

## **Negotiating Traditions: The *Maiyyas* of Vrindavana**

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### **The Catalyst**

*“When you are left with nothing in life, it is God’s home that you come to.”*

Way back in the 1500s, Saint Mahaprabhu Chaitanya rediscovered the sacred town of Vrindavana and marked it as one of the most popular places of Hindu pilgrimage. About 15 kilometres in diameter, Vrindavana today houses more than 5500 temples dedicated to Radha-Krishna and other Gods and Goddesses. Widows from all over the country, especially West Bengal (Chaitanya’s birth place) come here to die and to live.

The mainstream literature on widowhood in India focuses mainly on the tales of atrocities and restraints over the widows at large: their abject conditions, poverty and the strict rules that are enforced upon them. Given this, last year’s Holi Celebration by the widows of Vrindavana was received as no less than a spectacle. The contrasting image of a widow dancing away, dressed in a white saree smeared with pink colour flashed across all newspapers and TV channels<sup>1</sup> as a reflection of changing times, a reform. This became the catalyst for our interest in this field. A careful reading into literature hinted at gaps between the scriptural norms and the everyday practices of these widows.

With fifteen days in hand, the hot sun and the research proposal we hopped onto a Haryana Roadways Bus and made our journey towards Vrindavana. The site, sounds and smells of this highly popular tourist destination is designed with a religious flavour. With restaurant names like “*Yaduvanshi dhaba*”, “*radhey-radheys*” used for all greetings and courtesies, every second

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/first-colourful-holi-for-vrindavan-widows/article4544660.ece>

<sup>1</sup>[http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-03-25/india/38008876\\_1\\_vrindavan-widows-ashrams-traditional-holi-songs](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2013-03-25/india/38008876_1_vrindavan-widows-ashrams-traditional-holi-songs)

building being a temple, warnings about monkey menace and widows in white dotting the streets, we made our way through the lanes of the town.

### **Widowhood in Vrindavana: Everyday Negotiations**

In the Hindu religion, widowhood is seen as a social stigma, a curse. According to the *Manusmriti*, a widow is supposed to lead an ascetic lifestyle, where even her physical appearance is disfigured. The image of a “typical Hindu widow” presents the absence of colour, head shaved, ornaments removed and dressed in colourless white garments - remaining celibate, devout and loyal to her husband’s memory (Chen, 1994). Renouncing all worldly pleasures, colours, festivities and laughter, a widow is seen as a pollutant to society and is to be cut off from it. Orthodox Hindus believe that onions, garlic, pickles, potatoes and fish fuel sexual passions by stimulating the blood. Widowhood has thus been traditionally seen as a sort of liminal condition between social life and impending death (Chen 2000). Moving to Vrindavana was seen as such a step where by the widows sever all contacts with the material world, including their friends and family.

While traditionally, *Vrindavana Yatra* was seen as a complete break from social life and its ways, our interactions with the widows spoke a slightly different tale. With clever strategizing around the cultural norms, modernizing of beliefs and practices, and availability or non-availability of state support, they try to create a life of their own, instead of simply waiting to die. “*Vrindavana mein har maiyya ko do kism ke bhajan aate hain - ek Raam ke naam ka, ek doosron ke naam ka*” (“The *maiyyas* in Vrindavana know two kinds of *bhajans*”) says Vimla<sup>2</sup> *mai*. On asking she elaborates that the *Hare-Rama bhajan* is the religious structure that they have to abide to and the other one is where they have to be tactful and strategic with authorities and each other to make lives slightly more comfortable.

This became clarified to us when we found out what we had been thinking of as an exception, a one off incident, was not really new. Almost as soon as we landed in Vrindavana, we found out that while this year Holi had been celebrated on a large scale, they had indeed been playing Holi for several years. Most of these women like to wear colourful clothes. If one can find most of them in white sarees, it is because these are the sarees they get in alms. Prema a widow, who

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<sup>2</sup> Names of all respondents have been changed to protect their anonymity and privacy.

hardly remembers her age, would not mind buying a bright yellow sari with beautiful big flowers printed on it, if she had the money to do so. This paper attempts to look at such ways in which the norms and rules prescribed in the traditions are negotiated. In our fieldwork, we attempted to look at instances in the lived experiences of the *maiyyas* - the negotiations that they make in order to cope with the stringent rules traditionally imposed on them.

The attempt of this paper is to nowhere deny the abject conditions in which the widows of Vrindavana live in. Indeed it is impossible to remain unperturbed by the destitute conditions that they are in. Most of these widows live either in rented accommodations or temples and some even on the streets. They sing *bhajans* in *bhajanashrams* for several hours (6:00 am to 10:30 am and 3:30 pm to 6:30 pm), day after day, for Rs.5 and one meal per day. Only slightly better off were those who lived in ashrams which were privately or government run. One can see them struggling to make ends meet economically and the extreme emotional pain and loneliness that they live in. However, the purpose of our study was not to investigate this, which has been amply spoken about by various other competent authorities, governmental, non-governmental and academic. Rather we are looking at how in spite of living in miserable conditions and not so enviable lives, the women try to get the best out of the existing conditions by negotiating with their environment, people around them and social norms, customs, mores and traditions. This paper, rather, looks at widows and other women who have come to Vrindavana and the lives they have created there, dealing with the traditional rules and negotiating with the prescribed conditions.

### **Our ethnography**

We used the tools of non-participant observation, semi-structured interviews and narratives to interact with these women over a period of fifteen days. We interacted with them mainly at three different places: at the *bhajanashrams*, at *Ma Dhaam*, a privately run ashram and at *Mahila Ashray Sadan*, an ashram run by the Uttar Pradesh government; besides speaking to widows at the various temples, on the streets, in the marketplace etc. Our first meeting with the widows was at the *bhajanashrams*, which are privately owned halls where the widows go to sing *bhajans* every morning and evening. After being refused permission to interact with them at one *bhajanashram*, we were allowed to sit through the *bhajan* sessions in two others, where we could speak to them during their “breaks” and when they went for tea or meals. We continued to return to that place for the rest of our stay in Vrindavana every morning and evening, sometimes all together, sometimes in twos and sometimes individually. We sat with

them through the *bhajans*, often joining in. Within a few days each of us had formed our own special friendships and equations with them. They seemed more than eager to tell us their stories, their experiences and would even compete with each other for our attention.

After our *bhajan* sessions in morning, we went to the residential ashrams - two of us to the government ashram and three to the private ashram. Obtaining permission to speak to the widows in *Ma Dhaam* was not difficult, a single email to the director sufficed and we got permission to interact with about thirty of the women living there. However, interacting with widows at the government *ashram* meant getting signed permission from the District Provisional Officer at Mathura. So, we had to go to Mathura where we finally got permission after a long day of waiting, tactful conversations and trying to convince different government officials of our proposed project. The very next day, we started visiting the *Mahila Ashray Sadan*, where we conducted detailed interviews with about 50 women.

### **Negotiations** and *Maiyyas*

The title of our paper is “**Negotiating Traditions: *Maiyyas* of Vrindavana**”. When we talk about negotiation, we are distinguishing it from rebellion. Rebellion, or resistance, presupposes a threat, a need to subvert an existing social system; whereas negotiation doesn’t really seek to subvert, but at the same time it is not completely subservient to the existing norms of the social system. Negotiation does indeed question, but at the same time, it tries to find a common ground. In other words, it seeks to adjust. In alignment with De Certeau’s work on spatial practices (1998) we are looking at everyday practices, of lived space by looking at procedures that elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised.

One thing that must be noted is that the structure itself is ever-changing and is not stagnant. Nowhere are we arguing for a static structure. At the same time, we are not arguing for these negotiations as bringing about rapid changes in the structural system. Rather, we are looking at how structures are mediated by lived practices. Some of the structures maybe changing over time (as seen in terms of the introduction of government schemes and new programmes for the widows), and some may remain stable (the singing of *bhajans* in the *bhajan ashrams*). Our research attempts to locate negotiations within each of these structures - whether to barter or not barter kerosene, using the *bhajan ashram* as a place of exchange, etc.

A widow in Vrindavana is referred to as a *maiyya*. The term *maiyya* is used to mean not only the widows but also married women who were abandoned by their families. In this sense it is

a classificatory term and includes a lot many women under its purview. Everyday negotiations occur across various dimensions for these *maiyyas* - the place they stay in, the food they eat, the places they visit and the people they interact with, all become spheres where we could locate strategies of dealing with the prescribed norms. In many cases, elements of tradition and modernity could be seen co-existing together. While this co-existence may conceal fissures and struggles, at the same time these struggles feed into the whole - never challenging it completely, and trying to find a common ground; in other words, negotiating.

### **Coming to Vrindavana - Snap with “Home”???**

While many of the women who come to Vrindavana have been abandoned and left here to die, many others claim to have come of their own volition. Most *maiyyas* come because they do not get along with their sons and daughters-in-law. Sometimes it is because they have no immediate family to live with or because their families are highly impoverished and cannot afford to take care of them. One woman, who was earlier working as a government employee told us that her son is not well-established and cannot take care of her properly. In the *ashram* she gets food and company. She will leave as soon as he gets a job, she says. Jaya *mai* describes her coming to the land of Krishna as a safe escape from her worldly worries and tension. “*Bachhe nahi hue the, unki dusri shaadi karwakar hum idhar chale aye. Phir kabhi wapas nahi gaye*” (I couldn’t bear children. I made him (husband) re-marry and came here for good). These women, often neglected or ill-treated at home, come to Vrindavana in search of independence, even though it might mean battling poverty and need. Most do not wish to go back and live with their families. Durga Som is still in constant touch with her daughter and son. But upon being asked why she doesn’t go and live with them, she smiles and says “*Paradheen hoke jeena zindagi thodi hai*” (“Living in a subjugated way is no life”). In Vrindavana they are able to live with a certain amount of autonomy with the limited resources that they have. Without many immediate social responsibilities, to a certain extent they are able to live lives in their own manner. It gives them freedom, a space of their own and they don’t feel lonely in the *ashrams*. Many see it as living self-reliantly without “troubling their children”.

An interesting thing we found out almost immediately is that these women do not completely sever contacts with their families when they come to Vrindavana. They stay in touch with them through letters and phone calls. Many own mobile phones and speak to people back home regularly. Most continue to go back “home” at least once a year, a point also noted by Malini Bhattacharya (2008). While some go back simply to visit, many go back to take care of family

businesses, sowing/harvesting season, social responsibilities, etc. Marriages, births and other celebrations are usually occasions for their return, and also, interestingly for many, are the elections. Many also continue to take their share from the agricultural produce. When asked how she makes ends meet, Vidya *Mai* told us that she continued to take money from her share of rice grown in the family land and also sell coconuts from her trees back home. Hence, the traditionally prescribed complete snap with all connections does not seem to happen. Rather, they seem to distance themselves yet not quite cut-off from the relations and social contexts back home. Chandana who had fled away from her husband and mother-in-law who were plotting to kill her, has never gone back to see her children. Yet, she kept information about how they were and what they were doing from other relatives.

For Diya after her husband's death and children's marriage, there was a certain vacuum in her life. She talked about the four stages of life in Hinduism - *Bramacharya*, *Grihastha*, *Vanyaprastha* and *Sanyasa*. She tells us that she is in the fourth and last stage - *sanyasa* or that of the ascetic. However, unlike the scriptures where the *sanyasi* abandons all his connections with material life, including friends and family, Diya visits her family every now and then. But what is striking is that she returns back to Vrindavana as well. She hints that after her husband died and her children married and settled down, she felt a little abandoned, alone. Thus, it is a combination of her volition and her circumstances that led her to leave her house and settle in Vrindavana. What Diya, like many others, is trying to do here is an attempt at negotiating with her changed circumstance. If they would have left their household never perhaps to return, that would have been complying with the scriptural doctrines. Had they not left at all, it would have amounted to a rebellion against tradition. But she chose to leave, and at the same time, she chose not to sever her ties completely. This very act itself constitutes a negotiation.

Getting a place to live in Vrindavana is not an easy task. With increasing tourism and a growing real-estate market, Vrindavana is becoming a very expensive town to live in. When they come here, it is usually through a contact, a neighbour or relative, who is already living in the town. They get introduced at the *bhajanashrams* where they subsequently keep coming, unless they find other modes of livelihood. The *bhajanashrams* are not where they live. Many live in rented accommodations (usually sharing with other *maiyyas*), temples or even streets. They wish to shift into the widow ashrams, run by the government or private individuals or organisations.

However, getting into the *ashram* itself is part of a greater negotiation. The government *ashrams* are the most sought after because of the financial aid they receive from the government

schemes, NGOs, etc. But it doesn't have as many beds as the number of widows on the streets. The price of getting a bed is openly declared, and spoken about. Namrata *mai* admits she faked her age to seek entry into the ashram.

The government *ashram* has dorms, lined with beds. The space between two beds is used as a kitchen-cum-storeroom-cum-sitting parlour. Each bed has a different story, nurtures different dreams yet a collective, a fraternity in the making. One's ability to negotiate with the warden in charge, their rapport with the warden, decides their space in the dorm - which bed they get, when they get access to the bathroom etc. There are house rules, curfew timings and leave rules that one has to adhere to.

### **Authority and Ashram: A negotiated Relation**

Kali *Mai* arrives late after her holiday. She had been to Gobardhan to attend a sermon by a famous *Babaji*. The others informed her that the warden was upset with her late arrival and may chuck her out of the ashram. When asked what would she explain to the warden, she smiles as she picks up some money from her little money bag, tucks in her blouse and says, "*Warden Beti jaisi hai, mana lenge aur kya*" (The Warden is like my daughter, I will convince her). Some others gang up against the warden. Meena *mai* was furious when last time her name was not included among other women who were being taken to Delhi as part of a program arranged by an NGO. She doesn't mind staging a *morcha* against the warden if she does that again to her.

The relationship between the authority figure and the inmates is one of constant strategising and multi-dimensional. On the one hand, one cannot deny that the jargon the supervisor uses to keep the *maiyyas* within her control creates their daily life. "*Zyaada kuch kiya, toh Yamuna main kaatke phak dungi, kisi ko pata nahi chalega*" (If you do something, I will cut you into pieces and throw you into the Yamuna): a very popular phrase used in everyday language. On the other hand, Kiran *mai* waved her mobile phone at us, saying that if the warden misbehaved with her she would shoot a video and show it higher authorities.

One morning, we entered Mahila Ashray Sadan amidst hustle-bustle in Manju *Mai*'s room. The Warden had decided to send Laxmi *mai*, who got hit in a road accident, home to Bengal. Manju *mai* and Abha *mai* were to assist her to Bengal and thus also make a round trip to their homes. The conversation took place between a group of women who surround Manju *mai* to hear about Laxmi's health and the way the authority has denied paying any money for their travel. Soon,

it became a forum to address other issues and they all decided to go to speak to the ‘madam’ from the NGO who would report about it to higher authorities. Meanwhile Abha *mai* made phone calls to the taxi driver and bargained a good price for a trip from the hospital to the railway station. The women complained to us that those close to the supervisor could transgress certain rules otherwise binding, such as leaves to go home, going out to work, etc. Another way of getting around rules is to give bribes to the supervisor which many claimed to have given. Closeness with the supervisor becomes an important negotiating point in the private ashrams and *bhajanashrams* as well. Vidya boasted that since she had known *Guruma* (one who monitors the singing of *bhajans*) from her village days, she would not be scolded for extending the break by a few minutes.

### **Domesticities and ‘Othering’**

One interesting thing we noted in both the *bhajanashrams* and the residential ashrams is the familial relationships that these widows seemed to have forged. Coming from different parts of the country, but carrying similar tales, they are thrown together in a single place. Living together implies that they form family like units among themselves, helping each other in chores, in times of medical and other necessities, emotional and financial help. Nirupa Chakrabarty is 85 years old and cannot walk or do household works properly. So, the others in her dormitory try to help her out. Some give her vegetables they cook (which she eats with the rice received from the *ashram*); some help her clean her section of the dorm; while some help her to wash her clothes. She in turn acts as a motherly figure, giving them advice and emotional support when required. They find in each other a support system and strength, affection and love, much like a family. The need to establish the very human relation which they are traditionally supposed to shun as widows make them turn to each other as sisters, friends and confidantes - “*Hum saheli bhi hain, dost bhi hain aur behenein bhi hain*” (We are friends and sisters) says one *maiyya*, pointing to her friend on the adjacent bed.

However, not all widows in Vrindavana see each other as family members or as similar. The linguistic, regional and caste divisions of the larger Indian society are reflected within the *ashrams* as well. The process of “othering” actually becomes an important strategy to facilitate lives and choose friends. Strong regional or caste-wise in-groups are formed. For example, there is a noticeable difference between the Bengalis, the East Indians and the ‘Hindustanis’ or the North Indians, in the residential (government and private) ashrams as well as the *bhajanashrams*. The very first day we stepped into the *bhajanashram* we saw them seated on



two sides of the room, hardly talking to each other, and competing with each other for alms and favours of the alms givers, even our attention. As we kept visiting we saw that those were their fixed positions and crossing to the other side was unacceptable.

This clear cut spatial division often takes the form of hostility and antagonism; and as one *maiyya* told us “*jhagra nahi mano bharat Pakistan ki larai hai dono me.*” (“They fight like it’s the India-Pakistan war”). This was openly visible one of the days during our visit to the *bhajanashram*, when a family had come to donate money to these *maiyyas*. They distributed ten rupee notes to one group and twenty to the other which created a furore and war of words between the women. The Hindustanis complained that *Guruma* favours the other group because she herself is a Bengali. Cultural differences are highlighted and life styles questioned. The north Indian women often expressed ridicule for the lifestyle of the Bengalis, with many expressing an antipathy for their food habits. “*Ye log to mach machi khane wale hai, koi dharam nahi hota inka*” (These are non-vegetarian people, they have no religion”). Furthermore, even within the regional fractions one can see divisions based on caste with those of the same caste associating more with each other. Interestingly, many Brahmin women do not eat the food given at the ashram but take the tea. Thus, their identity as a *maiyya* is subordinate to their other identities. Other social stigmas are also seen. In the private ashram we saw a mentally challenged woman being made to live in a room outside the main ashram precincts. Even those who were sympathetic were hesitant to openly express this or help her out in fear of social ridicule.

While the widows have created new families in the ashrams, staying “at home, with their own families” is a definite status symbol and gives leeway from many rules binding to the other not-so-fortunate ones. We met some such women, either married or widowed, in the *bhajanashrams* who lived “at home” and came for the *kirtan* only to earn money or as they claimed “to pass time”. Maya Banerjee’s story illustrates this. On a cloudy cool morning, unlike the other days in the hot month of June in Vrindavana, she confidently seeks permission from *Guruma* to use the toilet and wanders in the cool breeze for a good half an hour before she joins back. She knows the *Guruma* would not dare say anything to her. She is not poor, doesn’t have to beg. She visits the ashram just to spend time. She claims the TV and the radio at home don’t amuse her anymore. While the rest of the widows stand in queue, Bala *mai* hurriedly gets tea for Maya *mai* every single morning. She is a Brahmin, has had a cherished marriage and lived her life as she claims. Her negotiations with everyday do not in any way illustrate any kind of technique to survive or struggle, but her constant attempt to establish her identity, her space

amongst the others. Her stories would delight other women, as they would gather around for tea. She doesn't take snacks, hardly utters *bhajans* and quietly observes the rest. While *Guruma* would scold anybody in the group trying their luck with a little nap, she would not dare to say anything to *Maya mai*.

### **Food: Norms, Strategies and Practices**

Food practices are an important field of negotiations in their daily lives. Although many *maiyyas* are East Indians, they prefer *chappati* to rice and do not eat non-vegetarian food openly. Vrindavana being a religious place with a significant Hindu population, non-vegetarianism is seen to be polluting. One Oriya woman had remarked that one cannot eat fish, if one wants to fit in. Thus, by giving up a certain kind of food, she bargains for a place amongst the North Indian women and within the normative structure. The ones who don't have the capacity to afford LPG cylinders blame the others for using gas to cook *prasad* as gas is made up of human faecal matter and kerosene is not. A *maiyya* mentions to us that even garlic and onion are not used in preparing the *ashram* food. However, they could eat these items in their own rooms. Thus, the scope of an alternate always exists. Manju *mai* eats fish when she comes to Delhi to visit her brother. Lata confessed that she had gone to her relative's house in Vrindavana and cooked and eaten fish. She proudly said that her recipe had been praised by everyone around.

Even in their relations and interactions with *ashram* authorities, food was the most important issue in dealing with their poverty-stricken conditions. The scramble for food is very much present and out there for anyone to see. In the private *ashram* the lunch bell is awaited with utter eagerness and even sick and ailing *maiyyas* rush to the dining area at exactly 12 p.m. The *maiyyas* receive only a fixed amount of food – two *rotis* and a little portion of rice and *daal*. Most complained that the ones who distribute food keep a larger portion for themselves and save *rotis* for the night without giving the others. If one is late by even ten minutes, food finishes and they have to stay hungry till evening. It is worth mentioning one incident in this context. We were sitting in one of the *maiyya's* room when she was having her lunch. She looked at us and said, “I am eating such less rice and *daal* whereas my roommate is saving those seven-eight *rotis* for the night.” There was a pile of *rotis* on the other bed while many *maiyyas* outside were complaining that there was no food. On our second visit to the *ashram* one woman told us, “*aaj kheer mila hai, shayad tumlog aye ho na isliye. Aise to kabhi nhi dete*” (We got dessert today but they generally don't give us).

The *maiyyas* in the private ashram do not get breakfast after a financial scheme was introduced by the government and an NGO. However, most of the women are not recipients of the money as they are either new to the *ashram* or have certain bank issues to address. Many of them said that this was the biggest problem that they faced as they wake up quite early in the morning and staying without food till lunch time becomes difficult. As a result, after taking a bath, they sleep in the morning hours to control their hunger!

The widows residing in the government-run *ashrams* are slightly better off. Monetary and other benefits they receive allow them to employ slightly different strategies to deal with the cultural norms as well as the *ashram* rules. Their better financial position allows them to cook their own food instead of eating the food that is provided by the *ashram*. “*Sarkar toh khane ke liye hi de rahi hai paise, toh main apne mann ka kyun na khaun?*” (“The government is giving money to eat, then why shouldn’t I eat what I feel like?”) Most of them also get goods of their choice (mainly food items and groceries - vegetables, fruits, rice; sometimes Horlicks, Glucose, snacks etc.) from the nearby market.

### **Income, Benefits and Livelihood**

With some money in hand they are able to afford some other small things for their need or even pleasure: some buy books (mostly religious), mobile phones, gifts for friends and family. Some women even support their families with the money they get. Alka supported her two sons (ten and eleven) who lived in orphanages and sent gifts to a daughter who was married with the money she got in the *ashram*. She acknowledges that she lives in the *ashram* to be able to support her sons, even though she has her family back home. Karuna Haldar sends money to her son who is highly impoverished and keeps unwell. Others who do not have families to support spend their money in buying knick-knacks, going to *teerthas* (pilgrimage), or saving up. A major spending is on healthcare as most do not go to the doctor that visits the ashrams and claim his medicines are “useless”. Durga Som claims that she is saving up some money so that her last rites can be taken care of.

Interestingly, the money given in the ashrams is sometimes what draws them to Vrindavana in the first place. Tradition requires only the widow to come to Vrindavana and submit herself to Lord Krishna but there are many women with their husbands still alive who regularly attend the *bhajanashrams*, the primary reason being economic, Malini does not hesitate to admit that the first thing she had thought about after reaching Vrindavana was a source of income for her

to survive. She visits her husband and children back home regularly, used to send money to home until she got affected by a skin disease a few years back and could work no more.

The benefits received are often used as further strategies. For example, they get 3 litres of kerosene oil from the government as a part of their monthly ration. They claim it does not suffice for the whole month. Thus, many of the women sell the kerosene oil to others and instead buy LPG cylinders. Similarly they barter many other goods, to make their lives slightly easier. It is therefore no surprise that the *maiyyas* negotiate with their daily lives at every step possible. Radha suffers from chronic arthritis and cannot afford to bear the cold. She goes to take a bath at 2 p.m. regularly because there is a power cut during that time and the fans are switched off in her room after she comes out from the bathroom. Otherwise her pain increases with the cold. Since she shares a room with three other women, she does not expect them to switch off the fan at other times. Therefore Radha takes advantage of the power cut and takes a late bath which means that the *ashram* warden often scolds her. But as she herself described it, “*kuch pane ke liye kuch khona to parta hi hai*” (To get something you have to lose something).

Water is another big bone of contention amongst the *maiyyas* living in the *ashrams*. Many complained that they have to get up very early in the morning to take a bath as water gets over quickly. However, there are strategies that they use to combat this problem. Many store water for friends in their buckets and save a place in the washroom. They have mutual understandings: if on Monday one gets up early, and then on Tuesday, someone else gets up. However, saving water often invites ridicule from the other women who argue that it is unfair.

Traditionally, the widows were not supposed to work, begging and income from *bhajans* being the only source of sustaining themselves. However, with government schemes, awareness generation, etc, the widows have now started taking to other occupations as well. Many of them work in *goshalas* (cow sheds), making ayurvedic medicines, garlands and clothes for the idols, bangles and chains of beads which are sold to tourists. To discourage them from begging and working as domestic helps, the *ashrams* have skill development classes to teach them to sew. Many widows attend these classes with interest. Their interest in working and earning demonstrates not only a traversing of prescribed path of ‘good behaviour’ but also a desire to live life in a better manner, instead of accepting their condition as fate.

### **The *Bhajanashrams*: Kirtans and More**

As said earlier, the women first get introduced at the *bhajanashrams* which is where those not in the residential ashrams interact with each other. The *kirtan ghar* in these *bhajanashrams* is a lively space with the *maiyyas* singing kirtan, dancing, playing musical instruments, talking, etc. What is interesting is that, while singing *bhajans* is the source of income for these women, it seems to be only that in a large part. It is more of a livelihood strategy than a religious activity. One would be surprised to see that most *maiyyas* sitting there are actually not singing but only clapping their hands or pretending to be attentive. Especially those sitting in the back rows seem to carry on conversations, sharing gossip and stories, while the *bhajan* goes on, joining in only when they earn a stern look from *Guruma* (the supervisor). One woman even fell asleep in the middle of a session once. The disconnection with the *bhajan* pattern is further emphasised in the way they rush outside during breaks, stopping not even for the ongoing song to finish. The biggest incentive to stay for the *bhajans* is food, as the *ashram* provides them with lunch. Many of the women also bring tiffin boxes to pack their food.

Amidst the continuous chants of “*Hare Krishna Hare Rama*”, the *bhajanashram* becomes a space where everyday negotiations take place. Here one can witness buying and selling of goods that have been obtained as alms or food items given by the ashram. Hira Soren, for instance, would collect the *chhola* (chickpeas) distributed in the *bhajanashram* and would sell them in the market as she gets bored eating the bland food every day. When asked the reason behind this, she, in a hushed tone, answered that she craves for egg. Hence, with the money collected by selling the chickpeas, she would buy eggs. Of course she admits that the money was not enough, and she hardly eats eggs. Many such manoeuvring tactics are being employed to make their lives more liveable. We could see one lady trying to sell a sari that she had been given by some patrons. There was bargaining and bidding over the price, arguments and discussions about the quality and design of the sari. The *bhajanashram* was turned into a temporary market place, while the *bhajans* continued in the back drop.

Before going to the kirtans, we had expected to see a completely religious and spiritual atmosphere. But what we witnessed instead was the way this structure of sacrality is twisted and turned, that behind the veneer of sacredness lays topography of materiality. The *kirtan ghar*, thus provides a space in which the women come out of their regular lives and interact with others. The *bhajanashrams* also become the place where they develop friendships and sisterhoods, helping each other out emotionally and even financially. Borrowing and lending of small sums of money is a frequent occurrence. One can see a few women pooling in to help one of them in times of need, or someone reminding another (often not so subtly) about the

money she owes her. Hence, while the *bhajanashram* doesn't fully unite the differences of the many women with their varying stories but sure does locate them in full colour and capacity.

### **Voting, Education and Mobile phones: Strategies for Living**

The *bhajanashram* stands as a workable recourse niche to help the women to keep up with changing times. Apart from bargaining *chanas*, *jalebis*, sarees, it also becomes a space of opportunities, such as building contacts, expressing one's identity, a place of both unity as well as othering. These women are extremely marginalized and do not have any access to the universal public sphere where they could voice their opinions and be heard. However, they create an alternative public sphere, what Nancy Fraser calls "subaltern counter public". It allows them to "invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser: 1990, 67). Thus, the *bhajanashram* also becomes an arena of expression and interaction.

For instance, during our participation at various *kirtans*, we found the women not only politically aware and interested, but active. Many of the Bengali women living in personal accommodations, continue to go back to cast their votes during elections. They say they do so, so that they can continue to avail some benefits provided by the state governments. We heard discussions about the upcoming municipal elections in West Bengal and which candidate would be a suitable person who would listen to their needs. Interspersed with these were also talks about various pension schemes, the hard life of a widow and the need to be self-independent.

Education also becomes an important bargaining point. Those women who are educated see themselves slightly above the others and boast of a better knowledge of the workings of the world. Often it is those who are educated who become the key mediators in the exchanges and barter that take place within the *ashram*. They often become advice-givers and guides. Being well-educated and having worked in a factory for many years, Durga Som had such a position in the government *ashram*. She proudly said that she was consulted by the others and was happy to be called to help by the sewing teacher at the *ashram*. Nandita Rai had been a school teacher and took to disciplining the others in her dormitory. She scolded another woman for wearing dirty clothes and gave her two soap bars to go wash them immediately. She boasted that she did not gossip or argue like the other women, rather passed her time by reading books. Even the uneducated seem to value literacy. This is evident in how enthusiastically they enrol in the *ashram* classes to learn to read and write and can be seen practicing their lessons in their

free time. They get occupied with their tailoring classes every forenoon. They also learn Hindi, Maths and Bengali. Meena *mai* expresses her desire to learn numbers so that she could operate her phone - the one she plans to buy in a few months.

For those who can afford it, mobile phones have become an important part of the lives of these widows, especially those who are in the government *ashram*. This is their means to remain in touch with their families “back home”, this is where they took down our numbers as we bid them goodbye. Some jokingly threaten the other of making a video of the other’s act and show it to the rest. They are definitely not unaware of the *Gita* that comes in the mp3 format, nor do they hesitate to show you pictures of their family members in the photo gallery. Thus, through technology they have managed to find a middle path between tradition and modernity. Mobile phones to keep in touch with families, recorded religious sermons, all hint at the gap through which negotiations run strongly standing for the agency etching its space in the assumed structure.

### **Morality, religion and negotiating traditions**

Morality becomes an important sphere where daily lives are negotiated. Apart from a functional hierarchy that exists between the Brahmin and non- Brahmin women, the Bengalis and Hindustanis, there is also a difference between women who beg and the ones who don’t indulge in the ‘menial activity’. There is also a noticeable gap between women who are friendly with men (usually *babas*) and others who refrain. Kamla *mai* drops subtle hints about young Namrata *mai* of not coming back to the *ashram* on time, staying out late and at times not coming back to the *ashram* when she has nowhere to go; while Namrata *mai* is busy on phone for about four to five times as we spoke. There is considerable angst about drinking, as many claim to have lost their near and dear ones to alcohol - however, never got a chance to meet anybody who condemns smoking or other forms of tobacco consumption. Prema *mai* shared her tobacco budgeting for the month. She spends around hundred and twenty rupees per month for the *beedis* and snuff powder, and doesn’t mind crossing her budget when she has a fight back home despite the price of ‘*Musa ka gul*’ and ‘*paanch photu wala*’ going up.

Deviations from norms and traditions are not unknown. According to Hindu custom, a widow is not supposed to wear any ornaments or colourful clothes. She is expected to give up the life of a *suhagan* (married woman) and thus discard the signs of marriage like bangles, vermilion (*sindoor*), etc. Thus, most *maiyyas* who are widows did not wear any kind of ornament. However, one Kalpana Devi was wearing ear rings and red bangles even after being widowed.

Some others did not like this fact and made some derogatory comments like ‘*inka shauk abhi pura nhi hua hai* (Her greed still exists).’ But desires do not cease to exist because one’s husband dies, do they? An almost 70 year old widow trying out my ring, and that too when *kirtan* was going on, a devotional act, seems to suggest otherwise. As said earlier, colours do not completely leave their lives, and most women would like to abandon their customary white. However, circumstances lead them to make the custom itself a negotiation. Malini says she is a *suhagan* (a married woman whose husband is alive) and yet had to wear a dirty white saree like the other widows as that helped her in getting alms from pilgrims. Some young women also wear the white sarees when they go out to beg or pray. This is to get easily identified and also avoid sexual harassment on the street, especially near the *ghat*. Dressed in a red and yellow saree, Alka said that she wore the white sarees she had received only when she had to go outside to temples, etc. Some others, however, do not hesitate to look good. Abha *mai* buys the seven rupee *kaato-gholo* hair dye every month, whereas some wear customized tulsi bead earrings. Some claim they look younger than their age and fear harassment near the *ghat* and lonely roads. Amrita *mai* buys cold creams and lifebuoy in memory of her darling husband who used to work all day in the fields and would not let her out in the sun.

A very interesting sense of negotiation is the relationship with Lord Krishna. Serving Lord Krishna is a costly affair; it involves lot of ghee, fruits and flowers. However, piety has its benefits. Sajni Mai claims that her children are afraid of her because of her piety. She doesn’t go home often, as she is often busy with *pujas* in and around Vrindavana. She says she would perform a puja at her village soon, for which she has been collecting money. Religion for her becomes a blessed strategy to earn her space, identity and autonomy. Manju *mai* in full competence scolds the neatly decorated idols in front of her, as she cooks Prasad for the ‘no good lord Krishna’. When asked why would she blame and yet engage in such a task at the same time, she replies that, “Even the Government provides food for the prisoners, I am the *sarkar* - the idol is my prisoner”. Feeling more powerful this way, and staging herself on par with her Lord, Manju *mai* entertains the rest with her witty talks, excuses and ideas about living life as a widow. The everyday starts with little negotiations of this sort, which helps her negotiate around the norm despite her hidden unwillingness to keep together a constructed widowhood.

## **Conclusion**



As young researchers we had gone to Vrindavana with a simple question: how do the widows in Vrindavana strategise their everyday lives? What we found was an extremely multi-layered and multi-coloured picture. A suggestive departure from tradition with no near religious explanation made way for a compelling introspection into the everyday lives of women in Vrindavana. The grammar and force with which the everyday life of a widow is constructed is often denied fresh look and the structure compels to reinforce the status quo despite the agency to experiment with the changing times. However, with the help of loopholes, the agency (few women with whom we interacted) tries to manage to drape the stereotypical notion on the very lively self to keep the everyday going at a level called the affordable convenience. Yes, we did find many women crying about their past and present lives, but not until when one of us hugged one 73-year old - she pushed her back exclaiming, “*Tu aadmi hota toh zyada maza aaata*” (If you were a man, it would have been more fun).

Fifteen days in Vrindavana, we made friends for life. Each woman was an inspirational tale, each life-story capable of becoming a full-fledged study in itself. What makes the religious understanding of life in Vrindavana critical is the realization that what seems to be modern is actually very much religious and what looks like religious has interesting underlying strategies which are very much modern. The key role played by agency then becomes crucial. One can see that the everyday life of the Vrindavana widows is not entirely as per the black and white writing in the traditional texts. Oppressive norms leading to poverty and destitution exist, but these very norms force the widows to navigate ways to deal with them. There are attempts to traverse them, without upsetting the status quo. Stuck between a highly internalised value system and an inherent human desire to live, the widows develop strategies and tactics to lead their lives. The *maiyyas* are not just victims but participating agents in moulding the societal structure. Strategising and negotiating is evident in the everyday parlance, especially the way they defend their claim to fit into the structure and the idea of their imagined life in Vrindavana. This is best exemplified in the case of one unmarried woman who in order to get a pension card registered her husband’s name as Shyam Sundar (another name of Lord Krishna) with no guilt as she is anyway here in Vrindavana to be counted as Lord Krishna’s *gopini*.

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