationship with God.⁵⁴ Prentiss (1999) emphasizes bhakti as a participatory theology of embodiment, making it the “foundation of human life and activity in the world.”⁵⁵ Joseph T. O’Connell presents an additional interpretation and underscores the significance of ‘bonding’ within bhakti, suggesting that bhakti itself serves as “that which binds beings to one another.”⁵⁶ Intimately connected to this notion of ‘bonding,’ scholars focusing on the historical role of bhakti have frequently emphasized one specific aspect of the tradition: that “bhakti brought people together in ways the other Hindu traditions had not.”⁵⁷ Thus, there exists a pervasive theme of bhakti as a “unifying force”⁵⁸ which is further linked to social change, “either as an observation about the past, an aspiration for the future, or both.”⁵⁹

⁵¹ Hawley 2015, 2.

⁵² John E Cort, “Bhakti in the Early Jain Tradition: Understanding Devotional Religion in South Asia,” *History of Religions* 42, no. 1 (2002): 62.

⁵³ Hawley 2015, 5.

⁵⁴ Karen Pechilis Prentiss, *The Embodiment of Bhakti* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 24.

⁵⁵ Prentiss 2000, 6.

⁵⁶ O’Connell 2018, 16.

⁵⁷ Keune, Jon. *Share Devotion, Shared Food: Equality and the Bhakti-Caste Question in Western India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 54.

⁵⁸ Keune 2021, 61.

⁵⁹ Keune 2021, 61.

Already, bhakti “occupies a semantic field that embraces the notions of belonging [and] being loyal.”⁶⁰ These are ideas that we will return to when considering the relationship between bhakti and belonging, and the ways in which bhakti constitutes a sense of belonging: both within its theological and historical make-up, as well as in its practice within the space of ISKCON Montreal.

When I asked devotees about bhakti, they most often would direct me to Prabhupad’s books – particularly the *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is* and the *Nectar of Devotion*, Prabhupad’s translation of Rūpa Gosvāmi’s *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu*. The instruction to turn to the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (*Gītā* for short), was not a surprise, particularly as it is the *Gītā* which first “established bhakti as a technical religious term.”⁶¹ Indeed, it is in the *Gītā* where Krishna first gives instructions on bhakti and thus endows “it with autonomy as its own religious path.”⁶² Prabhupad continuously stressed that bhakti “is always active and that all activities performed with body, mind, or speech must be in relationship to Krishna.”⁶³ In this way, Prabhupad reads the *Gītā* as a purely bhakti text, further establishing bhakti “as independent of and superior to all other modes of worship”⁶⁴ For many devotees at ISKCON, it is the following simple phrase which best captures the meaning of bhakti: “bhakti means devotional service.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Hawley 2015, 5.

⁶¹ Prentiss 2000, 40.

⁶² Prentiss 2000, 5.

⁶³ Tamal Krishna Goswami, and Graham M. Schweig, *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti: Essential Teachings of A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 165.

⁶⁴ Goswami and Schweig 2012, 166.

⁶⁵ A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *The Nectar of Devotion: The Complete Science of Bhakti Yoga* (Boston: ISKCON Press, 1970), xi.

South Asian Participants and Other Gods

While “the Hindu background of this bhakti tradition accepts the idea that God has unlimited forms [... ISKCON] asserts that among the innumerable unlimited divine forms [...] is Krishna, who is himself the highest.”⁶⁶ Nevertheless, scholarship has shown that many participants of South Asian descent engaging with ISKCON “do not consider Krishna to be the supreme God”⁶⁷ and believe that various Hindu gods should be worshipped. Indeed, this was articulated for me in multiple conversations with South Asian participants at ISKCON Montreal. For example, Shivraj, a young student who recently moved to Montreal from Pune⁶⁸ once described how his family typically worships Ganesh – the Hindu elephant-god of beginnings – and that Krishna is generally absent from their home. A second-generation South Asian-Canadian research participant who has been involved in ISKCON Montreal since childhood described how she has been trying to encourage her parents to visit other Hindu temples in Montreal, and to worship Shiva and Ganesh:

“Lord Shiva is the greatest devotee so why wouldn’t we go [to the Hindu temples] we should be celebrating... and before my parents joined ISKCON they grew up like that, they were Hindu, so I’m like why can’t we worship Lord Ganesh too, he is the remover of obstacles! Or Hanuman’s appearance day... I love the Rāmāyaṇa!”⁶⁹

Sentiments like these are manifold and have not gone unnoticed by ISKCON temples. As Zaidman (1997) describes, this tendency has led to an array of changes within ISKCON, including the introduction of specific Hindu festivals such as Holi and Diwali, as well as deities and rituals “not sanctioned by Prabhupad.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Graham M. Schweig, “Reflections on God and Evil in the Krishna Bhakti Theology of Caitanya,” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 24 no. 4 (2016): 15.

⁶⁷ Zaidman 1997, 340.

⁶⁸ A city in the western Indian state of Maharashtra.

⁶⁹ Interview with devotee, June 2023.

⁷⁰ Rochford 2018, 50.

In *A Living Theology of Krishna Bhakti*, Tamal Krishna Goswami and Graham M. Schweig (2012) highlight the importance of financial contributions and their role in popularizing the Rāmāyaṇa tradition within ISKCON. They explain how Rama and his companions Sita, Lakshmana, and Hanuman have become ISKCON favourites. They attribute this “concession to his popularity among the large Hindu congregations whose financial strength ISKCON often depends on.”⁷¹ Moreover, in her ethnographic examination of the Philadelphia ISKCON temple, Nurjit Zaidman (1997) explains how drastic changes were made at the temple in order to appeal the needs of the South Asian diaspora. This included the development of rhetoric that justifies “deviation from ISKCON theology or philosophy,”⁷² further accommodating the needs and desire of the diaspora to worship gods other than Krishna. This included ISKCON Philadelphia’s first celebration of Lord Rama Appearance Day, or Ram Navami, in April 1992.

ISKCON Philadelphia’s first celebration of Ram Navami in 1992, months before the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Hindu militants, is no small matter. The dispute about Rama’s birthplace has been a long and intricate one. Many Hindus believe that the exact location of the Masjid was where Rama was born, and that there should be a temple dedicated to Ram. Struggles over the site intensified “under the pressure of a massive campaign waged by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a group with close ties to the major instrument of Hindu nationalism in India [...], the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).”⁷³ Struggles continued to intensify,

⁷¹ Schweig, 2016, 195.

⁷² Zaidman 1997, 341

⁷³ John Stratton Hawley, “Militant Hinduism Ayodhya and the momentum of Hindu Nationalism,” In *Life of Hinduism*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Vasudha Narayanan (The Life of Religion, Berkley: University of California Press, 2006), 358.

and the first attempt to attack the mosque was made in 1990. On December 6th, 1992, thousands of “militants flooded into Ayodhya [... and] in five hours’ time, the mosque came down.”⁷⁴

Zaidman’s (1997) timely ethnographic presence at ISKCON’s Philadelphia temple one Sunday afternoon in December 1992 gives another glimpse into Rama’s significance, and the Hindu nationalistic undertone that exists within ISKCON. In a lecture given by an initiated board member, specifically when the temple president was not present, the lecturer spoke about the events in Ayodhya, using the temple floor “to address the needs of the Indian audience.”⁷⁵ Zaidman explains how this disregarded ISKCON’s organizational rules, which forbids conversations about politics in a militant matter. While the speaker’s Hindu nationalistic tone may have been an isolated incident that slipped through the administrative workings of ISKCON Philadelphia, the situation as a whole raises important questions regarding ISKCON’s part in supporting Hindu nationalistic ideals.

Various negotiations took place between South Asian advisory board members and ISKCON Philadelphia. It is no coincident that these negotiations were taking place during the time in which the BJP was gaining popularity in India. These negotiations not only led to an increased presence of Rama within ISKCON’s celebration hall in Philadelphia, but also the presence of Durga, a Hindu goddess who is not traditionally worshipped at ISKCON temples.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the Philadelphia president allowed the program celebrating Durga to take place in a rented hall, under that condition that “Krishna be symbolically represented as the supreme god and given a higher status than Durga.”⁷⁷ What Rochford (2007) has termed the “Hinduization of

⁷⁴ Hawley 2006, 259.

⁷⁵ Zaidman 1997, 346.

⁷⁶ Zaidman 1997

⁷⁷ Rochford 2007, 194.

ISKCON's Religious Culture"⁷⁸ has further manifested through the celebration of Shiva Ratri, Holi, and the accompanying images of Shiva and Ganesh at ISKCON's San Diego newly built temple, funded by the "Indian," or what I term the South Asian diasporic community.⁷⁹

At the same time, the increased support and involvement of Hindu identities has generated new movements and branches within ISKCON. As Karapanagiotis describes, these include variations such as the "Krishna West" movement started by Prabhupada disciple and ISKCON guru, Hridayananda Das Goswami. Krishna West is an ISKCON "sub-movement" that specifically caters "to westerners' religio-cultural tastes and preferences,"⁸⁰ while existing alongside, though separate from ISKCON's traditional temple programs and centres. Sub-movements similar to this are often labelled "bridge-centres," which exist as an entry point for non-Hindus into the world of ISKCON, advocating the belief that if folks "are appropriately 'primed', then they can eventually come to appreciate ISKCON's temple life and even become active participants in it."⁸¹

Considering all of this, I argue that the rising presence of South Asian participants within ISKCON is what influenced an initial rebranding of the movement, from a tradition strictly worshipping Krishna to one that worships other Hindu deities, further satisfying the needs of South Asian donors. Today, there are shrines devoted to Rama and his companions in multiple ISKCON locations. These include the ISKCON Towaco temple in New Jersey, Den Hague temple in South Holland, New Gokula in Brazil, Suva temple in Fiji, Chosica temple in Peru, Spanish Fork temple in Utah, Vedic Cultural Centre in Seattle, and the Hare Krishna Land in

⁷⁸ Rochford 2007, 194.

⁷⁹ Rochford 2007, 195.

⁸⁰ Karapanagiotis 2021, 175.

⁸¹ Karapanagiotis 2021, 217.

Mumbai. Thus, the Rāmāyaṇa tradition within ISKCON has multiple implications, both financially and politically, and is connected to the rising number of South Asian involvement within the movement.

Alternatively, some bridge-centres include Philadelphia’s Mantra Lounge, New York’s Bhakti Centre, and Govardhan Eco Village outside of Mumbai.⁸² A visit to the Bhakti Centre (Figure 4), for example, might include attending a postural yoga class with a female instructor dressed in a sports bra and shorts, or a Thursday night kīrtan fuelled by strumming guitars and followed by a free vegan dinner. Montreal has its own bridge-centre named Espace Bhakti, which is supported by organizers, hosts, and participants who frequently inhabit both worlds – the bridge-centre and the temple space. A devotee once explained to me that Espace Bhakti is there to help those who are in the early stages of learning about Krishna Consciousness – it helps bridge the gap for newcomers while offering a chance for them to engage in alternate ways, such as a weekend Kirtan Festival at Nandagram Ecovillage⁸³ (Figure 5) and a Kirtan Marathon event at a local park. These spaces differ from the traditional temple space, which is filled with modestly dressed devotees and prasāda⁸⁴ filled with dairy, which vegans are known to avoid. Nevertheless, bridge-centres do work to re-envision and redesign the temple space and the ways through which the bhakti is shared. All the while, more traditional ISKCON spaces such as the Sri Sri Radha Manohara temple persist – reaching for harmoniums, ghee, and sarees.

⁸² In *Branding Bhakti: Krishna Consciousness and the Makeover of a Movement*, Nicole Karapanagiotis offers a thorough analysis of these bridge-centres. Karapanagiotis shows how non-traditional temple spaces associated with ISKCON, such as Devamrita Swami’s Mantra Lounge aiming 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. Her multi-sited ethnography offers a thorough account of ISKCON’s current landscape and highlights the heterogenous diversity of the movement.

⁸³ Nandagram Ecovillage is a small ISKCON farm community in Mascouche, Quebec.

⁸⁴ Prasāda is food sanctified by having been offered to god(s)/goddess(es).

This chapter has provided an overview of ISKCON's development, emphasizing the role of the 1960s counterculture in popularizing the movement and the importance of Krishna within ISKCON. Considering the rise of South Asian participation within ISKCON, I argued that this increase in presence caused the initial rebranding of ISKCON, which shifted from a tradition that strictly worships Krishna to one that also celebrates other Hindu deities. Finally, this chapter introduced ISKCON bridge-centres and their role in introducing the movement to a diverse audience. In the next chapter, the focus will shift to ISKCON in Montreal, where the context of Quebec and key research participants will be discussed.

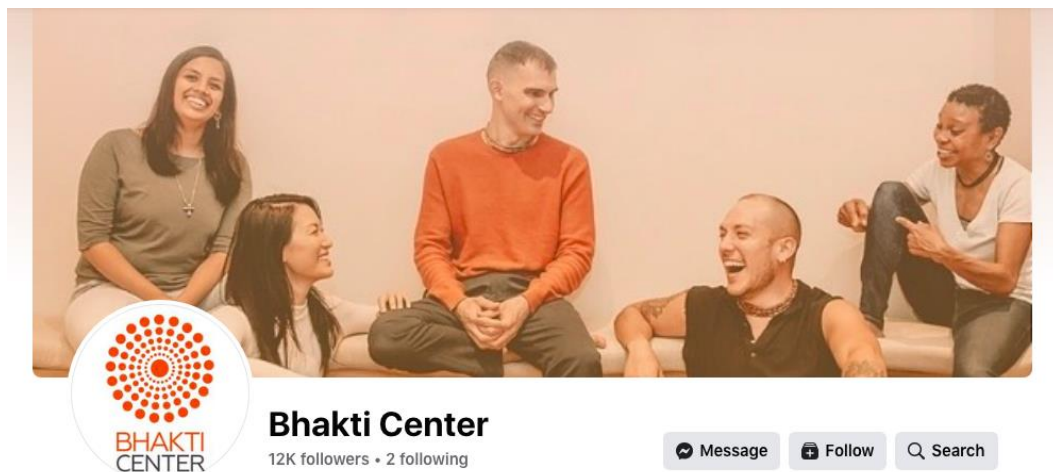


Figure 4. New York Bhakti Centre's Facebook page. Screenshot by author.



Figure 5. Kirtan festival at Nandagram Ecovillage. Kirtan Marathon at Nandagram Farm Facebook page, posted by Bliss Movement, August 1, 2023. Screenshot by author.

Chapter 2:

ISKCON in Montreal: The Quebec Context and Key Research Participants

Lecture on the Bhagavad Gītā, at Sri Sri Radha Manohara ISKCON Temple, Montreal, February 12, 2023.

It was a sun-drenched Sunday when I arrived at the temple, just as the evening lecture was about to commence. Walking into the prayer hall my ears were greeted by the melodious chanting of *jaya radha-madhava*.⁸⁵ Bodies swayed side-to-side, lips uttered words that celebrated the profound love shared between Krishna, Radha and the Gopīs. Devotees congregated within the temple’s hallowed space, and prepared to receive the lecturer’s sacred instructions.

Indeed, most days two lectures are given at the temple: morning lectures, which are often reserved for topics in the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam*, a 44-volume English translation of the Sanskrit *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, while evening lectures cover the *Bhagavad Gītā: As It Is*, Prabhupad’s translation of the *Gītā*. On this particular evening, the lecturer sat in a white dhotī and shirt, which symbolized his status as a householder. He recited verses from chapter six of the *Gītā*. Attendees were scattered throughout the space, most sitting cross-legged on the floor while elders occupied the benches. Some exhibited deep engagement and attentiveness, nodding their heads as the lecturer imparted his wisdom, while others appeared distracted, their attention divided between their smartphones and whispered conversation. Still, a few became enraptured by the presence of the deities, with their gazes fixed upon the open altars which revealed the divine figures.

⁸⁵ This song was written by Bhaktivinoda Thakura, a Gauḍīya Vaishnavism reformer and a devotee of Krishna. The words are as follows: *jaya rādhā-mādhava kuṅja-bihārī, gopī-jana-vallabha giri-vara-dhārī, yaśodā-nandana braja-jana-rañjana, yāmuna-tīra-vana-cārī*.

In the midst of the gathering, a young boy entered the room holding a garland of flowers. He approached the lecturer, gently draped the fragrant offering around his neck, to which the lecturer responded with joined hands, expressing his heartfelt gratitude. The instructions persisted, as the lecturer explained the importance of associating with other devotees, further emphasizing the profound importance of our shared presence within the temple's sacred space, and the collective yearning to be closer to Krishna.

French Quebec, the Secular, and the Hare Krishnas

The above description offers a glimpse into the weekly Sunday Feast lectures at ISKCON Montreal. The lecturer's emphasis on the importance of socializing with other devotees highlights the significance of community and connection on the path of bhakti. In order to understand how such a community has come together in Montreal, and how lectures on the *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* have become a daily occurrence within Montreal's Pie-IX district, it is important to consider the historical development of ISKCON within Canada and the political and cultural landscape of Quebec as a province. In this chapter, I offer an overview of the ISKCON Montreal temple and analyze its positioning within Montreal and Quebec more broadly. By examining the positioning of the French language and the Catholic-centred past of Quebec, I outline how ISKCON Montreal poses an extra challenge for the South Asian diaspora, particularly for new immigrants who are confronted with the French language. In addition, this chapter shares the daily schedule and life of ISKCON Montreal temple, presents key concepts such as sevā and prasāda, and introduces key research participants.

As ISKCON began to flourish in New York in the mid-1960s, efforts were quickly made to spread the movement outside the borders of the state, reaching San Francisco and soon after that, Canada. By 1967, a group of devotees would gather in a small building on Parc Avenue in

Montreal to worship Krishna. Montreal thus became the third city worldwide and the first in Canada to house an ISKCON temple. More than seven years later, in 1975, the congregation relocated and ISKCON Montreal bought what used to be a United Church, where the temple is now located.

Made up of four levels with men's dormitories in the basement, a large industrial kitchen on the ground level, the main prayer hall and gift store just above the ground floor, and the prasāda hall (an eating area with a stage at the front on the top floor), the current temple offers space for devotees to worship Krishna and facilities which support this. The temple also has a library on the top floor along with some office spaces which have been under construction for the last few years. Across the street of the temple is the women's ashram in a humble 4-bedroom apartment since, as Krtamala, the leader of the women's ashram once explained to me, "women need some more comforts!"

Today, although the temple building has undergone a series of construction and changes, the Protestant influence endures within the physical structure of the temple – the high ceilings, the archways, stained glass windows, and perhaps most brightly, the outside of the temple which, despite the ISKCON temple sign, still looks much more like a church than a temple (Figure 4). In many ways, the influence of Christianity within the physical structure of the ISKCON temple mirrors the political landscape of Quebec and the positioning of Catholicism and secularism within the province (Figure 5).



Figure 6. Outside of ISKCON Montreal temple. Photo taken by the author, January 2023.

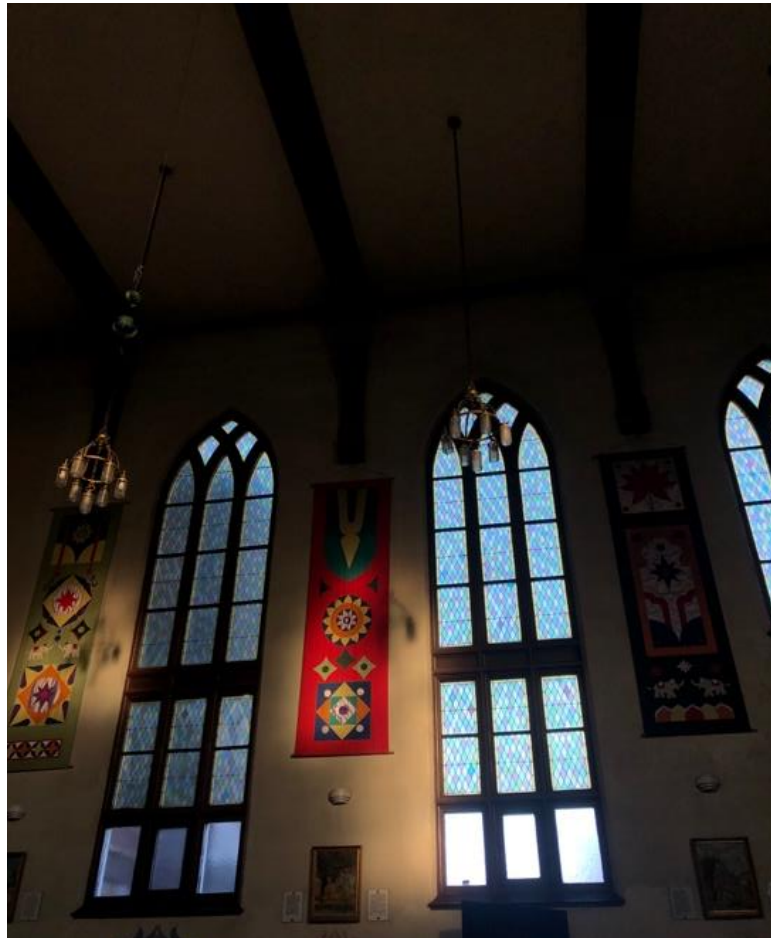


Figure 7. Windows inside the temple prayer room, ISKCON Montreal. Photo taken by the author, January 2023.

The political and cultural landscape of Quebec is unique in comparison to other areas in Canada. Through the promotion of French as the common language of public life, the search for a revived sense and definition of secularism, and continuing debates regarding immigration and integration, Quebec distinguishes itself from other Canadian provinces and territories.⁸⁶ Secularism, in particular, currently bears great significance in the province which was

⁸⁶ Ratna Ghosh, Marie McAndrew, and Mehdi Babei, “The Context of Reception,” in *The Invisible Community: Being South Asian in Quebec*, eds. Mahsa Bakhshaei, Marie McAndrew, Ratna Ghosh, and Priti Sign (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2021), 19.

historically controlled by the Catholic Church. Until the 1960s, the Catholic Church “closely controlled nearly every part of sociopolitical life, particularly through its involvement in education, healthcare, and the welfare system.”⁸⁷ During a series of political and social upheavals, commonly referred to as the Quiet Revolution, Francophone Quebecers pushed towards a secular and French-speaking state, further removing the Catholic Church from the major public functions it had managed.

Today, in addition to the French language, secularism has become a key marker of Quebec identity.⁸⁸ The push towards a secular state has resulted in both the attitudes of some Quebecers, who “feel threatened by the apparent increase in religious expressions in the public sphere induced by new waves of immigrants,”⁸⁹ as well as the attempts of political charters and laws such as Bill 21, which “bans public workers in positions of authority from wearing religious symbols.”⁹⁰ Thus, Quebec and a majority of its population push towards a more secular landscape, one that does not see school teachers in turbans or police officers in hijab. All the while, ISKCON devotees roam the city of Montreal wearing *tilak*⁹¹ and other traditional Vaishnava signifiers, proselyting at metro stations and street corners. In this way, as Quebec distinguishes itself through the rest of the Canada through its emphasis on French and secular law, ISKCON Montreal distinguishes itself from other Hindu and other minority religions with Quebec, which tend to be more private: ISKCON devotees go out into the secular streets of Montreal, in hope of awakening Quebecers to Krishna Consciousness.

⁸⁷ Yannick Dufresne, Anja Kilibarda, Blais André, and Alexis Bibeau, “Religiosity or Racism? The Bases of Opposition to Religious Accommodation in Quebec,” *Nations and Nationalism* 25, no. 2 (2019): 676.

⁸⁸ Ghosh et al. 2021, 21.

⁸⁹ Ghosh et al. 2021, 21.

⁹⁰ Ghosh et al. 2021, 22.

⁹¹ *Tilak* is a Hindu religious marker applied most commonly on the forehead to signify religiosity and devotion. At ISKCON, devotees mark their foreheads with a vertical triangle most often with sandalwood paste to signify devotion to Krishna.

Notably, this represents a stark contrast to the positioning of ISKCON in Singapore. While secular (though not anti-religious), Singapore does not allow the free entry of ISKCON preachers into the country and does not allow the movement to be registered. Because of this, ISKCON does not have an official temple in Singapore and instead is portrayed as a Hindu-based religion by devotees.⁹² Alternatively, in Quebec, ISKCON has a recognized status as a spiritual movement and a non-profit organization, and it has its own temple where devotees gather and worship Krishna. Nevertheless, the structure of ISKCON in Montreal is undoubtedly influenced by the structures of the state.

Here, it is important to note the rise of New Religious Movements (NRMs) in Quebec, and the “favourable ecology”⁹³ of the province for NRMs. The social, cultural, and political changes of the Quiet Revolution created a more pluralistic society. Moreover, the push towards a more secular society and the waning affinity with Catholicism has, in many ways, opened up opportunities for NRMs to emerge and gain a foothold. As the NRMs compete against the weakened local churches and religious organizations, they have a higher chance to attract and engage a following.⁹⁴

The political and social landscape of Quebec continues to influence ISKCON Montreal and the inner workings of the temple, most significantly through the French language (Figure 8, Figure 9). Indeed, there are “Francophone devotees” who gather weekly, separate from the rest of the temple and often in private homes. Here, “Francophone” refers to those for whom French

⁹² Rodney Sebastian and Ashvin Parameswaran, “Hare Krishnas in Singapore: Agency, State, and Hinduism,” *Sojourn* 23, no.1 (2008).

⁹³ Rodney Stark, “Why Religious Movements Succeed or Fail: A Revised General Model,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 11, no.2 (1996): 135.

⁹⁴ Susan J Palmer, *The Mystical Geography of Quebec: Catholic Schisms and New Religious Movements*, (Switzerland: Palsgrave Macmillan, 2020), 4.

is their preferred language of communication. French also makes its way into the temple through the offering of nightly French lectures. On Sunday's, for example, during the Sunday Feast Program where the temple opens its doors to a greater public, two lectures are given: English lectures are offered in the main prayer hall while French lectures are offered in the prasāda hall upstairs. In fact, some Francophone devotees barely speak English and thus associate only with other French-speaking attendees. The French language also influences the array of books available for purchase at the gift store, many of which have been translated to French by Francophone devotees. Moreover, French is woven into the social fabric of the temple, in whispers of “Ça va?” as devotees greet each other, and in Sunday Feast announcements which are almost always given in both English and French, and even sometimes in Hindi.



Figure 8. Sunday Feast Program invitation in English. Photo taken by the author, January 2, 2024.

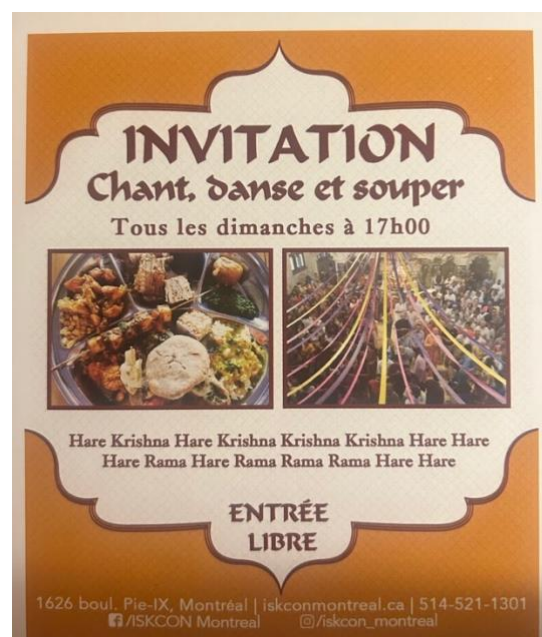


Figure 9. Sunday Feast Program invitation in French. Photo taken by the author, January 2, 2024.

While there is significant French influence as a result of the solid number of Francophone devotees of non-South Asian descent at ISKCON Montreal, there are also many South Asian devotees that participate in daily events. Some of these participants speak fluent French, although for most, English is their primary language at home. Additionally, Hindi and other South Asian languages, most commonly Bengali, Marathi, Malayalam, and Gujarati can frequently be heard at the temple. This, of course, reflects recent trends in ISKCON's demographics internationally, where more and more devotees of South Asian descent have been participating in the movement both within India and globally.

ISKCON's beginnings in Canada can be traced to Montreal. Now, there are numerous ISKCON-based communities and temples around the country. With active centres in every major city in Canada including Edmonton, Ottawa, Regina, Toronto, Vancouver, and Winnipeg, as well as farm communities such as Sarangati Village in British Columbia, ISKCON is certainly influencing the Canadian population. At the Sri Sri Radha Manohara temple in Montreal, the influence is two-fold: ISKCON devotees are influencing the general public through their public chanting, or harinām, and ISKCON is being influenced too, both by the Catholic-centred past of Quebec, encapsulated in something as simple as the structure of the temple which used to house a church, and also through the use of the French language. In this way, ISKCON Montreal signifies a distinct type of ISKCON – one in which its unique positioning within Quebec influences the daily operations of the temple.

Daily Life: It Takes a Temple!

The Sri Sri Radha Manohara temple follows a strict daily schedule that quite literally revolves around Krishna and his deity needs. The day begins at the break of dawn, as the sound of the conch shell reverberates through the temple walls. The deities wake up, are bathed and cleaned,

and then *mangal āratī* (morning worship) is performed to welcome the Lord into the new day. When I first attended the early Saturday morning service, I was amazed at the quietness of the temple, though the rhythmic beats of the *mridangam*⁹⁵ and the melodious tunes of the harmonium filled the space. There were only eight of us inside the prayer hall, including a pujarī who stood on the alter offering various gifts to the deities. As *āratī*⁹⁶ reached its end, devotees gathered to read the list of 10 forbidden acts as outlined by Prabhupad, and then prepared for Tulasī-puja, where devotees sing prayers to the Goddess Tulasī, offering her water and prayers. Next, devotees prepared for a two-hour period of chanting, everyone focusing on their own practice. I found a seat next to the wall and pulled out my mālā, as other devotees also prepared for their practice, while others moved in and out of the prayer hall, some preparing for their mantra practice while others offered sevā.

There was a distinct change in sound and the aura of the prayer hall as the practice period began. Formerly, the morning practices have been communal – we have chanted together and have offered devotion together. Now, each person sat or stood as a single unit, following their own rhythm as they chanted the mahāmantra. Suddenly, a buzzing entered the room as most people were chanting quietly under their breath. It was like bees filling up the room, with shaking whispers of *hare krishna hare krishna krishna krishna hare hare, hare rāma hare rāma rāma rāma hare hare*. A stereo was brought in the room too, projecting a recording of Prabhupad repeating the same sacred words. Some devotees paced back and forth the distance of the hall, while others sat in a meditative posture, while still others offered their morning service. A middle-aged woman near me was making a garland of flowers. I got lost in the soundscape that

⁹⁵ Mridangam is a two-headed drum and one of the oldest Indian percussion instruments.

⁹⁶ *Āratī* is a temple worship ceremony offering light in the form of a candle to deities and objects of worship.

had been created through the layering sounds of the mantra, and two hours flew quickly like a bee jumping from flower to flower, in search of nectar.

After a two-hour practice period, guru-puja is offered, as devotees turned to face the life-size figurine of Prabhupad and greeted him with kīrtan, a flower garland, and prostrations. By now, sunshine was pouring into the temple windows and the space of the prayer hall became lighter, lifted – full of possibility. This sense of possibility expanded as morning lecture was about to begin. The curtains were opened, the deities were dressed up, and devotees greeted them one by one, singing songs to them beginning with Sri Gaura-Nitai, Sri Radha-Manohara, and Sri Jagannatha-Baladeva-Subhadra, all representing incarnations of Krishna in various forms (Figure 10).

Next, it is time for the morning lecture, which often lasts for about an hour and a half, after which devotees gather in the prasāda hall for breakfast. Food has been prepared by devotees who have been largely absent during the morning program. By now, it was 9:30am and my body felt as though it has gone through an entire day already – though for devotees at the temple, it was just getting started.

At 12 pm there is *bhoga āratī* (midday worship) and then some rest time for most participants, though those assigned to kitchen duties continue to work into the afternoon. Around 3 pm, most devotees head out into the secular streets of Montreal to chant the name of Krishna. Most nights are quiet at the temple, though on Sundays there is the Sunday Love Feast program which includes kīrtan, a lecture on the *Bhagavad Gīta*, and prasāda. Particularly distinctive about the Sunday feasts is the high number of attendees of South Asian descent. Throughout the week, there is generally a balanced number of devotees and participants of non-South Asian descent and of South Asian descent. However, during the Sunday program, the number of South Asian

attendees is much higher. Indeed, consistent with Noah Casey's reporting on the Montreal temple, "the walk-in community on Sundays is made up predominantly of Hindus who were born into the religion ... [and] on Sundays the converts are either matched in number of outnumbered by Hindus who were born into the religion."⁹⁷



Figure 10. Devotees greeting deities, ISKCON Montreal Temple, Photo taken by the author, November 10, 2023.

Moreover, central to the daily workings of the temple is the concept of *sevā*, or selfless service. For ISKCON, the concept of *sevā* traces its roots to the *Gīta*, which outlines the path of *bhakti-yoga* and *karma-yoga*, where selfless love is linked with the former and selfless action with the latter. Although ISKCON devotees consider themselves to be *bhaktas*, meaning followers of the path of *bhakti*, the daily happenings of the temple demonstrate that ISKCON is

⁹⁷ Noah Casey, "Sri Sri Radha Manohara Temple," *Montreal Religious Project*, 2003.

also a place of actions, where devotees engage in karma-yoga by offering their service to Krishna in every way.

Rūpa Gosvāmī's *Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu*, which was later translated into English by Prabhupad as the *Nectar of Devotion*, outlines the importance of sevā by affirming that the fifth best component of bhakti is “*śrī-mūrtira śraddhāya sevāna*,”⁹⁸ or “serving with faith the blessed image.”⁹⁹ The importance of service to Krishna is encapsulated in the everyday speech of devotees as they interact with one another and understand their roles in relation to the rest of the community. Utterances such as “doing this all for Krishna,” “serving Krishna and his needs,” or “he (Krishna) demands our attention and it is my intention to show up for him!” frequently fill up conversations as members gear their focus towards service through devotion. Often times a devotee's sevā will require challenging tasks such as a day-long fast when handling the deities for street festivals, or having to offer double- sevā when another devotee is feeling ill. In some cases, devotees have to offer sevā even when they themselves are feeling unwell. For example, in a conversation with a female devotee about daily life and the challenges at the temple, she explained how, even though against the rules of the temple, she sometimes offers sevā during her menstruation period as there is no one else available to tend to her duties. This technically goes against the standards of the temple and ISKCON in general, which encourages women to rest during, at least, the first three days of their menstruation cycles. The COVID-19 pandemic also brought up challenges for the temple, as some devotees were unable to travel to and from the temple to offer service, and thus others had to work double time. This demonstrates both the high

⁹⁸ A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Śrī Caitanya-Caritāmṛta: Madhya-lila* (London: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1975), 402.

⁹⁹ O'Connell 2019, 22.

demand of tasks that need to be completed every day at the temple, as well as the aspect of selflessness and sacrifice central to sevā.

For some, sevā can bring a new sense of intimacy with Krishna. For example, Nandini, who often dresses Krishna in the morning as part of her sevā, explains how important it is for her to get to be so close to him:

“It is a very intimate experience, and you know, some people think we are crazy for doing this but they are the real crazy ones – they who do not realize what we are actually doing. We are building intimacy with God in the physical form, so that we can know him in other ways too.”¹⁰⁰

Thus, different people offer different types of sevā depending on their abilities and availabilities. For some devotees who work or study full time, their sevā comes in the form of participating in the daily harinām at metro stations and street corners. For others, opportunities to offer sevā pop up in unexpected moments – like during morning lecture when the prayer hall gets turned into its own kind of kitchen as devotees chop potatoes for the Sunday feast, or after enjoying prasāda, as cleaning dishes and mopping floors becomes an opportunity to support the community. Most devotees offer daily sevā, weaving together the threads that make up the temple’s daily schedule.

Temple Community and Key Research Participants

There are many individuals at ISKCON Montreal who were key to this research. In this section, I introduce three research participants who embody the diversity of the South Asian diasporic experiences within the setting of ISKCON Montreal. While there have been numerous influential research participants who have instrumental to this project, through these specific participants we can gain an overview of the diversity of experience within ISKCON. In other words, as I

¹⁰⁰ Nandini interview, June 7, 2023.

introduce these individuals, their stories help illuminate the complexities of identity, spirituality, and the nuanced ways in which bhakti and belonging manifest in the diasporic context.

Samir Prabhu

Samir Prabhu,¹⁰¹ who immigrated to Canada from Kolkata, India in 1968, is a key figure within ISKCON Montreal. Indeed, he is a temple council member and is responsible for donations at the temple. He first moved to Ottawa and it was there where he met two devotees who shared Prabhupad's books with him. Reflecting on that time, Sami Prabu explained:

“In 1971 I found some devotees in Ottawa at the very beginning [of the movement] so for me it was a great experience knowing them and these devotees, one was an American and one Canadian. And very knowledgeable [...] and they gave me a wonderful impression and then I studied Prabhupad's book and I was immediately impressed by the simplicity of the language and so that was actually a turning point in my impression of ISKCON as a whole. I was working as an architect and my apartment was close to the temple so I had the opportunity to come in the evening and attend āratī and associate with the devotees and they were extremely friendly and made it into an everlasting experience and it was like an ideal society and devotees in those days, on Parc Ave [Montreal] which was the first temple, devotees were living in very austere conditions. I often wondered, ‘how these devotees they choose such an austere life’ and then I realized they must be getting something in return so that's why they are here.”¹⁰²

Later, Samir Prabhu explained how although his family in India had always been religious, when he moved to Canada he was “not so serious like the devotees [and was] very busy trying to improve” his situation as an architect. Yet, after meeting the devotees he began incorporating many of their ideals into his daily life. For example, although his family had always been vegetarian, before coming to Canada he was not. But, by coming into contact with the devotees, he became vegetarian.

¹⁰¹ The term “Prabhu” functions here as a specific signifier of respect, traditionally bestowed upon men, particularly those who are older, within the ISKCON community. Throughout my research I have never heard anyone refer to Samir Prabhu without the “Prabhu.” To show my respects, I have also included this suffix.

¹⁰² Samir Prabhu interview, June 19, 2023.

Notably, while Samir Prabhu supports ISKCON through his sevā and active participation in the community, ISKCON Montreal has also supported him during challenging times. In 2015, his wife passed away and just two years later, his son also. Reflecting on the challenges that were brought for him, Samir Prabhu, with a sweet smile, explained:

“I am just grateful for Krishna for giving me some strength and for associating with devotees here which is great because if I was living alone that would be hard you know. [So the temple life], it really helps. Because all the families who come here to do some service, I see that they have the same intense attachment to Krishna and Prabhupad and they follow devotional service so their association is very very valuable.”

Samir Prabhu was the oldest individual who participated in this research. His experiences help us understand how members of the South Asian diaspora both support ISKCON, and are further supported by the movement and community.

Gaurangi

The master of ceremonies (MC) for most ISKCON Montreal events, Gaurangi is a twenty-eight-year-old woman whose parents’ close connection to ISKCON has largely shaped her experience of bhakti. Gaurangi’s parents moved to Montreal from Mauritius in the 1980s and today, her father is the head priest and her mother is the head cook at the ISKCON Montreal temple. When discussing her parents’ close connection to ISKCON, Gaurangi emphasized how their involvement within ISKCON helped build her own connection to the temple at a very young age. She explained:

“The temple was my playground in a way, and my sister and her friends we were always taken care of by everybody and the temple always has felt like a second home, or even a first home. Everything was so close and I have been living in the neighbourhood like my whole life and it has been our space since then, so, the temple feels like second nature.”¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Gaurangi interview, June 20, 2023.

As a child, Gaurangi participated in a weekly Sunday school at the temple where she learned about ISKCON philosophy through verses and theatre. Although today Gaurangi is well-established, both within the temple and within her professional life as an elementary school teacher, she did highlight that she faced difficulties because of her intimate connections to ISKCON as a child, and most significantly, as a teenager. This included feelings of not fitting in within her broader social network at high school, challenges of being vegetarian, and the difficult task of acting in a way that held up her parents' reputation.

More recently, Gaurangi has started to be the MC for ISKCON Montreal events, welcoming guests, announcing important messages, and getting the congregation excited about the programs ahead. This has helped Gaurangi in many ways:

“MC-ing has become such a big thing for me now and interacting with people has helped me a lot. I love what I do, being able to provide information and teaching at Sunday school about scripture and reading, it is everything to me. So I love that I can do that here [at ISKCON Montreal temple].”

Gaurangi's experience as one of the two daughters of the head priest and cook at ISKCON Montreal offers a unique perspective into the diverse roles first- and second- generation South Asian immigrants play within ISKCON. The challenges she faced at school with feelings of exclusion due to her connections to ISKCON highlight the complex nature of being connected to the movement. Her experience offers a glimpse into the world of those who grew up in the movement and the challenges they might have encountered as related to topics of belonging. Most importantly, Gaurangi represents the next generation of ISKCON devotees who may one day become leaders of the movement.

Shivraj

A master's student specializing in cybersecurity at Montreal's Concordia University, Shivraj moved to Canada from Pune, India in August of 2022. After a couple months of being in the city,

Shivraj began attending the Sunday feast program at ISKCON's Montreal temple. In India, Shivraj would occasionally visit ISKCON temples for special occasions such as Krishna's appearance day. In Montreal, he has visited a couple of Hindu temples, though it is the ISKCON Montreal temple where he has become a regular attendee. Reflecting on his favourite thing at ISKCON Montreal, Shivraj emphasized the importance of meeting and connecting with various people:

“Meeting people from various backgrounds is so great. I am from Pune and I get to meet other people who are from various cultures and I can have a good relationship with them. I get to see how others have their mindset towards their spiritual journey.”¹⁰⁴

Despite the demands of his master's program, Shivraj's manages to visit the temple a couple of times a month, a pattern shared by many of the South Asian students pursuing studies in Montreal. Whenever I would see Shivraj at the temple, he often accompanied other international students, forming a community that frequents the temple with varying degrees of regularity – some weekly or monthly, while others contribute more frequently through weekly sevā. This dynamic illustrates the shared experience of South Asian students navigating their spiritual, communal, and academic journeys in a new cultural setting.

Conclusion: Moving to Belonging

The Sri Sri Radha Manohara temple stands as a distinct space full of diverse practices and identities, holding both political and cultural significance. By providing insight into the political and cultural backdrop of Quebec, this chapter has underscored the unique positioning of the ISKCON Montreal temple within the Canadian context. Additionally, this chapter has outlined the daily structure of the temple, offering a peek into the everyday experiences and lives of

¹⁰⁴ Shivraj interview, May 21, 2023.

ISKCON congregational members. Within this, the pivotal role of sevā emerges as central to sustaining the temple's daily operations and devotees' spiritual practice. Lastly, this chapter has introduced three key research participants, shedding light on the varied identities present within the temple and the intricate realities shaping perceptions of belonging within the ISKCON community.

Chapter 3:

Bhakti Belonging: Experiences of South Asian Diasporic Community

Members at ISKCON Montreal

“Our belonging is more important than our belongings”
– H.G. Chaitanya Charan Das (2015)

This chapter explores the intricate relationships between bhakti and belonging. It examines the influence of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) Montreal on perceptions of belonging among members of the South Asian diaspora. It presents a comprehensive overview of belonging as a scholarly concept, along with an exploration of the ramifications of migration on individuals’ sense of belonging. In this chapter, I investigate the theme of belonging within prominent bhakti texts, highlighting its significance within the philosophical framework of ISKCON, which emphasizes a direct relationship between a devotee’s physical body and their belonging to Krishna. To ground this discussion in the lived experiences of South Asian diasporic community members at ISKCON Montreal, I reflect on conversations as well as formal and informal interviews with temple attendees and participants. By examining the diverse positionalities of these interlocutors, I highlight the interplay of belonging, partial-belonging, and experiences of not-belonging within the context of ISKCON Montreal.

To examine the relationship between bhakti and belonging, it is important to clarify what “belonging” means in the first place. The word is made up of the intensifying prefix *be-* and *long*, from the Old English word, *gelang*, meaning “together with.”¹⁰⁵ Echoing Ilgın Yörükog ̇lu,

¹⁰⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “belong, v.,” September 2023.

belonging is a “term which includes multiple forms and degrees of commonality and connectedness [...] somewhere between a fixed identity and a simple membership.”¹⁰⁶ Belonging captures the “affective, dynamic, complex nature of human connectedness [...] and] goes beyond the limit of private versus public, emotional versus rational, local versus global.”¹⁰⁷

When asked about what “belonging” means to them, my interlocutors responded in a variety of different ways. Shivraj, for example, discussed the importance of feeling valued within a community. Nandini spoke about its connection to the idea of home and comfort. Some emphasized the importance of “fitting in,” while others discussed notions of not-belonging – of feeling like they had to hide aspects of themselves to fit in and a general sense that they are unable to connect with others in the community. In general, these responses share an understanding that belonging is a “sense” one has.

One way to define a sense of belonging is the “extent to which an individual feels socially connected, included, respected, accepted, and supported by others in different social contexts.”¹⁰⁸ In this way, a sense of belonging is often viewed to be a basic human need, as people want to be socially connected to other people. Considering it as a “sense” also implies that belonging is not necessarily linked with logical understandings of personhood and community, but rather is transfixed in the interplay of emotions, senses, and the overall feelings one has in relation to specific group, place, or community.

¹⁰⁶ Ilgın Yörükoğlu, *Acts of Belonging in Modern Societies: Sexuality, Immigration, Citizenship* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 3.

¹⁰⁷ Yörükoğlu 2020, 3.

¹⁰⁸ Henri Pesonen, “Sense of Belonging for Students with Intensive Special Needs: An Exploration of Students’ Belonging and Teachers’ Role in Implementing Support,” Ph.D. Dissertation (Department of Teacher of Education, University of Helsinki, 2016), 6.

Kelly-Ann Allen et al. (2021) distinguish between a trait and a state of belongingness, where the former is connected to a psychological need and the latter is subjective and based on lived moment-to-moment experience. Here, there is a clear emphasis on the variability of situations and experiences that have the power to change one person's subjective sense of belonging, which can ultimately "change as frequently as several times a day, in much the same way that happiness and other emotions change over time."¹⁰⁹ In the remainder of this chapter, I undertake an analysis of belonging through a state-based approach. This perspective captures the transient nature of feelings of belonging or lack thereof within the context of ISKCON Montreal. Ultimately, belonging is connected to ideas of inclusion, acceptance, connection, and community.

Belonging, Home, and the South Asian Diaspora

In general, the term "diaspora" encompasses various categories of people, including expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities, who share a common experience of having left their homeland, either themselves or through their ancestors. However, being a part of a diaspora doesn't automatically imply a sense of belonging within that group. The term "diaspora" may not fully capture the experiences of transnational identities, particularly second- and third-generation immigrants, who might not strongly identify with a specific diaspora. In fact, most research participants did not actively use the term "diaspora" to locate themselves. Instead, they opted for terms such as "immigrant," "Indian-bodied," "brown," and "minority" to describe their positioning in Canada.

¹⁰⁹ Kelly-Ann Allen et al., "Belonging: A Review of conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Direction for Future Research," *Australian Journal of Psychology* 73, no. 1 (2021): 89.

Much like one participant's emphasis on the importance of “home” in the context of belonging, the idea of “home” is often used to represent a sense of belonging in a diasporic setting. In “Oh, give me a home: Diasporic Longings of Home and Belonging,” Kumarini Silva discusses how the concept of home, especially the notion of an *imagined* home or a distant geographical place as a metaphorical home, symbolizes the immigrant experience. Drawing from her discussions with second- and third-generation South Asian Americans, Silva argues that the nostalgic longing of “home” is a response to the everyday realities of alienation intrinsic to the racial landscape of the United States.

Moreover, in their introduction to the edited volume *Relation and Resistance: Racialized Women, Religion, and Diaspora*, Sailaja V. Krishnamurti and Becky R. Lee (2021) assert how the scholarly impression that diasporic communities retain a nostalgia for home is an outmoded approach. Instead, they highlight how for some people in diaspora, imaginings of home do not exist. The authors allude to Avtar Brah's (1996) conceptualization of a “homing desire”¹¹⁰ which grounds the diasporic experience as a potential site “of hope and new beginnings [...] where cultural and political terrains collide, reassemble, and reconfigure.”¹¹¹ Brah outlines clear distinctions between a “homing desire,” or the general wish to belonging, and a “desire for home,” which involves a conceptualization of home that is situated in a specific time and place, and is often views as “somewhere else.” Nevertheless, the concept of “homeland” still significantly informs how individuals at ISKCON Montreal understand belonging. Yet, the referencing of home within the community is also connected to Brah's “homing desire,” through which individuals develop a longing for, or desire for a connection with the ISKCON community

¹¹⁰ Avtar Brah, *Catographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities, Gender, Racism* (London: Routledge, 1996), 189.

¹¹¹ Krishnamurti and Lee 2021, 7.

and the divine. Samir Prabhu, who immigrated from India in 1968, clearly outlined the connection between his understandings of belonging and the homing desire for the divine:

“So, suppose you are out of home and you are out of your country of home. And after ten years you come back home and you feel great and think, *wow, this is where I belong!* Similarly, if we purify ourselves from material desire then Krishna takes care of us, and we go home to the spiritual realm. Then there is joy because we are really with Krishna.”¹¹²

Samir Prabhu’s description of being away from home, returning to home, and feeling a sense of belonging at home is undoubtedly informed by his experience of immigrating to Canada. Yet, simultaneously, this passage emphasizes the longing for, or a *homing desire* for the “spiritual realm.” Samir Prabhu equates being with Krishna to a feeling of belonging and returning home.

Shivraj similarly referred to the idea of “home” to signal connection and a sense of belonging. When explaining his social circles in Montreal, he discussed how although he is not very close to his roommates, he has a friend at school who makes “Montreal feel like home.”¹¹³ Again, a direct connection is made between understandings of belonging and ideas of home, one that isn’t tied to a *longing* to return to a distant home, but rather a desire to cultivate a *sense* of home.

Moreover, a striking illustration of the significance of home within ISKCON’s South Asian diasporic imaginaries is captured in the following episode: One afternoon at the temple, while a devotee and I were seated upstairs, a couple along with their daughter entered the prasāda hall. The husband inquired about the timing of the lunch service, while further expressing disappointment that they had missed the *bhoga āratī* (afternoon worship). This encounter marked the beginning of a conversation with the family who had immigrated from

¹¹² Sami Prabhu interview, June 19, 2023.

¹¹³ Shivraj interview, May 21, 2023.

Pune, India in 2017. They explained that they were visiting from Thunder Bay, Ontario, with the hope of having *darśan* (sacred viewing) of the Montreal deities. As he shared their story, the little girl playfully ran towards us, introducing herself as “Radhika” – also the name of Krishna’s consort and goddess frequently worshipped within ISKCON. Her mother chimed in, explaining that they had “decided to name her Radhika after coming so much to the ISKCON temple in Thunder Bay and Toronto...” She continued, smiling: “[the temple] has really become our home away from home.” Here, the concept of home clearly transcends mere notions of homeland and the past, evolving into a metaphor for finding a connection and comfort in a new found place.

The above example raises the question: what is it that make ISKCON spaces a “home away from home”? As Marjo Buitelaar and Femke Stock (2010) explain, ‘home’ refers to a place that is stable, exclusive, and most importantly, familiar. Feelings of home can therefore be evoked through familiar habits, smells, or tastes, and are often anchored in certain objects or a category of people.¹¹⁴ At ISKCON Montreal, the greatest contributing factors which cultivate feelings of home amongst South Asian attendees is three-fold: *prasāda*, home programs, and *darśan*.

“Prasāda smells like home”

As discussed in Chapter 2, *prasāda*, or blessed food, is a key thread within the ritual tapestry of ISKCON. *Prasāda* is a “category of Hindu sacred food, emplaced within an interrelated web of Hindu socio-religious norms.”¹¹⁵ ISKCON’s institutionalized life, through daily rituals, weekly

¹¹⁴ Marjo Buitelaar and Femke Stock, “Making Homes in Turbulent Times: Moroccan-Dutch Muslims Contesting Dominant Discourses of Belonging,” in *Muslim Diaspora in the West: Negotiating Gender, Home, and Belonging* eds. Haideh Modhissi and Halleh Gorashi, (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 164.

¹¹⁵ Andrea Marion Pinkney, “*Prasāda*, Grace as Sustenance, and the Relational Self” in *Companion to Religion and Materiality*, ed. Vasudha Narayanan, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 414.

feasts, and yearly celebrations, fundamentally revolves around elaborate preparations of food and the offering of that food to god, wherein the food is believed to refine the senses.¹¹⁶ Indeed, food that has been offered to Krishna is believed to “increase longevity, purify the mind, and aid bodily strength.”¹¹⁷

At ISKCON, prasāda is freely distributed to all who come to the temple. It is always vegetarian and almost always includes *dhal*, rice, *rotis*, and *puris* (Figure 11). Reflecting on the significance of prasāda at ISKCON Montreal, Nandini explained:

“Here we have the reputation of having the most amazing prasāda and like everybody who visits, they know and can realize that it is the best... there was this monk who came from India and he went back and said to everyone ‘oh Montreal does the best prasāda in the world’... and you know we do it all as a service and prasāda distribution is the highest service there is.”¹¹⁸

Indeed, the historical development of ISKCON in the 1970s is directly linked to the distribution of prasāda. ISKCON’s food relief program, Food For Life (FFL), was started in 1974 and distributes free or by-donation food. Prabhupad’s famous motto for starting the program: “No one within ten miles of a temple should go hungry.”¹¹⁹

Today, ISKCON volunteers around the world have expanded the original effort of FFL into global networks of kitchens, cafés, and delivery programs. In Montreal, Bader, a non-South Asian devotee who himself immigrated to Montreal from the Middle East, is responsible for managing Chez Soma Rasa, Montreal’s low-cost prasāda delivery program.

The food at ISKCON Montreal was identified as key instigator for multiple research participants’ initial visit to the temple. One Sunday night, I sat to eat with Swathi, a young

¹¹⁶ Anna S. King, “Krishna’s Prasadam: “Eating Our Way Back to Godhead,” *Material Religion* 8, no. 4 (2012): 449.

¹¹⁷ King 2012, 450.

¹¹⁸ Nandini interview, June 7, 2023.

¹¹⁹ King 2012, 460.

Shivraj similarly emphasized how grateful he feels for prasāda and how ISKCON's reputation has been a motivating factor for him in attending and participating in the Sunday feast program: "Whenever I walk in through the temple doors it almost smells like my mother's kitchen in India... prasāda smells like home!"¹²¹ Here, drawing on his sensorial experience of the temple, Shivraj expresses his perceived association between the prasāda served at the temple, his mother, and home.

Reflecting on the importance of food in relation to the South Asian diasporic culture, Anita Mannur (2009) writes:

"Food, as a central part of the cultural imagination of the diasporic populations, becomes one of the most viable and valuable sites from which to inquire into the richly layered texture of how race is imagined and reinterpreted within the cultural arena both to affirm and resist notions of home and belonging."¹²²

At ISKCON Montreal, the connection between food and a sense of belonging exists through the sensorial and nostalgic elements associated with prasāda. Thus, the food distribution programs are both responsible for attracting attendees and igniting a sense of home for members of the South Asian diaspora. Moreover, the very act of sitting down with others to eat creates a community experience through which temple attendees meet, greet, and interact with another. Indeed, so many of my interactions with South Asian research participants, and other members within ISKCON Montreal, were centred around food. Overtime, these interactions offer opportunities for connection, the building of relationships, and eventually, a sense of belonging to the community.

¹²¹ Shivraj interview, May 21, 2023.

¹²² Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 8.

Most ISKCON events emphasize “free vegetarian food” in their advertisement. Yet, there rests some points of tension amongst both non-South Asian and South Asian congregational members at ISKCON Montreal, who feel that many people only attend the temple for the free food: “some Indians come here just on Sundays for free prasāda and don’t even come stay for the rest of the program!” proclaimed one devotee. This is still considered beneficial for the attendee, since “Prabhupada said that even if someone doesn’t love Krishna, by eating prasāda they will gain the benefits.”¹²³ Nevertheless, there is often a much higher number of people in the prasāda hall at 8pm than there are in the temple prayer room, where a lecture on the *Bhagavad Gīta* is given just forty-five minutes prior. Throughout the course of my research, quite a few temple-core congregational members expressed their frustration regarding the under-attended programs. One devotee shared their perspective on the matter, explaining:

“If the Indian people are coming it’s usually for prasāda, because not everyone comes for the whole program, and it shows... so having an influx of Indian population is okay but there has to be someone to guide them because some come to temple for prasāda and it’s like there’s a program to follow not just food and it is like, they aren’t really respecting what Prabhupad established because we have a full program so people can participate and take part in the rituals.”¹²⁴

Another core-devotee explained:

“Some come and go straight to prasāda hall... I have seen it and you know I understand the Indians come from their country and they don’t cook for themselves and they think they can come to temple for free food and it’s okay it’s prasāda but I hope they at least pay their respects to the deities... you have to offer something like its etiquette.”¹²⁵

Despite these frustrations, some core-temple congregational members do believe that South Asian congregational members will, over time, start attending not just for prasāda, but for the rest of the program as well:

¹²³ May fieldnotes, 2023.

¹²⁴ Devotee interview, June 2023.

¹²⁵ Devotee interview, October 2023.

“For now, the Indians coming for prasāda, it is their thing because that’s all they see it as but our hope is that maybe gradually in their hearts they’re like ‘oh maybe I should come and put in effort for something.’ We would never shame someone but we do try and give positive reinforcement. It’s like ‘oh congratulations you did this, you came for prasāda but how about next time you come at 5?’ Not like belittling them but encouraging them to come more.”¹²⁶

Prasāda is clearly an integral thread within the ritual tapestry of ISKCON. Throughout the temple’s institutionalized life food, prepared with devotion and offered to aspects of the divine, stands at the heart of daily rituals, weekly feasts, and annual celebrations. The familiarity and sensory experience associated with food at ISKCON contributes to a profound sense of belonging for members of the South Asian diaspora. Indeed, the scent of prasāda served at ISKCON Montreal evokes memories of home and family, offering a bridge, or entry, into the world of Krishna Consciousness. At the same time, the traditional South Asian food also unintentionally restricts the participation of non-South Asian devotees who might not be accustomed to such cuisines. The rich and diverse flavours of South Asian dishes, while a source of comfort and nostalgia for some, can be unfamiliar and challenging for those who did not grow up with them. Efforts to incorporate and promote culturally diverse prasāda was signified to me during preparatory fieldwork conducted at New York’s ISKCON temple, where an organizing devotee invited me to participate in a class aimed towards “newcomers.” To invite me in, the devotee exclaimed: “and you won’t have to eat the Indian food, we will serve you pizza!” This largely connects to Karapanagiotis’ ethnographic observations regarding the rebranding efforts in ISKCON which have been established to attract “westerner’s religio-cultural tastes and preferences.”¹²⁷ Also related are the rising tensions amongst certain core-members of the temple who are frustrated by South Asian attendees’ motivations for coming to the temple. These topics

¹²⁶ Devotee interview, June 2023.

¹²⁷ Karapanagiotis 2021, 175.

will be explored in the next chapter, titled “Multiple ISKCONs: Diversifying, Rebranding, and the Future of a Movement.” Throughout this section, I have outlined the complexities of prasāda within ISKCON, further emphasizing its role in constituting a sense of home and belonging amongst the South Asian diaspora.

Home Programs and Devotee Hospitality

While food is central to the institutional workings of the ISKCON Montreal temple, it is also an integral part of the events organized by ISKCON devotees *outside* of the temple, such as home programs, festivals, and kīrtan events. In this section, I focus on the significance of home programs where devotees gather, connect, and ultimately develop a sense of belonging. To do so, I draw from my fieldnotes capturing details of a home program at Madan Kishore and Amul Gopis’s residence, where more than fifty members of the South Asian congregation at ISKCON Montreal gathered in June of 2023. Madan Kishore and his wife Amul Gopis are dedicated to fostering a sense of community amongst the South Asian congregation. Both from India, they value the space of the temple and its power to bring people together in community. I have observed on numerous occasions how when a South Asian person or family enters the space of the temple, Madan Kishore makes it a priority to greet and welcome them in. On one occasion, we had planned to have an informal interview regarding his role at the temple, yet he was preoccupied speaking with a couple who had just recently moved from India. They exchanged numbers and he gave them a fresh new copy of the *Bhagavad Gīta*. While Madan Kishore has always been very kind to me, his busy schedule has not allowed for us to have a formal interview. Nevertheless, he has, on numerous occasions, invited me to home programs and events specifically held for the South Asian congregation, exclaiming, “you’ll see all the Indians who come!”

On June 2, 2023, I was invited to Madan Kishore and Amul Gopis' home for a special lecture from ISKCON Chowpatty teacher and monk, H.G. Chaitanya Charan Das. Madan Kishore generously arranged a ride for me and I was picked up by Raj, a young man between sixteen and twenty-one years of age, whom I had seen multiple times at the temple. Also catching a ride were two women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five, one of whom had immigrated to Montreal from Pakistan, and the other from India. The car ride was quiet – I introduced myself to the women and found that it was both of their first times attending a home program. Then, silence again. After about ten minutes, Raj began playing a mantra music on Bluetooth, and soon, the mahāmantra filled the car.

Arriving at Madan Kishore's home, there were a few shoes piled up at the door, though the low number of shoes signalled to me that the event was just starting. Inside the main room, near the kitchen, a large alter with two small deities, along with a larger figure of Prabhupada stood adorned with flowers. Madan Kishore's son played the mridangam while a young woman played the harmonium and chanted into a small microphone. Slowly, guests started to arrive, taking a seat on the plastic-covered floor, joining the ongoing kīrtan. The gathering was a testament to the diversity within the ISKCON Montreal community. South Asian families, children, couples without children, singles, and students from various backgrounds including Mauritius, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India came together and were each greeted by the hosts who ensured that every detail was in place.

The woman sitting next to me was carrying her baby and explained how it was her first time there – “Madan Kishore has been really encouraging me and my husband to come... we haven't been to anyone's house since we moved to Canada!” Both the mother and her baby were in beautiful outfits – the mother in a traditional North Indian saree while the baby wore a bright

green dress with flowers bejewelled on. Others, too, had come dressed for the occasion. Some brought offerings of fruit and flowers for the altar, while others gave gifts directly to Amul Gopi. Looking through the room, I realized that I and seven others were the only individuals of non-South Asian descent present, four of whom were core-devotees from the temple, and three of whom arrived right when the lecture began and left right as it finished. This suggests that the event was not for just anyone – it was specifically intended for South Asian congregational members, and non-South Asian devotees observed and responded to that.

The home program started with a three-hour kīrtan session and was followed by lecture, dinner, and more chanting. While attendees were mostly engaged in chanting or the lecture, there was opportunity for connection and communication as food was being shared. Women gathered around the kitchen island and operated in seamless synchrony, serving the various South Asian dishes and ensuring that everyone was served equally. A few guests had brought cake for dessert, and this was greeted with much excitement from the group. People laughed, conversed, many lined up to chat with the visiting teacher, and the children ran throughout the house and into the basement to enjoy prasāda. The program was homey, welcoming, and an opportunity for people to connect outside of the setting of the temple. Downstairs, a group of people sprawled on the couches, one full of young boys and another with middle-aged women. They spent their time laughing, sharing stories, and even indulging in some playful tickling. The scene highlighted the comforting feeling of home, community, and belonging, which had pervaded the gathering.

Home programs are a frequent occurrence, especially during the summer months when ISKCON teachers from around the world visit Montreal. While there are indeed home programs intended for non-South Asian congregational members within ISKCON, this section has predominantly centered its focus on programs intended to unite South Asian participants.

Drawing on their ethnographic fieldwork at ISKCON Chicago, Travis Vande Berg and Fred Kniss describe how ISKCON home programs are sites of education where core-temple devotees explicitly discuss the distinctions between Krishna Consciousness and Hinduism for “Indian devotees.”¹²⁸ However, it is important to emphasize that the role of home programs at ISKCON Montreal, based on my observations at multiple events, diverges from these established findings. Instead of outlining the differences between Hinduism and ISKCON theology, home programs in Montreal provide a unique opportunity for connection and interaction that extends beyond the confines of the temple. They are generally aimed towards community building and avoid discussions of religious or theological difference between Hinduism and the Gauḍīya Vaishnava tradition. Attendees discover a new sense of intimacy with one another within this setting. These home programs play a pivotal role in fostering a sense of belonging within a community that comes together to chant, learn, and dine together.

Deity Darśan as Key to Belonging

The third and most important element which contributes to South Asian diasporic member’s sense of belonging within ISKCON Montreal is darśan. In *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, Diana L. Eck (1998) explains how within Hindu ritual tradition, darśan refers to the religious seeing of the sacred. She further adds:

“When Hindus go to a temple, they do not commonly say ‘I am going to worship,’ but rather, ‘I am going for *darśan*.’ They go to ‘see’ the image of the deity [...] presented in the sanctum of the temple [...] The central act of Hindu worship, from the point of view of the lay person, is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image within one’s own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity.”¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Vande Berg and Kniss 2008, 88.

¹²⁹ Dina L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 5.

Similarly, at ISKCON Montreal, darśan is considered an important aspect of interacting and building a relationship with both the deities and the temple. I have encountered many South Asian devotees who come to the temple exclusively for darśan, whether it's during the morning program or at other times when the alter curtains are open and the deities are available for viewing. Devotees come with offerings, bow, and greet the figures on the alter. Often, during the Sunday evening lecture, many attendees ignore the lecturer and instead focus on the deities present on the alter – taking photos, offering prostrations, saying prayers, and observing the beauty of the figures.

Indeed, darśan is an important reason why South Asian devotees attend the temple more generally. When reflecting on the importance of darśan, Shivraj told the story of how the day after he secured an internship, he made sure to go to the temple to show his gratitude to Krishna and receive darśan. Another research participant explained how darśan is the main reason she comes to the temple and how she generally avoids coming here for festivals and the Sunday program, so she can take darśan in more quiet settings when the temple is not overcrowded.

The act of worshipping and taking care of deities is intricately connected to darśan. The ISKCON Montreal temple, as well as the many ISKCON spaces around the world, are centred around the worshipping of deities, where figures are bathed, dressed, fed, woken up, put to sleep, and generally taken care of. When reflecting on this intimate relationship, one second-generation South Asian-Canadian devotee described how when she used to live at the temple, she would get so excited when she would get up in the morning, knowing that she gets to greet each deity in her unique way:

“I would wake up so early, I was so excited, I would go and wake up and sing to the deities and it didn’t feel like it was me singing but that the deities were pulling out this voice that isn’t even mine out of my throat...”

Later, she emphasized the intimate relationship built between devotees and deities, which ultimately forms feelings of connection, a sense of understanding, and belonging to the divine:

“and it is a very personal thing you know having relationships with deities. If one has a sincere desire to know god then Krishna is merciful and kind and he descends in the forms of deity so we can worship him personally, dress him personally, we can offer incense and bathe him and offer service in some way. So whether you’re doing pujaṛī [deity worship] service or not, even if you’re cleaning or cooking or you’re just coming to get darśan of them or are talking to them, it is reminding you of your eternal relationship with god and the relationship you have with the spiritual world. It is a very magical experience and you feel like you really belong to the deity and the deity belongs to you.”¹³⁰

Thus, the very act of seeing and being seen by deities can ignite a sense of comfort. This connection is intimate and unique for everyone, some feel closer to, for example, Sri Radha-Manohara (Figure 12), while others feel connected to Sri Jagannatha-Baladeva-Subhadra (Figure 13). Nevertheless, seeing the deities can spark what Gaurangi explained as “the dormant love that all of us have in our hearts... darśan brings just an ounce of remembrance as you feel close personal connection with a deity.”¹³¹

Surprisingly, when discussing their intimate relationships with deities, almost all of my interlocutors emphasized how even though it might sound “crazy,” it is really a sense of connection that arises for them during darśan. One asserted:

“I must sound so crazy, and I know we sound crazy when we say stuff like that because it just looks like a statue that is stationary and it’s like how could someone have all these feelings and emotions and attachments but deities, they totally have their own lives...”¹³²

Another echoed:

“I think at first it sounds weird for people but like serving Krishna in the deity form is great because you can develop a relationship with god in your human body. We can’t actually perceive god but he appears in a material form so we can develop a relationship

¹³⁰ Devotee interview, October 2023.

¹³¹ Gaurangi interview, June 20, 2023.

¹³² Devotee interview, June 2023.

and have the chance to serve, and he accepts and really taking darśan and deity service is very powerful and that is what also heals too.”¹³³

Clearly, darśan offers an opportunity to create a personal relationship with temple deities. To more clearly situate the significance of deity worship at ISKCON, the following section examines the relationship between bhakti and belonging throughout ISKCON texts and philosophy.



Figure 12. Sri-Sri Radha-Manohara. International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) Montreal Facebook page, September 7, 2023. Screenshot by the author.

¹³³ Nandini interview, June 7, 2023.



Figure 13. Sri Sri Jagannatha-Baladeva-Subhadra. ISKCON Montreal website, Accessed January 4, 2024, <https://en.iskconmontreal.ca/les-deites?lightbox=dataItem-kaa3cnij3>

Ideas of Belonging in ISKCON Texts

This chapter began with a quote from H.G. Chaitanya Charan Das, an ISKCON teacher, author, and monk based in ISKCON Chowpatty in Mumbai, India. In his YouTube broadcasted lecture, Chaitanya Charan Das proclaims, “our belonging is more important than our belongings.”¹³⁴ In the video, he discusses the material nature of the contemporary world in which people constantly want more things, believing that acquiring more items will enhance one’s sense of belonging to a particular group. The need to belong comes from our deepest longing to be accepted, valued and respected, from the desire to love and to be loved, to fully belong. Chaitanya Charan Das is critical of those who “seek belongings to gain belonging” and proclaims that attaching our sense

¹³⁴ H.G. Chaitanya Charan Das, *Hare Krsna TV*, December 2, 2015.

of belonging to our belongings is a recipe for disaster. The moment we lose our status symbols, he explains, whether it's a phone or a fancy watch, we immediately feel shattered, not necessarily because the luxuries we can live without are taken away, but rather that the doors that have once opened us to elite circles close.

To escape the cycle of belonging through our belongings, and failing, Chaitanya Charan Das suggests we turn to Krishna, whose spiritual circle requires no exterior item or acquisitions. To support this claim, he turns to verse 4.35 in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which declares:

“Having obtained real knowledge from a self-realized soul, you will never fall again into such illusion, for by this knowledge you will see that all living beings are but part of the Supreme, or, in other words, that they are mine.”¹³⁵

The conceptualization of belonging to Krishna and being a “part and parcel of Krishna” is repeatedly emphasized through the wide breadth of ISKCON literature and personal narratives. For example, Gokulananda, a long time ISKCON Montreal devotee and direct disciple of Prabhupad, emphasized the connection between the physical bodily manifestations and its connection to Krishna:

“The soul is an expression of god and Krishna... we're like a little sample of Krishna and whatever is with us, it comes from him. Prabhupad would use the analogy of the sun ray – every sun ray and futon exactly has the heat and light of the sun, and so every soul has its entire nature as a sample of this source – the supreme soul of Krishna.”¹³⁶

In his commentary on verse 5.11 of the *Bhagavad Gītā As It Is*, Prabhupad further explains:

“A person acting in Krishna consciousness [...] has no false ego, for he does not believe that he is this material body, or that he possesses the body. He knows that he is not this body and that this body does not belong to him. He himself belongs to Krishna, and the body too belongs to Krishna.”¹³⁷

¹³⁵ A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Bhagavad-Gītā As It Is*, ed. Abridged (New York: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1971), 286.

¹³⁶ Gokulananda interview, June 12, 2023.

¹³⁷ Prabhupada 1971, 305.

Additionally, in *Perfect Questions, Perfect Answers*, Prabhupad expands:

“We are part and parcel of Krishna. We cannot be happy without being part and parcel of Krishna [...] we are part of Krishna; we must join Krishna. And you can join Krishna immediately by your consciousness, simply by thinking, ‘I am Krishna’s, Krishna is mine.’ That is all [...] Everything is generated by the energy of Krishna and everything is the energy of Krishna.”¹³⁸

Moreover, the importance of belonging in relation to bhakti was further emphasized to me by Gaurangi, as she shared a metaphor that clearly captures the significant aspect of belonging within bhakti at ISKCON:

“One quote we grew up with its like taking the metaphor of the bird, there is two of you, like Krishna the bird on the tree and then there’s you and Krishna wants you but we are looking everywhere else and trying to belong everywhere else but to him and that’s why we’re in this world because we want to belong elsewhere but like Krishna is just there and he’s like ‘no you belong to me.’ So, bhakti and belonging goes hand in hand and is experienced so differently but like my way is through my acts of service which makes it feel like okay I belong, but you should always affirm to yourself that you are bhakti and you belong to Krishna because the mind wants to push it back like no you have done all these things and so you don’t belong, and sometimes I feel like I have done so many things and like that I’m not good enough and I don’t belong but when you hear some lectures that are so affirmative like no matter what you do in your life you still belong to him because Krishna loves you so much so no matter how you perform your bhakti, you are allowed to make mistakes, and if your bhakti is dormant, it’s sitting there it doesn’t mean that you don’t belong, you still belong but it is all about reawakening the bhakti inside to remember that you belong. You belong to Krishna, and it is all about reawakening that spark of bhakti inside of you!”¹³⁹

Thus, the concept of belonging at ISKCON is rooted within a profound spiritual connection to Krishna and ultimately serves as the cornerstone of Krishna Consciousness. This understanding is deeply embedded into the spiritual teachings of ISKCON and the teachings of Prabhupad more generally. Ultimately, the interconnected relationship between bhakti and belonging challenges notions that external acquisitions are the key to belonging, and instead urges individuals to

¹³⁸ Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, *Perfect Questions Perfect Answers: Conversations Between His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada and Bob Cohen, a Peace Corps Worker in India* (New York: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1977), 39.

¹³⁹ Gaurangi interview, June 20, 2023.

anchor their sense of belonging to the divine. These philosophical presuppositions undoubtedly influence South Asian diasporic populations' understanding of their relationship to Krishna and the potential of that relationship to cultivate a sense of true belonging. Yet, the above statement from Gaurangi raises elements of uncertainty regarding a sense of belonging, rooted in phrases such as "I'm not good enough" and "I have done so many things." Although the devotee affirms that "no matter what you do in your life you still belong to him [Krishna]," there remain some questions regarding whether participants actually do *feel* like they belong within the world of ISKCON Montreal. The next section will explore topics of partial-belonging and not-belonging, to highlight certain aspect of ISKCON which influence the South Asian diaspora's experiences of belonging.

ISKCON's Challenges to Belonging: Not Belonging and Queer Identity

While ISKCON's philosophical underpinnings suggest that everyone inherently belongs to Krishna, the practical sense of belonging within the ISKCON Montreal community is not always straightforward. I have regularly observed instances of silence, detachment, and a sense of awkwardness amongst attendees at the temple. These subtle nuances reveal that the concept of belonging, while rooted in the organization's core beliefs, can manifest differently for individual members and is not always synonymous with a feeling of full inclusion.

During my research, many research participants and temple attendees chose to share personal reflections with me beyond our formal interviews. In many ways, these connections have transcended the typical boundaries of research-participant relationship, as some individuals sought emotional support and confided in me regarding their personal challenges at the temple. Some disclosed their feelings of discomfort about specific ISKCON members, as well as their dissatisfaction with certain aspects of the temple community such as its financial organization,

structure of programs, and leadership hierarchy. Overall, a recurring theme emerged, highlighting the perceived dissonance between the temple as a sacred place of worship, and the community as a welcoming and supportive environment, as articulated by these individuals. Ultimately, this underscores the complex dynamics of belonging within the community.

During formal interviews, research participants generally expressed positive sentiments when discussing their sense of belonging within ISKCON. However, one core-temple participant of South Asian descent shared their reflections regarding their place in the community and whether they *actually* belong. To ensure anonymity, I use gender-neutral pronoun “they” when referencing this research participant. When prompted to reflect on their understanding of “belonging,” this individual candidly revealed the intricate nature of belonging within ISKCON. Their experience navigating their queer identity has added complexity to their sense of belonging, often raising questions regarding their true connection to the community. They explained:

“I am part of the LGBTQ community and it’s a recent discovery for me and belonging has felt very powerful. So when I owned up to who I am and personally embraced my sexuality it felt really cool and having a beautiful support group [within the LGBTQ community in Montreal] has been so good. But then belonging was no longer a very simple journey for me within the movement, it’s like, well, do I actually belong? The philosophy says yes everyone belongs and a lot of devotees say that and it’s like okay but me as a person going through all my own things it’s like I don’t know if I actually belong here. The question of ‘do I still belong’ [is one that] I ask myself on a daily basis.”¹⁴⁰

Here, the research participant highlights how their understanding of belonging to the ISKCON community has shifted since they have been exploring their sexuality.

One of ISKCON’s regulative principles is no illicit sex, which only permits sex for the sole purpose of procreation. Otherwise, devotees are expected to refrain from sex outside of

¹⁴⁰ Devotee interview, June 2023.

marriage or outside of the purpose of having a child. Moreover, it is important to note that scholarship has not focused on LGBTQ+ identities at ISKCON. Rather, scholarship has mostly examine the positioning of women within ISKCON globally. Nevertheless, there has been much ISKCON open-access webpages discussing the topic of gay and lesbian relations.

A 2013 blog post from Govinda Dasi, an ISKCON author and Hawaii temple co-founder, explains an incident in the Montreal temple when Prabhupad shared his thoughts on homosexuality. In 1968, a young woman living at the temple had come to speak with Prabhupad about a problem she was having. As Prabhupad could not clearly understand what the issue was, he called on Govinda Dasi to help him interpret. The woman in question spoke about how as a celibate woman at the temple, she was finding it difficult be around all the other women, as they were sometimes only wearing slips when getting ready. Govinda Dasi writes that there was clearly a lapse in conversation and Prabhupad did not seem to fully understand what was being implied. Later, when the visiting woman left, Govinda Dasi explained to her guru: “In this country there are some women who are attracted to other women sexually, not to men. So she is having this problem and doesn’t know what to do about it.”¹⁴¹ Prabhupad quickly realized the issue, and responded:

“In India there are some such low-class men but not women [...] Just see, this sex life. Men to men, women to women. Men to women. Sex life is the bondage [...] the sex life between man and woman can be sanctified by marriage. That is the difference [...] this is very low class.”¹⁴²

In many ways, this account reflects the common perception of queerness and homosexuality in the 1960s, and moreover Prabhupad’s own upbringing. Indeed, as Rochford (2007) explains,

¹⁴¹ Govinda Dasi, “Srila Prabhupada Comments on Homosexuality,” *The Hare Krishna Revolution*, Wordpress, December 28, 2013, <https://harekrishnarevolution.wordpress.com/2013/12/28/srila-prabhupada-comments-on-homosexuality/>.

¹⁴² Dasi 2013.

multiple questions regarding the validity of Prabhupada's commentaries about women were raised following many derogatory statements made in his writings:

“Some pro-change women, in partnership with a number of academically trained ISKCON intellectuals, began to raise questions about Prabhupada's writings on women [...] Should Prabhupada's commentaries about women be considered eternal truths or products of his education and upbringing in India? Should Prabhupada's collective teachings be considered infallible, or were they subject to human error?”¹⁴³

When I asked interlocutors about LGBTQ+ identities at ISKCON, all of them assured me that everyone is accepted at ISKCON, as long as they have a desire to serve Krishna. Additionally, the phrase “we are not the body!” was frequently exclaimed as devotees tried to explain the “neutral” positioning of queer, trans, gay, and lesbian identities within ISKCON. Yet, the statement made by the research participant regarding their sense of not-belonging signals that for some, ISKCON's overall view of sex outside of procreation can lead to an exclusive environment that rejects sexual and identity exploration.

Considering the positioning of queer identities within South Asian diasporic communities, Krishnamurti (2021) illustrates the complexities that individuals experience:

“The narrative of diasporic belonging is challenged by people who remain marginalized within normative diaspora formations and fall outside of the heteronormative conventions; those who are at the boundaries of the diasporic community and also at the margins of the community at large. Queer people in diasporic communities experience this particular form of marginalization in a number of ways.”¹⁴⁴

Moreover, due to ISKCON's restriction against sex outside of procreation, if queer identities want to “play by ISKCON's rules” they are limited in how they can discover and explore their sexuality. Thus, when given the opportunity to discover inclusive LGBTQ+ spaces where exploration is allowed and even encouraged, a new sense of belonging is found. The research

¹⁴³ Rochford 2007, 153-154.

¹⁴⁴ Krishnamurti and Lee, 32.

participant who disclosed their questions regarding their positionality of belonging within

ISKCON concluded:

“There is a lot going on and it’s like no I do belong here and I love what I do and no one can take that away from me and I am the temple because I have a relationship with [the dieties] and I belong to the temple and every day I have to reaffirm that, like yes I belong at the temple, not just at ISKCON Montreal but ISKCON all around the world [...] but it is definitely not easy.”¹⁴⁵

Despite the challenges that can arise when navigating a sense of belonging within ISKCON as a queer individual, a personal relationship with the divine offers a source of certainty and affirms one’s belonging. In many ways, this passage can be likened to Samir Prabhu’s discussion of the homing desire to be with Krishna, which ultimately structures his understanding of belonging. This raises significant questions regarding the nature of belonging within ISKCON Montreal. For instance, is it tied to a specific physical place like the temple, or does it encompass a broader spiritual connection with god? Ultimately, this underscores the complexity of the diasporic experiences and the various dimensions through which individuals construct their sense of belonging.

Nevertheless, ISKCON’s traditional take on gender and sexuality does create restrictions and evokes feelings of exclusion amongst those exploring this aspect of their identities. These findings raise further questions regarding whether there are other aspects of South Asian diasporic identity that contribute to feelings of not-belonging within ISKCON. While this study has configured valuable insights into the complexities of diasporic identities within ISKCON Montreal, it also highlights potential gaps in research. Future analyses should explore questions of not-belonging, delving deeper into the multifaceted nature of belonging and how various

¹⁴⁵ Devotee interview, June 2023.

elements of South Asian diasporic identity intersect and influence one's sense of belonging within ISKCON.

Belonging in Bhakti: Concluding Reflections

This chapter has examined the relationship between bhakti and the experience of belonging amongst South Asian diasporic members at ISKCON Montreal. It has outlined a clear connection between ideas of home and a sense of belonging, suggesting that a homing desire for the “spiritual realm” is a foundational component to participation at the temple. In addition, this chapter has argued that feelings of home are a great contributor to understandings of belonging amongst South Asian diasporic populations at ISKCON. These feelings are attributed to three notable components at ISKCON: prasāda, home programs, and darśan. Reflecting on the lived experience of research participants, this chapter has outlined the importance of these themes in relation to research participant's sense of belonging. Moreover, by analyzing multiple forms of literature and teaching material from ISKCON leaders, I have argued that the concept of belonging is indeed foundational to ISKCON's philosophy. These philosophies assert that everyone is “part and parcel of Krishna” – we belong to him, and he belongs to us. This understanding of the intimate relationship and connection to Krishna inevitably influences the experience of belonging and creates affirmative avenues through which South Asian diasporic members can engage and bond with Krishna. Nevertheless, a few research participants demonstrated their sense of partial or not-belonging within the landscape of ISKCON Montreal, particularly concerning topics of queerness and sexual exploration.

To conclude, it is essential to acknowledge that this study has limitations and there are areas that require further exploration. Future research should consider the impact of various aspects of identity including sexuality, place of ancestry, and generational differences, in shaping

one's understanding of belonging with ISKCON. Recognizing these complexities is crucial not only for academic inquiry, but for promoting inclusivity and understanding within religious transnational religious communities.

Concluding Reflections:

Multiple ISKCONs and the Future of Belonging

Open Heart Kirtan Event, Kirtan du Coeur Ouvert, Espace Bhakti, Loyola Chapel, Concordia University, Montreal. June 22, 2023.

The chapel stairs led me to an unexpected scene: large platters of rice, dhal, and puri – a vegetarian feast prepared for attendees who have paid between \$25 to \$35 CAD to see kīrtan artists Gaura Vani and Krishna Kishore (Figure 9). The event, hosted by Espace Bhakti, exemplified the diversity of spaces and events that Prabhupad’s movement is engaged in. On this particular night, the focus was not so much on Prabhupad but more on the artists who had travelled from the United States. They sat on the stage with their companions, a mridangam, a guitar, a harmonium, a flute, and kartals.¹⁴⁶



Figure 14. Photo of the stage at Open Heart Kirtan Event, June 22, 2023. Photo taken by Phil Waheed. Kirtan du Coeur Ouvert Open Heart Kirtan Facebook event page. Screenshot by author.

¹⁴⁶ Kartals are hand cymbals used frequently to establish the beat during kirtan.

I attended the event with a friend who is connected to the Sivananda lineage. She is not a Krishna-bhakta, though she thoroughly enjoys kīrtan, ecstatic dance, and spiritual community gatherings and spaces. To her surprise, the night was filled with the mahāmantra in various tempos, tunes, and moods. In between songs, Gaura Vani told stories of Krishna’s past-times. The chapel pulsed with rhythmic clapping and shouts of “Hari Bol!”¹⁴⁷

It is impossible to overlook the great difference between this gathering and the happenings of the temple space. Although ISKCON Montreal had provided the food, most devotees who frequent the temple space were generally absent. Instead, the chapel was filled with attendees who make up the Francophone congregation of non-South Asian descent at the ISKCON Temple, and many others who I had never seen before. Absent, too, were images of Krishna that adorn the walls of the Montreal temple in the form of paintings, and the alter in the form of deities. Nonetheless, a few familiar faces were serving food and near the front door, some devotees engaged in book distribution had set up a table with a sign that read, “YOGA, MEDITATION, AND PHILOSOPHY BOOKS.” I spotted out Gaurangi from across the room and she ran to say hello. She was one of the very few attendees of South Asian descent present.

Multiple ISKCONs: The Future of a Movement

The proceeding account provides insight into a distinct facet of ISKCON, one that has not been thoroughly examined throughout the rest of this thesis. This event, hosted by Espace Bhakti, serves as a testament to the remarkable diversity that exists within the movement, highlighting the intricate interplay of culture, identity, and community dynamics within ISKCON. When examining the concept of belonging in relation to bhakti, various events at ISKCON underscore

¹⁴⁷ An utterance frequently used by ISKCON devotees and Krishna-bhaktas, meaning “sing the name of Hari.”

the movement's evident effort to offer a diverse set of spaces and events where individuals from a variety of different backgrounds can discover a sense of belonging.

In conversation with one of the main organizers of Espace Bhakti, he emphasized how important it is for him to introduce Krishna to those who might not have otherwise had an opportunity to know him. Moreover, he explained the challenges faced by some individuals of non-South Asian descent who, when entering the traditional space of ISKCON, may feel like they do not truly belong. Espace Bhakti, however, provides a venue for such groups to engage with the world of ISKCON in a different manner. This includes the types of food (prasāda) that are offered at such events, as well as the practices which, in these settings, focus on meditation, chanting, and dance, rather than deity worship.

Throughout the course of my research, I was introduced to various facets of ISKCON, including various programs and initiatives within the broader ISKCON movement. One such program is the Toronto Bhakti Academy, a live-in bhakti training program at the Toronto temple which offers an “immersive spiritual experience in a traditional Vedic ashram.”¹⁴⁸ A South Asian ISKCON devotee shared that the academy was established to facilitate a smoother transition into temple life for new devotees, primarily targeting “white-bodied people interested in bhakti.”¹⁴⁹ However, she noted that the program sees very few non-South Asian participants, with most enrollees being “brown-bodied.” The Bhakti Academy, in many aspects, mirrors a similar program in Gainesville, Florida known as Krishna House. While both provide Bhakti Academy

¹⁴⁸ “About Us,” Bhakti Academy, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://bhaktiacademy.ca/about#:~:text=The%20Bhakti%20Academy%20began%20in,terms%20are%20offered%20each%20year.>

¹⁴⁹ July fieldnotes, 2023.

for emerging students, Gainesville’s program differs slightly in that it offers students an opportunity to live in a spiritual community *outside* of the temple.

On a car ride back to Montreal after an ISKCON celebration in Ottawa, conversations arose with devotees about the various facets of ISKCON and the growing number of South Asian immigrants joining the movement. One devotee, who herself is of South Asian descent, expressed concerns about the need for diversity in membership to sustain the movement’s expansion, while another emphasized the importance of maintaining an active and engaged *traditional* temple community. Reflecting on the positioning of the ISKCON Montreal community, she highlighted its purpose which coincided with the need for traditional ISKCON spaces, stating, “That’s why something like Bhakti Academy would never be developed here [in Montreal]. The community is resistant to it and it is not what is needed.”¹⁵⁰ Later, she stressed that the main focus at ISKCON Montreal is preaching to Francophone devotees of non-South Asian descent.

Paula Richman’s (1991) edited volume *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* highlights the multiplicity of the Rāmāyaṇa tradition. The volume asserts that the Rāmāyaṇa tradition exists in multiple tellings, and that the “cultural uses of the Rāmāyaṇa are manifold and ever changing.”¹⁵¹ More than two decades later, Nell Shapiro Hawley and Sohini Pillai’s (2021) edited volume *Many Mahābhāratas* similarly emphasizes the many-ness of the tradition and how “the Mahābhārata story inherently invites more Mahābhāratas.”¹⁵² Parallel to these varied traditions, multiple ISKCONs exist, from the

¹⁵⁰ July fieldnotes, 2023.

¹⁵¹ Paula Richman, *Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 14.

¹⁵² Nell Shapiro Hawley and Sohini Pillai, *Many Mahābhāratas*, eds. Nell Shapiro Hawley and Sohini Pillai (Albany: State University of New York Press 2021), 3.

traditional settings of global ISKCON temples to affiliated centres such as the aforementioned Bhakti Centre in New York, the Mantra Lounge in Philadelphia, Krishna House in Florida, Bhakti Academy in Toronto, and Espace Bhakti in Montreal. Numerous destinations retreats led by ISKCON teachers such as Swami Radhanath further contribute to this diversity.

While acknowledging that ISKCON's significance as a movement differs from the broader impact of the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata traditions, it is essential to note that when scholars discuss the diversity of these epics, they do not use the language of “branding.” For instance, the Persian Adāb al-Muulūk (“The Etiquettes of Kings”), which incorporates parts of the Mahābhārata, is not viewed as an attempt to *market* the Mahābhārata story to the Mughals. Similarly, the well-known Amar Chitra Katha (“Immortal Picture Stories”), with over four hundred comics telling the stories of the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa, is accepted as a new telling – a fresh perspective on the tradition – rather than a branding effort. Thus, the question arises: Why should ISKCON's endeavour to diversify its tradition be perceived differently?

In *Branding Bhakti*, Karapanagiotis provides multiple examples illustrating the transformations taking place within ISKCON and emphasizes the significance of the Krishna West movement, led by Hridayanadna Das Goswami, in instigating this change. Hridayanadna Das Goswami argues that “if ISKCON devotees hope to attract westerners to the movement, they will have to create a separate space in the ISKCON house for them.”¹⁵³ Karapanagiotis goes on to suggest that initiatives such as Krishna West, or, in the case of this thesis, Montreal's Espace Bhakti, are akin to “creating a religiously comfortable room for westerners in the larger ISKCON house.”¹⁵⁴ This parallels the diverse translations of the Mahābhārata, which provide a place at the

¹⁵³ Karapanagiotis 2021, 194.

¹⁵⁴ Karapanagiotis 2021, 196.

tradition's expansive table for linguistically and culturally diverse audiences. The term "branding" takes an intriguing turn here, although Karapanagiotis also hints at "religious adaptations," offering a more positive perspective on the changing aspects within ISKCON:

"Equal in importance to making cultural changes in ISKCON for the sake of westerners' comfort, Hridayanadna Das Goswami argues, is making several key religious adaptations to the movement – adaptations aimed at making ISKCON's ritual worship more comfortable for them."¹⁵⁵

Karapanagiotis poses a significant question to ISKCON teacher Radhanath Swami regarding potential concerns surrounding ISKCON's western-focused rebranding programs running parallel to more traditional setting. Radhanath Swami responds:

"There are already two ISKCONs [...] There are *more* than two ISKCONs [...] and this is what Lord Caitanya preached actually [...] I hope that we can activate his philosophy, this philosophy of simultaneous difference in nondifference."¹⁵⁶

The changes occurring in ISKCON prompts questions about how scholarly investigations can provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolving dynamics within the movement. Recognizing the diversity within ISKCON's expanding landscape, Karapanagiotis deems scholars responsible for "representing ISKCON in its fullness and multiplicity in their own work on the movement,"¹⁵⁷ further highlighting that ISKCON is "no longer characterized (just) by temples [...] and that] it is therefore time for our scholarly maps to reflect that."¹⁵⁸ While this thesis predominantly focuses on the temple space of ISKCON, it has also offered the 'other side' of the narrative, drawing from the lived experience of South Asian identities involved within ISKCON Montreal. Nevertheless, I echo Karapanagiotis's call for future scholarship to explore the diverse landscapes of ISKCON, expanding our understanding of the movement's

¹⁵⁵ Karapanagiotis 2021, 194.

¹⁵⁶ Karapanagiotis 2021, 221.

¹⁵⁷ Karapanagiotis 2021, 229.

¹⁵⁸ Karapanagiotis 2021, 230.

multidimensionality globally. Additionally, I emphasize the need for future research to examine not only the various branches of ISKCON, but also the multiplicity of identities who navigate through the multiple worlds of ISKCON. As outlined in Chapter 3, these aspects of identity include but are not limited to sexuality, gender, place of ancestry, and generational differences. Investigating the significance of these themes within the everyday lives of ISKCON devotees and participants is essential for understanding the multiplicity of the tradition.

Thesis Summary

This thesis has examined the influence of bhakti on understandings of belonging amongst the South Asian diaspora at ISKCON Montreal. From the development of ISKCON as a movement which attracted members of the 1960s counterculture, to the rising numbers of South Asian participation, this study has identified the ways in which increased South Asian participation has led to certain shifts within ISKCON, such as the celebrations of Ram Navami and the worshipping of Durga in some ISKCON temples. Using methods of ethnographic participant observation and interview, this study offers anthropological insight into the relationship between bhakti and belonging within ISKCON Montreal. By focusing on the lived-experience of South Asian congregational members, this thesis has demonstrated the value of “ethnographies of the particular”¹⁵⁹ in formulating an understanding of the changing dynamics within transnational religious movements.

This thesis outlined how Quebec’s political and social landscape influences the everyday workings of the ISKCON Montreal temple, both in the physical structure of temple which used to house a United Church, and by bringing diversity to the languages used at the temple. The

¹⁵⁹ Abu-Lughod 1996, 153.

ISKCON Montreal temple signifies a unique case, as ISKCON devotees go out into the secular streets of Montreal for harinām, distinguishing themselves from other Hindu and other minority religions within Quebec. By providing an overview of the ISKCON Montreal temple, this thesis argued that sevā is fundamental in helping sustain the temple's daily operations, as well as devotees' daily spiritual practice.

Belonging is related to feelings of connection, inclusion, comfort, and acceptance. For diasporic communities, these feelings of comfort are often associated with ideas of "home." Indeed, in conversations with congregational members of South Asian descent at ISKCON Montreal, the significance of home was emphasized. Yet, these conceptualizations are not necessarily connected to a longing to return to a distant home, but are rather coupled with a "homing desire" for the divine and a desire to cultivate a sense of home in Montreal.

This thesis considered how key aspects of ISKCON Montreal evoke memories of homeland, and act as a way of cultivating feelings of home in the present. Chapter 3 discussed three key contributing factors which cultivate feelings of belonging amongst the South Asian diaspora, namely prasāda, home programs, and darśan. Prasāda, or blessed food, leads to sensorial experiences, which contribute to a profound sense of belonging for members of the South Asian diaspora, as prasāda offered at the temple almost always consists of South Asian dishes and recipes. This thesis further emphasized the significance of home programs directed towards the South Asian congregation at ISKCON where families, children, couples, singles, and students come together and discover a new sense of intimacy outside the walls of the temple, further fostering a deep sense of belonging amongst attendees. Darśan, or the act of seeing and being seen by the divine, also contributes to understandings of belonging within ISKCON Montreal.

This thesis examined the positioning of belonging as a concept within ISKCON philosophy and texts. Following H.G. Chaitanya Charan Das's assertion that "our belonging is more important than our belongings," this thesis argued that the concept of belonging serves as the cornerstone of Krishna Consciousness, where devotees are encouraged to anchor their sense of belonging to the divine. Numerous research participants emphasized the intricate connection between bhakti and belonging within ISKCON, repeating that we are all "part and parcel of Krishna."

Based on the lived-experience of some South Asian participants at ISKCON Montreal who, despite growing up within the ISKCON community, feel a sense of not-belonging due to their queer identity, this thesis outlined the complex nature of belonging within ISKCON Montreal. I have emphasized how when asked about LGBTQ+ identities, my interlocutors assured me that ISKCON does not discriminate against individuals and that one's sexual orientation is of no concern to the temple. Yet, one research participant's feelings of not-belonging to ISKCON due to their queer identity, as well as previously published accounts of Prabhupad's views on homosexuality, raise questions about how those who fall outside of the heteronormative conventions find, or do not find, a sense of belonging within ISKCON. Thus, this thesis underscores the complexity of the diasporic experience, calling for future analyses to examine how various aspects of identity intersect and influence one's sense of belonging within ISKCON.

Closing Reflections: Bent Down in Humility

In November of 2023, I attended Prabhupad's disappearance anniversary program at ISKCON Montreal. Devotees gathered at the temple to show their gratitude for Prabhupad and to celebrate his legacy. The program consisted of āratī, chanting, dancing, guru puja, and an extravagant

prasāda. The mood of the day was tender and generally quiet, as most devotees were observing a fast until noon – a customary practice for Prabhupad’s disappearance day. During guru puja, devotees gathered pink and red petals and offered them to Prabhupad’s figure (Figure 10). Afterwards, everyone gathered around his figure, with an opportunity for devotees to share some words about their feelings towards the founder of ISKCON. Some shared their favourite sayings and phrases of Prabhupad’s, while others explained how deeply their lives had been touched by his initiatives. Samir Prabhu recounted some stories he had heard in the early years about Prabhupad and his travels. In all of these reflections, one theme was repeatedly reiterated, both in regard to devotees’ feelings towards Prabhupad and Prabhupad’s own attitude towards his work: the importance of humility.

Indeed, the theme of humility stands as a central pillar in Prabhupad’s teachings. Through multiple letters, purports, and prayers, Prabhupad consistently underscores the importance of humility on the path of bhakti. In a prayer titled Mārkinē Bhāgavata-dharma, Prabhupad writes: “My dear Lord Krishna, You are so kind upon this useless soul, but I do not know why You have brought me here. Now You can do whatever You like with me.”¹⁶⁰ This multi-verse prayer was sung during Prabhupad’s disappearance day in both Bengali and English, outlining the devotee’s complete surrender to Krishna’s desires and needs.

¹⁶⁰ “Mārkinē Bhāgavata-Dharma,” Vedabase, accessed January 7, 2024, <https://vedabase.io/en/library/spl/1/markine-bhagavata-dharma/>.



Figure 15. Prabhupad's figure with flower petals around his feet, Prabhupad Disappearance Day, ISKCON Montreal Temple, November 17, 2023. Photo taken by author.

John Fahy reflects on the significance of humility for devotees in Mayapur. In a section titled “Bent down in humility,” Fahy discusses a dynamic that I frequently encountered during the course of my research, where temple participants, when questioned about their affiliation with ISKCON, would *deny* that they are devotees. Instead, individuals often return to a standard narrative of humility by describing themselves as “aspiring devotees,” or, on one specific occasion, explaining that perhaps in the next life they will be a devotee. Some would ask me to pray for them so that they could become a devotee. This signifies, as Fahy describes, that for ISKCON devotees “humility is not a stage they pass through, but an affection disposition that they must cultivate over the course of a lifetime.”¹⁶¹ Ultimately, the importance of humility on

¹⁶¹ John Fahy, *Becoming Vaishnava in an Ideal Vedic City* (New York: Berghahn, 2020), 70.

the spiritual path was established by Caitanya, who reportedly said, “A person with all good qualities is bent down with humility, like a tree full of fruit.”¹⁶²

In reflecting upon the importance of humility within the lives of my interlocutors and the fundamental principles of ISKCON, I find it essential to express my own humility in relation to this thesis. Throughout the course of this study, I have come to learn that each step in unraveling the tapestry of bhakti and belonging only reveals more and more layers yet to be explored. My understanding stands in constant flux, shaped by the humility to admit that the more I delve into this subject, the more I recognized the vast expanse of what I have yet to comprehend.

By focusing on the lived experience of South Asian congregational members at ISKCON Montreal, this thesis humbly highlights the pivotal role played by ISKCON in fostering a sense of home and familiarity for individuals of South Asian descent in Montreal. Simultaneously, it underscores the significance of belonging within ISKCON’s philosophy and offers a historical overview of ISKCON’s beginnings. In sum, the Sri Sri Radha Manohara temple is a place of worship that brings together a variety of different identities, from Francophones of non-South Asian descent to members of the South Asian diaspora, providing an opportunity for individuals to develop a relationship with bhakti. As I have attempted to document and reflect upon in this thesis, the positioning of the South Asian diaspora at ISKCON Montreal is marked by both feelings of alienation and connection, reflecting the intricate dance between bhakti and belonging.

¹⁶² “Real Humility,” Krishna, accessed January 2, 2024, <https://www.krishna.com/real-humility>.

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