



Sacred Texts and Silent Struggles: Living Realities of The Homeless in Vrindavan's Sacred Geography

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ABSTRACT

The Bhagavad Gita's teachings on devotion, duty, and detachment deeply shape Vrindavan's spiritual ethos, attracting many who seek spiritual refuge. Yet, a significant population lives in material deprivation outside its temples, dependent on charity for survival. This exploratory-descriptive study examines the socio-demographic profile and lived experiences of these homeless individuals. Thematic analysis reveals critical issues such as the contrast between spiritual refuge and material neglect, institutional exclusion due to ashram rules, and challenges in adapting to structured spiritual spaces. Despite their devotion, many are denied access to ashrams due to rigid norms around caste, gender, discipline, and diet. The study underscores the need for more inclusive, compassionate shelter policies that honour both the spiritual and material needs of Vrindavan's most vulnerable residents.

Keywords: Bhagavad Gita, homelessness, Vrindavan, Krishna, living experiences.

Introduction:

The concept of "home" deeply embodies the sense of belonging, security and comfort.(Ranmal et al., 2021). It is deeply disheartening that, even in the twenty-first century, many people and families struggle to meet fundamental human necessities including shelter, food, healthcare, and safety. In recent years, it is evident that there is an increasing wide range of unsheltered homelessness across the world, specially more concentrated in developing countries (Richards & Kuhn, 2023).Unsheltered homelessness is difficult to compare between countries due to varying definitions and measurements. In certain countries, homelessness may solely refer to unsheltered individuals (e.g., Japan), or to precariously housed populations (e.g., Australia). Countries with a broader definition of homelessness report greater rates of homelessness (Mosites et al., 2021).United Nations differentiates homeless as, "absolute homelessness" as individuals who do not have physical shelter and sleep outside, in vehicles, abandoned buildings, or other unsuitable areas. "Relative homelessness" refers to persons who have a physical shelter but do not meet fundamental health and safety standards, such as weather protection, access to fresh water and sanitation, tenure security, personal safety, and affordability (Turnbull et al., 2007). In this review, it is safe to define "homeless people" as those who sleep in homeless shelters or are "absolutely homeless." Homelessness definitions vary by country, and identifying the unsheltered homeless population is challenging due to limited data sources and methodology.

While there is a growing debate over the individual and structural causation of homelessness in the Western literature (Batterham, 2019; Chan et al., 2023; Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016; Hanratty, 2017; Mabhala et al., 2021; Ranmal et al., 2021; Richards & Kuhn, 2023; Turnbull et al., 2007; van Dongen et al., 2019), although very little is known about the forces contributing to the situations of homelessness with context to religion and places. Globally, homeless individuals are materially deprived. Homelessness is more common in individuals who have had trauma, low education, disruptive families, were raised in care homes or foster care, were physically, emotionally, or sexually assaulted, or were neglected at a young age ((DeForge et al., 2008; Duff et al., 2015; Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016; Hanratty, 2017).Literature highlights a range of issues, including poor mental and physical health, substance abuse, and exposure to domestic violence and harassment, hate crime,

bereavement, relationship breakdown, care or jail experience, refugee status, and involvement with criminal justice systems.

Structural variables in social policy, society, and institutions contribute to homelessness, while structural reasons claim that homelessness is a socially induced issue. Examples include limited access to affordable housing, educational and employment opportunities, financial support, and social benefits (Barman-Adhikari, Bowen, et al., 2016; Barman-Adhikari, Petering, et al., 2016; Batterham, 2019; DeForge et al., 2008; Duff et al., 2015; Farrugia & Gerrard, 2016; Hanratty, 2017). Poverty has been linked to both individual and institutional causes of homelessness (Chan et al., 2023; Kubendran, 2020; Mabhala et al., 2021; Mason, 2003; Mastey, 2009; Pande, 2015; Ranmal et al., 2021). However, there are differing perspectives about their relationship. Some argue that poverty is caused by a lack of material means, and that providing basic necessities like food and shelter can avoid homelessness (Aldridge, 2020; Chan et al., 2023; Henwood et al., 2013; Ranmal et al., 2021; Richards & Kuhn, 2023; Turnbull et al., 2007; van Dongen et al., 2019). Poverty can lead to social disadvantages such as limited access to school, work, and money, as well as exposure to abuse and maladaptive behaviours (Auger, 1968; Gupta & Nair, 2021; Hawley & Hawley, 2020; Kubendran, 2020; Kumari & Sekher, 2022; Kurniawati, 2017; Mastey, 2009; Reviewed-cum-refereed, 2015; Sharma et al., 2020; Taylor, 2012) (Barman-Adhikari, Petering, et al., 2016; Duff et al., 2015; van Leeuwen, 2018).

The argument over homelessness policy revolves around addressing poverty as the root cause. Barker, investigated the link between childhood maltreatment (physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as physical and emotional neglect) and high school completion among the homeless population. After controlling for confounding variables, the study found that four types of maltreatment were significantly and independently linked to not finishing high school: physical abuse, emotional abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect. In India, according to the most recent census statistics from 2011, Uttar Pradesh is the most populous state, with a staggering population of about 199.6 million, followed by Maharashtra (112.4 million), Bihar (103.8 million), and West Bengal (91.3 million) (Census India, 2011).

Religious Context and Bhagwat Gita

Today, India is known as a progressive country with multicultural heterogeneity, yet it is nevertheless firmly anchored in religious sentiments, cultural and traditional beliefs (Kumari & Sekher, 2022). The Bhagavad Gita, a revered Hindu scripture, addresses fundamental questions of life, duty, and spirituality. Its teachings on detachment, duty (dharma), and the impermanence of material existence offer profound insights into understanding the plight of the homeless in a religious context. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna emphasizes the impermanence of material life and the importance of spiritual devotion.

Bhagavad Gita 2.27:

He states, **"For one who has taken birth, death is certain; and for one who has died, birth is certain"** (). This passage emphasizes the nature of worldly anguish and asks one to flee from such materialistic world and find eternal comfort in devotion to God. (Srimad Bhagavad Gita, n.d.)

BG 9.22: "To those who are constantly devoted and who worship Me with love, I provide what they lack and preserve what they have." (Srimad Bhagavad Gita (Sanskrit, Hindi & English).Pdf, n.d.). This verse emphasizes the importance of devotion and love in worshiping God and suggests that through sincere devotion, one receives divine blessing and guidance. This verse also suggests for those who prioritize devotion and surrender to the divine, God becomes their provider and protector. The line from the Bhagavad Gita strikes a profound chord with Vrindavan's homeless population, who frequently see their religion and devotion as their most valuable assets. While they may lack tangible belongings, their constant devotion to Krishna offers them with spiritual nourishment and an emotional sanctuary from their worldly difficulties.

According to the introduction of Bhagwat Gita, Vrindavan is described as a replication of Krishna's eternal home in the spiritual realm on Earth. Furthermore, the Brahma-samhita asserts that Krishna, the Supreme Person, resides in that everlasting, spiritual Vrindavan/Info/Vrindavan, n.d.), (description-goloka, n.d.). Devotees, many of whom are elderly widows, flock to the holy city in the hope of finding peace, and sustenance in the space where Lord Krishna once dwelled.

BG 8.15: "After attaining Me, the great souls, who are yogis in devotion, never return to this temporary world, which is full of miseries, because they have attained the highest perfection." (Srimad Bhagavad Gita, n.d.). As inscribed in the holy scriptures of Bhagwat Gita it is mentioned that anyone who attains perfection will not return to this world of misery and illness, hence many people come to this sacred place in order to attain Krishna, as Vrindavan is referred as a replica of Krishna's home in the spiritual realm of Earth. They believe that spending their final days in Vrindavan will secure their passage to moksha (liberation), as promised by the scriptures, by participating in the rituals and traditions of Vrindavan, devotees feel they are partaking in this cosmic play, thus reinforcing their spiritual bond with Krishna. Several media documentations have also been presented of this places as to be the centre where most of the widows, these locations serve as a refuge for widows who have been abandoned by their relatives in their later years (Kubendran, 2020; Kumari & Sekher, 2022).

The third chapter of the Bhagavad Gita is "Karma Yoga" or the "Path of Selfless Service". Here Lord Krishna emphasizes the importance of karma in life. He reveals that it is important for every human being to engage in some sort of activity in this material world.

BG 3.20 – 21: By performing their prescribed duties, King Janak and others attained perfection. One should also perform their duties to set an example for the good of the world. Whatever actions great persons perform, common people follow. Whatever standards they set, all the world pursues (*Srimad Bhagavad Gita*, n.d.).

Krishna's teachings also promote compassion and service to those in need, reminding us of our responsibility to help the less fortunate. There are numerous ashrams in Vrindavan which preserve the essence of these stories, allowing devotees to relive the heavenly Leela's through meditation, recitation, and enactments. These ashrams are sanctuaries for spiritual practice, contemplation, and the pursuit of liberation (moksha).

In case of the homeless population, India has 4.5 lakh houseless families, out of a total population of 17.73 lakh, who live without any form of support roof cover. The biggest number of people live in Uttar Pradesh (329,125) and Maharashtra (210,908) (Census houseless, n.d.).

Mathura, which is a part of Uttar Pradesh, reported 1,428 houseless individuals in 2011, reflecting an increase from 657 in 2001 (Census & Operations, Uttar Pradesh, 2011). Despite the spiritual wealth of the city, economic and social support structures are frequently insufficient many people in Vrindavan face hard realities. Many homeless people rely on the generosity of temple visitors and local groups for their basic needs. The streets surrounding Vrindavan's temples are often lined with people who have no permanent shelter. These complexities show a paradox, the spiritual principles of care and compassion as well as the harsh reality of struggle and despair forming an ecology with each other. Despite its spiritual riches, Vrindavan faces the stark reality of homelessness, with many people seeking refuge outside its temples. The purpose of this article is to understand the socio- demographic characteristic and daily life of unsheltered homeless people taking refuge outside the temples in Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh.

Study Area

Vrindavan: A Sacred City of Devotion

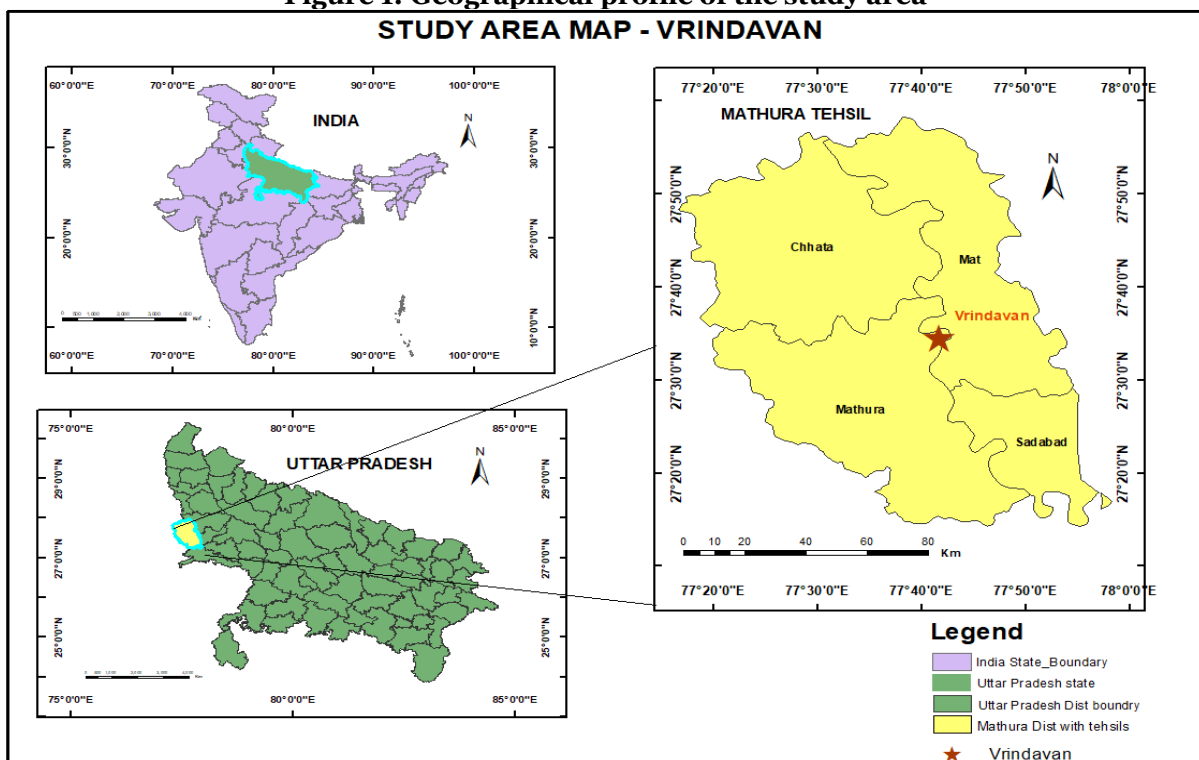
Vrindavan, known in ancient Sanskrit as वृन्दावन (Vṛndāvana), derives its name from the sacred groves of vṛndā, or holy basil, combined with vana, meaning grove or forest. This city holds great spiritual significance, particularly within the Vaishnavism tradition of Hinduism, and is recognized as a major site related with Lord Krishna's childhood.

Geographical Significance

Vrindavan is located on the west bank of the Yamuna River, roughly 15 kilometres north of Mathura and 125 kilometres from Delhi, at an elevation of 170 meters (557 feet). The Yamuna, an important river in Indian spirituality, runs smoothly through the city,

Vrindavan is a spiritual epicentre, with nearby areas such as Govardhana, Gokul, Nandgaon, Barsana, Mathura, and Bhandirvan contributing to its cultural circuit.

Figure 1: Geographical profile of the study area



Source: Prepared by author in ArcGIS

The objective of the study is:

- To describe the socio-demographic characteristics of homeless people residing outside the temples.
- To understand the lived experiences of homeless people in sacred places.

Sample population:

The studied population were homeless people. For this study, we defined homelessness as not having a permanent home. Since we had no way to validate our participants' status, we regarded all individuals who declared themselves as homeless and were accessing homeless people's facilities for a place to stay, safety, food, and healthcare as homeless.

Data and Methods

Data source and Study design

The study is based on primary survey data collected from the homeless individuals taking refuge outside the temples and its court yards of Banke Bihari Mandir, ISKON temple, Govind Devji Temple. A qualitative design (Kansal et al., 2023) was adopted. Data was collected through semi-structured (Jewett et al., 2019) interviews, direct observations, and informal conversations with homeless individuals residing outside temples in Vrindavan. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns in their lived experiences.

The methodology of the study is exploratory as well as descriptive in nature, through previous literature review the found that homeless people have limited literacy, so a face-to-face questionnaire with individuals was decided as a best choice for this study. Snowball sampling is used to collect data demographic data from homeless people dwelling and taking refuge outside the temples of Banke Bihari Mandir, ISKON temple, Govind Devji Temple in Vrindavan. Convenience sampling was used for in-depth interviews to about their lived experiences.

Data collection

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted between 20 to 24 February, 2024. Two interviewers conducted the interviews in the local language i.e. Hindi. Prior to commencement of the interviews, a brief explanation about the purpose and procedure of the study was provided. Permission to audio-record the conversation was elicited, and the participants were assured that the collected data would be treated anonymously. To minimize social desirability bias, interviews were conducted at different time period between 20 Feb to 24 Feb. Also, we did not use any leading questions during the interview. We met on a daily basis to review collected data and decide on data saturation (Kansal, 2023). Interview durations varied from 20 min to 26 min with an average of 23 min. At the end of each in depth interview, the participants were provided with fresh seasonal fruits (i.e. banana, apple, orange) for their contribution to the study.

Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by first and the second author (RR & HR is both fluent in both Hindi and English) re-checked the transcripts and corrections were made if required. All the study participants were invited to review their transcripts in Hindi but none of them showed any interest in doing so. The transcripts were translated to English along with manual coding, MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software (trial version) was employed to code data and examine plausible relationships between themes. Thematic analysis was informed by the Template analysis technique which involves both deductive as well as inductive coding. The execution of both these coding approaches demonstrates rigor in a qualitative inquiry (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006). All authors reviewed the codes for each transcript, validating the trustworthiness of the coding. Differences in viewpoints were resolved through discussion and alterations were made in the coding framework until agreement was reached (Ishtiaq, 2019). The emerging themes along with direct narratives have been reported in the Results section. Data visualization, focusing on thematic analysis are done through a word cloud and mind map.

Result and Discussion

Background characteristics of the respondent:

Out of the 60 respondents, majority of them were in the age group of above 60 (48%), followed by 40-60 years (37%) and then in the age group 18-39 (15%). Majority of the homeless people were of female gender (47%), followed by males, only a handful of samples was found of transgender (5%). About 46% of the homeless people were from the other backward castes, followed by SC/ST (35%) and general category (18%). The majority of the respondents were from rural areas (57%) and had a low or no level of literacy (67%). Illiteracy could also be one of the determining factors for the vulnerable conditions of these homeless people, as it could be the reason for their general lack of awareness in society. Almost 70% of the population stated that the main reason for being homeless is family issues (left/abandoned) or legal issues, which include housing, crime, etc.

More than half of the respondent lived without shelter for more than 10 years, 30% for 6-10 years, and 18% for less than 5 years. It was also crucial to understand and comprehend the family dynamics of these respondents

because it would help us understand their previous living circumstances. The bulk of homeless people (68%) belonged from nuclear families. 46% of all respondents had more than two children. Furthermore, around 80% of these unsheltered people do not communicate with their relatives or friends. A high percentage (76%) of the unsheltered population lacks a unique identification card.

Table 1: Percentage distribution of respondent by background characteristics

Background characteristics	Sample size	
	N=60	Percentage (%)
Age group (in years)		
18-39	9	15.0
40-60	22	36.7
above 60	29	48.3
Gender		
Male	10	16.7
Female	47	78.3
Transgender	3	5.0
Caste		
Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe	21	35.0
Other Backward Class	28	46.7
General	11	18.3
Marital status		
Single	8	13.3
Separated	11	18.3
Married	5	8.3
Widowed	36	60.0
Place of residence before homeless		
Rural	34	56.7
Urban	26	43.3
Education status		
No education	31	51.7
Primary and above	23	38.3
Secondary and above	6	10.0
Main reason for being homeless		
Family / legal issues	42	70.0
Unemployment	4	6.7
Substance Abuse/ Addiction	9	15.0
Illness	5	8.3
Duration of being homeless		
0-5 years	11	18.3
6-10 years	18	30.0
10+ years	31	51.7
Type of family before homeless		
Nuclear	41	68.3
Joint	19	31.7
No. of children		
None	6	10.0
1 Child	14	23.3
2 Children	12	20.0
More than 2	28	46.7
In Contact with family or friends		
Yes	11	18.3
No	49	81.7
Unique ID Aadhar/Pan if any		
Yes	14	23.3
No	46	76.7

Note: Primary survey, 2024

While attempts were made to organize group discussions and one-on-one interviews, not all individuals were comfortable in participating due to personal hesitation, mistrust, or the emotional intensity of their experiences. In such a sensitive and sacred context, it became clear that narrative-based engagement offered a

more ethical and immersive approach. Through informal conversations, observation, and slow trust-building, we were able to gather 24 detailed narratives, each reflecting the everyday rhythms, spiritual negotiations, and survival strategies of individuals living in or around temple courtyards. This narrative method allowed for deeper proximity to their lived realities,

Living experiences of homeless people in Sacred places: A closer engagement through narratives.

Thematic analysis was employed in MAXQDA to identify recurring patterns in their lived experiences.

Theme 1: Temple Courtyards as Sacred Shelters

Temple courtyards in places like Vrindavan are more than just open areas; they serve as spiritual and physical sanctuaries. For those who do not have a permanent home, these courtyards give a precarious form of shelter: open to the sky, vulnerable to the elements, yet filled with the warmth of divine presence.

A woman who is 76 years old sitting on a torn mat under a neem tree, her thin frame wrapped in layers of faded white cotton. She clutches a small cloth bag of belongings she narrates her story,

“Aligarh se aayi thi. (I came here from Aligarh) unke gusarne ke badh (referring that her husband passed away) ... beemari thi. (due to illness) ... bachchon ne keh diya ‘tum kahin aur jao’. Main bhi chup ho gayi. . . (a long pause), (My sons didn’t want me. I didn’t want to fight)”

Her silence ***“main bhi chup ho gayi”*** is not just submission, but survival. It is the muted resilience of women rendered invisible by kinship structures, yet re-appearing in sacred geographies like Vrindavan. She continues, ***(I came here to Krishna’s town. At first, I sat outside the temple steps, unsure. Then one of the sevaks told me I could sleep under the veranda. That was two years ago. I haven’t left since.)***

The proximity to the divine becomes a source of strength and comfort. Even when material resources are limited, the spiritual atmosphere of the temple provides a sense of purpose, acceptance, and inner calm. The divine becomes not simply a protector, but also a quiet ally in everyday problems.

A 19-year-old boy crouches beneath an ancient peepal tree, its gnarled roots snaking into the earth like old veins of forgotten stories. The bark is dark and worn in weather for many years, wrapped tightly with countless loops of red thread, some fresh and others faded with time (silent offerings from pilgrims and seekers). In his hands, the boy holds a small earthen diya, its flickering flame dancing against the golden dusk. He lights it with careful reverence, shielding it from the soft wind with his cupped palms. Around him, the scent of incense mingles with dust and distant temple bells, creating a sacred hush. The diya, now glowing steady, rests at the base of the tree (a fragile light amid the roots and shadows, a quiet act of devotion performed by the boy whose prayers are not in word but in the gesture and flame).

He narrates ***“Main ghar chod ke aaya hoon (left home), kyunki stepfather maarte the (physically abused) Ab main is ped ke neeche sota hoon... Ek pandit ne diya jalane ka kaam diya. Ab main roz diya (ritual tool of light) jalaata hoon... mughr yaha accha lgta hai (I feel good here)”***

His shelter is not architectural, it’s under a tree, preparing ritual tools for pandit ji, he finds solace and peace here under the protection of the divine presence.

Theme 2: Exclusion from Ashrams and faith-based NGO’s

Although ashrams and faith-based NGOs provide shelter and support, their religious and cultural norms often limit their accessibility for the broader homeless population. Many ashrams admit only those committed to spiritual practices, excluding individuals seeking basic survival needs rather than religious guidance. Some institutions further restrict entry based on caste, gender, or community, reinforcing social hierarchies rather than offering unconditional aid. Additionally, ashrams enforce strict daily routines mandatory prayers, meditation, and dietary restrictions like vegetarian or sattvic meals which may be difficult for homeless individuals unaccustomed to such discipline. Since these spaces primarily cater to pilgrims, monks, and spiritual seekers, those outside these categories often find themselves excluded. While ashrams serve a valuable purpose, their inherent restrictions highlight the need for more inclusive, secular shelters that address homelessness without imposing religious or cultural conditions. An interview with a 65-year Muslim widow, she says,

“Phele main ek dargah (place of worship for muslims) ke pass rehta thi..., lekin Vrindavan aayi kyunki suni thi ki yahan ashramon (seeking shelter) mein logon ko jagah milti hai. Ek ashram gayi, bola ki jagah nahi hai. Doosra gayi, wahan bola ‘kya naam hai? Yeh jagah tumhare liye nahi hai’...”

Her experience painfully reveals how religious and communal boundaries are inscribed into spaces that otherwise project universality and care. Though homelessness transcends religion, access to sacred shelter remains selective. His identity is read before his need.

A 56-year-old male says ***“Main rickshaw (Rishkaw Puller) chalata tha... Jab pair toot gaya toh bacchon ne nikal giya toh ashram gaya. Lekin wahan sab sattvic (Pure veg) khaana milta tha... Na masale, na chai... yeh niyam mere jaise aadmi ke liye nahi bane (I am not ment to follow such rules) ... Nikala gaya.”***

The rigid dietary codes of ashrams, grounded in spiritual purity, for laboring or street-experienced bodies sattvic diets is not preferred by him. Thus, food becomes a reason for his exclusion.

Theme 3: Dignity Amid Deprivation

In the sacred geography of Vrindavan, where devotion saturates the air and Krishna's name echoes through alleys, material deprivation coexists with spiritual dignity. Among those who inhabit the fringes, women sleeping under temple verandas, elderly widows beside Tulsi plants, and men seeking shade under peepal trees, streets etc. Basic needs like sanitation and healthcare are often unmet, riverbanks and temple backyards become makeshift toilets, clean water is a daily uncertainty, as for medicine, many rely on monthly camps organized by temple trusts or spontaneous acts of kindness from pilgrims and local donors. A persistent lack of institutional support leaves bodies exposed and vulnerable. A male respondent of 64 years old:

"Umar ho gayi hai, (I have grown old) pair dard karte hain (My legs pain a lot). Kabhi dawai milti hai, kabhi nahi. (Availability of medicine is uncertain). Temple ke koi bhakt kabhi kuch de jaye toh theek, warna main bas bhajan karta hoon (Perform devotional songs). Sharir kamzor hai par man nahi (I am only weak physically). Main apne swabhimaan (still live with dignity) ke saath jeeta hoon."

In a religious or cultural context, this phrase implies that offerings (like food, flowers, money, or other items) made by devotees at a temple are considered appropriate and part of devotional practice. In Hinduism, such offerings (*prasad*, donations, or gifts) are seen as acts of faith and devotion to the deity. Accepting them is generally viewed as a blessing, provided the intent is pure and aligns with the temple's customs. However, ethical considerations may apply depending on the nature of the offering and local norms. This reflects a clear separation between physical decay and inner strength. His body may struggle, but his sense of dignity is tied to devotion and mental resilience, not dependence.

And yet, within this ecosystem, a powerful form of **dignity endures**. People aren't merely passive victims of neglect. Their faith is active labour constructing meaning from suffering, weaving dignity into daily survival, and holding onto the belief that divine proximity compensates for material absence.

Theme 4: The Spiritual Economy of Survival

For Homeless people in Vrindavan, survival is often negotiated not through formal employment or institutional support, but through participation in what can be called a spiritual economy, an ecosystem where faith itself becomes labour, and devotion becomes currency.

"I sing hymns (chant mantras) from morning. Some people drop money, some give prasad. That's how my day goes." (a 62-year-old woman) In addition to expressing their devotion for Krishna, the 62-year-old woman's daily rhythm, steeped in devotion, embodies a life harmonized with Hindu spiritual traditions. From dawn, her day unfolds with the chanting of hymns and mantras, a practice rooted in the Bhakti movement's emphasis on *kirtan* (**devotional singing**) as a means of divine communion. As she engages in this sacred ritual, devotees visiting the temple offer *prasad* sanctified food symbolizing the deity's grace and monetary donations, often regarded as *dakshina*, (**a gesture of respect and support**). These offerings not only sustain her materially but also reflect the symbiotic relationship between spiritual practitioners and devotees, where faith and sustenance intertwine. Her role transcends personal worship; it becomes an act of *seva* (**selfless service**), nurturing the temple's sacred ecosystem. In spaces like Vrindavan, such routines are woven into the cultural fabric, where chanting mantras, accepting *prasad*, and receiving alms are not mere daily tasks but expressions of a living tradition that bridges the divine and the mundane, sustaining both individual devotion and collective spirituality. In the hopes that their *seva* may inspire goodwill among temple-goers or earn them a portion of the communal *prasad*. Men sweep the temple floors or distribute Tulsi leaves without having a formal job.

Many people consider it an act of both worship and survival to simply keep up a visible display of piety, such as folded hands, a silent chant, or a sandal paste-marked forehead. *"Main har din mandir ke aangan (court yard of temple) mein jhaadu lagata hoon (sweep floors). Mujhe koi naukri nahi di gayi hai (I don't work here), lekin log dekh ke chai ya nashta de jaate hain (I am offered tea or prasaad). Mandir saaf rehta hai, aur mera pet bhi bhar jaata hai. Isko main seva maanta hoon..."* (A 40-year-old male). This humble account reveals a profound interplay of devotion, community, and sustenance in Hindu spiritual life. Sweeping the temple courtyard, though seemingly mundane, is deeply symbolic in Hindu tradition, where physical labor for sacred spaces is revered as *karma yoga* (selfless action). The act of cleaning the temple is not just a chore but a form of worship, aligning with the belief that maintaining the deity's abode is a devotional offering. The absence of formal employment underscores the informal yet sacred economy of faith: devotees reciprocate the labourer's sincerity with small offerings (**prasad or tea**), ensuring mutual sustenance.

This dynamic reflects the Bhakti ethos, where service (*seva*) transcends transactional relationships, becoming a spiritual exchange. In places like Vrindavan or Mathura, such individuals embody the living tradition of *seva*, where devotion is not confined to rituals but extends to acts of care that nourish both the sacred space and the self. Their "**payment**" is not wages but a shared affirmation of faith. The simple act of sweeping becomes a mutual exchange between sacred service and subsistence. He performs *seva* without formal recognition, but the temple community acknowledges his presence through offerings, creating an unspoken spiritual contract.

Theme 5: Aspirations for Inclusion and Care

Many people who seek refuge in temple courtyards have silent aspirations for areas that provide dignity and a sense of belonging that go beyond their immediate necessities. Many people express a wish for homes where spirituality and humanity can live without judgment, while others have become wary of institutional care because of its stringent regulations, caste bias, or transactional orientation.

"Main raste (take shelter in streets) pe so leta hoon, koi dikkat nahi...(Silence). Par kabhi kabhi sochta hoon (sometimes I wish) kya hum jaise logon ke liye bhi ghar ho sakta hai? (if people like us also have a place to belong)"

This quiet lament echoes the struggles of countless individuals who navigate life's margins, their existence intertwined with resilience and unspoken longing. Sweeping temple courtyards as *seva* (selfless service) reflects a dignity rooted in faith, yet the harsh reality of homelessness lingers beneath the surface. Instead of charity, they want care without control, a place where they are viewed as individuals, rather than as burdens or spiritual endeavours. The words **"koi dikkat nahi"** reveals a duality, acceptance of life's hardships and a flicker of hope for belonging. They yearn for a place to chant, a place to rest, and a listener. The lack of this care is frequently shown through bhajans, silences, and day-to-day survival, wrapped in surrender and soft-spoken love rather than with anger.

Homeless people living outside temples often endure harsh and precarious conditions, they often lack access to basic necessities such as clean water, sanitary facilities, and safe housing. shows a glimpse of the daily living conditions of homeless people dwelling outside the temples of Vrindavan.

Theme 6: Economic crises, displacement and Divine Refuge

This theme captures both the **material dislocation** (displacement, abandonment, illness) and the **spiritual turn** that often underpins people's decision to take shelter near temples.

An interview with a 58-year-old male respondent outside Banke Bihari Temple says:

"Pariwarr ke sath lucknow me rheta tha (lived in Lucknow with my family), chotimoti chizon se kush rheta tha (find joy in simple moments). Jaha kaam krta tha... dubh gya (company I worked for went bankrupt), uske badh sab badal gya (everything changed) eviction notice arrived, rishtedar ke ghar mein panah (found temporary refuge in a relative's home) mila kuch din ke liye ... fir waha se vi nikal diya gya (Eventually forced to leave). Sardkon pe kuch din bhatakne ke badh, (seeking shelter) anth me bhagwaan k darbaar pe aaye (finally, outside a large temple)."

45-year-old women shares her experience and how she ended outside the temple as homeless:

"Main ek chhote gaon se Vrindavan aayi thi, ghar chhod kar (I came to Vrindavan from a small village), mera paati mughr bohot marta tha (left home to escape an abusive marriage) ... Pehle main ek ghar ka kaam karne waali bai ki naukri karne lagi (found employment as a housemaid)... woh job jyada din nahi chali (job was short-lived)... Jis pariwaar ke liye kaam karti thi, woh doosre sheher chale gaye, aur mujhe paise ya rehne ki jagah ke bina chhod diya. (The family I worked for relocated, leaving me without income or a place to stay) ... ISKON mandhir ke pas rhene lagi (outside the ISKCON Temple), yaha khana mil jata hai (free meals) ..."

while giving room to explore the **social causes of homelessness** and how people reframe their condition through faith.

Key themes related to Homelessness and Spiritual life in Vrindavan: A Word Cloud Analysis

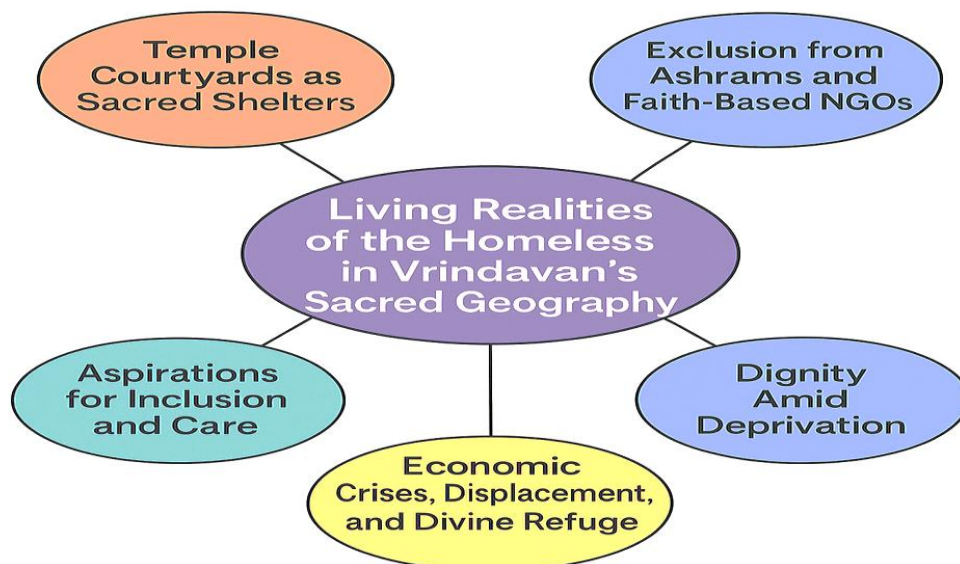
The figure presented is a word cloud that visually represents the most frequently occurring terms associated with homelessness and spiritual life in Vrindavan, India. Word clouds are a useful tool for summarizing large amounts of textual data, highlighting the most prominent themes based on word frequency. In this particular word cloud, larger words indicate higher frequency or importance within the analysed text, while smaller words appear less often. Prominent among the terms are "Vrindavan," "homeless," "people," "homelessness," and "their," suggesting that the central focus is on homeless individuals living in Vrindavan. Other significant words such as "spiritual," "temples," "health," "devotion," and "ashrams" point to the religious and social context in which homelessness is experienced in this holy city.

Vrindavan, a major pilgrimage site associated with Lord Krishna, draws individuals from across India, many of whom seek spiritual salvation and refuge but often find themselves living without stable housing. The word cloud also features terms like "widows," "shelter," "support," "poverty," "service," and "safety," indicating discussions around the vulnerabilities faced by homeless populations, including lack of basic services, emotional and physical hardships, and the role of religious institutions in providing support. References to sacred texts like the "Bhagavad Gita" and practices of "devotion" further emphasize the intertwining of spirituality and survival in this setting.

The presence of words such as "individuals," "outside," "social," and "study" suggests a broader academic interest in the structural and social issues that lead to homelessness in Vrindavan, beyond purely religious factors. Overall, the word cloud effectively captures the multifaceted nature of homelessness in Vrindavan, intertwining spiritual aspirations with social and health challenges. It serves as a snapshot of key themes that researchers and policymakers must consider when addressing the needs of these vulnerable groups in sacred urban spaces.

Main realities of homelessness in the holy Geography of Vrindavan

Figure 3: Living Realities of the Homeless in Vrindavan's Sacred Geography



Strengths and limitations

This study's primary strength lies in its narrative-based, qualitative approach, which allowed for a deep engagement with the lived experiences of individuals who find shelter in the courtyards and surrounding spaces of temples in Vrindavan. Structured surveys for demographic understanding, and informal in-depth interviews that captures the emotional and spiritual dimensions of homelessness that are often lost in quantitative data. The study offers a context-specific lens, grounded in the unique religious and cultural landscape of Vrindavan, where survival is deeply entangled with spiritual expression. The use of theme-based analysis such as dignity amid deprivation, the spiritual economy of survival, and aspirations for inclusion helped bring clarity and coherence to the complex realities encountered in the field. Furthermore, the research was conducted with ethical sensitivity, allowing participants to share at their own pace and comfort level, especially in settings marked by trauma, abandonment, and spiritual longing.

However, there are also key limitations. As a localized, qualitative inquiry, the findings are not generalizable to broader homeless populations across India. The narratives reflect the specificity of Vrindavan's socio-spiritual context and may not translate to other geographies. Participation was also selective—many individuals were hesitant to engage in formal interviews or group discussions, which may have resulted in the underrepresentation of those who are more withdrawn or vulnerable. Language presented another challenge: while most interviews were conducted in Hindi or Hinglish, the act of translation into English may have led to the loss of subtle emotional or cultural nuances. Lastly, due to ethical and spatial boundaries especially around nighttime routines or temple interiors certain aspects of daily survival could only be observed from a respectful distance, limiting access to some of the more private dimensions of life in sacred shelter.

Conclusion:

Homeless individuals particularly those who seek refuge outside temples in holy cities such as Vrindavan, serves as a sobering reminder of the socioeconomic and systemic issues that many people confront. Their stories, characterized by resilience and hope, highlight the critical need for comprehensive support systems. Thus, the area has witnessed the culture contact and fast pace of westernization, urbanization and modernization. A centre where the great tradition and little tradition assimilate with each other, the integration of the great tradition (formal, classical religious rituals and writings) with the little tradition (localized, folk, or popular religious practices) in Vrindavan is an intriguing illustration of how religious life thrives at the confluence of universal and localized aspects. Vrindavan, a significant hub of Krishna devotion (bhakti), demonstrates how two traditions can be blended through shared spaces, practices, and tales that appeal to both scholarly theology and popular devotion.

Although there are availability of ashrams and NGOs, however, several specific rules, norms, and religious principles followed by these institutions may limit their feasibility as shelters for the broader homeless population. Many ashrams admit only those who demonstrate a genuine commitment to spiritual practices, some ashrams have strict rules about admitting individuals of certain caste, gender and community. Ashrams often require residents to adhere to strict schedules of prayer, meditation, yoga, and other spiritual practices. Homeless individuals who are not accustomed to or inclined toward such a disciplined lifestyle may find it difficult to adapt. Many ashrams enforce vegetarian or sattvic diets as part of their spiritual ethos. Individuals unfamiliar with or unable to follow these dietary rules may feel excluded. Ashrams prioritize serving pilgrims, spiritual aspirants, and monks. Local NGOs and charity organizations also provide some help, but more comprehensive assistance is required.

Given the constraints of ashrams, there is an urgent need for specific shelter homes or inclusive housing facilities in Vrindavan to assist the homeless. These refuges must prioritize humanitarian needs without imposing religious or philosophical requirements. The main concepts of Hindu philosophy, such as seva (selfless service) and karuna (compassion), encourage for the protection of the disadvantaged. Creating inclusive shelters represents the fundamental core of Krishna's teachings of love, care, and acceptance, combining humanitarian activities with the spiritual ethos of Vrindavan. Addressing homelessness in Vrindavan demands a coordinated strategy that combines spiritual teachings with practical social action. By accepting Krishna's message of selfless service, the community may endeavour to ensure that everyone in Vrindavan finds both spiritual and physical refuge in God's shelter.

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