



The Production of Domestic Space and Gender during the COVID-19 Crisis: An Auto-ethnographic Account from a North Indian Small Town

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ABSTRACT

The novel coronavirus-induced pandemic has scarcely left any aspect of life untouched. Against the rabid virus, the home was suggested as the site of safety by the governments worldwide. This article by married partners studies the domestic space of their small-town North Indian home, employing an autoethnographic method. The authors ask, How has the COVID crisis shaped their domestic space? With the authority male figure of the susro/father-in-law dwelling at home round the clock during the lockdowns, the domestic space became more gendered. The COVID crisis resulted in reducing the spatial agency of the 'wife'/daughter-in-law/bhu in the domestic space. However, it was also the time when she strived to make home-outside-home, thus allowing us a revisit to the idea of 'home'.

Keywords: COVID-19, gender, home, space, and town

INTRODUCTION

“I could not sit outside in the verandah to have some fresh air during the (COVID-19) lockdowns as I found Papa (father-in-law) sitting there all the time”. This is the statement of the *bhu*¹, the second author, about the first lockdown period (mid-2020) induced by the COVID-19 crisis. This statement led the authors to the following research enquiry: How has COVID-19 influenced the pre-existing gendered spatial dynamics of the home, and how did it shape the agency of the *bhu* (daughter-in-law)/‘housewife’ (sic)? This question has been explored insufficiently in the existing literature, particularly in the context of small towns. This way, this article attempts to contribute to the body of knowledge at the intersections of the COVID-19 pandemic, small towns, the domestic sphere, gender, the dominant Other Backward Class (OBC) caste, and the aspiring middle class.

India experienced an abrupt and one of the longest and stringent lockdowns in the world, once in 2020 through a series of extended lockdowns, and further in the second wave of mid-2021 (Reuters, 2022). The first lockdown, as announced by the Prime Minister of India, came into effect at midnight on 24th March 2020. Despite a series of lockdowns, the pandemic did not offer any respite. Instead, the viral disease only exacerbated the following year. In response, another lockdown was imposed. In this seemingly never-ending spate of lockdowns, homes acquired a different meaning for their dwellers. Given the patriarchal structure of Indian society, women, already burdened with household work, received an even greater amount of work and responsibility. With this, their ‘breathing spaces’² became even more constricted. Leela Dube (2011) uses the term “living space” for the space that women in Indian households carve out using their survival strategies and skills. Dube (2001) analyses the subordination of women and argues against the notion of women-as-passive. This article examines this “living space” (Dube, 2011) as the *bhu* yearned-out for open spaces to breathe in the hot summer lockdowns. Through the deployment of the autoethnographic method, the authors of this article, a married couple with a young child, attempt to study their domestic space in light of the COVID-19 crisis.

¹Depending upon the context, *bhu* may mean one’s daughter-in-law or wife. With her individuality unrecognised, the *bhu* is identified in relation to her patrilocal residence and its members. Similar to a daughter, she is also considered as the repository of the family’s honour. To clarify, the *bhu* or the daughter-in-law and the second author are the same person, and the terms are used interchangeably. For the sake of convenience, the authors, against the prevalent norms of autoethnography, have used the third person.

²The term is used figuratively.

This article is divided into two parts. The first part familiarises the readers with the background and field settings through a description of the context, a broader review of literature, and a gendered analysis of the domestic spaces—the natal and patrilocal home. After providing this background, part two broaches the problem of the study. It analyses how the COVID-19-induced lockdowns shaped the domestic space and the agency of women, here the *bhu*. For the same, the tool of body mapping is found helpful.

Part I

The context

The research is situated in Chirawa, a municipal town in Rajasthan, India. The town is located in the state's northeast and two hundred kilometres from the national capital, New Delhi. Chirawa town and the larger Chirawa sub-district are a part of the Jhunjhunu district and the Shekhawati region. The region is known for, among others, its wealthy merchants, a very high number of army personnel, and havelis with exquisite paintings.

Let us briefly look at the town's social and demographic indicators. According to the last census held, the town's total population is 43,953 (Census, 2011) and has only increased since then. The sex ratio is 925 females per 1000 males. The sex ratio for the 0-6 age group is abysmally low, that is, 846 females per 1000 males. The urban Chirawa's (town) sex ratio (897) is poorer than the rural (957). The Census of India identifies Chirawa as a key trade center within the district (Census, 2011). Chirawa is more Hindu than the average in India. The Hindu population is more than 92 per cent of the total population, while the Muslim population is around 7 per cent (Census, 2011). All other minorities, such as Christians, Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs, are negligible in numbers. In terms of caste, Jats³ dominate the town and the Shekhawati region numerically. A caste census is not yet available; however, Jats are estimated to be around 30 per cent of the region's total population (Rediff, 1999). Other caste groups in the town include *Brahmins*, *Baniyas*, *Meghwals*, *Maalis*, *Kumhars*, *Khatris*, *Sunars*, etc. The population share of the Scheduled Castes (the Dalits) and the Scheduled Tribes is approximately 17 % and 1%, respectively.

While the state's literacy rate is 66.11 %, the literacy rate for the town stands, relatively impressively, at 78.90 %, but with a 17.45 % gap in male-female literacy rate (Census, 2011). The Jhunjhunu district, having one of the highest literacy rates in the state, is known for its relatively greater representation in certain sectors such as teaching, the armed forces and

³Today, Jats are a greater social, economic and political force in the region and beyond. A good number of parliamentary seats are decided by how the Jats vote.

medical professions. The region is regarded as an aspirational one. Some of the charitable educational institutions in the region were established by the region's wealthy merchants (such as PIRAMAL) more than a century ago. Students from far-off states flock to the region for educational attainment. The 'education town' of Pilani, housing the well-known Birla Institute of Technology and Sciences (BITS) and Birla schools, is situated in the district. Towns may often be referred to here as *shiksha nagri* (education city).

The district and the nearby district of Sikar experience significant migration, markedly driven by educational pursuits. To secure better educational opportunities for their children, people often migrate from villages to towns and cities, and from smaller towns to larger urban centers. With half of such migration occurring in smaller cities, this rural-to-urban migration is a key driver of urbanization in India. According to Partha et al. (2017), every seventh person in India resides in a town like Chirawa. Despite relocating, the migrating population maintains ties with their domiciles. They may return for, among others, agricultural activities, weddings and other significant life events. This continued connection highlights the complex relationship between migration, education, rural-urban dynamics, and belonging.

Chirawa has experienced significant growth in terms of population, economy, and human settlements. Dominated by the upper castes, such as *Brahmins* and *Baniyas* (merchant castes), Chirawa was largely circumscribed around the *bazaar* (commercial center) until a few decades ago. Education, jobs, and aspirations for better living standards are among the visible factors behind the mushrooming of settlements in the town and the larger sub-district. The migrating population has acquired the peripheral spaces of the town, engulfing the commons and villages. The real estate market in the town is regarded as performing better than that of larger cities. The expanding urban space of the town is also characterized by a notable presence of the OBC castes, particularly the Jats.

The subject matter of this research is one such upwardly mobile household in the town, the authors' home. Experiencing a shift from agriculture to the service sector in an urbanizing milieu, it is a Hindu, Other Backward Class (OBC) caste, and an aspiring middle-class household. The household is situated in one of the extensions of the town, the Chaudhary Colony, also referred to as the Jat colony. The colony rests on the erstwhile agricultural lands cut into plots by private developers around half a century ago. Jats were instrumental in establishing this settlement and remain numerically dominant till date.

Nonica Datta (1999) considers Jats an endogenous community whose identity has been formed by others and themselves. The Arya Samaj movement has been pivotal to the formation of this identity.

Although this is a *bagar* (dry) region, the Jats of this region have attained considerable prosperity. This owes to a combination of factors such as landed-ness, better educational facilities, and greater employment in the secure government sector. With the consciousness shaped by a history of reform movements and resistance, a greater focus on education and the availability of a higher number of educational institutions, the women of the town and larger region are relatively more educated and better represented in state and national services. Notwithstanding, the status of women in the region is not on par with men in various respects. The social, economic, and political disparity between the two genders is quite visible. Women's empowerment through educational and professional attainments needs to be looked at from another perspective. Women now suffer from a double burden. They must earn by securing competitive government jobs and also be the prime domestic workers at home.

It is typical for this region to still have men as the head of the household. The household in question is also a male-dominated one. The de facto head of the house is the father of the first author, and the father-in-law or *susro* of the second author. As mentioned, the second author is the wife of the first author and the '*bhu* (daughter-in-law) of the house' (sic). The following section sheds light on the authors' positionality and household composition.

Household composition and the authors' positionality

The household comprises five members: the *bhu*, her husband and three-year-old son, and her father- and mother-in-law. As experienced by the *bhu*, her mother-in-law has a non-dominating personality, yet shares the prevalent patriarchal culture norms of the present milieu. She largely empathises with the *bhu*, however, she rarely goes against her husband, the father-in-law. It is a truism that millions of women like her understand their marriage and associated responsibilities through terms such as 'duty' and *majboori* (compulsion). A woman has to *nibhana*⁴ her 'duties' associated with the role of a wife, mother, daughter, *bhu*, sister, aunt, sister-in-law, and grandmother.

This autoethnography is an attempt to not merely present an account of the authors' lived experiences in COVID-19 times but also their experiences as cultural beings in the present settings. Both authors occupy several intersecting identities, including those of 'small-town' residents, aspiring middle-class individuals, and members of a dominant OBC caste lacking cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Additionally, they share the role of younger adults within the household. Being a young adult and

⁴*Nibhana* is a Hindi word, which here, means discharging one's 'duties' and performing 'roles' in the sense of obligation or compulsion.

unemployed often makes one subordinate to the parents, especially to the male head of the household. Commonly, the position of the *bhu* is the weakest and is greatly influenced by her husband's financial situation. The wives/*bhus* of economically independent husbands may exert influence in family affairs. Such *bhus* may not be the eldest (thus their higher status) of the *bhus*, yet they may be consulted in important matters. They may be asked to do less arduous work and enjoy better status than other *bhus* in the family. The first author is educated from the country's premier institutions, however, he was unemployed during COVID-19. Along with his wife and young son, he was dependent on his parents for most of the needs. This often compelled the authors, especially the second author, the *bhu*, to 'obey' and not do anything that offended the head of the household. In other words, the authors, more so the second, had limited agency.

Above, we noted the presence of multiple intersecting identities and contexts at play. Intersectionality is an old concept. However, as a term, it was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) in the context of law and race. Later, the concept was applied in multiple contexts and in different ways. It has been employed on different international platforms and in documents such as those of the UN. Most broadly, intersectionality is about the aggregate impact of discrimination and, thus, marginalisation that a person suffers owing to her multiple intersecting identities. For instance, a black woman who is also poor. In another instance, a poor Dalit woman is triply discriminated. Her different identities work together towards her marginalisation. The framework of intersectionality can be useful in different contexts and for different identities and experiences. With its limitations and usefulness (Menon, 2015; Gopal, 2015; John, 2015; Nash, 2015), much use and misuse, intersectionality is a useful conceptual tool that helps us to understand the operation of different axes of discrimination simultaneously.

This article attempts to apply intersectionality, though not in the most appropriate context. Consider this: the *bhu* is situated in a middle caste and an aspiring middle-class setting. However, it is important to recognise that she is a woman and is in the locus of a *bhu*. Moreover, she is employed in the private sector, marked by insecurity and low wages. Further, she is an unemployed man's wife, thus having little voice in the family. As we see in this article, these aforementioned identities and locations work together to shape her agency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Engendering spaces

It is a truism that spaces in North India are gendered (Chowdhry, 2014; Abraham, 2010). Through her research on Haryana's society, Prem Chowdhry (2014) exposes the dichotomisation of spaces based on gender. She (2014) underscores that men dominate most of the spaces in the region—from the streets to the *chaupal*⁵ and the *baithak*⁶ of the house and beyond—making the presence of men in these spaces seem 'natural'. The men not only occupy most spaces, but 'their spaces' hold symbolic power, for instance, the *chaupal* and the *baithak*, where crucial decisions of the village and the house are taken, respectively. Also, such places are the spaces where much information, varying from national politics to village issues, is exchanged and discussed. Such gender-segregated spatial arrangements deprive women of socially valued knowledge; thus, their status remains low (Spain, 1993). Doreen Massey (1984) argues that it "is not just that the spatial is socially constructed; the social is spatially constructed too" (p. 6).

Janaki Abraham (2010) considers the private and public dichotomy as fluid. Through her analysis of the *pata* culture of the Bikaner town of Rajasthan, she finds a continuity between the houses (considered private) and the street (considered public). *Patas* are wooden beds commonly placed outside houses in the old Bikaner town. It is on these *patas* that men sit, eat, talk leisurely, and sometimes sleep at night. *Patas* are placed outside the home, and this outside space becomes an extension of the home, Abraham argues.

In the context of this dichotomy, Chowdhry (2014) discusses in her work the rural homes of typical land-owning castes (such as Jats). It generally comprises three parts: *ghar*, *gher*, and the *baithak*. The *ghar*, or the inner house, is considered the 'feminine area' where men are not expected to enter. Colloquial sayings such as "*ghar to lugaai ko hi hove hai*" (a 'house' becomes a 'home' essentially because of women) reinforce this idea. This does not mean that the women have a considerable say in household affairs, rather, they only *belong* to the home. The *baithak* is the 'men's area' where household men and guests (men) dwell. *Baithak* of the house is a part of the house but is equivalent to 'public space within the home'. It may not occupy much space in the house, but it has a symbolic significance, for it is the "nerve center of the house" (Chowdhry, 2014). The

⁵*Chaupal* is understood as a men's public social space, where the political affairs of the village government are conducted.

⁶*Baithak* is the frontal part of the house where the men of the household, especially the head and the elderly, spend most of their time. Also, it is here that the guests (mostly male) sit, talk, eat and rest.

gher is the place for cattle, mostly tended by women, through putting in hours of arduous work. Thus, the house, according to Chowdhry (2014), is constituted of both the public and the private. The *baithak* extending to the street is the public realm of the domestic space, and the *ghar* and *gher* are the private realms. To note, Rabindranath Tagore's renowned novel *Ghare Baire* (1916, *The Home and the World*) delves into the meanings of *Ghare* (the domestic sphere, encompassing the *andarmahala* and *bhitarbari*) and *Baire* (the outside or public realm) in the Bengali society⁷.

COVID-19 crisis and the domestic space

The pandemic scarcely left any aspect of life untouched. As we see later in this article, several academic and popular press articles have reported the uneven impact of the pandemic vis-à-vis gender, class, caste, sexual orientation, region, and so on. A large amount of literature concerning this article suggests that the COVID-19 crisis, especially the lockdowns, has exacerbated different problems for women worldwide. For instance, there is an escalation in violence against women (UN Women, n.d.; Taub, 2020). Further, there is an increase in the burden of domestic chores and care (BBC, 2020). A plethora of national and international studies have documented the increased burden of domestic work upon women in the COVID-19 times (Chauhan, 2020, 2022; Dixit & Chavan, 2020; Casey & Huq, 2022).

It was the domestic sphere/home that was projected as the only site of safety against the rabid novel coronavirus. The governments' campaigns worldwide focused on instructing people to stay home. The same is reflected in the variegated slogans such as "Stay home, Stay safe" and "Stay home, Save lives". 'Home' as a concept needs critical engagement. Home has received considerable attention across different disciplines. The idea of the home in popular imagination revolves around safety, intimacy, family (heteronormative), comfort, and so on. Home, for Alison Blunt and Robyn M. Dowling (2006), "is both material and imaginative, a site and set of meanings/emotions" (p. 22). While meditating on his concept of dwelling, Martin Heidegger (1993) asks: "...residential buildings do indeed provide lodgings; today's houses may even be well planned, easy to keep, attractively cheap, open to air, light, and sun, but—do the houses in themselves hold any guarantee that dwelling occurs in them?" (p. 348). To dwell, for Heidegger (1993), is to be harmonious with the fourfold, that is, the earth and sky, divinities and mortals. For Heidegger (1993), dwelling is not merely occupying a place, but it means a harmonious existence with the

⁷Tagore's *The Home and the World* has contributed to academic engagement across disciplines. Also, the novel has been adapted for the cinema. Two well-known adaptations are Satyajit Ray's *Ghare Baire* (1984) and Aparna Sen's *Ghare Baire Aaj* (2019).

home and the cosmos. Dwelling is being—being at home. For Gaston Bachelard (2003), home is a place of "protected intimacy" and where one can dream at peace (p. 4).

Home has also been argued as a site of power. As against the normative assumptions, Massey's (1992) work suggests home as a site, *not* beyond power. Analysing Minnie Bruce Pratt's (1984) work, "Identity: Skin Blood Heart", Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1986) contend that Pratt constructs home in two modalities, that is, being home and not being home. "'Being home' refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; 'not being home' is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself" (Martin and Mohanty, 1986, p. 196).

As the research on young North Indian women reveals, the home may also be a space of boredom (Islam, 2020). The empirical data suggest that the home is a potential site of conflict for young women if they dwell in it for long (Islam, 2020). One can avoid this conflict, for instance, between mother and daughter, and mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, by spending a good amount of time outside one's domestic space (Islam, 2020). The same becomes possible for women, mostly through work or pursuing education. In the case of men, going outside one's domestic space comes naturally. Apart from work, they can go outside, with ease, for different purposes such as loitering, walking, visiting friends, smoking, buying groceries, etc.

Similarly, Blunt (2017) claims that "the home is an important and yet contested site in feminist debates about power and identity" (p. 1). A part of feminist literature suggests the home as a site of oppression. For instance, the well-known work of American feminist Betty Friedan (1963) argued the private sphere as an oppressive sphere. The Black feminist literature critiqued this argument. bell hooks is a prominent example. She (2015) argued that Black women, facing the brunt of racism in the public sphere, found solace in the private sphere, that is, their homes. She (2015) states that it is at their homes that the Black women could find and build space to love, care and nurture themselves and their families.

In the context of the COVID-19 induced pandemic, the home could be thought of variously—as a house, shelter, bunker, sanctuary, or community (Haris, 2021). Blunt and Dowling (2022), in the second edition of their work, *Home*, problematize home in a renewed manner. They (2022) critique the pandemic period's British government directive, 'stay home⁸,'—an uncritical assumption suggesting the home as a place of safety. The authors (2022) critique the poster released by the United Kingdom government regarding the COVID-19 lockdown. After facing public

⁸ This is similar to the Government of India's pandemic directive, that is, 'stay home stay safe'.

criticism, the poster was withdrawn. It depicted a woman engaged in domestic chores and a man sitting idly on a sofa. Apart from greater domestic work, women faced greater domestic violence in the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, the violence against women in domestic spaces may not always manifest in the form of physical violence. Reducing and restricting a woman's mobility in spaces, including the domestic, is also a kind of violence. As we will see in this article, COVID-19 lockdowns have caused a reduction in women's agency.

There is a considerable literature on domestic spaces and gender. The said literature in the context of COVID-19-induced lockdowns is growing, yet it is negligible for small town India. Barbara Harriss-White (2016) underscores that small towns or, in her words, "middle India" are essential to understanding the country. Yet, she (2016) finds negligible studies on such spaces. The same stands true in the context of the recent pandemic. This article attempts to modestly address this research gap by offering a study on the intersections of domestic space, gender, small-town, OBC caste, and middle class.

RESEARCH METHOD

Home as a research site is challenging, especially regarding data collection. This is essentially because homes are difficult to access for long-term field immersions—the quintessential requirement of ethnography. Researching one's own home has other problems. It is not a problem about access, but the research at one's home accompanies anxieties about issues of ethics, representation, and exposing one's own life on the public platform, permanently (Wall, 2008). Besides, rendering the too familiar (one's home) as strange is a challenge in terms of overcoming personal biases.

Owing to the COVID-19-induced lockdowns, the authors could spend plenty of time with each other. They could reflect on their lives and the evolving dynamics at home. A significant impetus for the reflections came from the *bhu*, who frequently shared her experiences of negotiating the domestic sphere during the pandemic. The idea of the present study emerged from this shared immersion in domestic space. Informal conversations (in the kitchen, bed or during evening walks), observations, and collective negotiations with the in-laws provided the preliminary insights that informed the research enquiry.

The autoethnographic method was chosen to share the *story* of this home. According to Stacy Holman Jones et al. (2016), all autoethnographies use "personal experience to examine and/or critique cultural experience" (p. 22). Further, the autoethnographies make "contributions to existing research", embrace "vulnerability with purpose", and create "a reciprocal relationship with audiences to compel a response" (Jones et al., 2016, p. 22). For D.E. Reed-Danahay (1997), autoethnography is about the self (auto-) producing a sociological (-ethno-) writing (-graphy). Autoethnography can

be a challenging exercise as the questions of representation, ethics, and balance may produce anxiety (Wall, 2008). Further, autoethnography, through which researchers share their intimate stories, contributes to the advancement of sociological understanding (Wall, 2008). This is where autoethnography differs from other writing methods, such as autobiography. The challenge of writing about personal life reflexively is a daunting weight attended by autoethnography.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Discerning the domestic space of Northern India

In the caste and class milieu to which the authors belong, a village home typically consists of a courtyard, an earthen cooking area, and, increasingly, a stove powered by an LPG cylinder. Along with rooms, it may also feature a *gher*, or *nohra*⁹. These spaces serve as extensions of the domestic sphere and are often used for storage, livestock, and miscellaneous household activities and purposes. In a town, the house acquires smaller dimensions. The courtyard often transforms into a small open chowk and/or verandah and a hall connecting to the inner space of the house. In the inner house, the kitchens increasingly have a raised platform in the form of a stone slab. The *chaubara*/s or the rooftop room/s meant for the younger couple/s persist. As the demands of the booming service sector leave little time, the *gher* is rarely found in urban settings. Although the materiality of the new houses has changed, however, the symbolic significance of most of the older structures remains intact. Men, as in the village, spend considerable time in the *baithak* or outside their house. Unless employed, women are seen mostly inside the *ghar*. It is in the *ghar* that men should not spend a lot of time, as their masculine status falls into danger. A man would be considered effeminate if he spent time in this space or helped his wife with domestic chores, say, cooking. He may be chided by other men with insulting words such as “*raandiyā*”¹⁰. Often, boys are rebuked by older men and women if they are inside the kitchen, essentially considered a women's space. Preparing food, gossiping, dwelling inside the home and especially the kitchen, taking a long time to bathe, etc, are considered women's domains and behaviours, respectively.

Within the overarching patriarchal structure, specific spaces are designated as women's domains. This provides women with some respite

⁹*Nohra*, an open space adjacent to the house, is reserved for cattle and other miscellaneous purposes.

¹⁰ *Raandiyā* has multiple meanings. It may be used for a man who is ‘under the influence’ of his wife. It may also be used for a man who likes the company of women, remains inside the house for longer periods, and engages in household chores.

from the overwhelming patriarchal oppression. Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar (1999) have termed such spaces as "women's significant spaces". Such spaces are significant to women and where they can exercise greater agency. The spaces may include the kitchen, courtyard, *pooja* (prayer) place, and *chaubara*. For the *bhus* in the present context, one of the women's significant spaces is the room they share with their husbands. This space may be in the form of *chaubara* or a room downstairs. This space provides *bhus* with a degree of autonomy in terms of access, privacy, and the freedom to organize the room according to their preferences. It is also a space where the *susro* (father-in-law) or other elderly male figures rarely enter, and almost never when the *bhu* (daughter-in-law) is present. Over time, new additions to this room have included, among other items, an ornate dressing table, a deluxe double bed, a television, a cooler or air conditioning system, and a *sandook*¹¹ or an almirah. These items are commonly part of the dowry provided by the parents of the *bhu*.

The research of Gloria Goodwin Raheja and Ann Grodzins Gold (1994) in rural Rajasthan documents the barring of men in the home courtyards. For instance, women performing *kesya* songs would hijack an open space. In this space, men would be scared to go for the fear of being teased, hurled abuses (in fun), or even attacked (Raheja & Gold, 1994). Also, some rituals, owing to tradition, accord women an upper hand, where men must follow the prevalent norms. For instance, in one of the wedding rituals in the present social milieu, the groom's father and grandfather would be thumped on their backs by women of the bride's family with a *thapa* (a herbal paste), and often vigorously.

In towns, the courtyard has taken the shape of a hall, verandah, and/or chowk. The hall represents an intriguing space within the household. Although both men and women use it, women tend to exert greater influence. Men, particularly the *susro* (father-in-law), typically enter this area with a purpose. In contrast, the *bhu* (daughter-in-law) and other women use the hall more freely. However, the *bhu* may prefer her room for rest and privacy. Chowk and verandah are open spaces where the men, especially the *susro*, have an upper hand. It is used by the *bhu* only when the *susro* has left the house. In the present case, the *bhu* used the chowk and the small verandah for leisurely activities such as walks and for having fresh air, albeit only after the *susro* had gone outside the house. However, on some occasions, the chowk may be taken over by women, and thus, men would avoid the same. For instance, during the rituals leading to the wedding, the chowk is the place for women to congregate, chat, sing songs, dance, and perform different rituals. Such a chowk is also a place for women to perform *tutiyo*. *Tutiyo* event takes place after the *baarat* (a bridegroom's wedding

¹¹A trunk used for storage purposes, especially for the *bhu*'s gifts, special clothes and other important possessions and things.

procession, mostly consisting of men) has departed for wedding to the bride's place. Barring very young boys, it is an explicitly women's event where they enact different roles for fun and bawdy humour. Further, it is at these open spaces like the chowk that *seethna*¹² (a local form of *gaari/gaali*) songs¹³ are performed. These songs are sung by women from the bride's side poking fun at the *baaratis* (bridegroom's family, relatives and friends) (Palmer, 1994; Henry, 1975). The domestic space, however, also acquires different meanings for different women in the house, say, a *bhu*/daughter-in-law, a *beti*/daughter, and a *saasu*/mother-in-law. In the following sections, we try to understand how the meanings of home change as a young girl/woman gets married and migrates from her natal home to her patrilocal home.

The rite de passage of *Beti* to *Bhu*

Women from a young age are prepared for multiple present and future roles: of a daughter, a *bhu*, a mother, and so on. A young girl understands that she is a prospective *bhu* of some other house. She is constantly told and prepared for this rite de passage. The responsibilities, roles, and behavioral expectations for both roles are different. After a daughter is 'married off' to another house, she becomes a *bhu*, and when she returns, she performs the role of a *beti*. The following sections discuss the complexities associated with both the roles and the domestic spaces.

***Peer*, the natal home**

The house a girl is born into becomes her *peer* as soon as the marital rituals are over. During the time spent from her birth till the marriageable age, she is constantly prepared to be a *bhu*/daughter-in-law, *lugaai*/wife, and a *maa*/mother. A girl in this sub-region is often reminded that she is the "*paar ki chidi*" (literally, bird of the other house). Within this household, a girl is socialized into embodying the norms of "being a girl." She is expected to conform to the ideal of an *acche ghar ki ladki*¹⁴, by adhering to socially prescribed codes of conduct, both in her natal home and, even more rigorously, in her marital home. Simone de Beauvoir's (1949, 2011) popular

¹²*Seethnas* are a local version of the *gaari* or *gaali* wedding songs. One of the local *seethnas* of the region goes like this: *aadhi roti khand bina, saara janeti raand bina*. In this *seethna* song, the bride's side is making fun of the *baaratis*, that, they are so useless that no one amongst them is worthy of having a wife.

¹³These songs are risqué in their nature and function to break ice between the *baaratis* (bridegroom's side) and the *gharaatis* (bride's side).

¹⁴ It is a proverbial phrase which literally translates as, 'a girl from a good house'. The connotations are about an ideal girl who is 'decent', 'modest', and follows the prevalent gender norms.

statement, "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman", is pertinent here (p. 357). In the Indian context, girls from a younger age are socialised to be 'good daughters', 'good wives', and 'good mothers' (Dube, 2001). This happens through regular suggestions and rebukes to alter one's behavior. Moreover, girls observe their mothers closely as they perform their respective roles. This observation encompasses taking note of their mothers' attire, demeanor towards men (within the household and outside), and the nature of their domestic and social responsibilities. Through these everyday practices, girls internalize the gendered expectations associated with the ideal of 'a good girl/woman'. It is also at this house where a girl starts learning that she is lesser than her brother. Dube (2001) documents a Telugu saying, according to which, "bringing up daughter is like pouring water in sand" (p. 90).

Saasro, the patrilocal residence

Post-wedding, the newlywed women of the region migrate to the *saasro* (or *sasuraal* in Hindi), making marriage one of the most significant contributing factors to migration (Palriwala & Uberoi, 2012). *Saasro* is the patrilocal residence of the *bhu*. Most often, the *bhus* live with their husbands' parents. The husband may live with his wife at his parental home or away in a town or city for livelihood purposes. The household members may include *bhu's* father-in-law, mother-in-law; younger unmarried sister-in-law/s, brother-in-law/s, and if married, their wives; grandfather-in-law (*daad-susro*), and grandmother-in-law/*(daadas)*. Being a *bhu* involves adhering to a set of prescribed and proscribed behaviors. Some of the norms, values, and roles expected of a *bhu* are internalized during her upbringing, while the rest are acquired and reinforced at her *saasro*. If she deviates—whether intentionally or unintentionally—from these explicit or implicit expectations, she is promptly made aware of her transgression, often through verbal or non-verbal cues. One may be rebuked as "*bhu-beti ke lakkhan seekh le*" ("learn the mannerism of the daughters and daughter-in-laws"). Essentially, learn to be a 'woman'.

According to D. Jacobson (1989), the lives of Hindu women revolve around following the rules of deference, avoidance, and social distance. As per the expectations of elders, a *bhu* must be 'respectful' (read reverent and submissive), and to the younger ones, she must be caring like a mother. 'Respect' to elders is demonstrated by a *bhu* by a certain kind of deference. This is expressed by common informal dictums such as "*kabhi bhi saamne na bolna*" (not saying no to elders, and never arguing with them). A *bhu* must never raise her voice unless with children whom she may shout at or, all the greater, strike. Previously, as Raheja and Gold (1994) note, the *bhus* must carry a *ghunghat* (veil) in front of their husbands as well. Although it has become uncommon for women in the present milieu to carry a veil in front of their husbands.

Despite some change over time, the *saasro*¹⁵ largely remains a constricting and suffocating space for the *bhus* and, therefore, the *peer* is often a respite. At her *peer*, the *bhu*, the *beti* here, may be consulted in household matters¹⁶, offering her a sense of importance and limited agency. She is generally free to engage in work as per her preferences and remains largely unsupervised. Additionally, wearing a veil is typically relaxed, allowing her some ease and personal freedom in her natal environment. However, the *bhu* can visit her *peer*, often at the mercy of the in-laws, and, at times, only after persuasions and pleadings by her family. The daughter who is not expected to dress up like a *bhu* at her *peer*¹⁷ enjoys much more independence than at *saasro*¹⁸. While travelling to her *peer* (natal home), the *bhu* removes her bindi and wears no or minimal ornaments. She maintains this unornamented state throughout her stay at her natal home.

Although a *bhu* may dress well and wear ornaments regularly, she must still observe *olah/purdah* at her patrilocal home. Over time, the practice has loosened its grip in the present milieu, yet at the very least, a *bhu* is expected to cover her head with a *chunni*¹⁹. The first author's grandmother continued wearing a veil before her granddaughter's husband till her last breath. Among other things, an *olah* and a *chunni* are significant to the idea of a woman. One is rebuked either for not wearing one or for not carrying it properly. Older women may say, "*sir pe pallo to le le besharam*" (oh shameless woman! Cover your head at the least).

When the *beti* prepares to leave the natal home, she prepares to be a *bhu* again. The second author wears a new or relatively new dress; adorns

¹⁵It is intriguing to note here that the husband's natal home (in relation to himself) is considered 'natural' and is not called as *peer* but *ghar/home*. Although his wife's home is *saasro* (the same word as used for husband's house) for him, where he must not stay for long, as it would lower his status as a *bateu/son-in-law*.

¹⁶However, at times, a married *beti's* acts and suggestions may be looked at as 'interference' and 'transgressions', especially so after the marriage of her brother/s. This way, the *beti* is never a full member of the natal home before or post her marriage.

¹⁷One of the proverbs goes like this: *peer beti gudad lapeti*. *Gudad* or *gudada* is a traditional slim mattress which is made of worn-out cotton clothes. *Gudada* or smaller *gudadi* are considered as simple and humble items of the house. According to this saying, the *beti* at her *peer* may even remain as simple as—figuratively—wearing a humble *gudada*.

¹⁸Janaki Abraham's study (2010) concludes similarly. Although both the patrilocal and natal homes are domestic spaces, however, women experience a different sense of agency in them.

¹⁹ A thin cloth used by women to cover the upper parts of the body.

gold ornaments; and applies a streak of *sindoor*²⁰, among other signifiers of being a married woman. On her return, she is expected to press the legs of her mother-in-law²¹, who, in return, blesses her. In the present house, the first author's mother was always blessed by her mother-in-law, orally, as "*seeeli ho... sapooti ho... bhodh suhagan ho, teri maa ka jaaya jivanta rho*" (May you have excellent health and bear male children! May your husband have a long life! May your mother's children live long!). As observed in the aforementioned blessing, a *bhu* is burdened with providing the family a male heir. A mother of boy/s is valued among kin and the society at large. Upon giving birth to the first male child, a *bhu* feels relieved. Often, a woman having a girl child/children keeps conceiving until she has at least a baby boy.

At *saasro*, a *bhu* develops a heightened awareness of time, her body, the presence of men, and the consequences of her actions and of others. An ideal *bhu* must not wake up late; if someone does so rarely, it is hidden from the neighborhood. This is done to save the family from embarrassment. A *bhu* is expected to stay aware of her body even in her sleep. Hence, she keeps adjusting her clothes to appear 'decent'. She negotiates living with other men in the new family, her father-in-law, and her husband's brothers. In order to avoid confronting each other, the *bhu*s and the men of the household develop a unique kind of communication. *Khakhara*, or a fake coughing, is one of the ways a typical father-in-law conveys his presence, and especially so during the night. This way, the *bhu* receives the signal and withdraws herself from that space (say, common-use spaces like lavatories) and waits till the male member vacates. *Bhus'* relations with the older men in the patrilocal home are characterised by avoidance, submission, and effacement of the self.

Predominantly, it is women who bear the responsibility of avoiding and disregarding the gaze and behaviors of men. It is commonly believed that if a woman is subjected to sexual advances, the responsibility to exercise restraint lies with her. This is because men are perceived to be "naturally shameless". This is often expressed by women of the sub-region, saying, "*aadmi ki to jaat hi isi hai*" (the tribe of men is like this only, promiscuous). The women have to perform as modest and sexless beings. A *bhu* cannot risk being 'caught' in any amorous act, for instance, an embrace with her husband. An innocuous act like this would be enough to invite a rebuke from the mother-in-law, whereas her husband goes unscathed. The *bhu* may be taunted as a "*bigdedi*" (immoral character).

²⁰*Sindoor*, a red vermilion powder, is one of the important markers of marital status for Hindu women of the region.

²¹Additionally, as a mark of deference, the *bhu* is expected to offer a *teel* (cloth gift) on behalf of her *peer*.

Ironically, a woman has two homes, yet no home. A *bhu* may be compelled to go to her natal home in a conflict situation. After the *bhu* arrives at her natal home, the natal family faces significant social pressure to send her back to her 'real home', the *saasro*. The predicament of being a woman is expressed through a Hindi proverb as "*na ghar ka na ghaat ka*" (neither here, nor there). Essentially, the *bhu*, in the present field settings, experiences what may be called as "classic patriarchy" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 278). "[C]lassic patriarchy" refers to a kind of patriarchy where a young woman enters into a patrilocal residence after marriage as a "dispossessed individual" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 279).

Part II

Analysing pre- and post-COVID-19 body dwellings

Space is not available to each one of us equally. The categories such as caste, class, race, gender, and sexual orientation manifest, among other ways, spatially. Public spaces such as streets would be used differently by a black person, a woman, a Dalit, an upper caste man, and so on. Similarly, as in the classic patriarchal contexts such as the present one, the domestic space is not democratic.

Employing body maps, this section attempts to assess the usage of the domestic space²² by the *bhu* and the *susro* in the pre- and post-COVID-19 times. The maps depict the patterns and density of body dwellings of the *bhu*. The pre-lockdown map (Fig. 1) suggests that the *bhu* had greater access to various areas of the house and could move between them more frequently. As seen in the maps, these areas include the open spaces of the verandah and the chowk. The lockdown period body map (Fig. 2) shows that the *bhu* spent most of her domestic time in the inner house, the kitchen and her room. The *bhu* recalls the lockdown period as follows:

The lockdowns coincided with a hot summer, and as Papa (father-in-law) was at home most of the time, I could not access the open spaces. Papa used to sit in the verandah the most. Thus, I could not take a walk in the chowk, nor sit in the verandah to get some fresh air.

Along with this, there was an ever-increasing burden of domestic work and care on her and the mother-in-law. The *bhu* notes:

When everyone is at home, the volume of work increases significantly. More tea is prepared, and thus more cups are to be washed. Additionally, my freedom is curtailed when Papa (father-in-law) is present. I

²²A: *Baithak*/Guest room/men's space; B: Another room, generally vacant; C: Room used for storage purposes; D: Authors' room; E: *Rasoi*/Kitchen; F: Toilets and Bathroom; G: Hall; H: Chowk and Verandah

cannot perform household tasks of my choosing, at my convenience, or in my preferred manner.

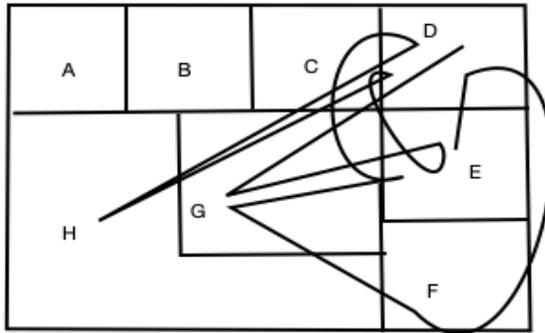


Fig 1. Pre Covid body map

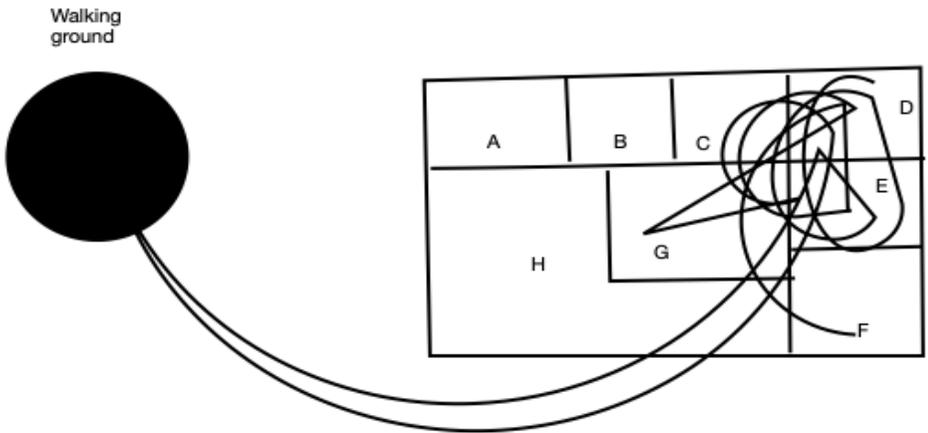


Fig 2. Lockdown period body map

For instance, I must take a palla²³ while sweeping the floor. Further, I cannot listen to the music while doing household work. Wearing a chunni makes me feel particularly sweaty and hot during the summer months. A bhu is always conscious of the susro, who may occasionally enter the hall and, infrequently, the kitchen. During these visits, he may question me about, for instance, whom I am talking to on the phone and the reasons for the length of the

²³ While an *olah* covers the face, the *palla* covers only the head.

conversation, etc. With the increasing presence of susro at home, there are greater chances of encroachments upon a bhu's privacy.

As is visible through the body maps, the dwellings of the *bhu* altered with the lockdown. With or without COVID-19, she dwelt in the space D, her room. Also, the Kitchen (E) was visited more during the COVID-19 period. Owing to the ever-increasing presence of the father-in-law, the semi-and open spaces of Hall (G), Verandah, and Chowk (H) were less visited during the lockdowns.

Discussion: COVID-19 and the *bhu*'s agency

Owing to the presence of the male authority figure, the father-in-law, the *bhu* largely remained inside the inner quarters of the house and mostly in her room. Being confined inside the house for long hours not only brought discomfort to the *bhu* but also reduced her agency over the home space. With the COVID-19 lockdowns, the father-in-law, who otherwise avoided the 'women's spaces,' visited them for brief durations. These spaces included the hall and, sometimes, the kitchen²⁴. This way, the "sanctuaries" and "refuge spaces" (Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 1999) of the *bhu* became threatened.

However, it was during the pandemic only that the *bhu* began to explore new spaces away from her domestic environment, a walking ground and a private school. Intriguingly, the COVID-19 crisis catalyzed a significant change in *bhu's* life. As her living space (Dube, 2001) at home became increasingly constrained, the *bhu* sought to establish a 'home away from home' in these new environments, finding a sense of freedom and agency.

In the pre-COVID-19 times, the *bhu* did not go out for evening walks, but it was towards the end of the first lockdown period that she successfully negotiated for outward mobility with the assistance of her husband. A *bhu* going out of the house, more so, for leisure activities such as walks, is a small act of resistance for the region in focus. In the present sociocultural milieu, leisure comes naturally to men. The women seeking leisure and pleasure are called out as 'bad women'. A woman who enjoys leisurely and recreational activities, say, going to the market frequently, eating at stalls, loitering, having unrigorous conversations with neighbourhood women, etc, is considered immoral and irresponsible. In colloquial terms, she is not a "*ghar bandhudi*" (one who makes the home). Alternatively, she is the "*ghar ujadu*" (one who destroys the home). In contrast, men are often found playing cards, loitering, chatting, smoking, drinking, and engaging in other leisurely and pleasurable activities without judgments by their family members or neighbours.

²⁴ However, the father-in-law never visited the *bhu*'s room, located downstairs.

Soon after the second COVID-19 wave, the *bhu* joined a private school as a primary teacher. Moving out of home for teaching was another challenge that the *bhu* faced. The father-in-law felt embarrassed at the hands of his relatives for "sending the *bhu* outside for a few thousand rupees". To note here, a *bhu* is a living and walking embodiment of honor for the whole family, and protecting the same involves following various prescriptions and proscriptions. The *bhu* succeeded in resisting the pressure from her in-laws and continued teaching at the school. Recounting the school experience, she says:

The job hardly pays me any money, but at least something. Moreover, I find greater freedom outside the home where I do not have anybody to tell me things—that I did not do this right or did that thing wrong. Despite being a low-paid, temporary private school teacher, I feel valued. I feel important when parents of young students listen to me eagerly in the PTM (Parent Teacher Meeting).

CONCLUSION

With the small acts of everyday resistance (Scott, 1989), as described in the previous sections, the *bhu* is trying to make 'a room of one's own' (Woolf, 2004) in the domestic sphere and beyond. Further, borrowing from bell hooks (2015), dwelling at the patrilocal residence can be argued as "homeplace"-making. For hooks (2015), a homeplace represents a space characterized by love, care, nurturance, and dignity, contrasting sharply with the external world marked by racism and oppression. In this way, homeplace-making is also about becoming an agent, albeit in a particular space/s only. The *bhu* is attempting to make her patrilocal residence a homeplace through her 'small rebellions', such as transcending the domestic space for leisure and work. Thus, such actions contribute to the making of homeplace, both within and beyond the confines of the home. Home, therefore, may be conceived as "fluid" (Blunt & Dowling, 2022, pp. 27-28), encompassing not only physical dimensions but also mental and emotional aspects (Lal & Kumar, 2007). Finally, the 'home' for the *bhu* is a dwelling-in-progress.

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