

The Role of Faith and Religion in The Lives of Destitute Women in Vrindavan.

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Abstract: The paper will explore how faith and religion can have significant role in the lives of poor women in the city of Vrindavan, India, a city with spiritual significance and a large population of widows who have been abandoned. The article examines lived experiences of 50 women using thematic analysis and focuses on personal experiences of widowhood, abandonment, isolation, and experience of faith-based practices. Through semi-structured interviews, the study establishes how religious beliefs and practices impact on their emotional and psychological resilience in the face of socio-economic adversities. The interaction of spirituality and coping, marginalization in society and the role of support systems are the main themes. Findings show that religion is two-fold as a source of comfort and a fortification of norms. The study contributes to the body of knowledge on the interaction of gender, religion, and destitution in India..

Keywords: Widowhood, Faith, Religion, Vrindavan, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, Destitute Women

Introduction

In India, widowhood and old age abandonment are one of the most severe forms of gender marginalisation. Even with laws and social welfare programs, thousands of women are still being ostracized, losing their property, and being rejected by their families after losing their husbands or husbands have divorced them. Many of these women travel to sacred places like Vrindavan, Varanasi, Mathura for dignity, shelter and spiritual solace. Vrindavan in particular has become a symbolical place of refuge for the destitute women because of its association with Lord Krishna and the Radha-Krishna cult of bhakti (Mishra & Sharma, 2019). According to estimates, there are more than 10,000 widows and abandoned women in Vrindavan, many of whom reside in religious institutions and temples or on the street, receiving meager pensions, charity and religious alms. These women tend to come with a history of trauma, economic hardship, and social stigma, stemming from cultural beliefs that link widowhood to inauspiciousness. Faith and religion are not an afterthought in this context, but are integral to their daily life and psychological health (Srivastava & Gautam, 2024; Rana & Misra, 2010).

Vrindavan is a special place in the Hindu religious consciousness as the place of Krishna's eternal abode. The temples, ashramas and the regular kirtans in the city provide an atmosphere where personal suffering can be understood through divine love (prema bhakti) (Aarthimeena & Subbulakshmi, 2024). In the case of many poor women, worship of Krishna and Radha is less about ritual than about an alternative relational world that is not one of abandonment or cursing, but one of choice as devotees. This phenomenon has led to some important questions regarding the psychological and existential role of religion among highly vulnerable people (Priyadarshini & Pande, 2021; Pandey & Gupta, 2019).

The socio-economic conditions of the widows of Vrindavan have been recorded in the literature but there is a lack of understanding of their subjective, lived experiences of faith. Most studies have taken a quantitative or sociological perspective and have tended to see religion as a static variable as opposed to a dynamic, meaning-making process. There is a dearth of research on the inner psychological experiences and interpretations of these women, especially in the context of their relationship with the divine in the face of chronic adversity, using qualitative phenomenological approaches (Thomas, 2021; Ranjan, 2001).

Migration of desperate women to Vrindavan is a complex phenomenon of socio-cultural, economic, and religious factors. Social stigma Widowhood in India is frequently associated with extreme social stigma, especially among the conservative Hindu population, where widows traditionally have been considered inauspicious and are not allowed to participate in social and familial interactions (Hasan, 2013; Khanna et al., 2022). Women who are widows can be abandoned by the family, deprived of property rights, and left without money, as they are often not given inheritance or the right to financial autonomy because of cultural norms (Auyero, 1999; Kubendran, 2020). Vrindavan is a refuge to many who seek to get away from rejection by society and poverty. The spiritual nature of the city provides a socially acceptable environment in which widows can spend the rest of their days in piety, which is the Hindu ideal of renunciation at an advanced age or widowhood. Moreover, Vrindavan has many ashrams and temples, where alms, food, and shelter can be received, and it is a convenient place to survive (Maitri India, 2023; Yadav & Rani, 2025). The hope of spiritual salvation by worshipping Krishna attracts women who need meaning and purpose in their loss, since the religious ecosystem of the city will sustain them physically and emotionally through charity and community (Sharma, 2014; Taneja, 2022).

Krishna bhakti is the devotional worship of Lord Krishna and has a significant impact on the lives of these women, who are emotional, psychological, and social beings. Vrindavan is a very religious place with its main religious culture focused on Bhakti, a spiritual way that focuses on love, surrender, and personal connection to the divine. In the case of impoverished women, engagements in activities like chanting the name of Krishna, singing bhajans (devotional songs), and attending temple rituals provide relief to their emotional state and a sense of belonging, which is otherwise a lonely experience of being a widow or an abandoned woman (Maitri India, 2023). Krishna, a god who is usually portrayed as kind and approachable, becomes an icon of salvation, and his words in the Bhagavad Gita are focused on devotion as a way of salvation (Eck, 2012; Solmanraj, 2022; O'Rourke, 2004). To these ladies, bhakti offers them a new identity as devotees, and they no longer have to face the stigmatised status of a widow or an outcast. Nevertheless, the role of bhakti is not that straightforward, as religious requirements, e.g., wearing white or following the code of asceticism, can enhance patriarchal restrictions, restricting individual agency (Trivedi et al., 2009; Dutt, 2018). The social nature of bhakti, in terms of group worship and life in an ashram, leads to resilience and a sense of belonging, but dependency can be reinforced by a dependency on religious charity, which demonstrates the way that religion can enable and limit people (Shukla et al., 2020).

This study uses thematic analysis to examine how desperate women in Vrindavan perceive and interpret the roles that faith and religion play in their lives. The study sheds light on the spiritual dimensions of the lives of widows, abandoned women or widows and those who practice Krishna bhakti through their narratives by concentrating on the emotional, psychological, and social implications of spiritual life, listening to women. The research context will help the researchers and writers to contribute to both feminist literature and phenomenological literature by giving voice to these silenced women, filling in the gap in comprehending how religion has further helped them to be resilient and face challenges in a sacred but patriarchal society. The study aims at shedding new light on the relationship between faith, how a person is treated in society, and support systems through in-depth interviews of 50 women of India, which may provide answers to underlying aspects of gender, religion, and social justice in India.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The situation of poor women in Vrindavan, India, especially widows, is a complicated combination of gender, religion, and socio-economic marginalization in the context of the Indian society. Vrindavan, a holy city which is considered the birthplace of Lord Krishna, is home to thousands of marginalized women who find spiritual solace and survival in the face of rejection in society (Mishra & Sharma, 2019). This literature review is a synthesis of literature on socio-cultural processes of widowhood, dual role of religion in empowerment and constraint, and efficacy of support systems, which forms the basis of the study of how faith and religion influence the lived experiences of destitute women in Vrindavan through a Thematic analysis perspective.

Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Widowhood in India

Widowhood in India, especially among the Hindu societies, is characterized by a high level of social stigma and isolation due to patriarchal societies and religious interpretations. (Wacquant, 1996) highlighted that with more than 40 million widows in India, systemic marginalization of widows is in the form of loss of social status, economic deprivation, and family desertion. Widows are usually viewed in a poor light by the cultural norms, leading to practices like wearing white, shaving heads, and not attending social gatherings that only perpetuate their loneliness (Dutt, 2018). In Vrindavan, the city has religious significance, which means that widows have to live in asceticism as a method of worship (Mishra & Sharma, 2019). According to Chen (2000), widowhood deprives women of their identities to where they are rendered to a state of liminality outside the family and community system, a situation that is more pronounced among women who move to Vrindavan following their rejection.

This marginalization is worsened by economic issues; widows are often denied the right to property or pension because of legal and bureaucratic issues, which throws them into poverty (Thomas, 2021). The move to Vrindavan is also a survival strategy for many since the city is home to ashrams and temples that provide alms and shelter (Maitri India, 2023). In another discussion, Banerjee and Ray (2020) also consider the interaction between caste and class with widowhood, indicating that lower-caste and poorer widows are subject to greater discrimination and have to rely on religious charity to survive. These works highlight the systemic injustices that compel impoverished females to Vrindavan, putting their experiences into a wider social and economic picture.

The Dual Role of Religion in Vrindavan

Religion, especially Krishna bhakti (devotional worship of Lord Krishna), is more of a mixed blessing in the lives of the destitute women in Vrindavan, an instrument of empowerment as well as a tool of restraint. Bhakti is a Vaishnava-based approach and focuses more on personal devotion, emotional attachment to Krishna, and provides women with a sense of purpose and identity (Eck, 2012). This paper records how ashram practices, including chanting, singing bhajans, and getting involved in temple activities, give emotional support to widows and connect them on a social level in the ashrams of Vrindavan (Maitri India, 2023). These practices reverse the solitude of widowhood, which can be understood through Haberman's (2013) argument that bhakti is a democratic form of spirituality that does not recognize inequalities in society, and thus deprived women were able to seek a devotional identity.

However, religion also perpetuates patriarchal norms that constrain women's agency. Dutt (2018) offers an argument that gender roles are supported by religious beliefs in Hindu society, and the anticipations of widowhood asceticism and subservience contribute to the widow's psychological distress, including depression and anxiety. Priyadarshini and Pande (2021) explain how the religious culture in Vrindavan imposes visible signs of widowhood, such as white robes, and stigmatize women and restrict their social interactions. Likewise, Sen (2019) criticizes the romanticization of Vrindavan as a spiritual sanctuary, saying that religious charity is commonly a dependency, women are trapped in poverty cycles and hierarchies are reinforced. These results emphasize the contradiction of religion as a source of solace and oppression to desperate women (Pande, 2020).

iii. **Support Systems and Interventions.**

Government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have put in place measures to address the issues of the poor women in Vrindavan, with some success. The Project Jeevan by Maitri India (2023) is a project providing shelter, healthcare, and vocational training to widows, with the emphasis on dignity and empowerment. However, Thomas (2021) is of the opinion that the work of the government is sabotaged by structural barriers, such as lack of pensions and property rights, and most women are left to fend off informal charity. According to Sulabh International (2020), the widows do not have access to social welfare schemes because of bureaucratic obstacles and lack of documents.

These gaps are often filled by NGOs, and their strategies are not devoid of criticism. According to Banerjee and Ray (2020), although NGOs offer necessary resources, they often neglect the spiritual aspects of widows, concentrating on material support rather than cultural or religious assimilation. This alienation is important in Vrindavan, where women are defined by faith (Maitri India, 2023). Moreover, that interventions do not work to tackle the intersectional issues of caste, class, and gender, which restricts their effectiveness with the most marginalized women (Sepulveda-Loyola et al., 2020).

iv. **Phenomenological Approaches to Marginalization and Gender.**

The qualitative research methodologies, especially the phenomenological approaches, provide a good understanding of the lived experiences of marginalized women, which fits into the thematic analysis framework of this study. Siddiqi (2021) proposes the use of phenomenological research to understand gender inequality as a socially constructed phenomenon, where the focus was on the subjective interpretation of women. Thematic analysis is the most appropriate to use when analyzing personal meaning-making in a situation of adversity, and thus it is the best to study the experiences of destitute women in Vrindavan. Recent research, like that of Kumar and Gupta (2022), uses phenomenological lenses to understand how marginalized women in India are resilient and discover that spiritual practices are essential in dealing with social exclusion. These articles offer methodological and theoretical justification to explore the role of faith and religion in the emotional and psychological life of impoverished women.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design of this study is a qualitative research design based Thematic Analysis to examine the experiences of destitute women in Vrindavan. Thematic analysis is also suited to study the ways in which people construct meaning of their personal and social worlds, especially when it comes to marginalization (Braun & Clarke, 2016).

The sample will be composed of 50 women who will be chosen out of a bigger group of survey respondents to guarantee the diversity of socio-economic backgrounds, age, and isolation levels.

A variety of experiences such as widows, abandoned women and those with different levels of family neglect will be captured using purposive sampling.

Research Setting and Participants

The research is carried out in Vrindavan, the city of religious importance and a great number of widows who are destitute. The participants are women who are residing in ashrams or shelters and have been widowed, abandoned, or neglected by their families. The inclusion criteria will be women who are aged 35 and above and practice religion and are destitute. The sample will be diverse in terms of caste, economic status, and length of stay in Vrindavan to bring diverse views.

Data Collection Tools

The data will be gathered using semi-structured and open-ended interviews, which will enable the participants to discuss their experiences in detail and be flexible enough to capture emergent themes. A guide to the interview will involve:

Personal accounts of widowhood, abandonment, or neglect of family.

- Isolation and treatment in society.
- Emotional and psychological problems (e.g., depression, loneliness).
- Government or NGO support programs experience.
- Their religion and faith in their everyday life.

The interviews will be carried out in Hindi or local dialects with a trained interpreter, where necessary to make it culturally sensitive and accessible.

Interview Process

To ensure that the participants feel secure, interviews will be held in a private and comfortable environment, i.e., ashram common areas or NGO facilities. The interviews will take about 60-70 minutes and will be recorded with the consent of the participants. The semi-structured format will enable the participants to lead the discussion, and there will be some prompts to address their spirituality and emotional experiences. The researcher will be non-judgmental and empathetic to establish trust and open sharing.

Data Management and Analysis

All audio data will be safely stored in encrypted devices. The transcriptions will be made verbatim in the original language and translated into English to analyze and back-translated to check accuracy. The anonymity of the transcripts will be preserved, and pseudonyms will be used to preserve the anonymity of the participants. All data will be stored in a secure server that will be accessible to the research team only.

Step-by-Step Implementation of Braun & Clarke's Thematic Analysis

STEP-1: Familiarisation with the data

All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim (Hindi → English) by the first author, preserving pauses, laughter, and emphatic intonations in the transcripts. The research team (first and second authors) read and reread the full transcripts and field notes to immerse themselves in the material and record initial analytic impressions. At this stage, the team produced reflexive memos documenting emergent ideas, notable language, and contextual details.

STEP-2: Generating initial codes

Transcripts were imported into NVivo to facilitate systematic coding. Two researchers independently performed open coding on an initial subset of transcripts ($n \approx 10$) to capture segments of interest related to social isolation, stigma, religion, economic vulnerability, and coping. Coding was semantic and interpretive where appropriate (i.e., capturing both explicit meanings and latent significance). All codes were kept deliberately close to participants' language at this stage to retain grounding in the data.

STEP-3: Searching for themes

The coding team met in an iterative fashion to compare codes and group together codes that are related to create higher-order candidate themes. Codes were grouped together in NVivo queries and code tree visualizations, and tentative labels were suggested for the themes (e.g., "Charity as Help and Humiliation", "Broken Identities", and "Faith as Comfort or Cage"). Initial grouping decisions were guided by the socio-ecological framework, but were still data-driven.

STEP-4: Reviewing themes

Two passes were made to review candidate themes. First, the coded extracts of each theme were analysed for coherence and distinctiveness within the theme. Second, a purposive sample of full transcripts was used to test candidate themes to ensure they reflected the range of participants' experiences and that no major patterns were missed. The team combined themes that were very similar, divided themes that were quite diverse, and redistributed codes as needed during a review.

STEP-5: Defining and naming themes.

The team went through several rounds of refinement and then had analytic meetings to reach consensus on final theme names, definitions, and scope. Analytic memos were prepared for each theme, which included (a) a clear definition of the theme, (b) representative quotations from the participants, (c) codes and sub-codes, and (d) notes on the relationship of the theme to the socio-ecological model and to previous literature. Themes were selected to be short, but to capture the analytical focus, such as “Unseen in Public,” which is not a descriptive phrase.

STEP-6: Make the report

The final step was writing theme narratives which incorporated verbatim quotations, analytic interpretation, and connections to theory and previous research. If translation was done, the Hindi word was kept in the transcript and the English translation was included in the manuscript with the English version checked by the bilingual team member for meaning.

Measures to enhance rigor and transparency

Researcher triangulation: Two researchers independently coded transcripts and discussed discrepancies until consensus on the codebook was reached.

Codebook and audit trail: A living codebook (in NVivo) documented code definitions, inclusion/exclusion rules, and coding examples; all coding decisions and memoed reflections were retained as an audit trail.

Peer debriefing: Preliminary themes and analytic memos were discussed with two external qualitative researchers and with NGO partners who work with widows to assess plausibility and contextual fit.

Saturation and analytic sufficiency: No substantially new themes emerged after reviewing approximately 40 interviews; however, all 50 interviews were analysed to ensure depth and diversity of accounts.

Reflexivity: Researchers maintained reflexive journals to note how their positionality might shape data collection and interpretation; reflexive comments informed analytic decisions and are reported where relevant.

Transparency about software: NVivo was used to organise transcripts and support coding; final theme development and narrative writing were carried out through iterative team meetings rather than relying on software outputs alone.

Researcher Reflexivity & Positionality: The researchers acknowledge that their educational and socio-economic backgrounds differed from the participants, which may have influenced rapport and disclosure. To mitigate this, interviews were conducted in familiar old age home settings, with an emphasis on non-judgmental listening. Reflexive memos were maintained to monitor biases, assumptions, and emotional responses throughout data collection and analysis.

Ethical Considerations

An institutional review board provides ethical approval. Informed consent is obtained, which clarifies the purpose of the study, its voluntariness, and confidentiality. Respondents have the freedom to drop out at any time without repercussions. Since the issues of abandonment and mental distress are sensitive, a referral system has been developed with local NGO counselors to support those participants who require it. Respect for religious practices ensures cultural sensitivity.

RESULTS

The analysis revealed four key themes, each with subthemes, indicating the role of faith, marginalization, social and psychological factors in shaping the life experiences of these destitute women in terms of faith. These themes are labeled and justified by quotes of participants and descriptions which explain how faith, marginalization, social and psychological factors affect the life experiences of these desperate women.

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The women were diverse in age, length of stay in Vrindavan, language and education as indicated in Table 1. The majority of them were aged, illiterate, and had lived in Vrindavan a long time. These attributes offer important background on how spiritual practices, social exclusion and coping strategies are displayed in their everyday lives. These demographic data give valuable background to the thematic results below.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Destitute Women in Vrindavan (N = 50)

Variable	Category / Statistic	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age	Mean $\pm$ SD	71.4 $\pm$ 7.8	-
	55–64 years	12	24.0
	65–74 years	21	42.0
	75–84 years	13	26.0
	85+ years	4	8.0
Marital Status	Widow	38	76.0
	Abandoned by family/husband	12	24.0
Duration in Vrindavan	Mean $\pm$ SD	12.6 $\pm$ 4.9	-
	5–10 years	18	36.0
	11–20 years	27	54.0
	21+ years	5	10.0
Education	Illiterate	39	78.0
	Primary education	8	16.0
	Above primary	3	6.0
State of Origin	Uttar Pradesh	22	44.0
	Rajasthan	9	18.0
	Bihar	7	14.0
	Madhya Pradesh & Others	12	24.0
Type of Shelter	Government Ashram	24	48.0
	Private/Temple Ashram	18	36.0
	NGO-run Shelter	8	16.0
Primary Income	Government Pension	29	58.0
	Charity & Donations	21	42.0
Common Health Conditions	Arthritis / Musculoskeletal pain	32	64.0
	Diabetes / Hypertension	23	46.0
	Sensory impairment (Vision/Hearing)	19	38.0

These are the themes bearing the given names, and being backed up by quotes provided by participants and the explanations provided after the analysis.

Faith as Comforter and Aspect of Identity: The participants explain religious activities and devotion to Lord Krishna as being the key sources of emotional comfort, meaning, and a new sense of identity. Women in Vrindavan, a city descended to as the birthplace of Krishna, practice daily rituals in the form of chanting the Hare Krishna mantra, prayer in temples and bhajans (devotional songs). Such practices make them change into devoted women, instead of being widows or forsaken women on the periphery and they feel their belonging and meaning in loss. Yet, tension is also present among some women, since the religious demands, like putting on white or following ascetic standards restrict personal agency and reinforce traditional roles.

I chant the name of Krishna 108 times in the morning; it soothes my heart and makes me feel that I am a part of Him and not a widow that no one wants. (Participant A)

They tell me I have to wear white and be quiet in the temple, that it is my home now, and I feel that I am losing the person I used to be. (Participant B)

Analysis: The women define faith as a lifeline that reestablishes identity and gives them emotional stability whereas the researcher views that as a coping mechanism built in the bhakti culture of Vrindavan. The results are consistent with those of Maitri India that show devotional practices bring about a community and sense of purpose among widows. Nevertheless, as Priyadarshini and Pande (2021) state, religious standards such as asceticism may limit the freedom of women, supporting the patriarchal norms. This theme unveils the two-sidedness of faith: it allows women to gain power by providing them with spiritual shelter and, at the same time, binds them into the conventional structures, directly discussing the role of religion in their emotional and social lives.

Societal Marginalization and Stigma: The participants feel deep marginalization by the society because they are widows or abandoned women, and according to the Hindu culture, they are considered inauspicious. They are excluded by social and familial structures in Vrindavan, where they are sometimes referred to as feeling invisible or dehumanized. They are isolated by religious symbols like white clothes or shaved heads that indicate them as outsiders. Women have reported that they are deprived of both social gatherings, economic opportunities or even of basic respect, and this makes them more dependent on the religious institutions and charities to survive.

My family claimed that I was unlucky when my husband passed away and in Vrindavan, people avoid me because I wear a white sari, as they would not consider me a human being. (Participant C)

The priests also feed me at the temple but look down on me like I am a burden and not a human being. (Participant M)

Analysis: These women internalize the stigma in the society, understanding their exclusion as an indicator of their reduced value. The author relates it with the results of Thomas (2021) regarding the systemic discrimination against widows in India, where patriarchal norms are promoted by religious interpretations. The theme emphasizes the role of the religious symbols, which, although the focus of the spiritual culture of Vrindavan, serve to strengthen marginalization by visibly identifying women as other. This fulfills the study goal of comprehending the role of societal treatment, showing how religion not only maintains the social order of Vrindavan, but also contributes to the exclusion.

Psychological struggles and Strength: The participants are exposed to severe psychological issues such as depression, loneliness, and grief due to the loss of spouses, family support, or social status. Societal stigma and financial poverty contribute to these struggles. Nonetheless, practices associated with faith like group prayers and ashram activities can bring about resilience by giving a sense of community and purpose. Women explain how their religious practices relieve them of sense of desperation, although some report the sense of internalized guilt due to cultural discourses that hold widows responsible of their predicament.

I lost my husband and family; there was nothing left in me when I started singing bhajans with other women in the ashram, it fills my heart and keeps me moving. (Participant E)

I cry in the night, why God sent me to this life, but praying to Krishna helps me to live another day. (Participant F)

Analysis: IPA shows that women interpret their psychological challenges in a spiritual context, considering religion as a source of strength. The researcher understands this as an agency in action in which the religious activity contradicts the despair, reminiscent of the result of learned helplessness in widows by Dutt (2018). Nevertheless, the continued feeling of guilt and depression shows that faith is not sufficient to deal with systemic problems such as poverty or stigma. This theme answers the research question directly by demonstrating that religion helps in enhancing emotional wellness and how it is limited in completely alleviating deep-seated psychological pain, which are formed by cultural and social restraints.

Navigation of Support Systems: Interviews with government and NGO support systems, including shelters, health services, and vocational training are explored and tend to be out of touch with their spiritual needs. NGOs such as Maitri India offer the much-needed resources, including food and medical services, which women cherish to survive. But they complain that their religious ways of life, like visiting temples, or getting spiritual guidance, are not highly involved in these programs. Government handouts such as widow pensions are mostly unavailable owing to red tape, non-existence of documentation, or knowledge, and women have to survive on alms, or ashram charity.

The NGO provides us with a bed and meals, but they do not know why I have to pray at the temple every day. It is what keeps me alive. (Participant G)

I attempted a pension, but they had sought documents I do not possess. I now beg about the temples to keep me alive. (Participant H)

Analysis: The eyes of women, support systems can be seen as essential but partial, and that material needs take precedence over spiritual needs at the core of their identities. The author attributes this to the critique that was provided by Thomas (2021) about systemic barriers and the focus on holistic empowerment by Maitri India. The results indicate that there is a discrepancy between what the women are going through and external interventions, and faith forms one of the major coping mechanisms. This theme can be used to respond to the research question of examining the interactions with support systems and the necessity of culturally sensitive programs that combine spiritual well-being and practical help.

Table 2. Theme and Analysis

Theme	Subtheme	Code	Participant Quote	Analysis
Faith as Solace and Identity	Spiritual Solace	Chanting for peace	<i>"Every morning, I chant Krishna's name 108 times. It calms my heart and makes me feel I belong to Him, not just a widow no one wants." (Participant A)</i>	Chanting and devotional practices provide emotional comfort, countering the pain of widowhood by fostering a sense of divine connection.

	Redefined Identity	Devotee role transformation	<i>"I'm not just a widow here; I'm Krishna's devotee. The temple gives me a new name, a new life."</i> (Participant B)	Devotion to Krishna redefines identity, replacing social stigma with a spiritually empowered role, enhancing belonging.
	Tension with Religious Norms	Ascetic restrictions	<i>"The temple is my home, but they tell me I must wear white and stay quiet. It feels like I'm losing who I was before."</i> (Participant C)	Religious norms like asceticism constrain personal agency, creating conflict between spiritual empowerment and cultural limitations.
Societal Marginalization and Stigma	Social Exclusion	Family rejection and invisibility	<i>"My family said I bring bad luck after my husband died. In Vrindavan, people see my white sari and turn away, like I'm not human."</i> (Participant D)	Family and societal rejection isolates women, stripping them of social identity and reinforcing cultural exclusion.
	Stigmatizing Symbols	Marked by white clothing	<i>"The white sari marks me as a widow. Everywhere I go, it's a sign I don't belong."</i> (Participant E)	Religious symbols like white saris visibly stigmatize widows, amplifying their exclusion from social spaces.
	Internalized Stigma	Self-blame for curse	<i>"I feel I'm cursed sometimes, like my husband's death was my fault."</i> (Participant F)	Internalized cultural narratives lead to self-blame, deepening psychological distress, and reinforcing marginalization.

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Psychological Struggles and Resilience	Emotional Pain	Grief and loneliness	<i>"I cry alone at night, wondering why God gave me this life. But praying to Krishna gives me strength to face another day."</i> (Participant H)	Profound loss and isolation cause depression, yet faith provides strength, highlighting the tension between pain and coping.
	Faith-Based Resilience	Bhajans for fulfillment	<i>"After losing my husband and family, I felt empty. Singing bhajans with other women in the ashram fills my heart and keeps me going."</i> (Participant G)	Group devotional practices foster resilience and community, counteracting emotional emptiness through shared faith.
	Internalized Guilt	Punished by fate	<i>"Sometimes I think I'm punished for something I did. Why else would I be alone?"</i> (Participant I)	Cultural beliefs blaming widows for their fate lead to guilt, exacerbating psychological struggles despite faith-based coping.
Navigating Support Systems	NGO Support	Material over spiritual needs	<i>"The NGO gives us a bed and meals, but they don't understand why I need to pray at the</i>	NGOs provide essential resources but neglect spiritual needs, creating a gap between material aid and women's

			<i>temple every day. It's what keeps me alive."</i> (Participant J)	faith-based identities.
	Government Barriers	Bureaucratic obstacles	<i>"I tried for a pension, but they asked for papers I don't have. Now I beg near the temples to survive."</i> (Participant K)	Inaccessible government support due to bureaucracy forces reliance on informal systems, perpetuating poverty.
	Reliance on Charity	Dependence on alms	<i>"The ashram gives me food and a place to stay, but I still need alms from pilgrims to buy medicine."</i> (Participant L)	Charity from ashrams and pilgrims sustains survival but fosters dependency, highlighting systemic support gaps.

Discussion

The research is about the role of faith and religion in the lives of 50 poor women in Vrindavan, India, with the Thematic analysis being used to shed light on the experiences of these women. The results grouped into four themes, Faith as Solace and Identity, Societal Marginalization and Stigma, Psychological Struggles and Resilience, and Navigating Support Systems, show that Krishna bhakti, societal forces, psychological issues, and support systems interact in a complex way to shape the emotional, social, and spiritual lives of these women. These findings are synthesized in the discussion and linked with the existing literature, answered the research question, and implications of the findings to policy, practice, and future research are discussed taking into account limitations.

The theme Faith as Solace and Identity points to the way Krishna bhakti has offered emotional comfort and re-identification of self to desperate women changing them into widows who are stigmatized into Krishna devotees. The participation of the participants in chanting, bhajans, and temple activities promotes a feeling of belongingness and meaning, which is consistent with Maitri India (2023) findings that devotional activities are community-building processes in Vrindavan. The idea of bhakti as a democratizing way of spirituality, as explained by Haberman (2013), reinforces this, whereby people are expected to offer their devotion to Krishna and be free of social hierarchies, which would provide marginalized women with a spiritually enabled position. Nonetheless, the sub theme of conflict with religious norms demonstrates restrictions, where the idea of asceticism (e.g., wearing white) limits the agency of individuals, which is also close to what Dutt (2018) writes about the ways in which religious norms uphold patriarchal gender roles. This duality answers the research question by demonstrating that faith gives women emotional and social strength and at the same time reinforces the cultural restrictions.

Societal Marginalization and Stigma identify the extreme level of marginalization of participants with family rejection and stigmatizing signs such as white saris making them invisible. Such results are similar to the work by Priyadarshini and Pande (2021), who focus on widowhood as social exclusion,

where cultural norms consider widows as unlucky. The subthemes of internalized stigma whereby women fault themselves because of what they have is in line with the idea of widowhood as liminal status by Chen (2000) which deprives women of identity and value. This work expands on the position of Thomas (2021) demonstrating how religious imagery in Vrindavan enhances stigma, as it addresses the research question by demonstrating that religion, despite being a source of comfort, reinforces social exclusion by vivid displays and cultural narratives.

The article Psychological Struggles and Resilience portrays the emotional burden of widowhood and abandonment, where participants were depressed and lonely but managed to cope with faith-based practices. The Faith-Based Resilience subtheme with the help of group bhajans and prayers supports the findings of Kumar and Gupta (2022) on the topic of spirituality as a coping strategy of marginalized women. Nonetheless, internalized guilt, when women are punished by fate, echoes the findings of Dutt (2018) of the learned helplessness resonating in widows. These results answer the research question by demonstrating that Krishna bhakti is beneficial in decreasing psychological distress by using community and devotion, but not fully removing guilt due to cultural blame, which highlights that faith is helpful but has its limits.

Navigating Support Systems shows how spiritual needs of participants are not met by NGO and government interventions which are material-focused. Although NGOs such as Maitri India (2023) support shelter and medical services, respondents are annoyed by the lack of focus on religious practices, which validates the argument by Banerjee and Ray (2020) regarding interventions that do not take into account the spiritual aspect. Such barriers to government, including inaccessible pensions, are consistent with the conclusions of Thomas (2021) and Sulabh International (2020) regarding bureaucratic barriers, requiring one to depend on charity as Sen (2019) mentions. This theme answers this research question by showing that support systems, as important as they are, do not incorporate faith, which forms an important aspect of the identities of the women, thereby putting them at a disadvantage.

All of these themes reveal that Krishna bhakti is a major driver in the lives of women, providing comfort, a sense of identity, and strength, yet is limited by the stigma surrounding it and the lack of support structures. By using the thematic method (Braun & Clarke, 2006), foregrounding the interpretations of the participants is guaranteed, which will give a multi-faceted understanding of the role of faith in the lives of the participants in a patriarchal but sacred setting.

Policy and Practice Implications

The results are dismal to policymakers and practitioners dealing with the destitute women in Vrindavan. The empowering nature of faith implies that interventions must incorporate spiritual well-being with material support. NGOs would be able to integrate bhakti practices, like group bhajans or access to temples, into their programs. The ethical considerations in the study should focus on training the staff on cultural sensitivity because this would guarantee the respect of the devotional identities of participants.

To overcome societal stigma, there must be a wider societal transformation, such as problematizing cultural discourses that define widows as unlucky. The inclusivity would be encouraged with the help of public awareness campaigns, which would be backed by religious leaders in Vrindavan, as Krishna bhakti is regarded by Eck (2012) as the unifying force. The economic dependency on charity would be lowered by policy reforms that would ease access to pensions, property rights, as suggested by Thomas (2021), and allow women to live with dignity.

The mental health issues that the findings reveal are significant and show the need to have accessible mental health services. Increasing referral networks through NGO counselors, as done in this study, and training ashram staff in simple psychological first aid may help to treat depression and guilt, especially in women who internalize stigma. These would increase the resiliency, which will be complementary to the supportive role of faith.

Limitations

There are language barriers with Odia or Bengali speakers in Odisha and West Bengal, and an interpreter is needed, which may lose the nuances of the narrative, even with the back-translation. Participants (aged 80+) with health problems (hearing or fatigue) give less expressive answers, which also restricts the depth of data. The authorities of old age homes are strict and require a representative.

Future Research Directions

Future studies may overcome such limitations by increasing the sample size or incorporate women belonging to a variety of religious groups in Vrindavan like the other practises of Hinduism or other religious communities as a way of contrasting the role of spirituality in different settings. Longitudinal research might examine the effects of faith on the experiences of women throughout the years, especially when intervention changes. Such comparative research to other Indian cities, such as Varanasi, also where widows find refuge would put the unique religious ecosystem of Vrindavan into context, as proposed by Mishra and Sharma (2019). Also, quantitative studies may serve to complement Thematic analysis by quantifying the level of psychological distress or access to support systems to offer a larger picture on the predicament of destitute women.

Conclusion

The work illuminates the broad but complex role of faith and religion in the lives of poor women in Vrindavan, and answers the research question based on the Thematic analysis emphasis on lived experiences. Krishna bhakti is a source of solace, belonging and power, but is constrained by social stigma and lack of support networks. By placing the voices of women at the center, the findings contribute to the feminist literature and phenomenological literature by breaking the existing discourses of widowhood and advocating culturally respectful interventions that integrate the strength of spiritual and material empowerment. The discussion points out that the poor women of Vrindavan must be treated as a whole, in order to enable them to lead dignified lives and become strong members of a marginalized society.

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