

“Research is what I'm doing when I don't know what I'm doing.”

- Wernher von Braun

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This is to certify that the work incorporated in this report entitled ‘Women in and through Brindaban’ submitted by the undersigned Research Team was carried out under my mentorship. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

“Women In and Through Brindaban” focuses on exploring the association between Brindaban and Women and, understanding the impact of this space on women and their notions of womanhood. The two focal points of this research are the place Brindaban and Women, along with the explanation on how they are interlinked. In order fulfill our objectives, personal stories and narratives of women were collected which proved to be much more insightful than the conventional way of interviewing.

The report begins with illustrating the role of Radha-Krishna in shaping the understanding of the town. Moreover, it also looks at how introduction and addition of new belief systems and people contribute to the transformation and identification of Brindaban over time. Brindaban constitutes of not only Indian women but women from all over the world. The main source of this tourist attraction is the identification of Brindaban as Radha’s town or as a place where no one ever goes hungry. The above facts have been highlighted by the media for several years now. Therefore women, destitute or well-off, educated or illiterate, widowed, married or even unmarried choose to come to Brindaban.

The report continues to elaborate on the patterns of migration of women to this place which are supported with reasons for these migrations, obtained from the narratives. Our research also reveals the origin of Radha as a fictitious character and very importantly, establishes the association between Brindaban and Women since the mythical and historical times. The report also explains how to identify the notions of womanhood from the narratives and establishes that women are not always victims of oppression but also have agency and ability to adapt and mould situations in their favor.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Radhe Radhe!

I came to Brindaban 17-18 years ago. When I was on my way here on the road, I was all alone. I came walking. Walking! Orissa is very far! 1200 kilometers! My children visit, but my husband doesn't come that much. He used to come but I prayed to God, 'Prabhu, please don't bring him here.' I was afraid his visits would weaken the strength in my relationship with Krishna. That is why I should be left alone with God. I didn't even say anything. I had just prayed to God, 'Please don't bring him here.' I live with Radha Rani now.

(Laxmi maa. Personal interview. 2014)



Figure 1: Laxmi maa greets us

One common image of a woman in India is that she is a passive victim of patriarchy¹. But is it only India? Devdutt Pattanaik in his interview asks the question, “Which epic in the world treats women fairly?” He responds by saying, “not the Illiad, not the Odyssey, not the Bible, not the Mahabharata.” He justifies the above statement by explaining how these stories existed in a patriarchal set-up and are mostly written by males. Moreover, God in nearly all religions is depicted in male

¹ Pande, Manisha. "In World of Patriarchal Epics, Sita Had Extraordinary Powers, Says Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik." *DNA*. DNA, 26 Nov. 2013. Web. 27 Feb. 2014.
<<http://www.dnaindia.com/other/interview-in-world-of-patriarchal-epics-sita-had-extraordinary-powers-says-mythologist-devdutt-pattanaik-1925315>>

forms. The numerous stories and myths from the epics of various religions contribute in shaping the mind of the masses. And what are these stories? – Buddha deserted his wife and child in search of freedom from suffering. Confucius viewed women as subservient to men. Vedanta *acharayas* such as Shankara and Ramanuja viewed women as merely temptations. Ram upheld values that proved to be unjust to his own wife. Krishna is known to have multiple wives but he never married Radha. Epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata have significantly shaped the Indian thought for about 2,500 years². And what do these stories say about us? That we do not advocate fidelity or that male is the superior gender? Well, neither. It is the perception of the reader that answers these questions. For instance, politicians continue to speak about Ram in a manner that portrays him as a righteous man who rescues his wife from evil and at the same time he fulfills his social responsibility of being a king. This is unlike the view of feminists, who view Ram as the source of Sita's victimization. Everyone reads with an agenda. And it is not only women who yearn for a fair society; but everyone who is a part of it. The patriarchal trend that our country has been known to follow for the past several years have only been questioned in the 20th century³. The number of studies or researches done in relation to women, their living conditions, their association with men etc. has increased in the past few years. This has given rise to multiple varied perspectives on women. One such perspective we came across during our pre-field research was Brindaban being referred to as the 'City of Widows'. The article we read this in highlights the poor living conditions of the widows in Brindaban. It shaped our understanding of the place as part of our pre field research. It was not until Dr. Dalia Wahdan showed us a complete different way to look at the space that we shifted our research focus from widows to Women in Brindaban. The term 'widow' is a socially constructed designation for women in association to men. The fact that a woman's identity is looked at in association to men to such an extent that it defines most of their life, encouraged us as a group to find out why and how exactly this happens. Therefore we began our exploratory journey to Brindaban.

² Pande, Manisha. "In World of Patriarchal Epics, Sita Had Extraordinary Powers, Says Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik." *DNA*. DNA, 26 Nov. 2013. Web. 27 Feb. 2014.

<<http://www.dnaindia.com/other/interview-in-world-of-patriarchal-epics-sita-had-extraordinary-powers-says-mythologist-devdutt-pattanaik-1925315>>

³ Ibid

Walking down the bustling streets of Brindaban, amidst fading *bhajans* and wandering devotees, we found ourselves in the middle of dialectical beliefs; questioning why precisely women from all over come to Brindaban. Yes, Brindaban is known for its mythical association with Krishna. It is also considered holy by all branches of Hinduism, particularly Vaishnavism and *Gaudiya Vaishnavism*. Brindaban is known as the epicenter of Radha-Krishna's love. It is known to be the replica of heaven on earth. Brindaban acts like an anchor to our heritage, drowned in myths and stories that are still believed by people. One such myth is that Krishna till date resides there. Adding to this is Brindaban's geographical location that maintains its image as sacred or pious. Brindaban falls in the *Brajadham* which is considered to be a holy space in itself. It is commonly believed that Lord Krishna grew up in Brindaban. The relationship he shares with Radha is all at once spiritual and divine. Over the years, Radha has evolved in to a goddess in her own light and is now a symbol of sacrifice, surrender, true service and unconditional love. Today, Krishna and Radha are worshipped together in Brindaban, to remind everyone of a divine and loving relationship. Another very significant part of Brindaban and our research are the people of Brindaban. The faith that people possess and show in this town is what makes up the essence of the town. According to the early texts, Brindaban has commonly been depicted as a town with values of humility, generosity, devotion, love and simplicity. However, over the years it has transformed in to much more than just that. The transformation of this space is influenced by the flow of people in and out of the town, introduction of new and modified belief systems and the change in thought to some extent. Brindaban is a town where people with dialectical belief systems reside and work together towards their individual paths.

Studying a place this rich in culture and beliefs that are followed so religiously even today is almost overwhelming at first. However, moving away from conventional routes such as studying a certain community or tribe, an art or dance form, this space, what constitutes it and the factors that define it caught our attention. Moreover, being a group of mostly girls served as another strong reason to study this particular topic. Therefore our research question is to explain the relation between Women and Brindaban and to further understand if or not this religious space impacts the lives of the women living there or passing by.

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTION

Our research question has been structured in such a way that it highlights the two key aspects that we majorly focused on during our study: The place Brindaban and Women and, how the two are interlinked. Hence our research question is:

To explore the association between Brindaban and Women and to understand to what extent this space has impacted their lives and shaped their notions of womanhood.

Aims and Objectives:

We have devised our aims and objectives in such a way that will help us gain a better understanding of our research question. We went with a more holistic approach by looking at the two key aspects of our study from multiple perspectives.

-To explain the belief systems prevailing in and the impact of recent globalization to the understanding of Brindaban

Womanhood cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the religious myths, beliefs and changes of this temple town.

- To trace the historical association between Brindaban and Women and to analyze why women continue to come to this space

In our preliminary research, we often came across Brindaban being referred to as the “city of widows”. This led us to question whether there exists a relationship between this space and women and how far it dates back. It also got us curious to know what attracts these women to Brindaban.

-To understand the changes that have occurred in Brindaban and assess their impact on women.

We came across numerous articles about modernization in Brindaban and thus this made us wonder about its effects and impact on the lives of the women living there.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

“If you steal from one author it is plagiarism; if you steal from many it is research”

- Wilson Mizner

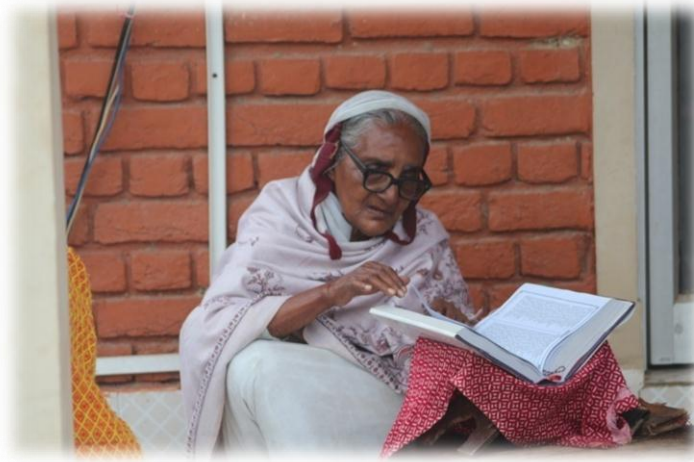


Figure 2: Reciting the Bhagvad Gita

This topic originated as a result of group discussions over the concept and theme of womanhood. In order to get an idea of concepts in gender studies, Dr. Dalia Wahdan, an anthropologist referred “**Seeing Like a Feminist**” by Nivedita Menon to us. The book introduces feminism and the feminist research approach to us, breaks stereotypes and then goes on to compare nude makeup to social order, both of which require “faithful performance of prescribed rituals”⁴ repeatedly during “one’s lifetime”⁵. She emphasizes on the striking and “complex networks of cultural reproduction”⁶ that she theorizes has an influence on social order as well. In order to introduce her theory clearly, she describes the feminist perspective which we found extremely helpful in our research as it helped us to understand the lives women lead, their respective realities and the “powerless position”⁷ that they occupy. Our main learning from her book is that in our research, it is imperative for us to “understand that different identities, located hierarchically as dominant or subordinate, are produced at different times in different spaces, but also to be aware particularly of the

⁴ Menon, Nivedita. *Seeing Like a Feminist*. New Delhi: Penguin Group, 2012. Print. Page vii

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid Page viii

processes of gendering”⁸. To elaborate, many women whom we interviewed retold their histories through insightful accounts about how their self-perception and identity went through a process of change and deeper understanding at specific time periods- such as traveling from their father’s home to their husband’s, and then finally finding their way to Brindaban- from which we further understood that their identity was not greatly shaped by their hierarchical socio-economic status, but more so by these time periods that were defined by life-altering events and the spaces these women occupied at that time. We then adopted her explanation of gendering - “ways in which people are produced as ‘proper’ men and women through rules and regulations of different sorts; some of which are internalized, some of which have to be violently reinforced”⁹ -in order to probe the women we interviewed them and to gain an in-depth and varied insight into what has shaped their womanhood we let them tell us their story without asking them too many specific questions. Nivedita Menon stated in her book that, “Gendered power relations oppress women and prevent them from attaining their full potential”¹⁰ which we found to be true, yet we also found that women have been able to develop constructs for themselves wherein they manipulate the oppression they are subjected to, in their own favor. Yet having read on, her musing regarding- “When are women to be considered as **victims** needing protection, and when as active **agents** engaging with power and carving out their own spaces?”¹¹, was very fundamental and moreover, a question we came across in our own research, due to the popular belief that the sexualities of young and widowed women are dangerous.

Furthermore, the author’s concept of “commodification of the female body”¹² interests us. Initially a Marxist theory, we found that we were able to incorporate it into our research. For example, we closely looked at how Radha Rani Worship has brought in pilgrims who contribute to the commercialization of Brindaban, and how, when women are married, they are used as the sole domestic help, for procreation and status.

⁸ Menon, Nivedita. *Seeing Like a Feminist*. New Delhi: Penguin Group, 2012. Print. Page ix.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid page 175.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid page 176.

The data we collected on field is very similar to Nivedita Menon's literature in her book, so it helped us structure our perspectives. For example, we found and identified with the author's finding that women create multiple identities for themselves through their work and lifestyles yet they all trickle down to how "Poverty and limited education are conditions that push women into labor markets at an early age"¹³. Moreover, our findings further coincided with the women of Brindaban's mechanism of choice- "limited but still, exercised within possible limits"¹⁴. For example, in one of the narratives we collected, an eighteen year old woman was forced into a marriage with a seventy year old man. However, after getting married she completely rejected her marriage to him. She did not live with him, she threw away her *mangalsutra*, she did not wear *sindoor* or bangles and in fact anything else that was an indicator of being married. So in one sense she did not have a choice in her own marriage, in the other sense she rejected that marriage completely.

"For most women, isn't marriage far more of a compulsory institution (and compulsory form of work) than any other?"¹⁵ Nivedita Menon used the example of bar dancers who protested against the right to livelihood when the government banned their profession from which we draw a parallel and question the practice of widows singing at ashrams in order to earn for themselves and whether their marital status has an influence in this. Was this their last resort, just as the women who were brought to Mumbai after being promised domestic work and they found themselves working in bars, whose situation we found, was similar to women who migrated to Brindaban due to lack of social and financial support?

"Seeing Like a Feminist" has certainly opened our eyes to certain enlightening concepts and has also aided us in evaluating our own data. Referring to her book for information about research methods, perceptions and treatment of women in India, their current social, economic and legal status has greatly assisted in our study.

After understanding a little about the feminist approach we had further discussions over what would be the ideal topic to study under womanhood. Through those discussions we realized that categorizing and identifying women based on their

¹³ Menon, Nivedita. *Seeing Like a Feminist*. New Delhi: Penguin Group, 2012. Print. Page 181.

¹⁴ Ibid. Page 183

¹⁵ Ibid. Page 184.

marital status is a common practice. Widows become victims of this practice; although widowhood is not unique to India, the way it is practiced is quite different. Widow ashrams as separate, isolated spaces, wherein women are simply displaced to an absolutely new physical space, intrigued us. We started looking at places in India where this is practiced. We referred to **“The Bengali Widows of Varanasi”**, an article written by Swati Ghosh on her study conducted to assess the link between the social transformation in Bengal in the 19th century to the Bengali widows flocking in religious destinations such as Varanasi and Brindaban. It refers to concepts such as the emergence of the Nationalist Patriarchy in Bengal in the 1800’s and also the century long practice of sending a section of women, the widows, into social oblivion in the name of religion.

On the death of her husband, a widow is considered to be “half dead”. During the social transformation of Bengal, the emerging nationalist patriarchy was engaged at shaping the new role model for women as ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ and as widows lost their reproductive abilities; they were pushed out of society. It was assessed that most of the prostitutes in Bengal at that time were widows and often illicit relationships and adultery were associated with young widows. Widows were not marginalized but ostracized. As widows played no part in the transformation or even in society, they were sent not just anywhere, but to religious places so as to ensure their religious commitment to the Bengali male populace.

This article is extremely resourceful and has added much to our understanding of widows in context of Indian Society. Although this cannot be generalized to the whole of India, it helps us understand how practices in our country are so often justified based on religious sanction. It had also risen so many questions that we addressed during our field trip as to why the seemingly oppressive practices still prevail and by whom. It helps us understand how human relationships have been shaped by modernity, especially in the context of the social transformation in Bengal during the British rule. Some other important questions it raised for our project are whether this is the only reason for women to come to Brindaban, what else led them there and how has it shaped Brindaban.

On the order of the Supreme Court, The National Commission for Women, Delhi was directed to inquire into the plight of the widows living in Brindaban. They

were ordered to conduct a comprehensive survey on the age group of the widows, their family backgrounds and all other information that is relevant for the purpose of the court. **“Study on Widows of Vrindavan”** is the result of this order and was drafted in 2009. It is an exhaustive survey documenting the state of widows in Brindaban in the form of statistical data.

Having been ordered by the Supreme Court, the survey was done with the purpose of assessing government aid and intervention in the lives of these widows. Hence, the information pertains to the living conditions, economic background, health care, education, skill sets and marital status of the women, so as to assess the grey areas where government aid is needed.

Though the study only describes the physical state of the women, and more specifically widows, it has been extremely helpful in facilitating our understanding of the women in Brindaban and giving us an idea of the kind of lives they lead. It has provided us with information of important sites for primary data collection such as the *bhajanashrams*. It has also helped us understand government intervention in Brindaban and the role it plays in the lives of these women. Further, it has led us to contact Governmental and Non-Governmental organizations in Brindaban, some of which became our primary locations of conducting research. It also gives us insights into some of the reasons why women are attracted to this particular town. Thus, this study provided us with a good framework, when we were conducting research in terms of analyzing quantitative data.

Religion and belief systems are an integral part of Brindaban and the lives of women in this research. These belief systems have almost been internalized in their lives. Owen Lynch, in his book, **“Divine Passions- The Social Construction of Emotion in India”** writes extensively about the holy and emotional scenes of India. However, only found the tenth chapter- ‘Hare Krishna, Radhe Shyam: The Cross Cultural Dynamics of Mystical Emotions in Brindaban’ written by Charles R. Brooks is relevant to our study specifically. This chapter looks into the history and belief systems of Brindaban. It provides us with knowledge of *rasas*, how Chaitanya along with his six goswamis rebuilt Brindaban and how the founder of ISKCON, Srila Prabhupada, a monk of the Bengal Vaishnava sect, influenced foreigners towards this religion. He delves into sixty-four different ways by which one can become a *gopika*.

Brindaban has been explicitly stated as the epicenter of Krishna devotion. The author carves out two Brindabans: earthly or the terrestrial one and the highest celestial realm where Krishna conducts his *lilas*; and the '*bhaktas*' perceive earthly or terrestrial Brindaban to be intrinsically spiritual, holy and same as the celestial *dhama*. Thus, Owen Lynch informs us that for devotees of Radha-Krishna there is no difference between the earthly and spiritual Brindaban and the worship of Radha and Krishna is a symbol of divine love. The '*bhaktas*' believe in the worship of Krishna in accordance with a *rasa*. We know from this book that the Bengal Vaishnava sect has influenced Brindaban greatly; like the vocabulary and attitudes of the sect infuse the socio-cultural aspects of Brindaban. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the founder and six goswamis of the Bengal Vaishnava sect rebuilt this place as Krishna's town. In fact later, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu has been identified as Krishna himself and he symbolizes the perfection of spiritual love. He is believed to be an incarnation in the mood of Radha. The book gives us a lot of information about the beliefs and belief systems prevailing in Brindaban; it lets us know that it is believed that five thousand years ago Krishna came to this place with his celestial entourage of the gopis and Radha and his relationship with them and each of them are worshipped as an origination of his own '*shakti*'. This book gave us information about the context in which we were to conduct our research.

Raksha Authar, a scholar and researcher we met on our trip referred to us a book that is considered ground breaking in terms of its methodology. **"Playing with fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India"** is a very thought-provoking book written by Richa Nagar and the Sangtin Writers. In this book, Richa Nagar crosses many boundaries in terms of the way research is done. Richa Nagar is based at the University of Minnesota, Gender and Women Studies. She is the head of this department, a geographer and also the dean of that faculty. When a research is done, researchers come and collect stories, ask questions and then they write about it. Usually once the researcher leaves the interview space, much of the authority is left with the researcher and the researcher writes as he/she interprets the data collected. But in this book, the research participants are actively engaged in the process of knowledge production by writing diaries and so on, thereby actually writing and producing this book together.

The book tells the story of a journey undertaken by nine women travelers from varied socio-political locations and captures the meanings of such journeys when it is continuously evolving and unfolding in order to seek answers to a set of shared concerns. The book is set primarily in Uttar Pradesh (which is our setting as well), which has been the target of numerous development initiatives operated by NGOs as well as government funded projects. The book mainly focuses on two organizations: Sangtin and Nari Samata Yojna. Both are functioning in the Sitapur district of U.P and seek to empower rural women.

The book has a lot of examples from the daily lives of the women: For example women that live in conservative villages are not allowed to leave their homes and go out to work. They are also supposed to keep their heads covered and it is considered a taboo for them to ride bicycles in public spaces. These women continue to abide by these norms but they also shift and change it slowly. Thus they work and ride bicycles but only after a certain hour. Once they get past the village or a certain area where no one can see them they ride their bicycle. Thus they keep their heads uncovered, but if they are in the village area where their mothers in law are around they cover their heads. Although women have particular constructs in society, they are actively remaking them. They do not complain about being helpless and victims to the social notions; but remake them instead. This shows their creative agency to adapt to certain notions in order to work them out in their favor. Even though there is a lot of emphasis on chastity and the way femininities are constructed, not just in India but across the world, within these constructions, women are actively reconstructing these notions.

Active reconstruction of notions led us to the idea of self empowerment. Following the idea of empowerment, Raksha Authar, the scholar and researcher referred **“Examining Empowerment among Indian Widows: A Qualitative study of the Narratives of Hindu Widows in North Indian Ashrams”** written by Nimi Mastey to us. She conducted her research in two ashrams in Brindaban; Ma-Dham in Chattikara and Chetan Bihar. Ma Dham was also one of our primary locations of data collection. Her research enabled us to gain a very different and interesting perspective on a similar topic at the same place. Our research was similar in the way it was conducted; her approach too was qualitative and she also collected her primary data in the form of narratives from the women themselves. She focuses on and redefines the

word ‘empowerment’ for the readers, which has helped us gain a new perspective on the theme and the sub-topic of ‘empowerment’ and the role NGOs play on the same. The article talks about how most of the definitions of ‘empowerment’ actually imply that one was powerless to begin with. This is because the definitions of the word are created not by the people themselves but by the people around them who tend to treat them as subjects of victimization.

This article has helped us analyze our primary data and draw meaningful conclusions and inferences from the narratives of the *maas*. It has also made us understand and realize that unlike what the *maas* believe of their own condition, the media proposes a pathetic and unfortunate condition of the women.

Nimi Mastey’s observation has clearly been demonstrated in the BBC News articles that we referred to, as an important source of information in order to understand the portrayal of women in Brindaban by the media. We referred to news and magazine articles from the BBC website. These articles generally depict these women as victimized under the same monotone of tragedy. They present an extremely Euro-centric view of the situation of the women in Brindaban. **“The Indian Town with 6,000 widows”** by Anthony Danselow is a magazine article that talks about Brindaban, the town famous as a religious space for Radha-Krishna devotees becoming a town of destitute, helpless widows. The other article by Shilpa Kannan, **“India’s abandoned widows struggle to survive”** also paints an extremely painful picture of the lives of the women and mainly gives us information about the NGO-Maitri. **“More Indians in ‘city of widows’”** is written by Jyotsna Singh and gives us information from the UNIFEM report that it is not spirituality but poverty that drives women to Brindaban; and one of the reasons for their poverty is lack of awareness of government policies designed for widows. The article gives statistics on the increase in the number of widows to 15,000. Thus, the articles give us an insight into the portrayal of widows by the media based on incomplete and generalized knowledge.

“White Saris and Sweet Mangoes” is an extremely relevant guide to our research. Sarah Lamb is the author of this book and of several other articles on widowhood and her research has been conducted in the village of Mangaldihi in West Bengal. A research paper like ours needs to be backed up with academic literature and this book gives us that academic reference when we talk about widowhood in India.

She brings to light many theoretical concepts and she looks at themes such as gender, culture, body and family through the lens of old age. She also uses narratives to bring out certain themes which have helped us identify certain themes from the narratives collected by us. She brings out themes of impermanence of life and its effect on the Bengali Maas in the later life. This book has helped us understand an important part of our research, the thin line of difference between women and womanhood; it gives us insights into notions of womanhood. This has helped us draw conclusions from the narratives collected by us and analyze them in depth.

The West Bengal Commission for Women appointed a committee to look into the matter of the much spoken lives of Bengali women of Brindaban. The report prepared by the committee is a major part of “**In Radha’s Name**” which is one of the most important sources of information in our research. The author, Malini Bhattacharya was one of the core members of the committee that did this study. The book has helped us understand the historical context in which migration to Brindaban began and the reasons for the same.

The book has also helped us gain a political and economic perspective on how these women and their migration has impacted Brindaban as a religious space and vice versa. After having read this book, we realized how noticeable and apparent this is at places like the *bhajanashrams*. Similar to our research, the book draws conclusions based on narratives. The book has also made us realize that both women and Brindaban as a place of “institutionalized worship” are exploiting each other for their own benefit. This book has opened our eyes to certain innate and unnoticeable influences of this religious space on the identities of women. This book has been immensely helpful in writing this report as we could relate to the observations made by the author and include them in the report.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

First Impressions, changing perceptions

“The world is not in your books and maps, it’s out there!”

– Gandalf the grey

The essential core of an ethnographic study is to understand another way of life from the native’s point of view. It is not merely collecting data but rather learning from people and being taught by them. This is what we have been hoping to capture through our study. The primary objective of our research before going on field was to try and explain “Brindaban and Women” through the lives and experiences of the women themselves, who travel to and live in this space. We wanted to capture their experiences and journeys.

For almost two months, before our field trip, we had been training ourselves in methods

of on-field data collection both in theory and practice. Four tasks were set and rotated amongst the group. These tasks included studying methods of collecting data that would be relevant for our research on field, visualizing the project, collecting oral life histories of women on campus and lastly, reading articles and making a list of places to visit and people to interview in Brindaban that would be relevant to our topic. Conducting interviews on campus gave us a feel as to how to approach women on field, how to ask questions, what to ask and what not to ask them by closely observing their reactions and we learned most importantly, how to conduct ourselves. For example, we had approached the women



Figure 3: Blending in with women

with a set questionnaire but this proved unrewarding because it did not encourage free flow dialogue as we only got answers to the questions we asked. Another thing we observed was hesitation and reluctance while video recording. We realized that by not approaching our informants with a camera we would be able to ease them into a conversation must faster.

To further pursue our study based on this topic, secondary research was conducted in terms of reviewing newspaper articles, websites, videos and accounts of people's personal experiences after visiting Brindaban. Appointments were made to facilitate our research. Members of our group met with Gandhari Devi Dasi, the Vice Principal of ISKCON, Mumbai and Varaharupa Mataji, Head of Cultural Activities, ISKCON. They are both staunch devotees and have facilitated our understanding of Vaishnavism in Brindaban. However, we were unable to find relevant research material to make an analysis in connecting Women and Brindaban. So, we decided to conduct separate research on Brindaban and Women and see how the two could be related.

Despite being an extremely important religious place, we were unable to find relevant and factual historical data on Brindaban. Most sources talk about Brindaban as the place where Krishna spent his childhood days, frolicking with the milk maids and fighting demons. We came across some blogs and personal accounts of Brindaban but these proved to be biased. We stumbled upon a chapter titled '**Hare Krishna, Radhe Shyam: The Cross-Cultural Dynamics of Mystical Emotions in Brindaban**' by Charles R. Brooks and this was extremely helpful in not only our understanding of religion in Brindaban but more importantly kick starting our understanding of the "historical history" of Brindaban. From here on we were able to construct a rough history of Brindaban through a number of references and perspectives.

For our research on Women in Brindaban, the data was skewed towards the "Widows of Brindaban" and the "misery" of their lives. We came across a number of newspaper articles whose headlines read "India's neglected Widows"¹⁶ by BBC,

¹⁶Jill McGivering. "Indias Neglected Widows" BBC. Web. 31st Jan 2014<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1795564.stm>

“shunned from society, widows flock to city to die”¹⁷ covered by CNN, “Nothing to Go Back To – The Fate of the Widows of Brindaban, India”¹⁸ by Women News Network (WNN) and so on. We also came across a report published by the Women’s Commission of India called ‘**Study on Widows of Vrindavan**’. This, however, was a quantitative study pertaining to the living conditions of widows in Brindaban. It did not give us a true perception on Women in Brindaban. Watching the movie ‘**Water**’ by **Deepa Mehta** was another pre-trip exercise. We found that there was a very strong and uniform way in which Indian widows are represented both nationally and internationally and this was a crucial point in our research – We questioned whether widowhood is a uniform journey and experience for all, are women as powerless as they are portrayed and what do the women themselves believe? The word ‘widow’ is a construct and it has a very strong, oppressive connotation to it. It was at this point that we realized that we wanted to expand the scope of our study to include women and not just widows in Brindaban and see how this space plays a role in their lives.



Figure 4: Woman performing the Yamuna aarti

Our primary data collection process was hence undertaken and confined to the city of Brindaban and its people, mainly women. Prior to our field trip, we had identified widow and women ashrams as our primary locations of data collection. Our first day in Brindaban was spent familiarizing ourselves with the space and observing the people as they go about their daily rituals. From these observations, we realized that studying solely women in Brindaban would be a fallacy

¹⁷Damon, Arwa. “Shunned from Society, widows flock to city to die.” CNN.Web. 31st Jan 2014<<http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/07/05/damon.india.widows/index.html>>

¹⁸Anzia, Lys. “Nothing to Go Back To – The Fate of the Widows of Vrindavan, India.”WNN.Web. 31st Jan 2014.<<http://womennewsnetwork.net/2007/11/05/nothing-to-go-back-to-the-fate-of-the-widows-of-vrindavan-india/>>

if we did not also study her gendered counterpart (men) and understand the broader social worlds in which they reside in. Hence we also interviewed a few men, locals, priests, foreigners, and women we found hanging out at temples, on roadsides, in the courtyards of their homes and at *Aartis* on the banks of the Yamuna. We wanted to get a sense of their voices, their lived worlds and their everyday experiences.

We realized that the best way to go about our primary data collection would be to divide ourselves into groups to focus on specific areas and specific groups of people who would be relevant to our research. We gathered with our respective days' data every night and tried to see the commonalities and differences and we planned the next days' schedule accordingly. Every day brought not just new data but new informants and this proved extremely helpful in our research. We were lucky to meet many resourceful people such as Miss Raksha Authar, a scholar who had conducted similar research at one of the Ashrams we had visited. She gave us much insight into her own research which was centered on the **'notions of respectability to the widows in Brindaban'**. Our in-depth interview with her gave us many valuable insights for our research as also many new perspectives that we were over-looking. We were also referred to very helpful secondary data.

Since we are looking at womanhood in relation to Brindaban, we resorted to qualitative research methods that were adapted to the spaces we were in. At the ashrams, we collected oral histories through unstructured interviews, participant observation and focus group interviews. At the temples and on the streets of Brindaban we resorted to random sampling, unstructured interviews and participant observation. We had interviewed shelter home authorities and a scholar on-field with whom we had in-depth interviews.

As mentioned earlier, we did not use fixed questionnaires due to its restricting nature but we did have some common questions and then we let the interview dictate its course. Our questions and conversations were centered on talking about what brought them to Brindaban and their journeys, what role this space plays in their lives, their daily routines, their family relationships, their childhood, their religious beliefs, their notions of women, and the changing nature of Brindaban. All our field work has been either video-tape, recorded and noted down. This report is the product of an amalgamation of narratives, secondary data and most importantly (being a predominantly female group) our own observations and inferences.

3.1 LIMITATIONS

However clichéd it may sound, no amount of research could have prepared us for what we actually experienced on field. Our research process proved to be full of complexities and plenty of learnings. Time was a major constraint in our project. Eight days was not enough time for the nature of our research. Although many of the women were open to talking and have each contributed to our understanding of womanhood, letting someone into your lived world is not an easy task.

Being women ourselves was both a boon and bane. Women were obviously more open to talking to us but we realized that our age and general lack of experience were limitations. Very often when some women talked about motherhood or marriage, it was hard for us to relate sometimes or make inferences as we have not experienced these stages.

In terms of videography, we were not allowed to photograph or videotape the women inside the ashrams or record our conversations and hence had to resort to notes very often. These notes were not always taken down during the interview, depending upon the comfort level of our interviewee, but taken down right after or a couple of hours after the interview. Although we took many measures in executing this meticulously, some data could have been lost or forgotten.

We had a little difficulty in the language department. A lot of the women we met were Bengali and although they spoke Hindi, many of their words were naturally Bengali. This did not prove to be such a big problem unless we were at an ashram and had to get someone from the management to translate for us. Hence sometimes, we were not able to talk openly with the women about their lives in the ashram.

Lastly, our research is purely qualitative in nature. This report provides only a glimpse into the lives of women living in Brindaban. It is far from conclusive and we have refrained from making any generalizations about the women. Our goal is not to launch criticisms against any gender or any individuals but to grapple with complex and contradictory notions of womanhood.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

4.1. PUTTING BRINDABAN IN CONTEXT

“Brindaban ko samjhne ke liye logic bhool jao.”

“In order to understand Brindaban, forget your rationality.”

- (Anuragg Goswami. Personal Interview. 2014)

We embarked on this journey towards a destination unknown to all of us- Brindaban. Its rich history, culture and heritage intrigued us. The history of the city dates back to the mythical times when Lord Krishna was considered to be the essence, soul and spirit of Brindaban. Since the fabled times, Brindaban is believed to be a place complete with lush green forests and beautiful meadows. Known to be the place where Lord Krishna spent his youth, his pastimes have been documented and practiced till date in order to keep his memory alive thus enabling those who pass through Brindaban that Lord Krishna plays a dominant role in recognition of the city. Spirituality and divinity define the relationship that Krishna and Radha share. With the passing of time, Radha gained the title of a goddess based on her own merit and today she symbolizes sacrifice, surrender and unconditional love. Radha is believed to be Krishnas Shakti, he is incomplete without her. The people of Brindaban are Krishna followers wherein they share similar beliefs and ideologies despite variations in each one's respective story.

A place containing many myths is bound to also be home to superstitions and beliefs to the locals. Some legends state that Lord Krishna has indeed never left Brindaban while others state that Krishna and Radha, together, pay homage to the place by performing their famous *raasleela* on a daily basis. This is believed to take place in the sacred groves of Nidhivan where the trees of the forest turn into *gopikas* at night. Thus, as an act of respect, Nidhivan is closed to visitors after 7 PM. In addition to this, locals place *solah shringar* overnight in an adjoining sacred grove,

Seva Kunj; doing so in dedication to Radha. It is believed that when the priest opens the temple the next morning, these *shringars* are used by Radha.

“The soul’s eventual nature is to serve; we belong there with Radha and Krishna, to serve. The problem is that we want to be served, we want to enjoy. When we turn back to the true nature of serving, we start uncovering our true nature and that is when yoga is applied. Yoga means the link, the link to our true nature, which is to be with Radha and Krishna. Radha is the best *sevak* of Krishna, which is why she is always paired with Krishna. Everyone who thinks of Krishna thinks of Radha and vice versa. The Sanskrit word for service to Krishna is *bhakti*. *Bhakti* is emanated through Shrimati Radha Rani. You cannot approach Krishna directly, you have to go through Radha Rani and before that you need to go through her servants, that is what guru *parampara* is, to follow a specific line. They have an identity in the spiritual world as Shrimati Radha rani’s servants. That is why they specifically worship her. Through the grace of Radha and her servants, Krishna can be approached,”¹⁹ This elaborate philosophy represents a section of the locals’ strong beliefs. Due to Radha’s dominant influence in Brindaban, locals often refer to the place as being Radha’s territory. Devotees from across the world visit Brindaban to worship Radha and Krishna together, to simply remind themselves and the on-lookers of the world of what defines a pure and loving relationship.

Being the ultimate devotee is equivalent to attaining perfection but comes with the knowledge that it is impossible to achieve this perfection therefore he or she should consistently try throughout his or her respective life. Thus, Brindaban is where all the devotees come in search of this, trying to become the ultimate devotee.²⁰ However the definition of being an ultimate devotee can be questioned because to be an ultimate devotee one is assumed to be at par with Shrimati Radha Rani. Since Brindaban is known to be the replica of heaven on earth, people often come here to emulate the roles and status that takes place in divine Brindaban.

Brindaban’s piousness, divinity and spirituality are a few of the major aspects that define it thereby inevitably drawing us to explore the various temples and myths that can be found. Surprisingly, through this, we discovered that Brindaban has an

¹⁹ Prashant. Personal Interview. 12th January 2014

²⁰ Maya. Personal Interview. 7th January 2014

association which dates back to the Mughal times. After visiting the temple of Govind Dev, we learnt that during that period, out of devotion, the locals performed the act of lighting a big 'diya', which was visible to Aurangzeb in Delhi. He then set out to destroy this temple and on hearing this, the devotees moved the original idol to Jaipur in Rajasthan for safekeeping. Post his arrival, Aurangzeb had destroyed 4 floors of this temple but it stands strong till today.

Yet, upon interaction with the temple priest, we were informed of a contradicting tale- that Aurangzeb's ancestor, Emperor Akbar, played an influential role in the development of Brindaban, making it a thriving and successful pilgrim destination for devotees to pay patronage to. It is claimed that Brindaban's spirituality impacted Akbar to the extent that he initiated the construction of four significant temples in the name of Krishna and provided the necessary funds to aid the same.

A common misconception was that Brindaban was always established to be a temple town. The truth is that Brindaban had been lost in time until the 16th century when its history was revived by the advent of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's arrival in Brindaban. Many believe him to be the reincarnation of Lord Krishna. His purpose was to trace the lost holy places associated with Lord Krishna and through this began the rediscovery of the town of Brindaban as a holy city. After spending 1515 in Brindaban, he dispatched his disciples, Rupa and Sanatana Goswami, to Brindaban to continue his discovery of Krishna and Brindaban. Rupa and Sanatana Goswami, along with four of their siblings, together known as the six Goswamis, carried forward his teachings in the form of literature speaking of the philosophy and doctrines of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, commonly known as Bhakti-yoga. Thus, through this research and findings, awareness about this movement spread throughout India and Brindaban grew to be known as a pilgrimage destination. It is known to house a lot of foreign devotees as well. In 1965, Bhaktivedanta Swami, better known as Srila Prabhupada, visited America where he propagated the Hare Krishna Movement. Following this, the Hare Krishna Movement spread worldwide. Today, Brindaban is revered by thousands of foreign devotees across borders and seas.

Before Chaitanya familiarized the *bhakti* movement in Brindaban, locals lived the brahmanical way of life. This included the performance of elaborate and complex rituals that were restricted to certain



Figure 5: Wall painting of Chaitanya in Radha Kund

privileged members of society, such as sages and *pundits* from influential backgrounds. However this form of worship acted as a limitation and oppression towards a majority of the town residents. Post the *bhakti* movement, personal devotion and worship was encouraged. No process had to be passed in order to perform *seva* (service) towards Lord Krishna. The concept of complex rituals was made unnecessary. Now every devotee was allowed to make a form of offering, elaborate or humble.

It is said that “those people who are at that spiritual level can see that Brindaban and the heavenly Brindaban are the same, until then we just have to believe. That is called *sharaddha* or faith.”²¹

In accordance with the above insight as to why and how Brindaban came into existence, it is believed by many that Brindaban still holds the spiritual essence that belonged to it decades ago. Brindaban is a space visited by people from all walks of life. Almost every street walked down Brindaban replicates the same image. Temples embracing every other street turn, loud chants and prayers in the



Figure 6: Savitri maa in her trademark attire

²¹ Prashant. Personal interview. 12th January 2014

name of Radha and Krishna, foreigners walking around and about wearing their trademark attire, locals and devotees, children in hand, walking about while street vendors were found coaxing them into buying all that they had to sell, painting a very regular day in Brindaban.

As mentioned earlier, Brindaban is a place which is believed to offer *moksha* to the devotees, the highest peak of devotion by offering themselves to Radha and Krishna and seeking solace in them.

Those who visit Brindaban eventually stay behind permanently with the belief that they obtain patience and *shanti*. In fact, a majority of the population consists of those who visited as tourists and are now permanent residents.

We came across numerous stories of people who spoke about how external sources of pleasure do not entice them anymore and how many of them, especially the foreigners have renounced their old lifestyle and believe that this form of living gives them immense pleasure. Every action that they perform is by keeping God, Radha and Krishna in the centre. Just being in Brindaban provides them with utmost fulfillment. Another old tale speaks of how anyone and everyone who is born in Brindaban is immediately liberated.

ISKCON, a Hare Krishna movement introduced the concept of Krishna consciousness, which in turn attracted a large number of foreigners to Brindaban. Many locals question their choice in Brindaban and attempting to live their lifestyle. “I met many locals and they always questioned my decision to shift to Brindaban. They told me that in Brazil, where I am from, I am free. I can do what I want. Here in India, especially in Brindaban, all one can do is pray.”²² The idea of Krishna consciousness draws them here and they enjoy this lifestyle. Majority of the foreigners believe that the locals are



Figure 7: ISKCON

²² Ana Flavia. Personal interview. 10th January 2014

accepting of them and they feel comfortable living here.

Widows play a very dominant role in shaping the image of Brindaban. It is often conceived that they are treated with disrespect and are perceived to be unhappy and in suffering. Before visiting Brindaban, this is what we pictured and expected as well. However there are various perspectives about the reality of the living conditions of widows in Brindaban and how they are viewed as a collective group. With their trademark of white saris, covered heads and *tilaks* on their forehead they were easily traceable, lined up in the lanes begging for money. While interacting with them, we learnt that they gave up everything to come to Brindaban and walk the path of devotion among other reasons that will be discussed in the following chapters.

However, a number of locals believe that widows in Brindaban are not Krishna conscious. They believe they are only pursuing money instead of completely devoting themselves to Krishna. The residents of Brindaban strongly believe in the power of karma. Everything is known to be Krishna's will because he will give a person what he or she deserves. "Brindaban is exploiting the widows and the widows are exploiting Brindaban with their money making tactics."²³

A few days into our stay we noticed this divide, which we referred to as old Brindaban and new Brindaban. Other than just being situated in two extreme parts of Brindaban, the differences in opinion, judgment and thinking could not go unnoticed. Living in what is now termed as "new Brindaban", reaching the old part of the town was merely a ten minute rickshaw ride. While all the new, more recent temples such as Prem Mandir and ISKCON are located in the apparent new side of town, the other side had a very old world charm to it. Narrow lanes, cycle rickshaws and the faint smell of *agarbattis* permeate the place.

Walking around this side of town, we struck up conversations with the local vendors, shopkeepers, *pandits*, *pujaris* and local residents. They all led a very similar lifestyle. Their daily routine dominantly consists of *puja* and *seva* while the rest of the day is spent in work and taking care of household matters. Jagdesh Sharma, who owns a medical store, believes that Brindaban is different because of Radha and that she is the "malkin" and Krishna is the "sevak". Manish Agarwal, who owns a mobile

²³ Jagdesh Sharma. Personal interview. 5th January 2014.

store doesn't believe in the concept of old Brindaban and new Brindaban. The only difference is that the old side of town still holds the original essence of what it was like a decade ago while the more recent side of town is in the process of development.

Even though Brindaban is known for its holiness and purity, we came across many instances, which hinted towards this town becoming more of a business than a lifestyle. Visiting old temples like Banke Bihari and Govind Dev had an old world charm to it through which we could feel the divinity and the sincerity Brindaban had to offer, which we had heard about. Recent temples such as Prem Mandir, provide a contradicting image. They are grand in structure, modern and are cited to be one of the most famous tourist destinations. They are designed in order to keep up with modern day practices and to attract maximum number of tourists. These practices include musical fountains and 5 pm *aartis* with musical and dance performances. These temples introduced another school of thought in Brindaban that express devotion in a different, unconventional manner.

While interacting with the locals and the priests all over Brindaban, we gained immense insight regarding tourism's significant role in its contribution to the economy. We came across one such instance where a fake temple was constructed in

a *bhajanashram* in order to cash in on donations.



Figure 8: A devotee performing the *parikrama*

Brindaban has been influenced by various people that visit over time. From being identified as a religious town, it is believed to be the hub of multiple belief systems. Each individual who comes here brings in a part of them- be it

their culture, philosophies, values or faith- leading to a diversity that adds on to Brindaban. Each person's personal interpretation of God, idea of devotion and *bhakti* have shaped Brindaban into what it is today.

4.2. – FIRST LADY OF BRINDABAN

I have come to do bhajan for God. What we believe to be the truth in the world is not really the truth. Truth lies at God's feet. Living in this world without the Lord gives no happiness.

(Geeta maa. Personal interview. 2014)



Figure 9: Geeta maa

This chapter is dedicated to establishing the relation between Women and Brindaban and the reasons for why women came and continue to come to this temple town. In our preliminary research on the topic, we found that the journeys of women (mainly the widows) have been generalized to religion, oppression and force. However, there is no universal story. Women came to and have been coming to Brindaban for an array of reasons which we shall delve into further in this chapter. This chapter also aims at answering why Brindaban is a chosen destination for many women.

Their reasons for coming today have their roots and must be looked at in a larger historical, social and political context that goes beyond the bounds of

Brindaban. The women's narratives gave us insights into the worlds around them from which we were able to understand the larger context in which women in our society live by. Women and Brindaban have been associated since mythical times and references to women going to Brindaban have been emphasized on since the historic times. Malini Bhattacharya in her book, 'In Radha's name', mentions the first two women pilgrims, who made their way to Brindaban. They are known to have followed Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and his six *goswamis* to this town. As elaborated in the previous chapter, Chaitanya's preaching was accepted and adopted by a large number of people and have shaped much of the beliefs in Brindaban even today. He is known to have a massive number of followers who followed him to Brindaban and



Figure 10: Shri Radha on a wall

eventually settled there. What does this mean in the context of women and their relation to Brindaban?

As stated in the previous chapters, Brindaban is most commonly known as the town where Krishna grew up. However, after being a part of the town for a few days, we noticed something interesting; the name Radha resonates louder than Krishna. As we spoke to more and more people, we found that Radha is etched so strongly both physically and mentally; the trees, the walls, entrances to homes, in people's belief systems and in the very first words they mutter '*Radhe Radhe*'.

The Radha of Brindaban, does not appear in any literary or archaeological sources. She first appears in the sixth and the eighth centuries in the '*Patala Khanda*' or *Padma Purana* and is described as 'primal nature'.²⁴ She was in fact an 'Eastern mother-goddess' who was absorbed by the Krishna cult and her devotion became a crucial aspect of the new *bhakti* elements in Vaishnava philosophy. The *Gaudiya Vaishnavas* installed her as the key figure in the mystic world of devotion that Brindaban came to represent for them.²⁵ She appears in the literature of Vaishnava poets who raised her to a position of supreme importance in the Krishna cult.

Today in Brindaban, Krishna is never worshipped without Radha. She is in fact the ruler of Brindaban and Krishna is a guest there.²⁶ Her name is always taken before his. Chaitanya was a proponent of *Radhabhava* and his disciples believed him to be an incarnation of both Krishna and Radha. He is believed to have the mind of Krishna and the mood of Radha.²⁷ The question arises as to how this powerful goddess, installed by the *Gaudiya Vaishnavas*, plays a role in women coming to Brindaban. Many of the women we interviewed in Brindaban see Radha as their protector. Others see her as their way to Krishna. Varaharupa Mataji, an ISKCON devotee says "to please Krishna, you first need to please his golden goddess, Radha".

Of the many widows we spoke to, most hailed from Bengal. It is not exactly known when propertied women, mainly widows, began to visit Brindaban and settle down there. It has been conjectured by Malini Bhattacharya that the examples of Meera and Jahnaba inspired these women to adopt a life of devotion in a place where Radha held a supreme status as a manifestation of Krishna's divine energy.²⁸

During the colonial times in Bengal, there was a very strong influence of Vaishnavism on newly-rich people who were close to the East India Company. They began acquiring land in Brindaban and setting up trusts and mansions from where the charitable work of feeding the poor and distributing alms was organized. This was done both in Kashi and Brindaban and many propertied women were involved in this

²⁴ Bhattacharya, Malini. *In Radha's Name: Widows and Other Women in Brindaban*. New Delhi: Tulika, 2008. Print. Page 14.

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Anuragg Goswami. personal interview 2014

²⁷ Pandit. Personal interview. 2014

²⁸ Bhattacharya, Malini. *In Radha's Name: Widows and Other Women in Brindaban*. New Delhi: Tulika, 2008. Print. Page 17.

process. These religious establishments were chosen by affluent widows as a last refuge.²⁹ Not all of these women, however, were affluent. Another group came as pilgrims and sometimes settled there were courtesans and women in the sex-trade. Though Vaishnava sects strictly followed Brahmanical practices, Vaishnavism after Chaitanya had a deep influence over social groups who had been marginalized by traditional Brahmanical society. His preaching contained the radical component that through *Bhakti*, social outcasts and women could also attain a social superiority. This was manifested by encouraging people to sing *bhajans* and *kirtans* publically.

Another route by which women who had moved outside the domestic sphere could reach Brindaban was through the *Bairagi Vaishnavas*.³⁰ These were women who for social or economic reasons had been out caste by family and society. The *Bairagi Vaishnavas*, a nomadic set of people, attracted unmarried girls, unmarried women and widows into their group.³¹

In the 19th century, the *Vaishnava* women, generally enjoyed a degree of autonomy and mobility. Even low caste women were initiated into literacy so that they could have access to the *Bhakti* texts, which was an opportunity that most women were deprived of. It is said that non Brahmin women could attain a degree of religious autonomy by adopting Vaishnavism, although their discourse on faith was later dominated by the Brahmins.³² For many women, Vaishnavism was able to provide women with escape routes and it became an occasion for coming to Brindaban.

From our narratives we have observed that widows form the majority of women who travel to Brindaban a part from married and unmarried women. Varanasi was another destination for such women but Brindaban continues to be a more preferred destination for it's relatively less fierce society. Another factor is that unlike in Kashi, where death was the final goal, Brindaban is a unique location for its spiritual joy of sharing in the mystic love of Radha and Krishna. Many of the women we had interviewed were of the same view and preferred Brindaban for its more

²⁹ Bhattacharya, Malini. *In Radha's Name: Widows and Other Women in Brindaban*. New Delhi: Tulika, 2008. Print. Page 17.

³⁰ Ibid. Page 18.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. page 19

accepting society. This can be established by the fact that a widow, in Brindaban is referred to as '*maa*' which literally means mother. This is a gesture of respect followed by everybody in Brindaban.

In Bengal's quest for modernity in the 19th century, the treatment of widows in traditional society was a very crucial issue. At this time, Bengal was going through a social transformation where the new role model for women as wife and mother became the central site of social change³³. The widows did not fit into this scheme; they ceased to be women of home as soon as they were widowed. The need for education, emancipation and refinement was irrelevant when her male partner had ceased to exist. The question of personal development was meaningful for a woman but only with reference to her husband. The widows were expected to find solace in the celebrations of solemn rites of Hindu religion. They were sent to religious places like Varanasi, Nabadwip and Brindaban.³⁴ This form of controlled sexuality prevented these women from claiming their share in family property and sending them to sacred places ensured their religious commitment. Their piety was held as the pureness of Indian tradition; the pale, barren women draped in spotless white.

This has been largely internalized by the women, and is very apparent even today. The narrative we collected from Geeta *maa* at *Ma Dham* who was from Bengal informed us that she was married at the age of thirteen to a man of a much older age than her. She was expected to live separately from her husband until she was 18. However, her life took an unforeseen turn as her husband passed away when she was sixteen. Her family, not wanting to support her, decided to send her off to a women's ashram in Brindaban. Drawing from her narrative and what we have read about Nationalism in Bengal, it is safe to say that Bengal at that time had set notions of what the life of a widowed woman should be; both physically and mentally. They believed that after the death of a woman's husband, the woman is half dead anyway therefore she should take to a path of isolation, confine herself to eating certain kinds of food, dress in a certain manner and confine herself to certain physical spaces such as the *ashrams* found in Brindaban and Varanasi.

³³ Ghosh, Swati. "Bengali Widows of Varanasi." *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol 35 (2000). Page 1151.

³⁴ Ibid. Page 1152.

Not all women who enter a life of devotion in Brindaban are widows. Many pilgrims go in and out of Brindaban ever since it had flourished as an important pilgrimage center for the Vaishnavas. Many of these women who did not settle had set up establishments and trusts for other women pilgrims to stay. These establishments such as *chhatras* and *akharas* provide support to the not so affluent women.³⁵ At the same time, the charitable institutions which had developed around the places of pilgrimage sustained them physically by ensuring that however destitute they might be, they could get their food from the *chhatras* and find shelter in and around the temple areas, or in the *akharas*. The charity of rich pilgrim who wish to enhance their religious credit by making donations in cash and kind also enable these women to have necessary articles like clothes and blankets replenished. This is the life that homeless women have now adapted to. Religious mendicancy was and is an accepted practice and has no stigma attached to it, especially in places like Brindaban. Even today, the many women and men who sit outside the temples waiting to catch the eyes of pilgrims and tourists do not consider themselves beggars.

There is much significance in the year of 1914 when Seth Janakidass Patodia of Navalgarh from Rajasthan, started an institution in Brindaban known as the Shri Bhagawan Bhajanashram.³⁶ A number of them have been set up around Brindaban, one of which we had visited. These centers cater to destitute women in the form of clothing, food grains, and small amounts of money in turn for singing *bhajans* at a certain period of time every day. Many women have flocked to these institutions as it caters to their material and physical needs and most importantly, it gives them some respectability. For instance, Anita *maa* narrated to us how after marrying her two daughters off, her husband turned into an abusive alcoholic. Apart from physically and mentally violating her, he used their money to buy more substances. Moreover, he didn't let her use any money for herself. Eventually, he restricted her to the boundaries of their home. It took Anita *maa* 3 years to gather enough courage and find the means to run away from Bihar and come to Brindaban. She came to Brindaban, a scared, physically hurt and embarrassed woman. That was long time ago though, now she has transformed in to an independent and respectable devotee. She

³⁵Bhattacharya, Malini. *In Radha's Name: Widows and Other Women in Brindaban*. New Delhi: Tulika, 2008. Print. Page 22.

³⁶ Ibid. Page 26.

credits this transformation to the *bhajanashram* where she now continues to stay. She feels independent as she now has control over money and being referred as ‘*maa*’ provides her with immense respect.

Generous payments are made even today by the rich, devout community of pilgrims who want a share of this piety. *Bhajanashrams* today are making large amounts of profit, smartly mixing this profit with piety. Previously, the production of piety in the holy town which had earlier centered on feudal charity has now come to be organized profitably.³⁷ Many women have become wholly dependent on these institutions for their earnings and because it gives them a status of devotees. Since the establishment of these institutions, the migration of women to Brindaban has gone up considerably.³⁸

A large number of NGOs, government and private organizations have recently taken an interest in the condition of women in Brindaban. This has led to the establishments of many shelters, ashrams and homes which have been attracting many women. These institutions differ from each other in terms of the facilities offered so depending on their needs; the women take to these different shelters. We have observed however, that the shelter offering the most amount of money is usually



Figure 11: Anita maa

the chosen destination. For example, when a new NGO named Sulabh International came into Brindaban to help the widows by offering Rupees two thousand a month, many women left the homes they had previously been living in for several years to join Sulabh.³⁹

Although historically Brindaban has been a magnet for many groups of women, mostly destitute and marginalized, the same cannot be said for women who continue to come to Brindaban today. It is still a common misconception that women who come to Brindaban continue to do so under compulsion and destitution. It cannot

³⁷ Bhattacharya, Malini. *In Radha's Name: Widows and Other Women in Brindaban*. New Delhi: Tulika, 2008. Print. Page 26

³⁸ Ibid. Page 28.

³⁹ Geeta. Personal Interview. 9th January 2014.

be denied that most patterns of migration have to do with patterns of religious beliefs; however from narratives that we collected, we find a great deal of individuality and diversity. Many of the women we spoke to have made the voluntary decision of coming to Brindaban

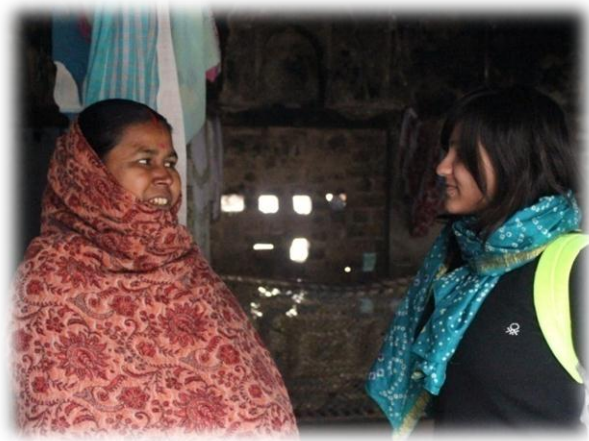


Figure 12: Group member interacting with Urmila maa

such as Urmila maa who had left her husband and children to serve Radha and Krishna in Brindaban.

Women who continue to travel to Brindaban are unmarried, separated, divorced, married householders who want to escape the exerting pressures of domestic or householder's life and so on. With the wave of globalization and religious tourism, there have been voluminous arrivals of women who come just during the peak time of pilgrimage and during important festivals such as *Radha Ashtami* and *Janmashtami*, make money and leave.⁴⁰ There are all kinds of permutations and combinations existing in the narratives of the women.

Another generalization is that most women come from Bengal but we met a considerable number of women from Assam, Bihar, Orissa and other parts of North India and even abroad. After the establishment of *ISKCON* in 1975, Brindaban has seen the influx of numerous foreign women who frequently visit or have permanently settled there. These women too come from various socio-political backgrounds that have influenced their religious paths to Brindaban. Govinda Mataji is one such woman. She is from Ukraine and came to Brindaban when it was still a part of the Soviet Union. She could never identify herself with the church and when she found Krishna Consciousness, she could not practice it as it was forbidden in the Soviet. This brought her to Brindaban to continue on her path to Krishna⁴¹.

To conclude this chapter, it has been largely conceptualized that the influx of women into Brindaban, which has been going on over the years, is a special form of migration along a traditional pilgrim-route, taking place on the basis of specific

⁴⁰ Garima. Personal Interview. 9th January 2014.

⁴¹ Govinda Mataji. Personal Interview. 6th January 2014.

religious-cultural beliefs and aspirations. However, with the changing contours of such beliefs, and with the overlapping of such a phenomenon with other kinds of migrations, undertaken for more worldly reasons, cannot be underestimated. Our initial response to the women of our research was conditioned by our perception of their journeys as a collectivity. Before going to Brindaban, we were expecting to only find widows who have been forced into dedicating their lives to Krishna. As our study progressed, however, the individual faces and voices asserted themselves. This generalization of their journeys has impacts on the space and the identities of these women which shall be discussed in this next chapter.

4.3. MAPPING WOMEN

Dear students,

Please note the cultural and social behavior expected of you:

Women do not generally shake hands with men. Also men and women should not touch each other in public, especially in holy places and temples.

To greet someone, it is good manners to put your palms together and say “Namaste” or “Radhe Radhe”.

It is best to dress conservatively. Women should not overly expose themselves. Women should ideally have their head covered in a temple.

(e-mail sent to us by Bhakti Dhama)



Figure 13: On our way to Bhakti Dhama

Even before we stepped into Brindaban, we encountered constructions of gender in the form of everyday interactions and practices through the above email sent to us by Bhakti Dhama, the hotel we stayed in. The fact that they sent an email stating so clearly the terms of “social and cultural behavior” of women highlights and emphasizes the bodily requirements of the place; local constructions of gender in the form of daily practices involving the body or what Sarah Lamb has referred to as “the bodily training that anthropologists must go through when learning to fit into a new socio-cultural setting is reflected in this e-mail.”⁴²

This made us realize that in religious spaces like Brindaban, the distinction between males and females is more evident and enshrined in the practices of the people. The construction of femininities and masculinities predominantly come across in spaces like these. It is coded in the way that males do particular *sevas*. For example, pujaris are predominantly male. Females on the other hand serve in very restricted ways and in some positions only.

We experienced local constructions of gender throughout our journey in Brindaban. Our initial observations were at temples where very often certain areas were warded off only for males. This made us wonder about the perceptions of men and women in this religious town. One common inference we made is that men, about their perceptions of women, very often quoted from the scriptures. In a conversation with Prashanth, an ISKCON devotee, he said, “It is very important for a woman to be married as she is identified with the husband because that’s the true nature. A woman’s nature is to be a mother. That’s what she was born for. Until a woman doesn’t hold a child she is not fulfilled”.

Religion has always played an important role in the construction of womanhood in India. Are women, however, powerless to these constructs? Are they victims or do they have agency? One of the scholars that we met in Brindaban, gave us insights into these fundamental questions. She told us about a study that looks at women in Muslim countries; they are always expected to use a veil and usually the stereotype or the thought about the veil or the *parda* is that it is very oppressive. But actually what these women do is that they wear these veils all the time but they use

⁴² Lamb, Sarah. *White Saris and Sweet Mangoes: Aging, Gender, and Body in North India*. Berkley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2000. Page 181.

the veils to gain better access to different parts of the city. They know that if they take their veils off, they will not be able to travel certain distances within the city; they will be under everyone's microscopic gaze. Thus, the use of veil allows them to access different spaces of a city and redefines the meaning of the veil itself. So in that sense, these women are not powerless to the constructs in their society. People generally think that the veil is very oppressive but actually these women use it very creatively and are able to remake the notion of what a veil signifies. Although they stay within the notion of wearing the veil, because it would be unacceptable in a Muslim society to take it off, they ultimately use it to their advantage. We noticed this creative agency of women remaking notions in case of Govinda Mataji, an ISKCON devotee. Govinda Mataji believes that a woman should cover her head because it was the path laid out by *Srila Prabhupada*. However, she also feels that it helps her to portray to other men who ogle at her (she gets ogled at a lot in Brindaban) that she is disinterested.

Although, initially we viewed this as something forced upon her, we realized



that it was her own decision and it in fact helps her.

Figure 14: Govinda Mataji tells us that covering her head is not oppressive

Another example of this is seen in case of widows. As a general rule widows are expected to wear white saris and several women in Brindaban do so; in fact the place is called the 'city of white widows' or 'the city of white shadows'. This might again come across as oppressive and forced; however several women, not just widows but also non-widows wear white saris as an outcome of a voluntary decision. Most of them say that they are in Brindaban, in *Bhajanashrams*, outside temples voluntarily because they wish to serve Radha; and several feasts are held for widows by religious institutions, ashrams and families. These women see widowhood and this devotion as

a prerequisite for such exclusive places and occasions. In order to fulfill this prerequisite of being a widow, several women, widows and non-widows wear white saris.⁴³ Thus, they use this uniform of widowhood to gain access to certain resources. This shows creative agency of using a religious or societal norm which is generally viewed as oppressive, for their benefit and in their own favor. So in this case women have redefined the meaning of a white sari to suit their own needs.

Safety was one of the major themes that came out of most of the narratives of the women. Even at Ma Dham women are expected to come back within a decent time (usually before sunset or before it gets dark) for their safety's sake. Several foreigners speak of being mugged or robbed. One of the *maas* shared one such experience wherein she asked a rickshaw driver for a place to stay for a night and instead of helping her, he suggested she spend the night with him. In this case she was in a position wherein she did not have a home and was asking for help and the rickshaw driver knew that she did not have a home, so it was much easier for him to make a pass at her, especially because she was an unaccompanied female. In many narratives, the *maas* spoke of this and they were very fearful of being alone as an unaccompanied female is perceived as a vulnerable target.

This idea that it is unsafe for females to be unaccompanied further brings out the theme of unprotected sexuality; especially for an unaccompanied female in India. In fact unaccompanied women in Brindaban perpetually face questions such as “Where is your father?” or “Where is your brother?”, because the expectation is that an unmarried female, no matter where she is should be accompanied by a male family member to protect her.⁴⁴

In India, if a female is unaccompanied her sexuality is considered to be very dangerous; she is considered to be a threat until and unless she is married.⁴⁵ This theme of dangerous female sexuality boils down to the idea of the way femininities are constructed in societies. Growing up in India, females are taught certain things

⁴³ Bhattacharya, Malini. *In Radha's Name: Widows and Other Women in Brindaban*. New Delhi: Tulika, 2008. Print. Page 76.

⁴⁴ Raksha Authar. Personal Interview. 11th January 2014.

⁴⁵ Bhattacharya, Malini. *In Radha's Name: Widows and Other Women in Brindaban*. New Delhi: Tulika, 2008. Print. Page 76.

and are socialized in certain ways, for example a girl should sit, dress, and speak in certain ways, if she goes out with her friends she should return within a certain time and so on. There is a strong notion of what is considered to be female. Being female is generally more subdued, tied to the notions of home and tied to the notions of body. However as mentioned earlier, these kinds of ideas are definitely being reconstructed and remade in innovative ways.

In India, religious texts and belief systems play a big role in constructing notions of femininity. The scriptures have preordained and suggest the way a woman should be socialized. For example, the laws of Manu state that a female should always be under the protection, first of her father, then husband and then son. In scriptures, female sexuality is also spoken about in a certain way suggesting that it is dangerous. The way a sacred book translates into Indian culture, further translating into in the everyday is in the way people look at it and then remake it according to their own time, place and circumstance. So there is a lot of influence from scriptures and other sacred books, however it translates into how the Indian culture interprets it and looks at it in a certain manner.⁴⁶



Figure 15: Collecting narratives

The householder's life is given much importance in the scriptures and according to Hindu texts, it is a woman's duty to perform the domestic chores; and this is quite the norm throughout India. In fact working women often talk about domestic work as a way of life. Most times domestic work is not even considered to

⁴⁶ Raksha Authar. Personal Interview. 11th January 2014.

be any form of work or labor as it does not have direct financial benefits. Even women from Brindaban are predominantly settled householders and doing domestic work is internalized as a way of life. Some of them we spoke to are housewives; some assist their husbands at work, some have to earn a living for the family however along with all these jobs, domestic work is an unacknowledged part of their life. Several women who we spoke to told us that they resent the dependent situations at home and this is quite significant among those women who faced these dependent situations back home. One of the *maas* at Maa Dham spoke of renouncing domestic life and lacking interest towards it. The general perception that females are tied to the notion of home undergoes a prominent shift here; Malini Bhattacharya also talks about her findings “contrary to the widespread notion that women are the most domesticated of creatures and that they prefer a life in the bosom of their families to any other”. In fact many women we spoke to said that one of the reasons they liked staying at the ashrams was that they did not have to suffer the exerting pressures of domestic life and did not have to be dependent on someone or the family be dependent on her for food and other household work. This brings out the notion of independence and critique of the common belief that women are meant to perform domestic duties and be tied to the notions of home.

This notion of independence and liberation is seen in the narrative of a woman who was a part of the research of Raksha Authar, a researcher we met at Ma Dham; she talked about this *maa* quite in detail. This *maa* was considered to be a misfit in the society from a very early age; one because she came from a very poor family and her father died at a very young age, (when she was just a year old) followed by her mother who died when she was just a little older. Since she was very dark complexioned, they didn't consider her fit to attract a suitor. During the course of her life she was always moved from one place to the next. She started working as a domestic, as a *chara*, cleaning and working at a very early age. She worked for around five years at one place and then a couple of years at another place. She was close to puberty, around the age of thirteen. Now because she was reaching puberty and we know that this is the time of **dangerous sexuality**; she was **unaccompanied**, she was **not married**, so there was a fear that she could get pregnant, and so nobody wanted to assume responsibility of her. The person she was working for told her that she could not work there anymore and moved her to another place. Then she started

working for someone else. Again it was the same story because she was seventeen at that time, still unmarried; they did not let her work for them and preferred employing a male instead. Eventually all the village people decided to get her married off and arranged a marriage for her. They chose a seventy year old widower for her; she was eighteen then and she didn't have any choice in the matter at that time. She was married off against her will. However, the amazing thing about her story is the way she exercises her choice and this was Raksha speaking directly from her research about constructs in society and women remaking them; there is a notion of what is considered to be a respectable female once she is married. A respectable female is one who lives with her husband, takes care of him, and gives birth to (beget) his children and so on. But this particular *maa* completely rejected the marriage. Out of strong notions of respectability, women are expected to follow a set decorum in the way they dress and live. After she got married to the seventy year old man she threw away her *mangalsutra*, stopped wearing any *sindoor*, did not wear any bangles and basically did not wear anything that was a symbol of a married woman. Secondly, she rejected living with the seventy year old; so for ten years she never lived with him. She moved from one place to the next in the village, living at different people's homes; she just did not want to live with him. She would call him *budha* because she could not stand him. He was a reminder of the fact that she was forced to marry and do things that she did not wish to do. Although she got married to him in a one sense, she completely rejected her marriage to him; she completely rejected what the notion of a respectable female generally is and here we can see she was remaking the notions of respectability for herself; she considered her choices more respectable. However later, and this is the striking part in her narrative, when her husband became very sick, his son came to her and asked her to take care of him in his last days; whether in the role of a daughter or an aunt or anything else, it was upon her; and this time she actually agreed to do so. This is where we see how she starts shifting her notions of respectability again because she agreed to go and take care of him and when Raksha asked her "but why did you go back to him; ten years of marriage and you never lived with him? Why did you go back to him?" She said because "I believe that in a woman's life she only gets married once". So there is another notion of respectability coming out; that a respectable female is one who gets married only once and she made it clear "whether he was old or not, whatever! I didn't care; I was going back only to do the least and last duty". So just to complete her duty as a wife she went and

took care of him. Later, when he became bed ridden she would beg in the village for rice and lentils because he was very poor. Eventually he passed away and she became a young widow. Now again since she was a young widow the village people had an issue with her; they told her that she was a very young female, she should remarry. But this time she did not listen to them; so they told her to go somewhere else because anyone could take advantage of her as she was young and they would not allow that to happen in their village. After she decided not to get remarried, the villagers arranged a ticket for her to come to Brindaban. When she came to Brindaban she did not go to Ma Dham immediately; she stayed at *bhajanashrams* and other places. So in her case widowhood was liberating. She was able to leave that place forever and come to Brindaban. And now she talks about her life at Ma Dhama with immense joy because she had a job of taking care of the older Maas at Ma Dham and she would get a salary for that. She talks about the money that she earns at Ma Dham with great pride because the money she earned before was for work that she did not enjoy doing. However in Brindaban, at Ma Dham she is proud because she has responsibility. So it is a lot of pride for her to know that this is her own money and she has earned it on her own terms. She does not feel like she will be moved from one place to the next. She is the master of her own will now.

Ever since ‘the widows of Brindaban’ have gained international recognition through mass media, several NGOs have started coming to Brindaban with their own ideas and meanings of empowerment of women. Nimi Mastey talks about “the Ambiguous and Indefinite Nature of the term Empowerment”⁴⁷; she says there is no one definition. Just as Brindaban is called the temple town, it could also be called the ‘Ashram town’. There are several NGOs, ashrams and other organizations which are trying to help or at least claim that they help women. There seems to be no unified vision of what constitutes empowerment for any two women, to the extent that while most dislike the state of widowhood, a significant and surprising number seem to prefer widowhood to marriage.⁴⁸ The article assesses the empowerment models adopted by two different NGOs in Brindaban: Ma Dhama and Chetan Bihar. Ma Dham, an ashram that we visited, believes in empowering women by making them

⁴⁷ Mastey, Nimi. Examining Empowerment among Indian Widows: A Qualitative study of the Narratives of Hindu Widows in North Indian Ashrams. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Page 194.

⁴⁸ Ibid. page 198.

self-sustained and fearless; you don't give someone a fish, you give them a rod and you teach them how to fish.⁴⁹ Chetan Bihar on the other hand gives the women the three hundred rupee pension and five hundred and fifty rupees per month for personal expenses. While Ma Dham believes in constantly engaging with the women and encouraging them through talks, Chetan Bihar provides the women with money and the freedom to decide what to do with it. While neither of these ideas of empowerment can be defined as good or bad, empowerment of women remains a recurring and ambiguous idea throughout India.

From other narratives, we found that some women come to Brindaban due to ill-treatment by or feud with their families and construct their own lives outside of it. Devotional life is the most convenient and possibly the only available option to adopt while reconstructing this new identity (outside the family domain) in Brindaban. The culture of Brindaban encourages or compels them towards the religious way of life. However, they maneuver this devotion and religion in order to suit their own needs and wants; which they would not have been able to do within the four walls of their home. So in that sense although a space like Brindaban dominates their religious life, it gives them a sense of freedom and independence.⁵⁰



Figure 16: Women find companionship in Brindaban

Bhajanashrams are the single most important entities in the lives of several women in Brindaban. As mentioned in the previous chapter, *bhajanashrams* are places where women in huge masses congregate to sing *bhajans*. It can be surmised

⁴⁹ Raksha Authar. Personal interview. 11th January 2014.

⁵⁰ Bhattacharya, Malini. *In Radha's Name: Widows and Other Women in Brindaban*. New Delhi: Tulika, 2008. Print. Page 52.

that the practice of singing *kirtans* and *bhajans* publicly can be dated back to the time when Chaitanya introduced the *bhakti* movement to include marginalized groups; so they were also accepted and acknowledged by the society and could lead a pious and spiritual life. Thus, when the *bhakti* movement became popular in Brindaban, it attracted several marginalized women to places like the *bhajanashrams* in Brindaban. At places like this, women not only get an opportunity to practice their spiritual and pious lives, earn a living and fulfill their material needs but also contribute to the generation and regeneration of faith. In fact this helps to keep the circle of institutionalized worship in place. When others see the faith in the *maas* they feel compelled to and driven to visit these places. On the other hand, the *maas* also make the best out of such places. They find companionship being in such huge numbers.

In the initial days of our research at Brindaban, almost all women talked about their extreme commitment to *bhakti*, towards Radha-Krishna as the reason for coming to Brindaban; they spoke about it with immense devotion and sincerity. We were very surprised by this uniform response as we thought that this was the sole purpose of their life there. However, as we revisited the same places and spoke to them again, at length we received other, different reasons from the same women who spoke of sincere devotional forces that brought them to Brindaban. Financial, family, cultural problems due to age, marital status, familial status, color and so on were the real reasons. This shows that this place has internalized devotion within them to such an extent that these women talk of it and sometimes even believe it to be the reason for their migration. Some of them are even grateful to and happy about the ill experiences that brought them to the most “holy” place on earth; “now they live with god himself”. Most of their answers and activities revolve around faith in Brindaban as the abode of god and devotion towards Radha-Krishna. Faith is thus an extremely influential motive in the narratives of women at the *bhajanashrams*. Malini Bhattacharya says “It is not just a veneer, but a deeply internalized attitude”⁵¹. The ambience of Brindaban as a religious space plays an extremely important role in the construction of self images and self identities of these women⁵². One of the *maas* at

⁵¹ Bhattacharya, Malini. *In Radha's Name: Widows and Other Women in Brindaban*. New Delhi: Tulika, 2008. Print. Page 76 .

⁵² Bhattacharya, Malini. *In Radha's Name: Widows and Other Women in Brindaban*. New Delhi: Tulika, 2008. Print. Page 77.

the *bhajanashram* spoke about facing domestic violence at home, so she left home and became a *sanyasin* after coming to Brindaban. And now she believes that this was always meant to happen and she is so happy that no one can hinder her relationship with Krishna.

A place like Brindaban which is an attraction for several marginalized women and women stripped of their identities tends to put all of them in a common light; all of them are identified uniformly; there is an assumption that they all have similar stories to tell and similar woes. Many women who migrate are not even widows but due to the tendency of looking at these women under a singular, uniform light, the story of oppression masks the stories and problems of a lot of other destitute widows and non-widows.

Throughout the course of this research project an important question we have been constantly asking ourselves is that if we are to go back into the past, what would it mean for the future and how would we have contributed to it. We have constantly tried to mould our topic around this. Though stereotypes and generalizations often help in understanding and making inferences, in the case of Brindaban and in fact India, masking the individual voices of women in the face of heavy odds is hindering our understanding of individual identities.

We can conclude from the various narratives that there is not one same story; there are similar stories and problems which can be seen from the pattern of themes in the collected narratives but these women are constantly working out of the rigid constructions by creatively remaking them with the same constructions. It gives them the power to live in a space constructed and reconstructed by them.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

— Marcel Proust

This profound quote could not fit a more accurate bill in describing our 8 day journey to Brindaban. After all, gaining perspective and rediscovering this temple town through the eyes of their women was the intention we embarked upon our journey with.

Upon finalizing this topic as the one, being unique and philosophical in nature, questions were raised and hurdles were stumbled upon. Yet, at this point, we could not be more content with the decision of selecting a place such as Brindaban. More than anything, however cliché this may sound, in the quest of discovering Brindaban and its people, we all discovered a little bit of ourselves. With determined minds and passion in our hearts, we set off on this journey where none of us could have fathomed the number of monkeys and cows that would be coming our way!

Throughout our train journey, various thoughts crossed our mind. Why Brindaban? We couldn't help but wonder what it was about this city that drew so many people in. There are so many conceptions and beliefs that surrounded this place, the strongest one being that, back in time, in Brindaban, amidst the cattle and milkmaids, resided a hero, Lord Krishna. This is believed to be the reason why Brindaban is known as a temple and religious town. Certain other notions of Brindaban (being the City of Widows) told us that there was definitely a pre-existing relationship with this city and womanhood. Hence, this is where it all originated. This relationship is exactly what we wanted to study; what was it that draws and still draws women to Brindaban and how have changes in this city influenced their beings.

Brindaban is known for its spirituality, devotion and Radha and Krishna's unconditional love, one the reasons why it attracts women to this culturally enriched city. Brindaban and its people play a very significant role in our study as their beliefs and faiths in the many myths of Radha and Krishna is what keeps the essence of this place alive. This place has been through a significant transformation due to the influx

of devotees from all around the globe bringing with them their own culture altering the already existing belief systems and adding to the essence and identity of the place. Thus studying Brindaban, a place so enriched in itself was overpowering at first but once we realized what Brindaban had to offer and started understanding its traditions, we felt a part of its fabric

Our main source of gathering primary data was by collecting oral histories of the women. However, in a patriarchal system such as the one we live in, the dynamics of the relationship between a man and a woman have to be considered. A study cannot be conducted on women and their societies without men and the contribution that they have to society. A project of this nature required us to have a deeper understanding of certain concepts that we were looking to explore, hence our fieldwork was not without many complexities and challenges. However, we tried tackling this problem by experimenting and adapting to every situation that came our way when interacting with the people of Brindaban. This has been our most valuable learning experience.

This study has helped us understand that it is not just Brindaban that impacts women and their notions, it's also the women who shape societal constructs in Brindaban. Faith is something that is internalized in these women. It is so deeply embedded in them, it is almost treated like a separate entity; much alike Radha-Krishna. And this faith helps these women form identities. However, the *bhajanashrams* have found a way to exploit the devotion and faith these women possess and give these women a collective identity. The narratives of the women give us an insight into their notions of womanhood like that of respectability, freedom and so on; these notions keep shifting and evolving as the women adapt to situations and reconstruct these notions for their benefit. Being researchers we bring the notion of oppression into picture. Through our study we have realized women are not always victims of oppression but they have a creative agency to turn the oppression to their advantage.

Personally, we feel that women form an integral part of society. Educating or transforming a woman's life can change and transform many aspects of society. This is so because, a woman is closely networked to so many people, be it her family or community. However we can tell that, more often than not, women are given quite the

opposite, the short end of the stick. Our work was about looking at women and we have understood that it is not that women need to be empowered because the word empowerment implies that women do not possess any form of power, which is a fallacy. Women transform actively every single day. This is highlighted by the difficulties that they face with the constructs in society and yet they are still able to function within all the constraints. We have learned to become more sensitive towards different perspectives since we have worked with a lot of people who are not of the same culture, who are not of the same religious beliefs, who are completely different from us. In fact, we thrived through that because it enriched and taught us life lessons from people who are different from us. It was very inspiring to work with the *maas*, the foreigners and people who lead completely different lifestyles as compared to the ones we follow.

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GLOSSARY

1. **Aartis** – a Hindu ritual of worship, a part of puja, in which light from wicks soaked in ghee or camphor is offered to one or more deities.
2. **Acharaya** - a Hindu or Buddhist spiritual teacher or leader.
3. **Agarbattis** – used while performing service to a deity, during a puja usually.
4. **Akhara** – premises used by devotees (generally Vaishnava) for carrying out their day-to-day religious practices. Devotees may also reside there.
5. **Ashrams** – a place of religious retreat.
6. **Bairagi Vaishnavas** – An itinerant group among the Vaishnavas who spend their lives singly or as couples spreading the name of Radha and Krishna and make *bhajan* singing their principle means of livelihood.
7. **Bhajan**- a devotional song.
8. **Bhajanashrams** - an ashram visited by women who sing songs in praise of Krishna in return for money and food.
9. **Bhakta**- a religious devotee.
10. **Bhakti** - devotional worship directed to one supreme deity.
11. **Bhakti-yoga** - a spiritual path described in Hindu philosophy as efficacious for fostering love of, faith in, and surrender to God.
12. **Brajadham** – Pilgrim sites in and around Mathura and Brindaban associated with the myths of Krishna are collectively known as Brajadham.
13. **Chhatras** – A traditional charitable institution set up by rich patrons in places of pilgrimage which distributes food daily to the indigent.
14. **Diya**- a small cup-shaped oil lamp made of baked clay.
15. **Dhama**- abode.
16. **Gaudiya Vaishnavism** – refers to the specific brand of Vaishnavism that was propagated by Chaitanya from Nabadwip.
17. **Ghat** – a constructed bathing place consisting of paved stairs going down into a river or any water body. Pilgrims used them for purificatory ablutions.

18. **Gopi** - a word of Sanskrit origin meaning 'cow-herd girl'.
19. **Gopika** - group of cow herding girls famous within Vaishnava Theology for their unconditional devotion to Krishna.
20. **Goswami/Gosain** – The spiritual guru in Vaishnavism who leads the disciple towards salvation, often seen as a deity incarnate. In Gaudiya Vaishnavism the original six gosains were Rupa, Sanatana, Jeeva, Gopalbhatta, Raghunathbhatta and Ragunathdas, themselves disciples of Chaitanya, who dedicated their lives entirely to the study and dissemination of Chaitanya's philosophy of *bhakti* and made Brindaban a center of their activities.
21. **ISKCON** –International Society for Krishna Consciousness, also known as the Hare Krishna Movement, is a Vaishnava society founded by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.
22. **Kirtan** – A particular genre of devotional songs taking their cues most often from the Krishna myths and developed in medieval Bengal.
23. **Leela** – in the Vaishnava context it refers to Krishna's love play with Radha and the *gopikas*.
24. **Maa** – Literally 'mother'. Refers specifically to widows who have dedicated themselves to a life of devotion and to chanting the holy names of Radha and Krishna regularly at *bhajanashrams*.
25. **Ma Dham** - Ma Dham is run by a non-governmental organization run by The Guild of Service and houses around 70 women, mainly widows. It is around 2 kilometers from the city and provides food, shelter, and clothing and government pensions.
26. **Mahabharata**- A Sanskrit epic principally concerning the dynastic struggle and civil war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas in the kingdom of Kurukshetra about the 9th century B.C.
27. **Malkin** – in a general context, A lower-class or uncultured woman. However in this context, a malkin is someone who is answerable to a higher figure.
28. **Moksha** - release from the cycle of rebirth impelled by the law of karma.
29. **Pandits** - a Hindu scholar learned in Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy and religion, typically also a practicing priest.
30. **Parampara** – tradition.

31. **Parda** – a veil.
32. **Parikrama** – the custom of making a round on foot of all the holy spots in Brajadham on special religious occasions.
33. **Prabhu** – master or the supreme lord.
34. **Puja** - the act of worship.
35. **Pujari** - a Hindu priest.
36. **Raasleela** – Festive rituals through which Krishna proclaims his union with the devotee.
37. **Radhabhav** – mood or nature of Radha.
38. **Radhe Shyam** - This is the representation of cosmic love and compassion and the purest form of union of male and female at the mental, emotional and spiritual level.
39. **Ramayana** – A classical Hindu epic narrating the tale of the banishment of Rama from his kingdom and the abduction of his wife by a demon and Rama's restoration to the throne.
40. **Rasas** - the agreeable quality of something, especially the emotional or aesthetic impression of a work of art.
41. **Seva** – selfless service. Performed without any expectations.
42. **Sevak** –servant, someone who offers his/her services.
43. **Shakti** - the female principle of divine energy, especially when personified as the supreme deity.
44. **Shanti** – peace.
45. **Sharaddha** - faith.
46. **Shrimati** - used as a title of respect for a woman.
47. **Solah shringar** - 16 ornaments and other Hindu trademark bridal accessories.
48. **Tilaks** - a mark worn by a Hindu on the forehead to indicate caste, status, or sect, or as an ornament.
49. **Widow** – A woman who has lost her husband.