

**COVID-19 AND THE
CAGED BIRDS OF OUR
'HOMETOWN'**

—

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GENESIS OF THE STUDY

For countless young women across India, educational institutions have served as more than just places of learning; they have been sanctuaries of independence and self-discovery. College and university campuses provide a rare refuge where young women, whether they are students, research scholars, or budding academics, can temporarily escape the confines of their domestic responsibilities and carve out identities defined by their academic pursuits. Within these hallowed halls, they not only immerse themselves in their studies but also cultivate relationships with peers and revel in the freedom to explore and engage with their social environment on their own terms, free from the daily scrutiny of their families or in-laws. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly shattered this sanctuary, forcing young women to retreat from their educational havens and return to the confines of their homes. This seismic shift begs the question: how did the closure of educational institutions during the pandemic

impact the lives of these young women, who found themselves abruptly uprooted from their academic pursuits in the midst of their educational journeys?

In January 2020, when the news of the COVID-19 pandemic began appearing in our social media feeds, it felt more like a distant rumour—in the beginning. It was something happening in a different country and could have been a hoax for all we knew at that point in time. We were busy with our usual academic work, me rushing [through] my PhD synopsis preparations in the midst of the winter, while sitting by the heater in my hostel room in Delhi. All my batchmates were also doing the same; some were outlining the plans of the fieldwork they were to undertake in 2020, while others were already at their places of fieldwork or working hard in the archives and libraries.¹

This was the response of a PhD scholar in July 2021, when we asked her how the year 2020 had begun for her. She continued,

February was all about the Delhi riots, overshadowed by Trump's visit to India, as well as our PhD synopsis presentations, and the revisions, and finally the submission. After the synopsis submission, I was quite relieved and was planning out the states I had to visit for my fieldwork. I had spoken to my friends whose houses I was going to crash in (sic) and [had] already booked my tickets for Bombay in March to visit the state archives there. But when March actually arrived, it was a whole different scenario altogether. Universities were ordered to be shut down abruptly and we left the campuses in a hurry, hoping we would be back in a month. That turned into months, and here I am still in my house, while my research work is laying to waste in my hostel room in Delhi.²

This is not just the story of a sole woman research scholar, but lakhs of girls and women who are students and research scholars in India, who abruptly lost all access to their educational institutions after the

announcement of nationwide lockdown at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020. In this context, it becomes imperative to explore the holistic impact of the pandemic on the careers of women students and early-stage academics. The unprecedented circumstances underscore the urgency of shedding light on the multifaceted challenges faced by this demographic, from navigating remote work dynamics to balancing familial duties amidst a global crisis. This research endeavours to delve into the nuanced experiences of women academics and students, elucidating the profound implications of the pandemic on their professional trajectories and personal well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted various facets of society, including education and research. While its impact has been felt globally, its ramifications have been particularly pronounced for marginalised groups, including female students and researchers in regions such as Assam, India. This paper explores the unique challenges faced by these individuals amidst the pandemic, drawing parallels with caged birds confined to their 'hometowns'.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study primarily aims to understand the transformation of the genderscape during the COVID-19 lockdown for the women who pursued higher education. 'Genderscape' here denotes the attitudes, roles, and beliefs about gender in a culture, and the changing dynamics of the gender roles and relations of women scholars and students, in their lived spaces, during the lockdown. This research was conducted during the lockdown when the disruption of academic and social interaction was a major limitation. Mental suffering, travel restrictions, and participant concerns are some of the issues due to which this study is confined to a small group of respondents. The respondents were selected based on their connection, trust, and friendship with the researchers. Their consent, anonymity, and confidentiality

have been maintained while interpreting the narratives. The study emphasises the subjective interpretations of women scholars who experienced quarantine as hostel boarders, having moved from Assam to universities in Delhi for higher studies, as well as day scholars within Assam who travel from rural areas to urban centers to attend college. This study was initially unconsciously pursued during the lockdown when, as researchers of social sciences, we began feeling alienated from our academic campuses and private spaces. Coming back to one's hometown is usually a time for pleasure and celebration, but the lockdown showed us a different picture of it. Therefore, accidental ethnography (Fuji, 2015) is the crucial methodology for this study, which was initially unplanned, yet generated meaningful insight into understanding the connection between gender and space. The pandemic revealed the gendered nature of space and the restrictions on women's mobility and access to resources (Chauhan, 2021). As feminist geographers argue, gender is a product of specific practices and spaces (Beebe et al., 2017), and the lockdown highlighted the conflict over space and mobility for female scholars and students. The metaphor of caged birds aptly describes the experiences of women during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasising the need to address these hidden conflicts and untold stories.

THE MYTH OF EGALITARIANISM AND GENDERSCAPE IN THE NORTHEAST

Gender, as Butler (1990) posits, is a socially and culturally constructed framework that delineates patterns of femininity and masculinity. It serves as a categorical distinction between men and women, intricately intertwined with other binary oppositions such as nature/culture and private/public spheres. Building upon Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work in *The Second Sex* (1949:295), which contends that one does not inherently embody womanhood but rather becomes a woman under

cultural imperatives, Butler challenges the notion that gender is a performance enacted by individuals. Instead, they assert that gender itself is a product of societal norms and practices that construct and shape our identities. Central to Butler's theory of performativity is the idea that gender is not merely something individuals do, but rather something that acts upon and produces them. This perspective underscores the social foundations of a deeply divided and unequal world, wherein gender roles and relations are not inherent but socially constructed. These constructions influence individuals' accessibility to, and engagement with various spaces, including the public/private, physical/virtual, and intimate/distant realms. Gender roles, as delineated by household structures, access to resources, economic pressures, and local ecological conditions (Agarwal, 1997), dictate that specific responsibilities are assigned to individuals based on their gender. In contrast, gender relations refer to the broader societal framework that defines the rights, responsibilities, and identities of men and women in relation to one another (Martin, 2004). The division of labour within the household emerges as a primary focus of feminist inquiry, reflecting the unequal power dynamics inherent in gender relations. Thus, understanding gender as a socially constructed phenomenon sheds light on the complex interplay between individual agency and societal structures, highlighting the need for critical examination and deconstruction of gender norms and practices in order to achieve greater gender equity and social justice.

In popular discourse, the North Eastern Region (NER) is often portrayed as a bastion of gender equality, in contrast to the perceived gender norms prevalent in other parts of the country (Sengupta, 2018). Observers from regions like the Hindi Belt note the comparatively relaxed dress codes and gender norms, alongside a significant presence of women in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), which engender admiration and envy among women from elsewhere in India (Banerjee, 2010; Xaxa, 2008). However, as women researchers, it is crucial to unveil the underlying realities that belie this facade of gender parity. Buongpui's (2014) examination, 'Gender

Relations and the Web of Traditions in Northeast India' sheds light on the entrenched societal norms that perpetuate gender inequality. Across both tribal and non-tribal communities, women are relegated to subordinate roles, with customary laws reinforcing patriarchal structures. The delineation between family and society underscores the gendered division of labour, wherein women are assigned domestic responsibilities while men assume roles of community governance. Even in matrilineal societies like those in Meghalaya, where descent is traced through the mother's line, patriarchy remains entrenched, with women marginalised in decision-making processes (Gneezy, 2009; Krishna, 2005). Despite their increasing economic contributions, women in the northeast region remain far from achieving equitable status. Gender differentials persist across all levels of education, with female literacy rates, though higher than the national average, consistently lagging behind male literacy rates (Srivastav and Dubey, 2002). However, using female literacy as a sole indicator of women's social status overlooks the stark disparities in health outcomes, with persistently high rates of infant, child, and maternal mortality in the region (Mahanta and Nayak, 2013). Furthermore, the assumption that higher literacy rates translate into increased workforce participation among women has been challenged by empirical evidence (Samantroy, 2012). In light of these studies, it is imperative to reassess the prevailing narrative of gender egalitarianism in the predominantly tribal societies of the NER. While outward appearances may suggest progress toward gender equality, deeper analyses reveal entrenched patriarchal norms and persistent gender disparities that undermine women's advancement in the region.

GENDERSCAPE DURING LOCKDOWN

The COVID-19 outbreak in the first quarter of 2020 brought the entire world to a standstill. In India, a country-wide lockdown was

announced in March of 2020. Quarantine measures meant that offline education came to a halt and educational institutions all across the country had to adopt online methods to continue teaching, learning, research, and assessment. The pandemic altered the work dynamics of academics and students across the globe, who faced the challenge of balancing remote work and domestic labour. However, this varied among different genders, class, castes, age groups, and rural and urban scholars. When the location of educational place moves to the home, where work and family processes are playing in the same space, the boundary between work and domestic space is blurred. It is because of the intimacy and belongingness to the academic spaces, which originally seemed to be public, are rendered into private spaces for women scholars. Academic spaces inevitably become arenas of power and freedom for the women scholars, in contrast to their domestic spaces. These academic spaces also enable a woman to form relations with her peers and enjoy the freedom to explore and engage her social environment on her own terms, for which she does not have to be accountable daily to her natal homes or her in-laws. Lockdown limited the performance of gender in academic spaces and restricted the mobility of women within the domestic spaces, which are not free from patriarchy.

As stated by one of our respondents, '...returning to one's hometown typically evokes feelings of joy and celebration, yet the lockdown presented a starkly contrasting reality.' This discrepancy can be attributed to the varied performances enacted within different spaces, as posited by feminist geographers who assert that gender is shaped by specific practices, spaces, and discourses (Massey, 1984). Thus, gender manifests diversely across historical and geographical contexts. Butler (1990) expands on this notion, arguing that performativity is not a solitary act but a repetitive ritual ingrained within cultural and temporal frameworks. Indeed, our exploration of feminist discourses during this period unveiled new dimensions of significance, particularly regarding the pervasive influence of patriarchy. Walby (1989) defines patriarchy as a system characterised by social

structures and practices wherein men exert domination, oppression, and exploitation over women. The lockdown brought to light the hidden layers of patriarchy, particularly in terms of access to private spaces, underscoring the profound impact of gender dynamics on spatial accessibility. In this context, Spain's (2000) conceptualisation of space as 'the silent language' and 'hidden dimension' assumes heightened relevance, emphasising the role of spatial configurations in shaping human performances and interactions. By interrogating the intersections of gender, space, and power dynamics, this study not only sheds light on the hidden layers of patriarchy but also contributes to a deeper understanding of the nuanced ways in which spatial arrangements influence social hierarchies and individual experiences.

As social science scholars, rediscovering the meaning of space during the lockdown helped us to locate the regional genderscape that portrays various perceptions of the gender roles of women. Understanding power-based relationships is crucial here, due to the graph of expectations from women academicians who are of marriageable age (Dutta, 2020). It is found that they have to experience the existing societal burden of marriage, not directly from their family but from society itself. In addition to marriage, government job security is a quietly held aspiration that takes on heightened importance within their households. Accessing academic spaces became a strategy that helped respondents to negotiate such situations, which collapsed during the lockdown. One of the respondents, who is a fifth-semester student enrolled at a college located in an urban centre but comes from a rural family with a lower economic background, stated,

It was really a difficult time for my family. My father is a daily wage earner and due to the pandemic, he lost his job. The low-memory smartphone is the only source for me and my younger sister to attend online classes. However, it is not enough to download the lectures and notes that are shared for mine and my sister's classes. As a student of geography, I never realised the difference between public and private space. But the pandemic taught me that it is important to access the

college campus, not only for studies but for exploring new dimensions of life, to become more energetic and positive, to overcome anxiety.³

This experience foregrounds how access to physical academic spaces is not merely logistical but deeply tied to broader socio-political constructions of space and identity.

Space, as a product of social and political processes, can be understood in terms of both public and private domains. Space is thus produced and reproduced in connection with the forces and relations of production. The pandemic, and consequently the lockdown segregated space as public/private, rural/urban, intimate/distant, and digital/physical. The workspace, which is usually regarded as physical, transformed into a virtual space that required technicality and several resources, especially the availability of the internet, electricity, electronic devices such as laptops, or a good-quality smartphone. Accessibility to these devices is not homogenous. On the contrary, the accessibility of these resources reveals the class differences between women students from rural and urban families. Another graduate student stated,

During the pandemic, my younger brother had the freedom to roam around, but I could hardly access the same. Though the government protocol to access the public space was till six o' clock, I could hardly find any woman near my home at the tinali (crossroad). My father said that men also felt like women after six o' clock. His statement was a hidden pleasure for my mother, who criticised him whenever he came back home late at night.⁴

Furthermore, graduate students who are selected for post-graduate programmes in various central universities have to attend their classes online. The lack of separated private spaces from which to attend virtual classes is a major tension for many such students. This tension is especially apparent for those who are either members of a joint family, or managing their life in a limited physical space. Some respondents

during this study implied that they could not enjoy the success of being selected for a master's program in a central university when the classes were moved online. 'Doing assignments and cleaning the dishes are simultaneous work.'⁵ This statement by a respondent illustrates the burden of work while continuing their studies. Classes without classrooms is a privilege for those who have separate study rooms and proper technological facilities, while other sections of women have suffered with several constraints due to the lack of such spaces and arrangements. However, these limitations are not always economic but rather deeply located and shaped in the regional genderscape of the family-household system. The division of labour in the household is, therefore, one of the primary concerns for feminist research.

In his insightful analysis, David Harvey (1990) acknowledges the profound influence of social formations on the construction of space and time, tailored to meet the needs and objectives of material and social reproduction within each society. The above narratives add depth to this understanding by illustrating how space is imbued with subjective interpretations, serving as a conduit for social reproduction. Within this framework, the dynamics of public and private domains are shaped by the individual's sense of belonging and their ability to assert agency within a given space. Harvey further elucidates the parallel forms of domination exercised over nature and over women, both of which are often positioned in subordinate roles within prevailing societal structures. This echoes Blake's (2008) assertion that time and space possess agency, with time personified as masculine and space as feminine. This characterisation underscores the gendered dynamics inherent in the conceptualisation of space and time, highlighting the patriarchal underpinnings that shape our understanding of these fundamental constructs. Our study underscores the gendered dynamics of space, showing that academic institutions, though public, offer women a semblance of freedom that is absent in their domestic lives. It also emphasises the intersectionality of gender with class, caste, and geography, revealing how rural and lower-economic-status students faced greater technological barriers during remote learning.

THE BURDEN OF HOUSEHOLD

In our study, the 'family-household system' emerged as a genderscape of women's oppression during the pandemic. In examining the intricate nature of women's oppression, Barrett (1980) contends that a nuanced understanding necessitates an exploration of the family-household system. This comprises both a social structure, represented by the household, and an accompanying ideology, embodied in the concept of the family. Within the household structure, individuals, typically biologically related, rely on the earnings of a select few adult members, primarily husbands or fathers. Concurrently, they depend on the unpaid labour of wives or mothers, who are often engaged in household chores, childcare, and other domestic duties. Consequently, women's participation in the labour force frequently results in the phenomenon of the double burden, wherein they are tasked with both unpaid housework and paid employment (Kapur, 1970). The pandemic-induced transition towards online learning and research, necessitated by quarantine measures, not only transformed the educational landscape but also blurred the boundaries between work and home lives, for students and academics alike. As educational activities relocated from classrooms to homes, the convergence of the work and family domains became inevitable, presenting a unique challenge for women and girls. The pandemic-induced remote work set-up exacerbated existing gender inequalities, with women disproportionately bearing the burden of both professional responsibilities and domestic chores. Sullivan and Lewis (2001) have long highlighted the perpetuation of gender disparities in remote work contexts, an understanding accentuated by Power's observations (2020) during the pandemic. To glean insights into the dynamics of households during the lockdown period, we conducted in-depth interviews with research scholars. One research scholar, who is pursuing her doctoral degree, articulated her experience such:

In the initial months of the lockdown, despite the fears and the infodemic, me and my siblings, were happy about our

unplanned holiday and that we got to stay together and do nothing much, as schools and colleges were all shut down.

She continued,

But I realised we were squabbling over space soon enough. If one of us had work from home, the other had online classes and another needed the laptop to write her assignments. At the same time, our parents were also working from home, meaning constant phone calls or our names being shouted out when they needed some technical help on the mobile or the laptop. I just could not focus on anything after a point and someone needed to cook for the family, so I was somehow always in the kitchen, either making tea or food for everyone. Eventually, it became so (sic) that I took over the kitchen duty and cleaning duty altogether, and by the end of the day I had no energy to look at where my PhD research was going. I am honestly very frustrated now with what a waste of the year 2020 was for me.⁶

This poignant expression of her struggle to balance household responsibilities with academic pursuits during the lockdown resonated with numerous respondents in our study. Despite possessing access to technology, many found themselves unable to maintain academic productivity during this challenging period. The young researchers emphasised the importance of assessing productivity through self-reported data on manuscript submissions and meeting deadlines. They also reflected on the impact of social isolation on their ability to work remotely, and identified various factors that impeded their routines. The unpaid labour of women in households also increased due to the presence of those members who joined the family during the lockdown and stayed busy working from home. Such pressure for unpaid labour is linked to the patriarchal structure of households, where caring and household chores are identified as women's responsibilities rather than men's.

Most male members in my family do not know how to cook, but show an interest in having new food items on their plates every day (sic). It increases the burden of work for my mother and sisters-in-law in the kitchen. Sometimes they suppressed their anger.⁷

This empirical narrative, from a respondent then pursuing a bachelor's degree, shows that the active role of women in the kitchen in a way increases the duration of the unpaid labour of women which is mostly unrecognised; yet women are expected to be committed to cooking, cleaning, and caring of children and elderly people. The suppression of anger that she describes implies these women's everyday repression while managing a household where their personal desire and resistance are hidden, yet exist in the genderscape. Like various others, this study also indicates that 'space is crucial in the maintenance of patriarchy' (Aitken and Valentine, 2006). In this case, the household structure can be argued to be the base of a patriarchal mode of production that operates an 'intimate relationship between gender and space' (Datta, 2005). Space serves as more than just a backdrop; it is a dynamic entity intricately woven into the fabric of social processes. Far from being fixed and absolute, space evolves in tandem with its objectives, adapting to the ever-changing nature of societal dynamics. Amidst the lockdown, it was not merely familial constraints that limited women's access to public spaces, but rather state-imposed restrictions on movement (Aitken and Valentine, 2006). This patriarchal imposition was swiftly echoed by various institutions, including the family and household, reinforcing existing gendered norms and power structures. As Massey (1984) aptly observed, gendered characteristics manifest not only across countries and historical periods but also within the minutiae of everyday spaces and interactions. This underscores the inherent gendering of space, wherein accessibility is intrinsically linked to power dynamics (Datta 2011). In reality, women's access to public or private spaces is contingent upon their performance or labour, with mobility constrained to areas where their presence is deemed necessary or authorised.

DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered the landscape of higher education for many women and girl students and scholars in India, exposing deep-seated gender inequalities. This study sought to illuminate the multifaceted challenges faced by these women and girls, who found themselves abruptly uprooted from their academic environments and confined to their homes. The sudden closure of these institutions during the pandemic forced these women to navigate new and often hostile domestic spaces, where their roles as students and researchers were subsumed under the weight of household duties and societal expectations. Prior research has highlighted the differential impact of crises such as pandemics on vulnerable populations, including women and girls. Studies have shown that disruptions to education disproportionately affect women and girls, exacerbating existing disparities in access to learning opportunities and socio-economic resources (Gaynor and Wilson, 2020; Katikireddi et al., 2021). Furthermore, the intersection of gender with other axes of marginalisation, such as class and ethnicity, amplifies the challenges faced by marginalised women during crises (Agarwal, 2021; Chakraborty, 2021). The findings of our study reveal a multitude of challenges faced by women and girl students and researchers in Assam during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include a limited access to online education due to the digital divide and connectivity issues, disruptions to research activities and fieldwork, heightened caregiving responsibilities, economic hardships, and psychological distress stemming from isolation and uncertainty. Additionally, cultural norms and gender expectations further constrained the agency and mobility of women, exacerbating their vulnerability.

This study uncovers how the lockdown initiated gendered restrictions for women who pursued higher education but still faced patriarchy within household structures. Respondents highlighted the challenges of returning to their hometowns during the lockdown, and how limited access to academic spaces hindered their ability to

balance household responsibilities and academic work, highlighting the intersections of gender, space, and power. The research highlights the dichotomy of public and private spaces, where hostels and academic campuses transformed into private and intimate spaces for the respondents, rather than the home. For the respondents of this study, the home—traditionally a private space—became their new academic environment, thus blurring the boundaries between work and domestic life. Academic spaces, which traditionally offer women power and freedom distinct from their domestic roles, were transformed into private, constrained environments. This transition restricted women's mobility and reinforced patriarchal norms, revealing the implicit yet pervasive nature of gender inequality. The gendered landscape within household spaces, with distinct work roles for women, increased their unpaid labour during the lockdown. Class differences further exacerbated these challenges, with students from rural areas and those with a lower economic status facing technological barriers. The pandemic-induced remote work/online classroom set-up intensified gender inequalities, with women and girls bearing the brunt of both professional and domestic duties. The interviews underscored the struggle to maintain academic productivity amidst household responsibilities, revealing the persistence of gender disparities. This raises questions about gender inequality, particularly regarding women's engagement in other quality work like men. The study reflected that gender performativity is closely tied to the household's gendered landscape under patriarchal dominance. The narrative analysis reveals that the household structure and the state simultaneously became hegemonic and masculine. These experiences, though not physically violent, manifested as misrecognition and subordination of women in their gendered landscape. These constraints and unequal gender relations, described as 'symbolic violence' by Bourdieu (1998), became more visible during the lockdown. Gender inequality across time and space, intersecting with class, caste, and geographical differences, illuminates the nature of patriarchy, which is implicit but often invisible.

Our findings corroborate the conclusions drawn from numerous global and local studies, indicating that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing gender inequalities. By exploring the intersections of gender, space, and power, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the gendered implications of the pandemic and underscores the necessity of creating equitable and inclusive academic environments. Malisch et al. (2020) suggest that the transition to remote teaching, changes in grading systems, loss of access to research resources, and shifts in household labour, childcare, and elder care have all contributed to amplifying barriers to women's career advancement. Early career bias has also been identified as a factor influencing lower paper submission rates among women in academia during this period (Andersen et al., 2020; Viglione, 2020), particularly since the early career phase often coincides with women's reproductive age (Morgan, 2015). Furthermore, as highlighted by Malisch et al. (2020), the burden is compounded for women facing intersecting systems of oppression, such as ethnicity and race. Gender inequality intersects with the racial profile of academics, with networks playing a pivotal role in career success by providing employment, publication, and conference opportunities, as well as positioning researchers within burgeoning research trends (Heffernan, 2020).

Thus, by examining the gendered impacts of the pandemic, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between public and private spaces and the hidden layers of patriarchy that shape women's lives. The study emphasises the importance of understanding the gendered dynamics of space, as patriarchal structures within households and societal norms shape women's access to both public and private spaces. The pandemic highlighted the intricate relationship between gender, space, and power, calling for a nuanced understanding of these dynamics to address the inequalities faced by women in academia. The metaphor of 'caged birds' poignantly encapsulates the struggle faced by women scholars and students during the tumultuous phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, amidst this conflict over accessibility and mobility,

there emerges a narrative of resistance and untold stories, reflecting the resilience and agency of those navigating these challenging circumstances. Furthermore, the research sheds light on the myth of gender egalitarianism in the NER, revealing entrenched patriarchal structures that persist despite outward appearances of progress. The intersections of gender with class, caste, and geographical differences further complicate the experiences of women and girl scholars, underscoring the need for a nuanced understanding of these dynamics.

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NOTES

1. R1 – Respondent 1
2. R1 – Respondent 1
3. R2 – Respondent 2
4. R4 – Respondent 4
5. R1 – respondent 1
6. R5 – Respondent 5
7. R3 – Respondent 3

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