

Reading the Myth and Reality of Vrindavan

Manisha Yadav and Rekha Rani*

Department of Humanities, Deenbandhu Chhotu Ram University of Science and Technology, Murthal, Haryana, India.

* Corresponding author. Email: rekha.hum@dcrustm.org
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ABSTRACT

Vrindavan is commonly referred to as the abode of the mythic-literary-celestial couple Radha-Krishna, and is an epicenter of religious and spiritual questing and global sociocultural hub. Huge numbers of visitors come to the town to frequently and regularly express their faith. For them, Vrindavan is a metaphor of love, bliss and spirituality. Visiting Vrindavan can be seen as going to meet Krishna. However, Vrindavan is not only a religious center, it is also just like any other town, with many dimensions to its character. As a living organism, Vrindavan has its body, its soul, its beauty, its ugliness and its ordinariness. It breathes; it talks and feels pain as well. But this material reality with all its complexities is generally overshadowed by the brightness of its religious halo. This mythical and metaphoric construct of Vrindavan has veiled its real and complete identity. There must be a town in 'Vrindavan' and 'Vrindavan' in the town. This article attempts to describe this dual character.

Keywords: Krishna, Myth, Reality, Spirituality, Utopia, Vrindavan

INTRODUCTION

Vrindavan is a town of dreams and fantasies in India. It is a place where the mundane is juxtaposed with the extraordinary and the sublime. For many, it is a pilgrimage, while for some, it is a weekend getaway. Many have a special bond with the town. It is a place where they can unload their problems and everyday life worries and escape from the harsh reality of life to soak themselves in something that is both pleasurable and spiritual. For many, it is a spiritual home and a place of meditation and contemplation. It is a place where people can come together and share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in an unmediated way. It is also a place where people live their everyday lives with all the pains, suffering and pleasures of life. This

article discusses changes in the relational dynamics of the town, its temples, *ashrams*,¹ offices, institutes, and stakeholders such as residents, visitors, and others. Has Vrindavan adopted and adapted itself to change? What is the interface between Vrindavan as myth and Vrindavan as reality? How have regulations, or the lack of regulations, adequacy or inadequacy of infrastructure, and compositeness/expansion or fragmentation caused by the free market influenced the relational dynamics of the town?

The objective of the study is to analyze the realities of the modern and mythical Vrindavan, where they intermingle and support each other to coexist simultaneously. I study the concept of Vrindavan as a metaphor and its impact on people and the external world. Since time immemorial, Vrindavan has occupied a sacred space in the hearts of its residents, visitors, and pilgrims. In many cases, people go there to relax in the cool and easy-going environment. They experience the pleasure of participating in various ceremonies, events, and festivals held at the temples and ashrams in and around the area. Many pilgrims undertake a religious and spiritual journey in Vrindavan. In many ways, Vrindavan also represents a utopia for a person who seeks a higher meaning in life and works hard to achieve it. But Vrindavan is much more beyond this spiritual/ religious search center. It offers more than meets the eye to everyone who visits it.

CRITICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This article takes into consideration the theory of microcosm-macrocosm by Freidrich Schleiemacher. This theory draws on the concept that a part in metaphorical ways represent the whole, like a human body becomes a microcosm for the whole universe which is macrocosm (Conger, 1967, p. 86). Similarly, here the town of Vrindavan becomes the embodiment of Krishna in metaphorical ways and vice versa.

I conducted interviews with natives, vendors, and tourists/pilgrims visiting the town of Vrindavan to generate my data. I also survey secondary sources such as non-governmental organization reports and government records to analyze the current situation on Vrindavan in terms of its residential accommodation for the pilgrims as well as for the travelers, and the global impact of this. The study compares and contrasts the oral narratives with the modern representations in order to analyze the current position of Vrindavan as a cultural and spiritual hotspot along with its value as a modern town.

DISCUSSION

Coupe says that myth can be defined differently depending upon the medium of its usage (2009, p. 1). In the fields of cultural and literary studies, myth is taken to be synonymous with “ideology” and in the field of entertainment, it is considered synonymous with “fantasy.” This article takes into consideration both aspects. A living town is a place where ideologies and fantasies intermingle and a new meaning, and new form of devotion emerges. A very common myth circulating among residents

¹ An ashram is a hermitage or monastery in Hinduism. It is a place where one strives towards a goal—ascetic, spiritual, yogic, etc., in a disciplined way.

of Vrindavan is that it is a lost city² where Krishna used to live, and his childhood and youth times are described with great enthusiasm and beauty (Entwistle, 1987, p. 137). This belief seems to be in stark contrast with the descriptions of/references to Vrindavan by saints and scholars of medieval and modern times.

The first mention of the modern day Vrindavan is found in the works of Vallabha, a fifteenth century Hindu philosopher also known as Vallabhacharya,³ who visited Vrindavan and tried to restore it to its former glory (plants had grown rampant in the area). Shrivatsa Goswami,⁴ an acharaya⁵ of the 'Radha Raman temple' in Vrindavan, said of it: "The landscapes very dirty and the roads uneven and infested with ferocious dogs." He also mentioned Buddha's first visit⁶ to Vrindavan and his disappointment with its condition (Growse, 1979, p. 199). In F. S. Growse's book *Mathura: A District Memoir*, originally published in 1882, the area is described:

The first aspect of the country is a little disappointing to the student of Sanskrit Literature, who has been led by the glowing eulogiums of the poets to anticipate a second vale of Tempe . . . the soil, being poor and thin, is unfavorable to the growth of most large forest trees (and the place is filled with trees of the) "various species of fig tribe . . . and the river Yamuna during the eight months of the year meanders sullenly, a mere rivulet, between wide expanses of sand, bounded by monotonous flats of arable land (Growse, 1979, p. 71-72).

The place, he says, is mostly barren, with thorny shrubs, and was a forest area which was mostly avoided as thieves had their headquarters surrounding that place. Mamta Kalia in her novel *Dukkhām Sukkhām* (2020) too describes Braj and the areas surrounding Vrindavan in a similar tone:

The concrete road had not yet been laid between Vrindavan and Mathura . . . Usually thieves and thugs would hide behind the wall of the temple. Getting a chance, they would snatch money, and other belongings from the travelers by threatening them (Kalia, 2020 p. 4, my translation).

² Vrindavan is the so-called place of residence of Krishna but earlier the whole area was described as Braj only. When the saints like Chaitanya started to visit the area, they were unable to find a distinctly marked area called Vrindavan. Thus Vrindavan, which was lost, had to be found again.

³ Vallabha, a Telegu brahmin also known as Vallabhacharya, is the fifteenth century Hindu philosopher that founded the Vallabha sect. He undertook various pilgrimages throughout India to spread Krishna bhakti. Coming from the south of India, he settled in Mathura and made it the center of his devotional activities.

⁴ Shrivatsa Goswami was the acharya of the Radha Raman temple in Vrindavan. He founded a cultural organization which focuses on the patronization of the arts and scholarship in Vaishnavism, especially in Vrindavan.

⁵ Acharya is a learned scholar in Hinduism. A teacher (guru) is also called 'acharya' in Sanskrit.

⁶ Buddha's journeys are documented in Anguttara Nikaya, which talks about his disappointment with the condition of Vrindavan. Anguttara Nikaya is a collection of eleven sections of discourses by Buddha. Each of these discusses one subject matter.

All these references endorse the view that Vrindavan possessed no sign of extraordinary beauty as described and circulated in and through the folk narratives and Srimad Bhagvatam.⁷

The area received attention when Chaitanya⁸ visited Braj in the sixteenth century. It is said that there was originally no particular place called Vrindavan (Goswami, 2003-2004, p. 204). The area was covered with shrubs and Tulsi plants, which derives its name from these two words. The name 'Vrindavan' is said to be a combination of two words- 'vrinda,' which means Tulsi, and 'van' which means forest; together it means the forest of Tulsi plants. The place got its shape, structure and form after Rupa Goswami—one of the six disciples of Chaitanya—came to Vrindavan and started the construction of the very first temple of Vrindavan, 'Govinda Deva.' The local villagers along with Rupa Goswami with "great effort", finally "found the Deity and, under Rupa Goswami's direction, became enthusiastic to erect a temple and began proper worship" (Rosen, 2002, p. 100). The temple was constructed under the patronage of Akbar, the then-emperor of Hindustan. According to Rosen, Rupa Goswami was able to persuade Maharaja Man Singh of Jaipur to "donate huge quantities of red sandstone and to eventually become a noteworthy disciple" (Rosen, 2002, p. 100). After the installation of the idol in the temple and the fame it earned, a lot of people started visiting Vrindavan. People started to make huts and made Vrindavan their residence; slowly and gradually the number of temples also started increasing and in the medieval period, Vrindavan gained prominence. The cause of this prominence was that the temples were built under the patronage of both Hindu and Muslim kings and rulers.

In 1670 C.E., under the rule of Aurangzeb, many sites in Vrindavan faced destruction, including the 'Keshav Rai' temple (Vajpayee, 2011, p. 160-161). The whole place then decayed in the colonial period. After independence, various efforts were made to restore it to its former beauty and status as a religious center with state investment in the town's infrastructure. In this way Vrindavan evolved from being forested, to a town, and then a pilgrimage center. It became important not only on the map of India, but also on the map of the world. Vrindavan is now considered by many to stand on a pedestal—its soil, its water, or its people.

In the current era of globalization and information technology, the 21st century Indian middle class perfectly blends contemporary advancement in terms of science & technology with a convincing faith in divine wonders. For many, this manifests through religious sects, charity, and institutional organizations like Kathas and yagnas. It is not only the middle class but also the elite class that participates in and organizes these events, and performs charity. The moving of religious beliefs from the private to the public sphere has led to the creation of "a new, unapologetic, and open embracing of religiosity in India today which wasn't there in, say, the first half of our sixty-plus years as a republic" (Nanda, 2009, p. 63).

However, the rapid changes in Vrindavan including increased construction of infrastructure and temples are hampering the normal life of the town. The streets are crowded all the time and stampedes have also increased inside crowded temples (Kapoor, 2022, p. 298). The environment of the town has been affected with stray

⁷ Srimad Bhagvatam is one of Hinduism's eighteen puranas. Puran is old Hindu literature about legends and traditional lores.

⁸ Chaitanya Mahāprabhu was a 15th century Indian Vaishnavite saint from Bengal.

animals becoming a concern. Commercialization renders the city devoid of emotions and paralyzes the bhakti sphere. Social media has also given rise to the trend of visiting spiritual places in order to gain popularity and thus, visiting Vrindavan for many visitors, has become a symbol of pride and showing off. At times, the visitors gain no spiritual benefit but turn out to be exploiters.

Vrindavan, according to Joshua Nash is the amalgamation of the “Human-Nature-Divine” (2022, p. 56). In Vrindavan, the divine is said to be present in all things, from the flora and fauna to the local people of the Braj region. This logic was used by the World-Wide Fund for Nature Vrindavan Conservation Project to protect the degrading land of Vrindavan, but as Nash says, visitors tend to focus on the “transcendental Vrindavan” and the “current ecological state of terrestrial Vrindavan are not taken seriously” (Nash, 2022, p. 59). One can see huge crowds visiting Vrindavan and leaving it in an ugly and disturbed state. Due to the increasing number of temples in and around Vrindavan, the followers of the temples visit regularly, and temples now only serve as sightseeing monuments, with many donation boxes placed around their premises. In today’s world, everyone wants success, and donations to the poor, needy and temple priests often result in the donors receiving blessings. Most people visit places like Vrindavan with the selfish objective of receiving success and fame through offerings and donations.

The mad rush on these sacred places to gain social prestige has led to their damage and degradation. On the surface, Vrindavan has grown and expanded physically and structurally to accommodate and cater to the needs of the increasing numbers of pilgrims, visitors and other business-related communities. However, the reality is far removed from that projected and perceived image. New rituals and traditions, perceived as more convenient, are replacing old ones like the online prashad (gift/grace of God) facilities and the VIP darshan (glimpse of God’s image in the inner sanctum of the temple) facilities showing these changing trends: “Not only are the new rituals being fashioned out of the old, but the gods and goddesses are getting a makeover as well” (Nanda, 2009, p. 86). Many travelers treat Vrindavan like any other tourist place with no respect for its socio-religious-cultural fabric. Even the seekers of spiritual and religious connection seem self-centered to the extent of not being bothered about the misuse or exploitation of sacredness. The actual living town outside of the hub of temples and ashrams is of no interest to many travelers. They are only concerned with tourism-related aspects, the spiritual as well as the aesthetic benefits which can be drawn from the place. They are not bothered about the negative impact of the commercialization of the place in the name of religious tourism. Vrindavan has become like a spiritual dumpster, turning into a real-life dumpster, with all its land sold to developers, leaving hardly any space or trace for natural and scenic beauty.

The town of Vrindavan is not static, nor are its festivals, rituals and other cultural manifestations. In order to cater to the demands of social elites, the common people are sometimes not allowed to get a close look at temple deity images. For this and other reasons related to the poor management of temples, the trust that devotees had in Vrindavan and the temple ecosystem has been dissolving.

A group of fictional travelers visiting Vrindavan in Bhagwandas Morwal’s novel *Mokshawan* (2023) ask a shopkeeper about disputes within temple management groups. The shopkeeper tells them that a priest’s family has branched out in large

numbers through the generations and at present more than five hundred priest families are taking care of the temple management and its donations, so the conflicts and clash of interests among them are obvious. Hearing about this and observing the misbehavior of temple staff, the group resolves not to come back again. Also, along with Krishna temples, the temples of other gods and goddesses like 'Durga Mata,' 'Shani Dev' and 'Prem Mandir' have come up in Vrindavan, diluting the core essence of Vrindavan from being a town devoted to Krishna, to a religious spot accommodating other deities.

Krishna, the multifaceted God, is highly revered among Hindus. It is common to refer to many Krishnas. Krishna the divine manifestation, serving as the teacher of Arjuna and thus, a philosopher to guide the whole human race. There is Krishna of Gokula, the deity who was raised among cowherds. He is known for being a playful youngster, a charming lover, and a perpetual contradiction of physical and spiritual nature. In these images and stories of Krishna, his association with the land and the forest is the primary focus, which establishes his image as an environmentalist. Sharma (2010) argues that the different forms of Krishna have been constructed according to the change in the sociopolitical circumstances. He says that, "of the many descriptions that flow into the Krishna story as it swells over to the environmentalists, we see an environmentalist Krishna, sought to be created by romanticized, poetic narrations." (Sharma, 2010, p. 62). Radha-Krishna as a couple is a "powerful symbol of divine beauty and power, and into their dance, we are drawn not only by the cowherd maidens but also by the cows, birds, rivers and plants" (Sharma, 2010, p. 62). Krishna therefore, becomes not only the savior of human beings but also that of the flora and fauna, fitting into the idea of an environmentalist. This image of Krishna is not taken seriously by the people of Vrindavan. The devotees worship Krishna and sing his stories of being the savior of the land but ironically, they do not practice the same, leading to the physical degradation of the spiritually rich core of Vrindavan.

Vrindavan as a mythical place, that is to say where Krishna used to reside with his consort Radha, today coexists with modern Vrindavan, a city with all the same facilities available in other cities – and a dirty, dingy side. Vrindavan is still not viewed holistically, but in fragments. It is an example of one of the cultural spaces where the whole town is seen as divine, as the deity. Vrindavan can be seen as a modern marvel where both the modern and the mythical intermingle and coexist in unison. Though it might have lost its old grandeur, traces of it are visible in the local culture and in temple rituals. The erstwhile mythical Tulsi forest has now become a concrete forest, full of modern temples, ashrams, inns, shops and hotels. The land of Vrindavan is constantly being exploited and sold under the name of Krishna. One can see huge hoardings declaring "Land on Sale" in supposedly 'holy' Vrindavan. Urbanization and a constant influx of visitors is the new reality of Vrindavan, changing the structure, nature and culture of the town. To the outside world it is a religious tourism hub. Though many rites, rituals, and cultural beliefs are the same as the past, Vrindavan has become more liberal in terms of accommodation of not only pilgrims but also tourists who mold the town to their convenience. Large-scale immigration not only impacts the town's land, but also depletes water resources. The Yamuna River, located in the vicinity of Vrindavan, is now just a trickle of contaminated water. The town's sanctity adversely affects its land and water supplies. This situation is in stark contrast to the commonly held idea of Vrindavan, which is typically described

as heavenly and abundant in all oral and textual resources. Thus, what was once a highly valued paradise has changed for the worse.

The merging of these two worlds—the spiritual and the commercial—and the striking irony which surrounds this utopia, has pushed this land toward pseudo-utopia. Within the world of religion and devotion, Vrindavan is seen as a place completely covered in the colors of bhakti and spirituality. But like any other organic entity, Vrindavan too has other aspects to its persona and personality. According to a report by the Center for Science and Environment (2019), the living conditions in Vrindavan are very poor. The report clearly states there are no proper sewage management facilities and the city lacks in cleanliness and hygiene. These flaws and the seamy side of Vrindavan are overshadowed by the halo of divinity and the aura of spirituality centered around Vrindavan and the whole region of Braj.

Vrindavan has for decades been a synonym for 'Krishna bhakti.' The myth created about Vrindavan is that it was a land where everyone had equal access to divinity (Massey, 2017, p. 46). Sharma (2010) talks about the separation from the main deity felt by the Dalits and Muslims of the area, using conversations with locals to convey that the relation which the majority feels with the deity is not shared by the minorities. The minorities have not been given equal access to the temples and divinity. For them, the idol is a mere stone that cannot listen to their prayers and thus there is no connection felt on their part. He says that despite the fact that the degree of a person's devotion to Krishna matters more than their caste or religion in Vrindavan, there are people who are still categorized as 'others' and who do not feel the same association with Krishna and Vrindavan as other residents/devotees from the Hindu majority, and the upper castes and classes: "It thus appears that far from being a binding factor in Vrindavan Conservation, Krishna seems an entity that is claimed by few to the exclusion of many more" (Sharma, 2010, p. 64).

The Harivamsha Purana notes:

...a charming forest on the bank of Yamuna abounding in profuse grass, endowed with all the virtues and freed of thorns and insects. It is named Vrindavana. It is filled with fruits, water and Kadamba trees. Cool wind blow there in the forest as if it is an asylum of all seasons. All the woods there are so charming that the milk men will be able to range there happily (Dutt, 1897, p. 268).

The place is described as the most beautiful forest one can imagine. It is full of flora and fauna, cow herds live happily, and a soft breeze blows throughout the year. A similar description of a glorious Vrindavan is also presented in the Srimad Bhagwatam; it describes the place as the forest "filled with transparent autumnal waters and cooled by breezes perfumed with the fragrances of lotus flowers growing in clear lakes" (Vyasa, 2005). In contrast, modern accounts of Vrindavan depict it as severely damaged. Growse described it as a country devoid of exceptional beauty, characterized solely by prickly plants and wild dogs (Growse, 1979, p. 71). In Kalia's (2020) *Dukkham Sukkham* and Morwal's (2023) *Mokshawan*, the reader is presented with a deteriorated version of Vrindavan that is significantly different from the depiction found in mythical texts. The current state of Vrindavan is characterized by an abundance of concrete structures, resulting in the loss of its natural beauty. The river Yamuna is contaminated with sewage and animal carcasses. The sanctity and aesthetic

condition of Vrindavan has declined as a result of increased numbers of visitors and residents.

Vrindavan's old association with Radha and Krishna suggests it is an ancient utopian land. Prabhodhananda Saraswati⁹ in his book *Sri Vrindavana-mahimamrta* writes how Vrindavan has always been a utopia: "Sri Vrindavana is perfect in every way" (Saraswati, n.d., p. 11). Framing a location as home to something supernatural and divine elevates its value, overwhelming average people's understanding. But now the erstwhile utopia has turned into a dystopia as there is hardly any natural beauty left. The place is totally commercialized, and living conditions for the local population are not conducive to a prosperous life. The utopia as described in the scriptures has been transformed into a place of tourism, fun, and frolic. Kalia (2020) expresses her pain as she describes the present Vrindavan as inhabited only by the old and dependent, like widows, beggars, the disabled; youth have moved far away in search of better opportunities and permanent jobs. For the latter, the town does not serve as a utopia, but rather a dystopia, because it is not capable of fertilizing and nourishing their dreams. However, the place is worth billions of Indian Rupees for its spiritual and religious attractions. Vrindavan plays an active role in the lives of devotees along with the lives of residents as it provides them with their spiritual and daily needs. Krishna has become a major factor influencing the growth of Vrindavan despite the inundated, inadequate facilities in the town. The influence of Vrindavan has reached a global level. The number of visitors and pilgrims from foreign countries has gone up, and some call the place home. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) has also helped publicize the town. Increasing number of visitors to Vrindavan is also, in a sense, an index of the increasing faith and devotion of the public, which in turn makes Vrindavan an emerging power center. The religious rites, rituals and traditions followed there set norms adopted by its numerous followers throughout the world.

The utopian Vrindavan society imagined by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, the founder of ISKCON, is a Vedic idealized society with roots in farming and rearing. Vrindavan as depicted in the Vedas has always been a land that is lush green with fields and the streets overflowing with milk and butter. The economy was solely dependent on the farms and cows. With technical advancements, Vrindavan's character has undergone a transformation from the rural self-sufficient setup to an urban setting overlaid with concrete. The lush green fields are now nowhere in sight and residents have moved from farming and cattle rearing to other means of survival. From being a place where every house had cows, Vrindavan's socioeconomic dynamics have changed. Cows in countless number are now seen only in the countless number in goshalas (cowsheds). The self-sufficiency of the town has shifted from farming to tourism and related capitalism. Vrindavan is no utopia in its current configuration.

Yet, the beauty of Vrindavan is not only derived from its physical state, but also from the welcoming nature of its people. One can hear constant chants of "radhe-radhe" while moving around in Vrindavan, which shows the eternal association of

⁹ Prabhodhananda Saraswati belonged to a Telegu brahmin family which was converted to the devotees of Radha Krishna by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu between 1509-10 C.E., while Chaitanya visited south India. The *Sri Vrindavana-mahimamrta* is said to be written in praise of Krishna's birth place, soon after the conversion of Saraswati.

the name of Radha with Krishna, with them each being the reflection of the other. It is also believed that without Radha's permission no one can enter or leave Vrindavan. There are various stories of Radha-Krishna which make the place appear mystical. In conversation with locals, it was observed that they believe that Krishna and Radha visit Nidhivan every night and perform their raas leela even today. The locals also believe that not only humans but animals are also forbidden to enter the sacred Nidhivan at night as the plants of the grove turn into women and the temples in Nidhivan are prepared as per the needs of Radha and Krishna during their raas leela. Stories like these are orally told by the various guides of Nidhivan and money is extracted from the people visiting in the name of seva, offering for the deity. Thus, in one way the temples and ashrams have become the means of extracting money from the people in the name of devotion and worship. Devotees are like customers in Vrindavan who are lured in the name of prasad and other blessed offerings which they could receive in return of the donations they make. In the streets of Vrindavan one can find walls of temples covered with different marble pieces with different names of the donors engraved on them.

Vrindavan as a modern developed town does not enjoy the same status as the metaphorical Vrindavan. The metaphorical Vrindavan has all the myths and folk narratives to back up its identity as a perfect utopia. The story of Vrindavan as a mythical city is known far and wide but Vrindavan as a living entity is least talked about. No one knows the reality of Vrindavan. Reality is what exists, what we perceive, what we hear and what we see. Here in Vrindavan, the reality which one encounters while visiting the place is far different from the one that one might have heard through folk narratives and from various scriptures. The place is crowded with herds of visitors flowing in day and night. This has led to commercialization of the place. The town has become like a spiritual sugar lump, whose aesthetic value is subject to decay by the various types of ants consuming it every day. Though, Vrindavan grew like any other town, with the age of advancement, new technology came flowing in but the major catalyst in the growth of Vrindavan has always been Krishna. Had it not been for Krishna, Vrindavan may not have been the capital of pure love, devotion and spirituality. Due to Vrindavan's association with Krishna, the city has got all the fame without much effort. Once the temples started building and the name and fame of Krishna spread, it attracted millions of people all through these years. The city is now supported by Krishna in all the possible ways. The main source of income is tourism and related industries, which help to maintain the flow of economy in and out of Vrindavan.

Not only has commercialization changed the dynamics of Vrindavan, but the immigration of people from all over the world has affected its demography. Among the migrants to Vrindavan, widows make up a considerable part. The city is also referred to as the "city of widows" by Priyadarshini & Pande (2021, p. 160). In India, widowhood is seen with contempt and widows are often forced to leave their families. Kashi and Vrindavan become their last resort to spend the rest of their life. The presence of widows and the conditions in which they live comprise one of the dark realities of Vrindavan often overlooked by the visitors. But they have also become an important part in regulating the economy of Vrindavan, "The presence of widows has enabled a micro-economy of widowhood in Vrindavan" (Priyadarshini & Pande, 2021, p. 170). Also, the donations made by people to the widows and beggars of Vrindavan

have led to a boost in the local economy: “The articles for donations ... are locally purchased from small merchants boosting the local economy,” (Priyadarshini & Pande, 2021, p. 170). Despite many efforts by the state government and non-governmental organizations for the improvement of the lives of these widows, there is no improvement in their pitiable conditions. They worship Krishna for the rest of their lives in the hope to attain moksha in this life and the afterlife but this spiritual hub somewhere fails to provide moksha to some of its own inhabitants.

Holi, the festival of colors, is celebrated on a large scale in Braj. This festival goes for around a month and a large number of people visit Vrindavan during this time. This festival also provides a gateway for the widows to experience the joy of color in their life, as they otherwise are not allowed any kind of color or enjoyment once their husband dies. Therefore, the town of Vrindavan offers these individuals a means to break out from their monotonous existence and experience life as an ordinary person, though only rarely. Vrindavan is characterized by an exaggerated sense of grandeur, as Krishna takes precedence over the town itself, becoming its defining feature.

Vrindavan is seen from a perspective where the land is forever prosperous and free from the realities of the human world, but that is only its transcendental aspect. The town of Vrindavan has much death and other brutal realities of mortal life in it as any other city or town. Vrindavan turns out to be a death bed for the widows. Widows relocate to Vrindavan with the intention of attaining a respectable existence and experiencing a tranquil demise. However, the unfortunate reality is that their deceased bodies remain unclaimed due to their lack of family. Consequently, their remains are sometimes observed floating in the river or being mangled by stray dogs, or are dumped as unclaimed ones by the municipality. The sacred river becomes a dumping ground for the town’s waste. The love for the land and the river has been dwindling for a long time and the major motive of visitors is to see one or two temples, enjoy food, and shop at the local market. Their religious and spiritual quest is limited to seeing Krishna in a temple. Thus, this close association of Vrindavan with Krishna has made the place extraordinary and the other realities of the town get overshadowed or sidelined by the brightness of the mythical halo of Krishna’s presence. Interaction at different places and at different times with locals and visitors in Vrindavan confirms the opinion that Krishna is an inseparable part of Vrindavan, even in the recent times of market economy. To people, Krishna is Vrindavan, and Vrindavan is Krishna. Thus, if Vrindavan symbolizes Krishna, Krishna stands for Vrindavan.

Vrindavan as a metaphorical concept is visible in West Virginia, in the United States of America, where four followers of A. C. Bhaktivendata Swami Prabhupada tried to create a “New Vrindavan.” Sanford (2015) researched this and discusses how is a metaphorical concept, implying it is not a fixed piece of land, but rather a certain culture related to Krishna bhakti. Vrindavan is a fluid entity which can be seen as contrary to the idea of the fixity of place. There is a new Vrindavan emerging as seen, found and lived by its stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

Krishna is Vrindavan’s mythical and lived reality. The other realities are either hidden or ignored but they do not seem to exist for the visitors. The exploitation of

nature, environmental pollution, water crises and many other city problems do not matter to them. Their only focus is to have all their needs met for as long as they stay in Vrindavan. This religio-socio-cultural hub is frequented by people all round the world. In the name of accommodating more and more Krishna devotees, the jungle of concrete is replacing the natural green-scape of Vrindavan and thus, Krishna in one way, has become the destructor of flora and fauna in his own land. However, being Krishna's home, the place still holds its old charm. Thus, Krishna is Vrindavan's soul, though the driving force of that soul may be market oriented in contemporary times. Vrindavan derives its value from this mythical construct, and if this myth of Krishna is taken away from Vrindavan, then Vrindavan loses all its essence. Similar is the relationship with the people—locals, spiritual visitors, devotees, widows, and even tourists. These dynamics would have shifted had the name of Krishna not been attached to it. The relationship of Krishna with Vrindavan makes it difficult for them to be studied in isolation and as independent of each other as both of them complement each other in their growth and fame. Thus, it can be said that the myth of Vrindavan has helped to create the reality of Vrindavan.

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