Healing through Faith: Psychological Impact, Spiritual and Social Resilience of Widowhood in Vrindavan

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Abstract:
This qualitative study investigates the change of social exclusion into religiously mediated inclusion among widows in Vrindavan, India. Through feminist ethnography, biographical narratives, and participant observation, it illustrates how widows, often excluded by patriarchal norms, economic disenfranchisement, and familial abandonment, reinterpret their identities through ritual practice, sacred speech, and symbolic religiosity centered around Krishna devotion. Widows reconstruct identities and attain psychological resilience. While Vrindavan provides spiritual refuge and symbolic religious empowerment, inclusion is limited by Hindu scriptures, traditional beliefs, and economic precarity. The study builds on the foundational understanding of social exclusion and extends the discourse by examining the mental health dimensions of widowhood, challenging stereotypical depictions of widowhood by emphasizing the widows' resilience, their coping mechanisms and their social inclusion within complex socio-religious surroundings. Thematic analysis reveals important features that suggests religiosity as bridge that binds both spiritual and psychological coping mechanism that transforms pain into purpose within the sacred geography of Vrindavan, including religious embodiment, and economic engagement via holy labour.

Keywords: Social exclusion, Widowhood, Vrindavan, Krishna, Psychological impact, Spiritual resilience.

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Introduction

Widowhood in India represents a complex interplay of cultural norms, gendered expectations, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. According to the 2011 Census of India, there are approximately 56 million widowed persons in the country, of which nearly 78% are women (Census & Operations, Uttar Pradesh, 2011)(Chatterjee & Mohanty, 2022) This disproportion reflects both demographic realities, such as husbands often being older than wives and deeply entrenched cultural prohibitions against widow remarriage (Ghosh, 2000). Widowhood in Hindu society is often marked by social death: the widow loses her status as an auspicious member of society, is excluded from ceremonies, and faces economic disenfranchisement (Singh & Haigh, 2015). Gender inequality, an evident fact that persists in India, demonstrates that new ideals and institutions do not always lead to the extinction of earlier forms. These forms can even arise as an unexpected combination of tradition and modernity. This is a widely accepted finding in current sociological literature.

Conceptualizing Social Exclusion

Social exclusion is a multidimensional construct encompassing economic deprivation, labour-market marginalization, service exclusion, and exclusion from social relations (Bacchetta, 2000; Priyadarshini & Pande, 2021).It transcends mere poverty to include spatial-structural inequalities that intensify over time (Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016; Spencer & Triandafyllidou, 2022). Two primary sources of exclusion have been identified: group-based disadvantages (e.g., caste, gender, widowhood) and life-course discrimination (Blix et al., 2013; Kogan et al., 2019). Widows in India represent a paradigmatic case of group-based exclusion: they are debarred from economic resources, stigmatized in social rituals, and often abandoned by kin (Gupta, 2021; Liebelt et al., 2010). Social exclusion can manifest through ritual ostracism (e.g., tonsure, white dress), legal disenfranchisement (e.g., property rights), and everyday neglect (Auger, 1968; Mukherjee et al., 2019; Rana et al., 2023; Singh, 2023). Understanding how exclusion (Rawal, 1970) is experienced and resisted is crucial for framing interventions that move widows toward social inclusion. A category of Indian women that have a unique position is the widows and attitude towards them reflect the paradoxical stand on women. A culture which emphasises on the married status and as a nation deeply entrenched in patriarchal ideologies as far as women are concerned, a widowed woman (Balasubramanian & Banerjee, 2024; Bhattacharyya & Singh, 2018; Priyadarshini & Pande, 2021; Werbner, 2013) poses a threat to the social organization and is to be stayed away from, at all costs. On one hand, women are venerated as goddesses and considered as the source of the creative feminine power that holds the authority to construct or destruct the universe. On the other, they are labelled as evil, entrance to hell and a bad influence which should be stayed away from. A woman in the Indian culture is seen as property and is not seen as a successful woman unless she has a son and runs her household well and keeps her husband healthy. When her husband dies, she loses her identity and dignity for she has been taught from a young age that she is nothing without her husband and therefore responds as if she is useless when she is widowed and becomes a non-being. Yet, within this exclusion, some widows seek alternative forms of social inclusion (-, 2024a; Quinn et al., 2021; Rawal, 1970) by migrating to sacred geographies, among them Vrindavan, a holy town associated with Krishna. Vrindavan, one of Hinduism's most sacred places, is thought to be the site of Krishna's divine pastimes (Leelas). It is a popular pilgrimage site, renowned for its temples, bhakti (devotion) traditions, and vibrant festival culture. However, during the last century, Vrindavan has established a reputation as a "widow's refuge," attracting thousands of widowed women, especially from Bengal, Odisha, and within Uttar Pradesh itself, (Kubendran, 2020), who come seeking spiritual comfort but often end up in poverty, relying on temple charities and non-governmental organizations. This study examines how widows in Vrindavan negotiate the transition from social exclusion to a form of religiously mediated inclusion, drawing on life narratives, participant observation, and feminist ethnography.

Relating social exclusion with mental and psychological health

Social exclusion runs a subtle, destructive thread across mental and psychological health, diminishing self-esteem and increasing solitude (Carr et al., 2001; Ma et al., 2012). For Vrindavan's widows, marginalization, characterized by averted

gazes, avoidance of public areas, and cultural taboos fuels chronic stress, anxiety, and despair(Milevsky & Levitt, 2004; Pande, 2020; Pandey & Gupta, 2019). The stigma of widowhood, along with rituals that impose invisibility, reinforces a narrative of unworthiness, as if their sadness makes them ***"inauspicious"*** to the world. This systemic rejection denies not only social connection, but also the fundamental right to be seen, exacerbating trauma and fragmenting identity (Qureshi, 2020). Despite this, resilience flickers: social rituals and relationships formed during shared misery become lifelines, frail attempts to repair the psyche's fissures. Still, the toll of exclusion remains as a reminder that healing requires more than just surviving; it needs belonging.

History of Widowhood in India

The historical trajectory of Hindu widowhood is rooted in ancient texts and reinforced by colonial and postcolonial discourses. Dharma Sutras and Shastras prescribe a widow's role as perpetual chastity, asceticism, and renunciation (Asiva Noor Rachmayani, 2015; Singh, 2011; Theodor, 2017). Upper-caste widows were ritualistically segregated: tonsured, clad in white, and barred from auspicious events (Dhage, 2024). Practices like sati and prohibitions on remarriage reinforced the permanence of widowhood (Ummah, 2019). Colonial reformers targeted extreme practices like sati, but often reinforced stereotypes of widows as passive victims (Shandilya, 2017). From the mid-19th century onward, patriarchal elites in Bengal and elsewhere used religious sanctions to deport widows to sacred towns like Vrindavan and Varanasi, removing them from the domestic sphere, barring them from property, and ostensibly guaranteeing moral purity and social control (Ghosh, 2000).

 Contemporary legislation, such as the Hindu Succession Act (1956) and the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act (2019) that aims to secure property rights and maintenance, yet implementation remains uneven (Chen & Drèze, 1992; Government of India, 2019). The Widow (Protection and Maintenance) Bill (2022) further proposes state support through welfare boards and funds, but gaps persist, driving many widows to seek livelihoods through pilgrimage sites (Courtney, 2014). Following independence, state measures such as census surveys, pension plans, and NGO programmes attempted to alleviate widows' suffering, but implementation problems and lingering stigma limited their impact.

Vrindavan

Vrindavan, situated on the banks of the Yamuna River in Uttar Pradesh, India, is a holy pilgrimage place considered to be the playground of Lord Krishna. It is therefore a linguistically displaced part of the Braj region, which has complex links to Hindu mythology, resonating with the stories of Krishna's childhoods ras-rasiya and his lovelies or gopis (Hawley, 2020). The town's sacred geography is punctuated by forests, groves and temples believed to be locations where Krishna enacted his divine historical acts, like the Banke Bihari Temple, the Neelkantheshwar temple and the Seva Kunj(Shinde, 2012a).

Figure 1: Geographical map of the Study area
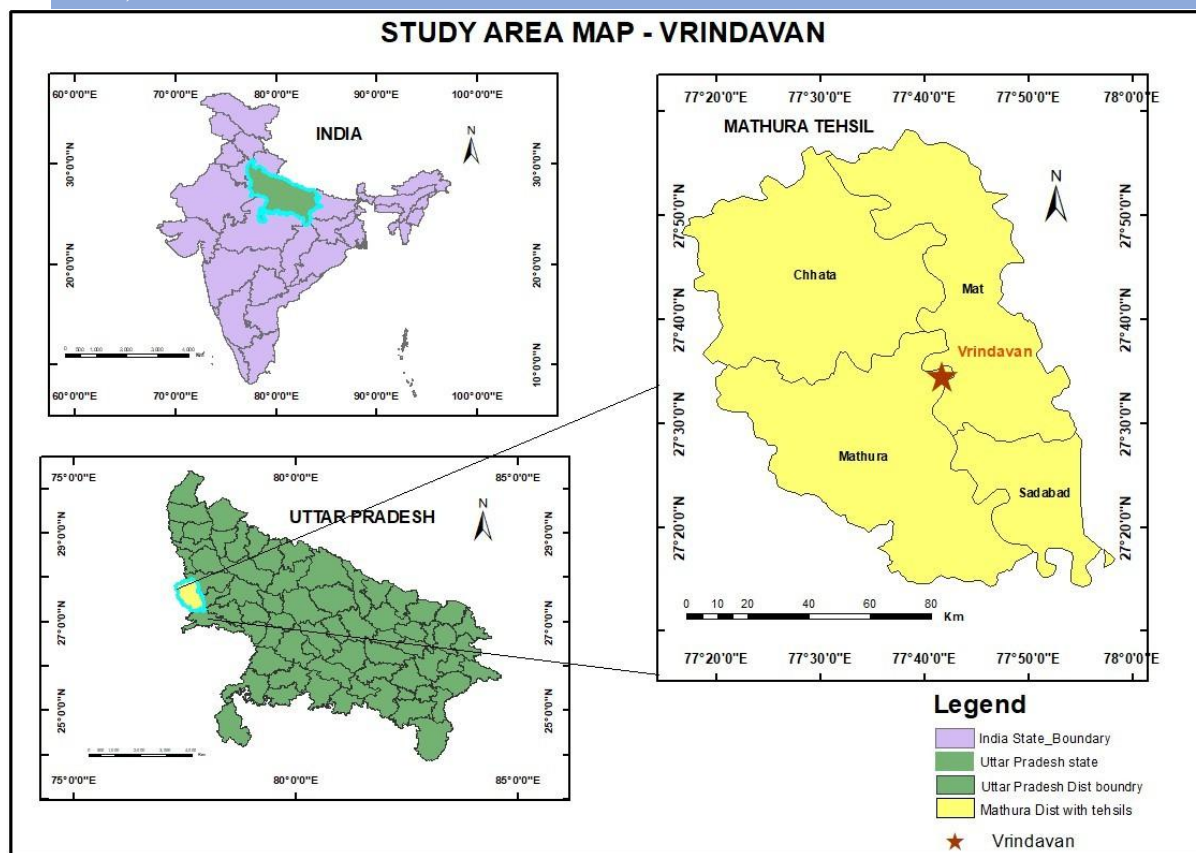
Source: Prepared by the researcher

Vrindavan came into prominence in the 15th century during the Bhakti movement, when disciples of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu made it a focal point of Krishna's devotion, championing experiential worship via song, dance and reenactments of Krishna's life. Now, it's a living, breathing centre of piety that draws both pilgrims and scholars with its harems of alleyways and popular festivals (Pande, 2015) like Holi and Janmashtami; even today, it carries a timelessness that erases the distinctions between myth and milieu. Famed for its initial depiction of Krishna as God in a poetic way, the reason behind its relevance is it encapsulates Krishna's eternal presence and therefore represents not only a mere physical location but also a living repository of India's ageless devotional lore.

How Widows of Vrindavan Differ from other regions

Vrindavan's specific cultural and economic ecosystem shapes a distinctive widowhood experience. Swati Ghosh's seminal essay on Bengali widows in Varanasi illuminates how 19th-century patriarchies, under the banner of the Bengal Renaissance, paradoxically emancipated women of the upper classes while actively excluding widows from family and community life. The widows of Vrindavan symbolize an unusual combination of religious holiness and social isolation (Hawley & Hawley, 2020; Shinde, 2012b). Unlike widows in metropolitan old age institutions or in areas with little cultural or spiritual value, Vrindavan widows are frequently transported away under the preteens of religious devotion. The city, known as the home of Lord Krishna, has long been regarded as a spiritual haven (Singh, 1995) where widows might spend their remaining years chanting devotional melodies and enunciating secular life. However, this spiritual framework frequently obscures the bitter reality of abandonment. Families, particularly those from Bengal and northern India, have long banished widows to Vrindavan, not for spiritual growth, but to avoid perceived social obligations. Widows at urban old age homes, such as those in Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore, live in a more secular and structured setting (Rana et al., 2023; Shinde, 2012b; Shukla et al., 2019; Singh, 2023). These homes may not have the spiritual veneer of Vrindavan, but they are frequently better supplied in terms of practical necessities like food,

housing, healthcare, and structured activities. While stigma and neglect continue to impact widows in metropolitan India, individuals in old age homes are more likely to attend such institutions voluntarily or through shared family decisions, as opposed to the moralized exile that distinguishes the Vrindavan experience.

Vrindavan's identity is intertwined with the childhood exploits of Krishna, evoking a maternal and childlike devotional ethos. Widows in Vrindavan adopt the persona of Gopis or Meera, cultivating a personal relationship with Krishna that reconfigures their identity from inauspicious widow to beloved devotee (Ramberg, 2014). The town's integration into global tourism particularly through the ISKCON movement has helped to formalize charitable practices: temple-based ashrams provide shelter, food, and communal rituals in exchange for widows' participation in devotional performances (Banerjee & Miller, 2003; Banerji & Jack, 2006). This sacred economy contrasts with other regions where widows remain largely invisible or relegated to begging on streets (Basu, 2010; Smith, 2015).

Data and Methods

This study uses a feminist ethnographic technique to focus on the lived experiences and voices of widows in Vrindavan, challenging colonial and patriarchal narratives that have traditionally portrayed women as powerless victims (Das et al., 2023; Ishtiaq, 2019). To ensure depth and richness, data was collected using different qualitative methodologies. First, life stories were obtained through audio-recorded and transcribed interviews with 24 widows from three ashrams: Rajkya, Birla, and an NGO-run shelter. Participants ranged in age from 50 to 85 years old, with the majority hailing from West Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Second, unstructured interviews with open-ended questions enabled widows to reflect on their pre-marital lives, conjugal experiences, the start of widowhood, their reasons for moving to Vrindavan, daily routines, and future goals. This strategy allowed for organic, emotionally complex tales and emergent themes that shaped the study. Third, participant observation was carried out across 7 days of fieldwork, during which the researcher participated in daily bhajan sessions, temple ceremonies, communal meals, and home interactions, capturing both verbal and nonverbal components of widowhood performance. Finally, thematic analysis was conducted on the transcribed interviews, with inductive coding indicating major patterns such as socioeconomic precarity, ritual embodiment, narrative agency, and negotiated inclusion. Psychoanalytic and postcolonial theoretical frameworks (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Mura & Sharif, 2017; Stone, 2004) were used to expand the interpretation of these themes, notably in examining socio-spatial exclusion and the concept of abjection in the lives of Vrindavan's widows. This methodological approach not only amplifies their voices but also analyses the institutional mechanisms that have contributed to their marginalization.

Widowhood in Vrindavan: A Closer Engagement

Widows in Vrindavan share common trajectories of economic destitution and familial breakdown. Many lost maternal caregivers early, assumed domestic responsibilities, and married young experiences that entrenched their dependence on marital families (-, 2024b; DeForge et al., 2008; Kubendran, 2020). Post-widowhood, they faced harassment, property disenfranchisement, and physical abuse, prompting migration (Dingle & Alistair Drake, 2007; Liebelt et al., 2010; Randolph & Naik, 2017).

Upon arrival, widows navigate a new social world structured by Krishna devotion. Their daily routines are meticulously ritualistic: dawn baths in the Yamuna, pooja offerings, bhajan singing, communal meals (khichdi and sugar), afternoon rest, evening prayers, and solitary reading of the Bhagavat Purana. The repetition of these practices "Naam dharna" is seen as a pathway to inner purity and psychological resilience (Turner, 2019; Mahmood, 2011).

The lived experiences of widows in Vrindavan show intricate emotional and identity exchanges that challenge popular accounts of passive victims. Their stories highlight five main themes that show how people rebuild their identities, reinterpret suffering, and navigate socio-religious frameworks according to their own terms.

Divine Calling: Spiritual Mandates Over Abandonment

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Many widows recast their move to Vrindavan as a divine invitation rather than a harsh exile. They recount dreams, visions, or inner voices that push them to seek sanctuary in Krishna's city, transforming their exile into a divinely appointed pilgrimage.

One participant reported, *″lalla (Krishna) hmko darshan diye (came in my dream and said), 'Mere sharaan me aa jao (Come to me) ...' saab chor char ke aa gyi (I left everything behind); what else could I do?... mere sath bura salugh hota thya mughpe hath uthaye (I was mistreated by my family)″*,

Her eyes brimming with the recollection of a midnight visit, as if she is trying to reclaim control of their life stories, transforming societal rejection into a spiritual adventure. This reframe reduces the stigma of abandonment and replaces it with a sense of divine purpose. Many widows in Vrindavan regard banishment as destiny. They repair their shattered lives with celestial threads dreams of Krishna's voice, glimpses of his inviting hand. What families saw as disposal, to her it is a sacred call to live in Krishna's shadow.

Reconstruction of Self: From Outcast to Divine Intimate

Widowhood in orthodox Hinduism frequently erase their woman's social identity, transforming her to a symbol of bad luck. In Vrindavan, widows often play spiritual roles such as Krishna's mother (Yashoda), lover (Radha), or eternal servant (dasī). One old widow stated,

″Jab main bhaagan gati hun (When I sing Hymes for Krishna), I am no longer a widow; I am Radha, dur kahi chali jati hun (lost in his love) ...″ These symbolic identities help individuals overcome their excluded status, replacing pain with a sense of holy connectedness.

Negotiated Norms: Selective Austerity and Pragmatic Devotion

While Brahmanical traditions dictate rigorous widowhood regulations (white saris, shaved heads, and food restrictions), many widows modify these laws to meet their own requirements. Some people refuse to shave their heads because they believe it causes extra hardship, while others adjust their fasting traditions owing to health concerns.

One participant stated, *″Ab yahi meri poshaak hai (I wear white), lekin khane me koi pabandh nhi rakti hun (I eat what my body needs), God understands.″* This chosen allegiance demonstrates their agency in balancing piety and survival, avoiding dogmatic orthodoxy while upholding spiritual integrity.

Economic Inclusion: Devotional Labor as Livelihood

Financial precarity is a difficult reality, yet many widows use religious activities to help them survive. Singing bhajans at temples, cleaning shrines, or selling ceremonial gifts (prasad) generates a modest but dignified income. One woman explained, *″Bhagaan kirtaan krti rheti hun kuch na kuch log vait de jate hai (When I sing, I earn blessings and coins) usise pet bhar jata hai (both keep me alive) ...″* This devotional labour not only provides for their practical needs, but it also reinforces their spiritual and communal obligations, allowing them to give rather than rely on charity.

These narratives reveal how widows transform experiences of abjection into practices of belonging and spiritual resilience, leveraging religiosity to negotiate social inclusion.

Psychological Impact and Mental Distress

Amidst the revered ambiance of Vrindavan, where temple bells echo along winding alleys and the air is filled with chanting of "Radhe Radhe," a quiet melancholy frequently remains in the eyes of its bereaved residents. The emotional and psychological aspects of widowhood are examined in this section using a qualitative approach, with themes of *sadness, anxiety, social stigma, and loneliness* serving as a guide.

Hymns greet the ashram's daybreak, but underlying the communal dedication is a silent pain of isolation. Many widows start their days with the burden of abandonment in addition to prayer.

In an unsteady voice, an 80-year-old West Bengali woman admits, "My sons left me here.... (long pause) ... I spent the evenings crying... I still cry somrtimes″.

Her statements reveal a reality that goes beyond just physical seclusion: the dissolution of family bonds and the loss of a sense of belonging. There are memories of homes abandoned, children who no longer visit, and lives that once had meaning beyond survival that grow large in the quiet before the Bhajans. Being alone isn't the only aspect of loneliness; identity loss and the unsolved question of why there is a change in the meaning of love and care that she has provided to her son and not getting any in return. However, even in the midst of the sounds of desertion, there is a tenuous fortitude, a mutual comprehension expressed through glances, hands linked in prayer, and the silent commitment to stick together even when the outside world forgets.

white saris in Vrindavan are more than just garments; they are a paradox, a veil of exclusion and a thread to the divine. One woman said, her voice quivering with the pain of being invisible, ″yaha vi kuch log unhi nazron se dekte hai (Even here, people see us and turn away), as if misfortune clings to us wherever we go.″

The clothing, which was intended to symbolize devotion to Krishna, frequently turns into a uniform of seclusion, designating them as omens that travellers should avoid or avoid in marketplaces. Purification rituals, such as fasting and avoiding celebrations, further erase them, turning lively lives into rumours in the periphery. Under the stigma, however, there is defiance: the white sari also turns into a silent protest, a claim to sacred space in society that makes them invisible. Yet, beneath the stigma, there is defiance: the white sari serves as a hidden revolt, a claim to sacred space in Vrindavan.

For many widows, Vrindavan is not a chosen sanctuary, but rather a place of exile, a destination imposed on them by relatives desperate to erase their presence.

A 62-year-old from Bihar recalls arriving in shaking disbelief: ″phele phele jab aayi thi man me bohot ghabrahaat hoti thi, hath pair thaande par jate the (I didn't know this place. I was afraid when I arrived) ...″ Her unexpected departure from home left her stuck in a maze of unknowns where to sleep, what to eat, and who would notice if she became ill or died. Fear gnawed at her bones, fuelled by the fear of desertion.

But eventually, a weak but strong reliance on faith took the place of anxiety's hold. She acknowledges, ″phir bhajan kirtan ... lalla ka nam leti gyi .... Ab utna nhi sochti (I started chanting so I wouldn't think too much) ...″ The pulsating recitals served as a lifeline, mending broken days. In Krishna, she discovered a divine listener to her mumbled anxieties and broken hopes of an audience that her family had rejected. Chanting through the sounds of sadness was a survival tactic that gradually evolved into a form of sovereignty.

Coping mechanisms

In the sacred geography of Vrindavan, widows navigate through deeply rooted spiritual coping mechanisms, widows can rebuild their sense of self beyond widowhood through the symbolic adoption of identities like Radha or Meera, daily engagement in bhajans, temple rituals, and group prayers provide emotional foundation. In addition to providing them with financial support, devotional work such as singing, shrine maintenance, or offering preparation allows them to become spiritually integrated into the holy community. Widows find comfort, meaning, and fortitude in the face of marginalization and abandonment by transforming their own pain into acts of devotion through ritual repetition, sacred speech, and communal religious activity.

Ritual Practice as Therapy

In Vrindavan, the daily cycle of bhajans and pooja serves as both an anchor and a shield for widows. These repetitiveness of the rituals and prayers calms the chaos of abandonment by substituting anxiety with structure. ″Mantra jab krne se dimag shaant rheta hai our idhar udhar nahi bhatakta (Singing stops the mind from wandering into dark corners) ...,″ one woman acknowledges, her voice calmer in prayer than in silence or speaking to others. It is observed that what appears to be inflexible tradition becomes rebellion: chanting turns agony into purpose, and hymns turn invisibility into visibility. Each ritual is a quiet rebellion, a way to transform pain into something sacred. In the cadence of devotion, they mend their broken lives into a chorus that insists, I am still here and alive.

Sacred Identity Reconstruction

It is observed that widows in Vrindavan create new identities based on old mythology. They shed the skin of societal neglect by assuming the identities of Radha, Yashoda who are eternally connected to Krishna. "When I sing for Krishna, I forget my pain," one says, her voice fading into hymns to the god. These representations are more than just roles; their lifelines. To embody Radha's longing or Meera's surrender means exchanging worldly desertion for a celestial love story, anguish for spiritual intimacy.

The white sari serves as a bridal veil for the divine, ritualized devotion reframes widowhood as a dedication, not an exile, but an opportunity to be recognized as tied to something infinite rather than shattered. Pain softens into poetry, and loneliness into liturgy. Even the lost can recreate themselves here by whispering to Krishna.

Linguistic Practices: Sacred Speech as Emotional Anchoring

Language provides both spiritual protection and mental peace. Greetings like ″Radhe Radhe″ and poetic invocations of Krishna ("Shyam," "Kanhaiya") contribute to a shared devotional vocabulary, establishing a sense of belonging. A widow remarked, "When I call him 'Nand Lal,' I feel he is my child..." These linguistic acts serve as emotional links, transforming sadness into lyrical devotion and fostering a sense of community among Vrindavan's widows.

Figure 2: Key themes related to Widowhood in Vrindavan: A Word Cloud Analysis
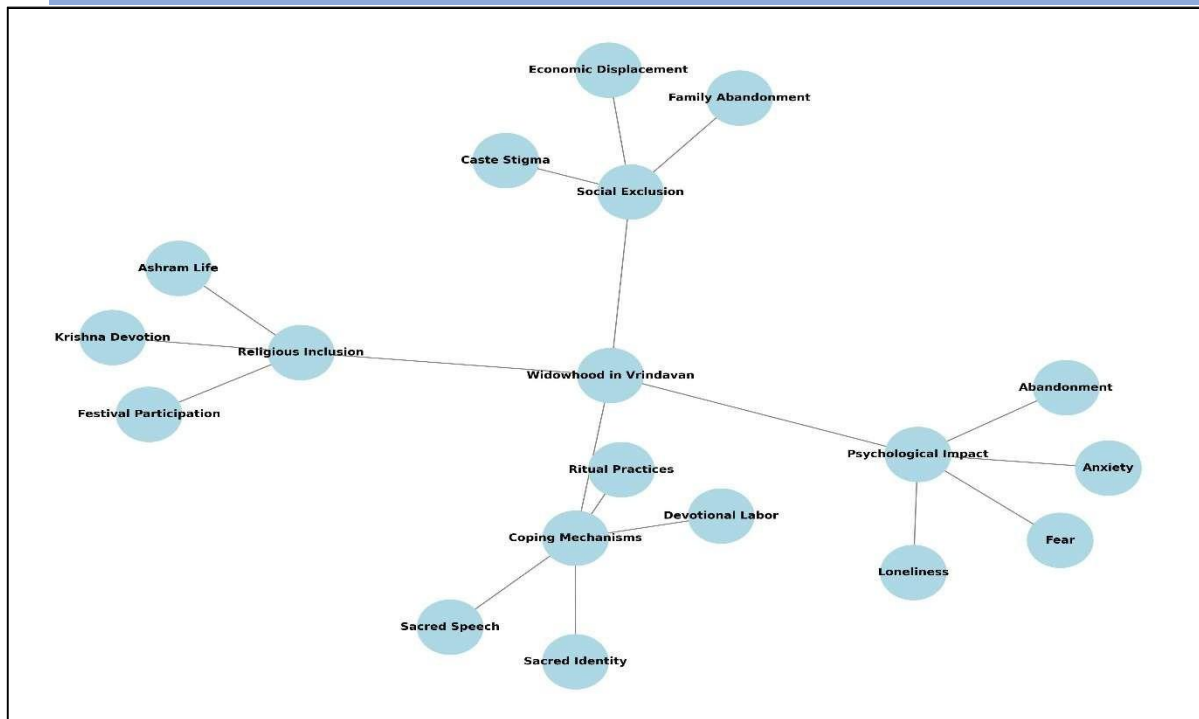

Source: prepared by author

The emotional and thematic centre of widowhood in Vrindavan is graphically represented by this word cloud. Key concepts like ritual, resilience, and sacredness are evident, demonstrating how the widows reconstruct their lives via devotion, spirituality, and community involvement in spite of experiences of exclusion, poverty, loneliness, and patriarchy. While words like identity, inclusion, and strength indicate the continuous battle to achieve dignity and belonging within a complicated socio-religious framework, words like Krishna, bhajan, temple, and chanting reflect how religious rituals give emotional healing.

Mind Graph:

A conceptual map showing the relationships among key themes like psychological impact, coping mechanisms, social exclusion, and religious inclusion in the lives of widows in Vrindavan.

**Figure 3: Mind Graph for widowhood in Vrindavan**

Source: Prepared by the author

In Vrindavan, the core reality of widowhood is divided into four key domains: psychological impact, coping strategies, social exclusion, and religious inclusion. The Mind Graph depicts these interwoven experiences. The widows' lives are profoundly impacted by psychological effects like abandonment, loneliness, worry, and terror. They respond by creating coping strategies such as ritualistic activities, assuming sacred personas (e.g., assuming the role of Radha or Yashoda), engaging in devotional work in temples, and employing holy speech (e.g., chanting "Radhe Radhe") to attain emotional stability. The graph also emphasizes the two forces of exclusion—economic marginalization, caste-based stigma, and familial abandonment—and religious inclusion, where widows reestablish their identities through participation in religious festivals, temple worship, and Krishna devotion.

Heatmap Matrix: This shows how different coping mechanisms (like ritual practices, sacred identity, etc.) relate to psychological challenges (like loneliness, abandonment, etc.), with intensity indicating how commonly each mechanism is used to address each form of distress.

Figure 4: Heatmap Matrix of Psychological impact and coping mechanisms
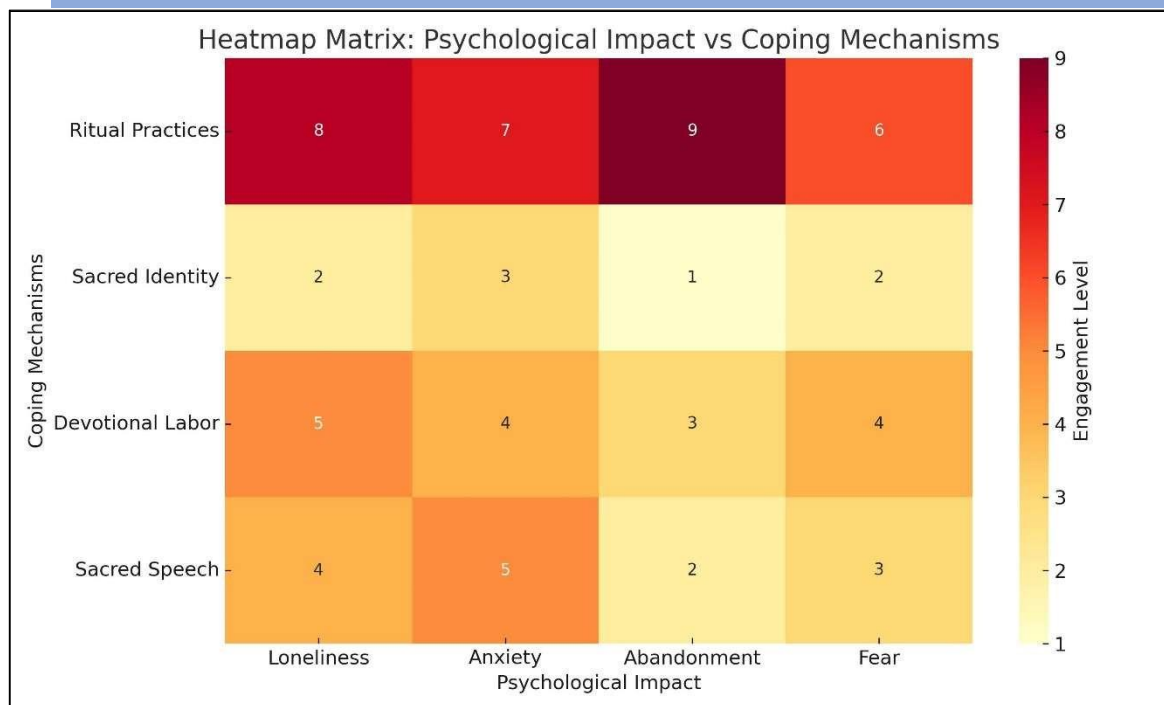
Source: Prepared by the author

The **Heatmap Matrix** helps to reveal how different coping mechanisms relate to specific psychological struggles. Ritual practices, like singing bhajans and attending poojas, are most effective in alleviating feelings of loneliness and abandonment. Adopting sacred identities helps counteract anxiety and fear by offering widows an emotional refuge through mythical associations with Krishna. Devotional labour, such as cleaning temples or selling offerings, moderately addresses emotional needs while also providing a modest livelihood. Sacred speech practices like chanting Krishna's various names offer widows a way to soothe their anxiety and fear, creating an emotional safety net. The heatmap shows that coping in Vrindavan is not uniform; instead, widows creatively combine spirituality, work, and community to heal from deep psychological wounds.

Discussion

The fact that individuals and groups can feel both inclusion and exclusion across multiple domains complicates the link between exclusion and inclusion (Balasubramanian & Banerjee, 2024; Rawal, 1970), for example, identify examples in which marginalized Nepalese communities are politically excluded but economically included, or culturally isolated but retain strong kinship links. This contradicts binary notions of exclusion, implying that marginality acts in subtle, context-specific ways. Furthermore, marginality is more than just a state of deprivation; feminist scholars and anthropologists such as Tsing (1998) believe that it can also be a source of resistance and innovation.

Vrindavan widows' transition from social exclusion to social inclusion is neither linear nor complete; rather, it is a negotiated process facilitated by sacred landscape, ritual embodiment, and narrative agency. Widows in Vrindavan are excluded from mainstream society due to caste-based conventions, yet they find limited participation among spiritual communities. Their agency emerges through "patriarchal bargains" (Balasubramanian & Banerjee, 2024; Rawal, 1970) in which they maximize constrained life alternatives (Kandiyoti, 1988), by adhering to Krishna's religious ethos. This alignment offers both emotional and financial support, countering notions of widow passivity.

However, the cultural dynamics of Vrindavan's festivals have changed dramatically in the twenty-first century, defined

by commercialization and timid gestures toward inclusivity. 2018 UNESCO research found that 72% of public Holi celebrations in Vrindavan catered to visitors, relegating widows to passive "observational roles". Orthodox norms still exist in places such as the Banke Bihari Temple, which prevented widows from entering its sanctum in 2015, citing the Padma Purana's Shuddhi Prakarana (verses on ceremonial purity). Scholars like Haberman (1994, 112) say that this is a selective interpretation of text, neglecting the Bhagavata Purana's emphasis on devotion that transcends social class. In response, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Sulabh International have mobilized religious counternarratives. Since 2012, the Holi for Widows movement has used Bhagavata Purana 10.29.15 "Krishna's flute called all, regardless of marital status" to justify inclusion (Pathak 2018, The Hindu). These efforts have resulted in measurable, albeit inconsistent, progress: widows were formerly mute observers at Holi, but NGO-organized participation has now become the norm (Sulabh International 2020). Similarly, Janmashtami celebrations have moved from prohibiting widows from approaching murtis (idols) to allowing bhajan (devotional song) performances in specific temples (Sharma 2021, 45).

Table 1.

Festival	Pre-2010 Norm	Post-2010 and onwards	Source
Holi	Widows silently observed rituals	NGO-organized participation introduced	(Popli, 2016)
Janmashtami	Widows barred from murti contact	Bhajan singing permitted in temples	(Popli, 2016) Sharma (2021, p. 45)

Vrindavan's socio-spatial configuration temples, ashrams, and pilgrims constitute a landscape of inclusion distinct from urban anonymity. Drawing on Sibley's psychoanalytic lens (1995), the psychic distancing that underlies social exclusion is countered by embodied rituals that reinscribe purity and belonging. The repetitive performance of bhajans and poojas operates as a technology of the self (Foucault) enabling widows to craft resilient subjectivities.

However, this form of inclusion remains circumscribed by religious hierarchies and economic precarity. Widowhood performance in Vrindavan reproduces upper-caste norms, and widows continue to rely on charity and informal labour. State welfare schemes, although legislated but fails to fully penetrate this sacred economy. Thus, inclusion in Vrindavan is a hybrid space: empowering in emotional and symbolic terms yet limited in socio-economic transformation.

Conclusion

This qualitative study illuminates the complex journey of widows from social exclusion to forms of inclusion within Vrindavan's devotional landscape. By centring widows' narratives, the research challenges monolithic portrayals of Hindu widowhood and highlights the creative strategies women employ to reclaim agency. Vrindavan's sacred geography offers a liminal space where abjection is transformed into belonging through ritual, narrative, and communal economy. Yet, the inclusion achieved is partial and precarious, underscoring the need for integrated policies that bridge state welfare with local religious institutions.

Future research might compare widows' experiences across different pilgrimage sites or explore the role of NGOs in augmenting widows' economic agency. Policymakers should engage with religious stakeholders to ensure that welfare schemes are accessible within ashrams and that widows can transition from dependency to sustainable livelihoods. Ultimately, moving widows from exclusion to inclusion requires addressing structural inequalities while valuing the rich cultural and spiritual practices through which widows assert their humanity.

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