

Exploring Vrindavan through Krishna

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Abstract

India is a land brimming with diverse cultures and historical places. Bhakti and devotion bear an important place within the Indian culture. Myths and mythology have been passed orally from one generation to another. Vrindavan is also one of such places which is surrounded by myth and mythology. Vrindavan has emerged as a place of popular pilgrimage and devotion in the recent centuries which has caused an increase in the circulation of myths related to this place. Krishna is deeply associated with Vrindavan and has thus become synonymous with the town. The current paper focuses on these myths which have prevailed in and around Vrindavan and Krishna for centuries and how new myths are being created in order to cater to the demands of the contemporary era. The paper also explores the role of Krishna in the development and decline of Vrindavan as a cultural and bhakti capital. The paper aims to explore the prevalent myths which have been acclimatized over time around Vrindavan and Krishna and how this has led to the popularisation of Vrindavan as a mythical and miraculous place.

Keywords: Myth, Reality, Vrindavan, Krishna, Radha

INTRODUCTION

Myth as Baumgartner (1974, p.195) and others define in “Myth and Mythology” is “a story, narrative, of the gods and spirits, whether in heaven or on earth, or in the nether world.” They also add that the word myth “it is a word charged with power” and therefore they can have a deep impact on the masses (Baumgartner, 1974, p.195). The popular places of pilgrimage like Vrindavan, Kashi, Salasar, etc. are full of such stories or myths about the god and goddess. These deities are supposed to be powerful deities that can grant miracles to the devotees who visit them with devotion in their hearts. Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh has now become one such place which is famous for the miraculous deity who promises to fulfil the wishes of the devotees. Vrindavan has slowly become a global hub that caters to visitors from all over the world. Krishna lies at the centre of Vrindavan and thus becomes the central force for attracting visitors.

The Bhakti movement, which started in the southern region of the country in the sixth century, disseminated across the nation. The definitions of bhakti and devotion began to transform, as antiquated rituals were supplanted by contemporary ones. Bhakti evolved as a vehicle of expression, adapting to the changing times. The essence of the movement was that bhakti lacks a definitive structure, allowing each individual to engage in its practice uniquely. The utilisation of vernacular language significantly contributed to its extensive dissemination. The veneration of a personal deity was a novel notion that arose throughout this movement. New deities arose, and manifestations of Vishnu were extensively venerated. A multitude of grand temples were constructed, serving as tangible evidence.

Vrindavan became a popular attraction earlier as being the birthplace of Krishna where he spent his childhood. But now the increasing popularity is also due to the miracles and oral narratives that surround Krishna and Vrindavan. An increase in the number of Vaishnavite devotees has also led to the popularization of Krishna. Krishna being an incarnation of Vishnu is highly popular throughout the country and receives much larger public throughout the year. Various stories regarding the appearance and *darshan*¹ (sighting) of the child Krishna can be heard by the locals and visitors. The visitors are driven by this myth that if one visits Vrindavan they can easily have a *darshan* of the deity and will be liberated from this world and the other and will attain eternal peace. Such myths are prevalent in every pilgrimage place which become a catalyst in inviting people to visit

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the place again and again. Vrindavan's Krishna is not only famous for the miracle-granting powers but also for his ability to grant *moksha*².

Vrindavan is seen as an abode of the celestial couple, Radha and Krishna. The place has emerged as a popular pilgrimage place where millions of visitors reach to fulfill their spiritual quests, for meditation, leisure purposes, and some just to satiate their curiosity regarding this utopian land. Vrindavan has now become hugely populated and there are a lot of immigrants who have shifted here to support their livelihood. On visiting the place and while having conversation with the locals and the immigrants it was found that as the popularity has increased the means of income have also increased in Vrindavan. One can also find a lot of widows and beggars within Vrindavan who are also dependent on the mercy and donation of incoming visitors.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper takes into consideration the Theory of Identity and the Global Social Theory by Stuart Hall. Hall says, through his Theory of Identity, that identity does not have a fixed form, it is fluid, dynamic and socially constructed. He says that identity is affected by the people we live around and the culture which they follow. Through this social interaction, our idea of identity takes shape. Other influencing factors are media and language. Media plays a vital role in influencing the ideas we follow; different media representations impact our minds differently. Hall, a prominent cultural theorist explored how globalization impacts local cultures and identities. This shows that identities are not fixed but fluid and dynamic that change their form when interacting with different cultures, either locally or globally.

As the paper talks about the relationship Vrindavan and Krishna share, it is important to understand the sort of identity they bear alone and with relation to each other. With the influx of more and more people locally and globally the culture and identity of Vrindavan keeps changing. The Vrindavan of today has moulded itself in order to accommodate the incoming population.

VRINDAVAN AND KRISHNA

Vrindavan is a town located in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. The town is closely associated with Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu. It can be said that the association of Krishna with the land of Vrindavan has led to an increase in the number of people visiting Vrindavan. *Srimad Bhagavatam*³ describes the town as a utopian land where Krishna used to live in his childhood days. But the reality of Vrindavan is different now; the land has now become a dystopia as there is no natural beauty left in the place and it has been commercialized. F.S. Growse (1998) in his *Mathura: A district memoir* discusses the ruined state of Vrindavan. He says: "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 unfavourable 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, 1998, p.71-72). The conditions of Vrindavan did not improve till after the independence of the country. Meera Nanda (2009) in *The God Market* also discusses the boom in construction of temples in India after independence. Nanda (2009) says, it 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, p. 63). She also talks about the inclination of middle class towards pilgrimage and related activities which has led to the new emerging popular pilgrimage culture. Vrindavan is not an ordinary town anymore; it has become a spiritual and cultural hub. On visiting Vrindavan one can find that still the town moves around Krishna and is dependent on Krishna for its survival and growth. The local residents of the town feel and revere the town in the same manner as they feel about their god Krishna and for them Vrindavan is Krishna itself and this myth is what is leading the masses from faraway places to come to Vrindavan.

Krishna himself has been very popular in Indian mythology. Krishna is considered one of the twelve *avatars* (incarnations) of Vishnu. Krishna is a dark-skinned cow herd who later becomes the king of the Yadu clan. Krishna's roles have been diverse and in various parts of India he is worshipped in different forms like in Braj area of Uttar Pradesh (Vrindavan is a part of this) he is worshipped as *Bal Krishna* (in the form of a child); he is

Vithal in Maharashtra; in Gujrat he is worshipped as *Dwarkadheesh*, a mighty King; he is *Guruvayurappan* in Kerala; and in Tamil Nadu. In the contemporary times, Krishna has become one of the most celebrated and popular gods in India. The first mention of Krishna can be found in Rig Veda, the word literally refers to a dark skinned one in Sanskrit. The current image of Krishna which is incorporated in the minds of the masses is however of a fair coloured one which is circulated through the modern interpretation of the mythological texts such as *Srimad Bhagavatam*, *The Mahabharata*, where Krishna is shown as a fair man, who is revered by all the characters of these texts.

The myths tend to change themselves over a period of time. New myths are added to the previous existing myths according to the cultural, ideological and political changes during a particular time period. The myth of Krishna is also believed to be created in this way. There may be a possibility that the Krishna who has been referred to in the mythological texts is not just one Krishna but different interpretations who have been merged into one to create an appealing portrait to have a desired effect on the masses. Myths, as discussed, are oral stories that get circulated in a region and when they reach a different region they get acclimatised according to the cultural interpretation in that region. For example, in the northern part, it is believed that Radha is the eternal consort of Krishna and she is worshipped alongside him in mostly every temple dedicated to Krishna; on the other hand, in the southern India, Radha is not the companion of Krishna but she is his *Nappinai*. *Nappinai* refers to cousin in Tamil, thus it can be derived that because it was a tradition to get married to a cousin in Tamil Nadu, the story thus changes and so does Krishna's partner. It is also interesting to note that the mythological texts nowhere mention the name of Radha but in the contemporary world Radha has become an important part of Krishna's worship. Thus, one can say that over time the myth of Radha might have been introduced into Krishna's myth to make it firmer. Radha, some historians like Kosambi mention, was a mother goddess and thus her myth has been amalgamated into Krishna's, making her an ordinary character and elevating the status of Krishna to a significant level.

Apart from Krishna and Radha, Vrindavan, the land where they spent their childhood is also of great significance. The land of Vrindavan is widely known today and has now become a global hub for the devotees of Krishna. Vrindavan derives its present value and status from the myths associated with it. It is considered a land where Krishna resides forever and a true devotee can find him anywhere in the streets of Vrindavan. The land of Vrindavan as described in the mythological texts is a beautiful land surrounded with luscious forests and clear water flowing the river. The land is shown as a beautiful utopia one can imagine but the present state of Vrindavan is far more removed from the representations in the mythological texts. The myth of a utopian land does not exist anymore in the current Vrindavan. However, the amount of people visiting Vrindavan is increasing continuously, therefore, it can be deduced that the myth of Krishna is far more overpowering than the land of Vrindavan which can aptly justify the current degraded state of Vrindavan and the surrounding areas.

Another myth which surrounds Krishna and the land of Vrindavan is the myth of *Nidhivan*⁴. *Nidhivan* is a forest area in Vrindavan where Krishna performs *Raaslila* (cosmic dance) with the *gopis* and Radha. It is believed that Krishna visits the place daily along with Radha and the trees turn into *gopis*⁵ at night. In conversation with the priests and tour guides, it was found that they are very insistent on this daily dance that Krishna performs and claim it as a fact. The temple inside *Nidhivan* has bed and other necessary objects for the celestial couple to rest at night. The priests constantly ask for donations for the ritual offerings to the couple and give blessings in return. In conversation with the shopkeepers and locals, it was found that no one is allowed to enter the premises of *Nidhivan* after sunset and if someone does try to enter and look at the cosmic dance it is believed that the person either goes mad or dies.

Another prevalent myth in Vrindavan is that one can find Krishna there. If a devotee truly wishes to find Krishna, the saints say Krishna comes to meet their devotees in one form or another. Taking care of cows and feeding them also is considered important as Krishna used to tend to cows when he lived in Vrindavan. Circumambulation around Vrindavan is also considered an important step in moving closer to Krishna. One can find herds of people moving around Vrindavan chanting Radha and Krishna's names. Vrindavan is a town filled with many temples, the three famous temples are Bankey Bihari temple, Krishna Balaram (ISKCON)

temple and Prem Mandir. The three temples signify the development of Vrindavan at various periods. Bankey Bihari is the oldest temple, whereas the latter ones are more modern. Prem Mandir is the most modern and huge temple in Vrindavan which attracts visitors as it contains different pictures of little Krishna's pastimes on the temple walls. The temple uses modern technology to play a light show on water fountain.

The one prevalent form of Krishna which is worshipped in Vrindavan is the child form of Vrindavan and one can find idols of child Krishna in almost every temple in Vrindavan. The market of Vrindavan is also filled with the idols of child Krishna and related clothes and accessories for the child Krishna. Every person in Vrindavan claims to have some kind of interaction with Krishna in one form or another. A few of these stories are compiled in *The Miracles of Bankey Bihari* by Acharya Vilas Chandra Goswami (2017). The compilation contains stories of the devotees' encounter with Krishna in a miraculous way. The present situation of Vrindavan or its reality is much influenced by the myths. The economy of Vrindavan solely depends on these myths and people visiting Vrindavan think of these myths as the reality of Vrindavan. The town of Vrindavan has lost its identity as a normal town and is amalgamated into the identity of Krishna. The place has become a popular pilgrimage as well as a tourist destination. People visit Vrindavan not only for pilgrimage purposes but for tourism, cultural, yogic as well as to gain knowledge and to quench their spiritual thirst. The Krishna of Vrindavan is seen as a miraculous form of Vishnu which grants boon easily. The priests say that after Covid-19 the number of people visiting has increased as their faith has grown stronger in the powers of the Krishna of Vrindavan.

The faith and devotion, however, are taking a toll on Vrindavan. The local culture and flavour of the town is being overshadowed by the outside culture and traditions brought by the visitors. The flow of economy in Vrindavan has also led to the degradation of land and an increase in the number of scams in Vrindavan. Every inch of Vrindavan is now put into the stock market and the so-called pious land of Krishna is now sold and bought at the mercy of power holders and not the locals. The mass immigration of people into Vrindavan has also become a cause of concern. The town still lacks basic necessities like hygiene and sanitation. The sewers lie open in the town and are connected to the river Yamuna because of which the river is severely polluted. The case of stampede has also increased in several temples. Also, the behaviour of monkeys in the town is a cause of concern due to the shrinking of their natural habitat. Although being highly revered by devotees, the town of Vrindavan seems to have suffered due to its myths and cultural history. The myths and traditions related to Krishna and Vrindavan have been exploited in order to gain donations. The priests enjoy a high position and organise rituals for parties giving huge donations and provide the luxury of easy access to the idol whereas the common masses have to stand far away from the idol and are pushed outside without proper sighting of the idol.

Nature and natural beauty were once considered as the characteristic features of Vrindavan. many scholars such as Mukul Sharma (2010) have talked about the role of an environmentalist as played by Krishna during his time in Vrindavan. Krishna is seen as a devotee of nature as he loved to live among the cows and in the forests. He is also considered synonymous with the *Govardhana*⁶ mountain, who is treated as a local deity supporting flora and fauna of the surrounding area. The Vrindavan of the past as described in the Harivamsha Purana is shown as:

a charming forest on the bank of Yamuna abounding in profuse grass, endued 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).

But the reality is very different from what is quoted in the puranas. The Centre for Science and Environment (2019) has highlighted the unhygienic side of Vrindavan, where drains flow openly and are released into the river Yamuna. Yamuna river is considered as a sacred river but still it is polluted by its own devotees on a regular basis. No proper arrangements have been made by the authorities to improve the condition of flora and fauna in the Braj region.

CONCLUSION

Vrindavan has now become an international hub of culture and devotion. Devotees from abroad not only visit the place but settle here permanently in the Braj region. The relevance of living in the Braj region is also constantly highlighted by the *Kathakars*⁷, who claim Vrindavan to be more revered than heaven and that living in Vrindavan thus guarantees *moksha*. Vrindavan's narrow streets are filled with the myths and stories of little Krishna and the locals seem overjoyed about the emerging Krishna trend as it is taking Vrindavan to a global level and providing better opportunities to the people of Vrindavan. However, the irony is that the locals are now reserved to the particular areas and most of the Vrindavan is covered with temples and *ashrams* that cater to the needs of the visiting pilgrims.

Vrindavan has become a place for popular pilgrimage and devotion. Krishna has played an active role in taking Vrindavan to a global scale. The emergence of different *gurus* (spiritual teachers) and *ashrams* has led to a tremendous increase in the number of people visiting Vrindavan. The cultural and bhakti capital has now reduced to a tourist place where people visit for leisure purposes. The ease of transport and rise in economy have also had negative impacts on the native culture and tradition of Vrindavan. It is becoming more and more difficult today to find the natives of Vrindavan in the crowd of millions visiting Vrindavan. Although, one claims to be a devotee of Krishna as the reason for their visit to Vrindavan but the visitors are mostly unaware of the rich history and culture of Vrindavan. The visitors do not care for the depleting culture and alarming conditions of the town but focus only on themselves and their comfort. Huge restaurants and cafeterias have opened recently in Vrindavan and the purpose of pilgrimage is being blurred by the markets surrounding the area and the temples.

The land of Vrindavan is now covered in concrete and is wholly commercialized to attract more visitors and to provide them with the luxury of tourism along with pilgrimage. This has become the sad reality of every other popular pilgrimage place now-a-days. The area of Vrindavan and the surrounding Braj region has now become more of a tourist spot than a pilgrimage place. Krishna who sustains the place according to the myths has now also become its enemy. It appears that Krishna's image and appeal as an environmentalist is not enough to save the natural beauty and habitat of the place. The influx of more and more visitors and migrators to Vrindavan has caused an increase in the population, pollution and disturbance in its natural harmony. The emerging middle classes are also playing a major role in this degradation. The place has become more of a market where everyone wants to earn more whether it is the locals, temple priests or the visitors who want as much blessing from the lord as possible so that they can get what they desire.

ENDNOTES

Sighting or viewing of the deity in a temple or sacred place.

The state of ultimate liberation from worldly desires.

Scripture describing the life of Krishna.

It is a garden area inside Vrindavan, where the celestial couple Radha and Krishna are supposed to reside.

The friends of Krishna and the cowherd women of Braj region.

The local mountain deity.

The spiritual gurus who recite various scriptures to a gathering of devotees.

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