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# BETWEEN FAITH, FAMILY AND ABANDONMENT

## A Qualitative Sociological Study of Elderly Life in Mathura–Vrindavan

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**ABSTRACT**

Ageing is not merely a biological process but a socially situated experience shaped by family structures, cultural expectations, economic circumstances, religious beliefs and institutional arrangements. Mathura–Vrindavan, a region of considerable religious and cultural significance, offers an important sociological setting for examining the experiences of elderly individuals living in old-age homes, ashrams and other institutional spaces. Older people may come to the region for varied reasons, including religious devotion, widowhood, family separation, economic insecurity and the search for social belonging.

This paper proposes a qualitative investigation into the lived experiences of elderly residents in selected institutional settings in Mathura–Vrindavan. It seeks to understand how family relationships, changing intergenerational expectations, religious identity, social exclusion and institutional dependency shape later life. Particular attention is given to elderly women and widows, whose social identities may be influenced by gender, marital status and cultural expectations. The proposed study adopts an interpretivist perspective and uses semi-structured interviews, participant observation and institutional document analysis. Thematic analysis will be used to interpret participants' accounts. The paper is a research proposal/framework; empirical findings and participant quotations must be added only after fieldwork.

**Keywords**: Ageing; old-age homes; Mathura–Vrindavan; widowhood; social exclusion; institutional care.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ageing is one of the important social transformations occurring within contemporary Indian society. Traditionally, the family has functioned as a primary institution responsible for the care, protection and emotional support of elderly individuals [1]. However, changing family structures, urbanisation, migration, economic pressures and transformations in intergenerational relationships have influenced established patterns of elderly care. The India Ageing Report 2023 also highlights the growing importance of institutional mechanisms, social protection and community-based support in responding to the needs of older persons [12].

The transition from joint to nuclear family arrangements, alongside changing employment and mobility patterns, has altered the position of older people within households. In some circumstances, elderly

individuals experience social isolation, economic dependency, reduced participation in family decisions and, in certain cases, institutionalisation. These experiences are not uniform; they vary according to gender, class, caste, marital status, health, family resources and access to social protection. Research on elder care in India further indicates that changing family arrangements, migration and urbanisation are reshaping the relationship between family-based and institutional care [10], [11].

Mathura–Vrindavan provides a distinctive setting for examining these developments. The religious significance of the region attracts older people from different geographical and socio-economic backgrounds. Vrindavan, in particular, is associated with the presence of elderly widows and religiously oriented residential settings. Some older people may seek spiritual belonging and community support, while others may arrive because of family separation, financial insecurity or limited alternatives. These circumstances should not be assumed to be identical and require careful empirical investigation. A study of elderly widows in the pilgrimage centres of Vrindavan and Varanasi documents the varied living conditions and infrastructural realities within institutional and shelter settings [8].

Religious institutions and ashrams may provide accommodation, food, opportunities for worship and social interaction. At the same time, institutional residents may encounter dependency, limited autonomy, loneliness or social marginalisation. The sociological significance of the region therefore extends beyond religious tourism: it offers an opportunity to examine how religion, family, gender, economic conditions and institutional structures influence everyday life in old age. These concerns are consistent with broader discussions of healthy ageing, dignity, social participation and access to supportive environments [12], [13].

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1 Ageing and Social Transformation

Cowgill and Holmes [2] examined the relationship between modernisation and the changing social status of older people. Their work offers a framework for considering how changes in economic organisation, occupational roles and family arrangements may affect the position of elderly individuals. Phillipson [3] similarly situated ageing within wider social structures and argued for attention to the social and institutional contexts in which later life is experienced. Contemporary demographic evidence also shows that population ageing in India requires attention to social security, health access and the availability of institutional and community support [12].

### 2.2 Family Structure and Elderly Care

The family remains an important institution in the organisation of elderly care in India, although the nature of family responsibility is changing. Lamb [4], through ethnographic research in India, explored cultural meanings of ageing, family relationships and expectations surrounding elderly care. Her work demonstrates that ageing cannot be understood independently of kinship, cultural values and everyday social relationships. Lamb's later ethnographic analysis also discusses changing moral expectations around care, dependence and the growing presence of old-age homes in India [9].

### 2.3 Widowhood and Gendered Ageing

Widowhood may alter women's access to resources, household authority, social participation and personal identity. Chen [5] examined widowhood in India with attention to gender relations, social support and economic vulnerability. This scholarship provides a useful foundation for investigating how widowhood intersects with age, class, family circumstances and religious life in Vrindavan. Research on older women in formal care homes in India identifies widowhood, childlessness and limited social networks as factors associated with relocation and later-life vulnerability [11]. Kumar and Bhakat [14] also discuss the relationship between ageing, social networks and gender-based disparities in India.

### 2.4 Religion and Institutional Living

Religion can shape social identity, community participation and the meanings attached to later life. Religious institutions may provide spiritual engagement, routine and opportunities for social connection. However, religious affiliation alone does not necessarily resolve material insecurity or social exclusion. The relationship between religious institutions and elderly welfare must therefore be examined through residents' accounts and the actual practices of institutions. The significance of institutional care in India has also been examined in relation to family preferences, cultural expectations and the changing organisation of care [10].

### 2.5 Social Exclusion and Institutionalisation

Goffman [6] examined institutional life and the ways institutional arrangements may shape individual autonomy, identity and social relationships. His work provides a conceptual lens for examining institutional authority, routines and dependency. It should be applied critically, since different old-age homes and ashrams may vary substantially in their rules, resources and relationships with residents. Evidence from Vrindavan and Varanasi further demonstrates why the quality of shelter, available facilities and residents' own assessments of care need to be considered [8]. Recent qualitative work on older women's lives in India also highlights the importance of examining care, social participation and everyday experiences beyond the institutional setting [15].

## 3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To explore the socio-cultural backgrounds and lived experiences of elderly residents in selected old-age homes and ashrams in Mathura–Vrindavan.
- To understand how family structures, intergenerational relationships, widowhood and economic circumstances shape elderly people's pathways into institutional living.
- To examine the role of religious institutions and religious participation in providing social support, belonging and everyday security.
- To explore how institutional arrangements influence residents' autonomy, dignity, participation and everyday routines.
- To understand elderly residents' experiences of loneliness, social exclusion, dependency, social relationships and identity in later life.

## 4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do elderly residents describe their lived experiences of residing in old-age homes and ashrams in Mathura–Vrindavan?
- How do family structures, intergenerational relationships, widowhood and economic circumstances influence pathways into institutional living?
- How do religious institutions and religious participation shape residents' experiences of social support, belonging and identity?
- How do institutional routines and care arrangements influence residents' autonomy, dignity and participation?
- How do elderly residents experience and negotiate loneliness, social exclusion, dependency and social relationships in later life?

## 5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 5.1 Modernisation Perspective

The work of Cowgill and Holmes [2] provides a framework for considering how modernisation, changing occupational structures and transformations in family arrangements may influence the status of older people. This perspective will help examine changing patterns of family responsibility and elderly care without assuming that all families or communities experience these changes in the same way.

### 5.2 Goffman's Institutional Perspective

Goffman's (1961) analysis of institutional life offers concepts for examining institutional authority, personal autonomy, routines and social identity. The study will investigate whether institutional environments support residents' independence and participation or create additional forms of dependency.

## 6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 6.1 Research Design

The study will employ a qualitative, exploratory and interpretivist design. A phenomenological orientation will guide the exploration of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to family relationships, institutional residence, religious practices and everyday challenges.

### 6.2 Study Area

The proposed fieldwork will be conducted in selected old-age homes, ashrams and elderly-care institutions in Mathura and Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh. Institutions will be selected on the basis of relevance to the research questions, feasibility of access and willingness to facilitate ethical research.

### 6.3 Sampling Technique and Participants

Purposive sampling will be used to identify participants with relevant experiences. A tentative sample may include approximately 25–30 elderly residents aged 60 years and above and 10–12 caregivers, institutional administrators, social workers or other relevant stakeholders. The final sample should be guided by the diversity of experiences, access and the depth and adequacy of the data, rather than treating a fixed number as a guarantee of saturation.

### 6.4 Methods of Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews will explore participants' family histories, pathways into institutional living, social relationships, religious practices, financial circumstances, experiences of care and perceptions of dignity. Participant observation, where permission is granted, will focus on everyday routines, social interactions, religious activities and opportunities for residents' participation. Institutional documents, publicly available welfare reports and relevant policy documents may also be reviewed to understand the wider context.

### 6.5 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and field notes will be analysed using thematic analysis, following the broad phases described by Braun and Clarke [7]: familiarisation with the data; initial coding; development of candidate themes; review of themes; definition and naming of themes; and preparation of the analytical account. The analysis should remain grounded in participants' accounts, with attention to differences and contradictory experiences. Reflexive notes will be maintained to document the researcher's assumptions and interpretive decisions.

## 7. PROPOSED ANALYTICAL THEMES

These are sensitising concepts to guide fieldwork and analysis; they are not empirical findings. Final themes must be developed from the collected data.

**Table 1. Proposed Analytical Themes and Sociological Dimensions**

| Proposed theme | Sociological dimension |
|---|---|
| Family separation and changing kinship | Intergenerational relations, family responsibility and social change |
| Widowhood and identity | Gender, patriarchy, marital status and social position |
| Religion and belonging | Faith, community participation and social identity |
| Institutional dependency | Authority, autonomy, care practices and welfare |
| Loneliness and exclusion | Social isolation, marginalisation and access to support |
| Dignity in later life | Agency, identity, participation and everyday negotiation |

## 8. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study will follow accepted ethical principles for social research. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants in a language they understand. Participation will be voluntary, and participants may decline to answer any question or withdraw without penalty. Pseudonyms or participant codes will be used in transcripts and publications, and identifying information will be stored securely. Interviews concerning family separation, bereavement or other sensitive experiences will be conducted with care; participants will not be pressured to disclose distressing information. Permission will be obtained from institutional authorities for access and observation, while individual consent will remain necessary. The researcher will avoid treating institutional residence as proof of abandonment and will represent participants' accounts with context and respect.

## 9. SOCIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The proposed study may contribute to the sociology of ageing by connecting individual narratives with broader social structures. It can offer insights into transformations in family responsibilities, gendered experiences of ageing and widowhood, the role of religious institutions in elderly welfare, and the relationship between social exclusion, institutional dependency and dignity. The findings may be relevant to social workers, policymakers, non-governmental organisations and institutions involved in elderly care. The study may also help distinguish between religiously motivated residence, family-related circumstances and other pathways into institutional living.

## 10. CONCLUSION

Ageing in Mathura–Vrindavan should be understood within its wider socio-cultural and institutional context. Religious traditions, family relationships, gender expectations and economic circumstances may collectively influence the everyday lives of elderly residents. The region offers an important setting for investigating how religious spaces and institutional arrangements function as sites of social support, belonging and, in some circumstances, dependency or exclusion. By adopting a qualitative sociological approach, the proposed study seeks to understand elderly individuals not simply as recipients of care but as social actors with identities, memories, relationships and aspirations. Its central concern is the relationship between ageing, family transformation, religious belonging and social dignity in contemporary Indian society.

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