

RESEARCH ARTICLE



OPEN ACCESS

Received: 02-09-2024

Accepted: 30-12-2024

Published: 12-02-2025

Citation: Anshuman A, Bhairannavar K (2025) Pandemic Geographies: An Ethnographic Enquiry into the Dynamics of Everyday Space During Covid-19 in India. Indian Journal of Science and Technology 18(3): 245-257. <https://doi.org/10.17485/IJST/v18i3.2824>

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Funding: None

Competing Interests: None

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Published By Indian Society for Education and Environment ([iSee](https://www.isee.org/))

ISSN

Print: 0974-6846

Electronic: 0974-5645

Pandemic Geographies: An Ethnographic Enquiry into the Dynamics of Everyday Space During Covid-19 in India

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Abstract

Objectives: To understand the notion of space/place and landscape in the context of mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic using a comparative analysis of a metropolitan city and a suburban town. **Method:** A mobile auto-ethnographic methodology was deployed to generate data by the first author during his travel on the 14th and 15th of June 2020, from his residence in New Delhi to Purnea - a sub-urban town in Bihar in the eastern part of India.

Findings: Social distancing and contact tracing shaped a new spatial reality in the city of origin, the destination town and the mediating mobile spaces of transit. Mobility of people while regulated and channelized, opens new ways of making sense of space/place and landscape. Cab service providers in the metropolitan city of Delhi negotiated the pandemic induced geography of city-space through the abstract space of maps and routes. People on the train formed social bubbles to evade contact with the fellow travelers. The relationship between the metropolitan city and the small town was redefined. The small towns viewed metropolitan cities with suspicion, disdain and fear where bodies were seen as potential virus carriers that had to be contained and quarantined. The sub-urban station authorities followed stricter norms to manage the movement of potential infected bodies. Family members stigmatized and dissociated with the moved-in body through quarantine at home. The study reveals how people react to changes in space and movement, and give new meanings to it during an epidemic outbreak. **Novelty:** The study contributes to the literature on COVID-19 by focusing on mobility and movement during the pandemic between two locations of different scales and regions, and the dynamics that unfold.

Keywords: Everyday space; Mobility; India; COVID-19

1 Introduction

The study focuses on the changes that were brought about by the coronavirus and their impacts on space, mobility, and the everyday life of people after the opening of the

first phase of lockdown in June 2020. It attempts to understand what happens to the notion of space/place and landscape when mediated by mobility, a process that was largely curtailed during this time. In doing so, it also brings out the relationship between metropolitan cities and small towns in the pandemic-stricken country. The data is generated using an auto-ethnographic method during the first author's travel from his residence in Kalyan Vihar, Delhi, the capital city of India, to his paternal family home in Purnea, Bihar, in the eastern part of India, 1352 km away, on 14 and 15 June 2020. The spatial movement between the metropolitan city of Delhi and the suburban town of Purnea was documented in three phases of travel between the origin and the destination, each dealing with a specific set of changes that arose due to the situation.

The study follows these three phases of movement to unpack the relationship between space, mobility, and the pandemic. The first section of the paper deals with routes and modes of travel taken in Delhi from the first author's residence to the New Delhi Railway Station. It compares the claims made by the app-based interface of the cab company booked for the ride and the ground reality of made-secure city space. Further, this section looks at the crucial elements that made up the landscape of the railway station. The second section documents the train journey between New Delhi and Katihar (the station to deboard for Purnea). This section elaborates upon the measures taken by individual passengers and the railway authorities to cope with the fear of transmission in the train compartment. It highlights how the measures undertaken by passengers have changed the spatial performance in the train compartment in comparison to the journeys before the pandemic.

The third section focuses on the landscape of Katihar station and Purnea in response to the pandemic and bodies that travel, to contrast between spaces of origin and destination and the regulative measures in metropolitan and provincial town railway stations. Furthermore, the third section expands the narrative, positionality and reflection of the first author concerning home quarantine.

The study contributes to the field of geography by articulating ethnography and space amidst a global phenomenon that has produced an astounding impact on everyday life. Existing studies on COVID-19 largely focus on exclusion of people from public spaces, isolation and social consequences on interactions, and the extent of disease spread. Studies inquiring about mobilities are rare. The study adds to the existing body of literature by focusing on what it meant to move in the height of the pandemic between two locations of different scales and regions, and the dynamics that unfolded in this process. The study captures the public response to the pandemic by analysing behavioural attributes of people on the move, comparing administrative preparation at metropolitan and regional scales, and examining the lived experiences of quarantine homes in small town India in response to the people/bodies that moved in from the big city.

The national lockdown imposed as a response to the virus transmission prescribed 'social distancing,' which meant avoiding physical proximity to people in public spaces. The spread of coronavirus was managed through social distancing of one body from the other through spatial restrictions to prevent the virus from spreading. As a part of the health management strategy, strict norms of restriction, including complete lockdown and curtailment on mobility, were imposed in countries across the world. These measures transformed the way everyday spaces were imagined.

The pandemic was characterised by a decrease in sociability⁽¹⁾ and ridership⁽²⁾. Public spaces became less engaging⁽³⁾ and marketplaces inhibited a sense of fear⁽⁴⁾. To overcome this challenge, behavioural nudges⁽⁵⁾ and creative adaptations⁽⁶⁾ were undertaken. Home spaces were put to multiple usages⁽⁷⁾ and they were perceived as safe havens against viral infection. As such, mobility, public space, and home spaces emerge as the key concepts in the geographical debate on the pandemic. at the centre of geographical debates on the pandemic.

1.1 Mobility

Mobility is a core geographic concept that deals with space and spatiality of movement. Mobility brings together territory, space, place, scales, and networks and provides a renewed conceptual framework to investigate geographical phenomena. Mobility plays a crucial role in shaping human interaction, transportation systems, and spatial organization. Scholars engaging with the pandemic and mobility have raised concerns regarding fear of infection, stigma, and changes in transportation patterns. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted mobility, leading to reduced social interactions and increased anxiety among mobile human bodies due to the fear of contracting the virus. The pandemic further caused a decline in ridership and a shift towards private transportation. Studies show that this affected sociability, shared mobility, transportation choices, and the relationship between individuals in public spaces.

Shokoohyar et al.⁽²⁾ discussed the emerging challenges and opportunities in the context of mobility during the pandemic. The authors highlight that the fear of infection and the need for social distancing have led to a decline in ridership and a shift in preferences toward private modes of transportation. This pattern was common across car-sharing, bike-sharing, and public transportation. Kokkola et al.⁽¹⁾ discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sociability of people travelling on public transport in Amsterdam. Through a qualitative research approach, the authors gained insights into the experiences and perceptions of public transport during the pandemic and stated that the fear of contracting the virus led to increased anxiety

and reduced social interactions among passengers.

The studies have also associated the pandemic with discrimination, as in the case of Chinese citizens in the United States⁽⁸⁾, the econometric causality nexus between mobility and COVID-19 indicators⁽⁹⁾, and migrant experiences and immobility⁽¹⁰⁾. However, these are centred on Western contexts, and a dialogue engaging a densely populated developing country is crucial in preparing the world for future anomalies. This paper extends the conversation of mobility by talking about nuances of sociability, shared experience, and challenges that arose in India with regards to the pandemic.

1.2 Public space

Public space represents visible and accessible spaces within the city claimed by institutions or people in action. Public space is a necessary element of human existence, providing channels for movement, nodes for communication, and common areas such as public squares, city parks, public streets, sidewalks, and plazas. These spaces represent the stage on which communal life unfolds and where the ebb and flow of human exchange takes place.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on public spaces. Marketplaces transformed into sanitized and less welcoming environments. Public space usage decreased to prevent viral transmission, and this led to decreased cultural functions. Sepe⁽⁴⁾ puts forward the view of 'tactical urbanism,' which promotes the use of temporary interventions to transform public spaces and make them more adaptable to changing needs. This concept is relevant here as the pandemic raised concerns about the safety and usability of these spaces, which otherwise play a crucial role in promoting social interaction, physical activity, and mental well-being.

Eck et al.⁽³⁾ argued that COVID-19 led to the death of public space, especially in the context of marketplaces, as marketplaces were closed or remained under strict restrictions owing to the preventive regulation by authorities. The authors presented a ground situation of a Dutch marketplace in Valkenswaard, regarded as unsafe and something that transformed into a 'sanitized' and 'prickly' public space, resulting in losing its status as a public infrastructure. Similarly, nuances of public spaces have witnessed a change of perception⁽¹¹⁾ and differential use of public space⁽¹²⁾ that have evolved from social distancing measures and lockdowns.

James⁽⁵⁾ discussed the influence of the pandemic on human behaviour in public spaces and explored the impact of COVID-19 on public spaces from a behavioural geography perspective. He highlighted the idea of 'behavioural nudges,' such as changes in the arrangement of pathways and seating, and stated that individuals become more conscious of maintaining physical distance and avoiding crowded areas which is a major implication for the design and management of public spaces.

Maddrell et al.⁽⁶⁾ explored the multiplicate ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic shaped people's spatial and temporal experiences. The pandemic space-times have created new spatial boundaries and temporal rhythms through the imposition of lockdowns, travel restrictions, and social distancing measures. These new spatial and temporal realities created disparities in access to space and time, with marginalized groups often experiencing more intense and constrained conditions.

Public spaces were at the centre of discussion among scholars, policymakers, and administrators throughout the pandemic. The pandemic led to closures and restrictions, reduced community interaction, and re-designing of public spaces. The paper deals with these transformations through the lens of management and surveillance where public spaces are highly regulated to decrease the spread of the virus.

1.3 Home Spaces

Home is a multi-dimensional concept that incorporates the understanding of house, family, haven, self, gender, and journeying. Geographers take a structural approach to the question of home at an intimate scale. Their detailed analysis of the physical features and social codes that organize our experience of the home reveals the cultural meanings of our living spaces. They indicate that our understanding and sense of home have been deeply engrained through cultural patterns. The geographies of homes offer evidence by closely examining every object and surface in a typical family living room and articulating the set of rules and restrictions that go along with each artefact.

The production of home spaces was altered amidst the COVID-19 crisis. Signorelli et al.⁽⁷⁾ examined the significant changes in the way living spaces were utilized. The authors mention that the increased time spent at home has led to individuals and families adapting to remote work, online learning, and limited social interaction. They argue that home spaces have transformed into multifunctional spaces by serving the needs of offices, schools, and recreational areas.

The authors regarded the perception of homes as safe havens and suggested inculcating the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic in shaping future housing policies and practices. Additionally, scholars have looked into the aspects of the impact of remote learning from home⁽¹³⁾, closed space (re)design⁽¹⁴⁾, and the need for occupational therapy⁽¹⁵⁾ to ensure healthy, safe, and sustainable built space. However, these works have given less attention to the home as a quarantine space that was at the

center of the Covid crisis. It is important to note that the individual's home became a fortress - the safest place to be, to escape the spread of the virus.

The paper deepens the inquiry to understand how the safety of the home was negotiated to accommodate the traveler who returns home with the potential of breaching the safety nets. The paper brings forward the intersections of the mobile person and the locked away home. In this context, home quarantine became an important strategy for keeping the virus away, which has received the least attention from scholars. The paper uses the concepts of mobility, public space, and home spaces to narrate the transformations brought about by the pandemic. It contributes to the field of geography by producing an ethnographic insight into the conditions that gave a new meaning to space, place, mobility, and landscape.

2 Methodology

The study is based on the mobile auto-ethnographic⁽¹⁶⁾ method to bring out the spatial aspects of home and public space in everyday life⁽¹⁷⁾. In this method, the researcher's lived experience 'on the move' becomes the primary source of data. The first author's journey is grounded in active self-reflexivity, where he attempts to bring the experience of traveling at the height of the pandemic to create observational, participative, interactive, reflexive, and experiential data useful for the study. Auto-ethnography⁽¹⁸⁾ is more than auto-biography as it involves self-identity along with cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues to create lived experience during the travel. The auto-ethnographic method used in the paper runs in the same vein as the approach that relies on constructing narratives around pandemic-induced mobility. Auto-ethnographic analysis was the most suited method to generate data, as other qualitative methods like interviewing and focussed group discussions were not possible owing to the COVID restrictions. The first author documented the journey from his residence in Kalyan Vihar, Delhi, to his paternal home in Purnea, Bihar, in the eastern part of India on 14-15 June 2020. The data was generated in the form of written reflections, audio recordings, photographs, videos, and GPS location which was later analyzed through reflexive engagement. The method facilitated in co-creation of knowledge as a result of the confluence of the experiences and emotions of the people, environment, and the researcher. The data is generated based on the first author's experience of traveling during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is contrasted through reflection on previous journeys on the same route.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 To the Railway Station

Travelling from residential quarters in Kalyan Vihar to New Delhi Railway Station involved booking a cab using a GPS-enabled cab service, interacting with the driver, traversing through the urban spaces of Delhi, negotiating with the renewed landscape of the railway station, and boarding the train. These activities, although mundane, reverberate essential geographical reflections on mobility, landscape, and spatial experience of the pandemic. The safety measures undertaken in response to the coronavirus changed the everyday dynamics of city space. The cab driver who was booked through the app found it difficult to reach the pick-up location as there were notable changes in the city traffic behaviour.

The railway station had an entirely new set of signs, symbols, and announcements - making it a more regulated space. The mechanised behaviour of people boarding and de-boarding the train too, was shaped by the regulatory changes brought up by the pandemic management response. The mundane city spaces looked different and deserted. This section investigates the reconfigured spatial aspects of the city spaces of New Delhi based on the experience of the first author's ethnographic account of boarding the train from New Delhi Railway Station.

3.1.1 Booking a Cab

Booking a cab involves pre-said company assurances of a safe city movement. This was heightened during the pandemic. The interface of the app promised '5 layers of safety,' which included mask recognition technology ensuring that the drivers always wore a mask before starting a ride, regular temperature checks integrated into the app, the car being cleaned and sanitized before every ride, fumigation of cars thrice a week, and protective screens between the driver and riders. At the same time, only one person could travel in the 'mini' category of the cab, which earlier accommodated up to four. These assurances aimed to build up confidence amongst the riders to encourage travel without restraint.

The estimated time of arrival, after making the booking, indicated that the cab would reach the pick-up point in five minutes. However, it took 15 minutes for the cab to arrive. The interaction with the driver began with him reasoning the delay as below.

Sir, it was extremely difficult to reach your place. Google Maps ditched me as the route suggested by it was closed. I had to take a U-turn and an extra kilometer to reach here. Because of the fear of the virus spread, several routes are closed, and this

information has not been updated on Google Maps. This creates a lot of ruckus for people like us who have to travel through narrow streets and lanes to reach our destination. Reaching your place was even more difficult because of the same reason. (Cab Driver, Kalyan Vihar Parking, 14th June 2020)

Right from the beginning of the journey, there were changes in navigation and mobility. The restrictive measures, like blocking roads, brought about by local authorities in the physical space had made drastic changes that contrasted the navigation routes in the digital space. Restricting mobility became a tool to isolate localities and ensure a secured space to minimize the potential transmission of the virus on the part of the city management.

In this context, Silva ⁽¹⁹⁾ emphasizes ‘networked urban mobilities,’ that occur in local and highly connected spaces. He argues that urban spaces are increasingly shaped by mobile technologies. However, scholars have argued that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the development of new forms of hybridity in cities ⁽²⁰⁾. Hybrid spaces ⁽²¹⁾ became the site of appropriation and creativity during the pandemic to coordinate urban life, manage mobility, and control the spread of the COVID-19 virus. This is evident from the above discussion where public spaces of the city (physical concrete space) and the interface of navigational apps (digital ephemeral space) underwent substantial changes during the pandemic. Thus, the hybrid physical-virtual space ⁽²²⁾ saw new material assemblages ⁽²³⁾ through security protocols and mobility patterns due to differential navigational routes.

3.1.2 The Cab Journey

This section focuses on roads as an essential component of city space mobility documented through traveling in the cab to the railway station. Travel data collection is an indispensable method for understanding city spaces, landscapes, and infrastructure ⁽²⁴⁾. It gives us a comprehensive idea of the lived experience of the city. Travelling in a cab revealed a different aspect of the city during the COVID-19 crisis.

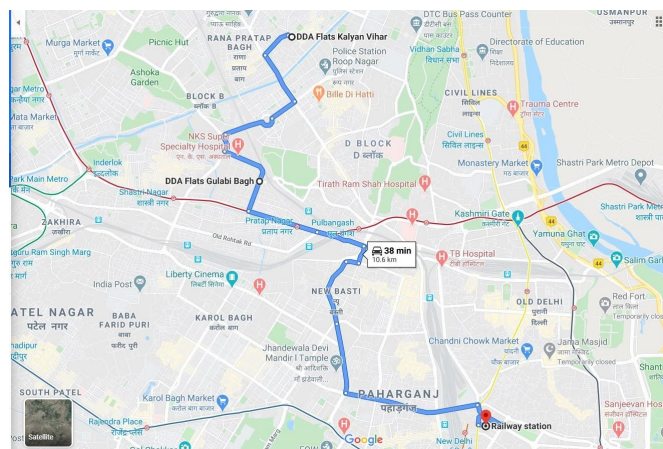


Fig 1. Cab travel route Source: Google Maps

The journey took less than the estimated time owing to the manoeuvres by the driver on the road. These included violating the speed limit and skipping the traffic lights. The journey had two near-accident cases, signaling the chaos that existed on the roads because of the lack of surveillance of the traffic police and non-functional traffic lights. The following narrative from the driver during the journey narrates the situation on the road.

Many traffic lights in the city are not working. Traffic has been less, but people navigate as per their judgment. However, traffic lights at the major junctions of the city, like the one coming right in front of us, are still functional. The problem is aggravated by smaller routes and densely populated areas. Because of less traffic, people often do not adhere to the traffic lights and that too leads to situations that are prone to accidents. (Cab Driver, 14th June 2020)

Potential accidents and non-functioning traffic lights are a common feature of the traffic system in India. Lack of infrastructure and funds could be attributed to this problem. The situation is aggravated at present due to the focus on the health sector and ignorance of critical infrastructure in peripheral areas. The resounding impact can be seen on the roads of Delhi with navigation and mobility in commotion. Public spaces reflected a sense of fear. People hesitated to travel and avoid physical contact as much as possible, and at the same time, the city management had put strong curbs on movement. The fear of the virus spread, lockdown measures by the administration, and the awareness of people shaped a new spatial reality with a smaller number of people engaging in public spaces. This is reflected in the observation below.

There are fewer people on the roads. This means that the lockdown measures have been effective in restricting the mobility of the people. In general, it takes at least forty-five minutes to reach the railway station from Kalyan Vihar through the same process of booking a cab but today the journey took less than 30 minutes. The city looks divorced from its natural humdrum that makes the city popularly known as ‘Dilwalo ki dilli’ (Trans. ‘Delhi belongs to the large-hearted’). The Marble Market along the Rani Jhansi Road has fewer shops open as people have refrained from buying construction materials due to the reverse migration of labor. The Jhandewalan Devi Temple has no beggars, no flower vendors and a fewer number of visitors. Even the façade of the railway station on the Paharganj side is less crowded with the cab facing no hinderance at the entry gate of the station which generally takes a good amount of time in navigation. The city has lost its fervour as an entity that brought people together and has transformed into a deserted landscape of fear. (Field Notes, 14th June 2020)

The journey to the station gave fruitful insights into the city infrastructure, behavioral aspects, navigational routes, and the impact of the lockdown on the roads and other public spaces of Delhi. The shared experience of the driver and the author reflects information on the changed spatial aspect of the city. City spaces have transformed because of the fear arising out of the transmission of the virus. Despite a smaller number of people accessing public spaces, city spaces were far from reflecting a safe environment, reflected in the lack of surveillance and disjuncture between ground realities and navigational tools.

3.1.3 The Railway Station

Railway stations are important nodes for arrivals into and departures from the city, thereby connecting the city with the rest of the country. The Indian Railways is an important means of mobility that transports a large number of passengers and goods daily. Railway stations (along with airports and bus terminals) formed a crucial point in the COVID-19 management landscape, regulating who enters or leaves the city to counter the disease spread.

The social distancing norms, thermal scanners, and sanitization facilities shed light on the way the railway administration shaped the railway station space in response to COVID-19. Train services were closed indefinitely since the first lockdown. A limited number of train services were restarted after lockdown restrictions were lifted to enable mobility of people who were in dire need to move to their respective destinations



Fig 2. Social distancing promoted through marked circles in the railway station Source: First Author

The railway management included social distancing norms, the use of thermal scanners, and public awareness in response to the health crisis. Measures taken to control the virus spread transformed the landscape of the railway station through additional signs, symbols, and announcements. However, considering the number of cases in the national capital, the management level was below satisfactory, and the casual approach in the management was evident from the field observation given below.

The station has posters of ‘Wearing Mask is Compulsory’ and constant announcements are being made to ensure that people keep the two feet distance and that people sanitize their hands regularly. The circle marks, each at a distance of 4 feet from the other, act as a reference point for people to help them maintain social distancing. Such marks are present throughout the railway station from the entry gate to the check-in point and the platforms. However, people rarely follow these circles that are made to ensure physical distance, and there is no reinforcement of the same by the authorities concerned. It seems as though these marks meant to serve a greater purpose merely exist as a formality. The changes in the landscape of the railway station through signs and symbols have failed to address the situation. At the same time, no thermal scans or checking of the government-mandated Aarogya Setu app is being made by the railway personnel. It feels as if the authority wants the people to take major steps to contain the viral spread while the authorities are playing the facilitating role. (Field notes, 14th June 2020)



Fig 3. A Near Empty Foot over-bridge Source: First Author

The most significant change at the New Delhi Railway Station is the reduced number of people. Only a few trains on selected routes were allowed to run. As such, the number of people coming to the railway station had diminished. The essence of the Indian Railway was lost during the pandemic with restricted mobility, social distancing protocols, restricted entry, and reduced services. This can be understood from the field notes and the figure below.

The absence of hawkers, beggars, small shop owners, and mobile vendors that usually add up to the railway station landscape are all missing. Their absence has changed the dynamics of the railway station which is otherwise imbued with a range of emotions and a diverse mix of people from various regions, cultures, and backgrounds. Platforms used to be lined with vendors selling a wide range of goods, from snacks and beverages to newspapers and toys. Hawkers moved through the crowd, offering items like books, magazines, and local delicacies. The constant buzz of commercial activity, a hallmark of Indian railway platforms is missing. (Field Notes, 14th June 2020)

The railway station reflected spatial changes in the most innate form. The presence of signs and symbols, continuous announcements, and the absence of several groups of people from the premises reconfigured the spatial dynamic. However, the sheer negligence on the part of the authorities contradicted the administrative stand on the professed measures against the pandemic. The above ethnographic vignettes highlight the reconfiguration of routes and spaces of mobility, taking into account the cab service, the roads, driving modalities, and the station space. The next section focuses on the train journey.

3.2 The Train Journey

A train journey involves several people put together within the same space as a train coach. A regular day in an Indian railway coach is a unique and enriching experience that provides insights into the country's rich cultural tapestry, diverse traditions, and the warmth of its people. It's an opportunity to connect with fellow travelers, witness India's changing landscapes en route, and create lasting memories of the journey. The experience is fulfilling as passengers engage with regional cuisines, vendor entertainment, social interaction, and collective experience. The coronavirus pandemic re-shaped these ordinary experiences. Social interaction, eating habits, tea-time discussion, and sharing the toilet facility amongst the passengers saw a plunge. The management, routines, and behavior of travelers were in stark contrast when compared to the pre-corona scenario. In this section, we look at the differential aspects of place-making within the train, at the same time comparing it with the situation that existed before the coronavirus scare transformed shared mobility on the Indian Railways.

3.2.1 Into the Night

The Indian Railways has a fleet of 12,617 long-distance trains running across the length and breadth of the country. However, owing to the restrictions on movement, only 200 special trains are allowed to run during the pandemic. The Rajdhani trains were the only ones running on my route with their timings changed to facilitate regulated passenger movement. The usual pantry car and bedding facilities on the train were not provided as they could be potential objects of transmission of the virus, though the seating remained the same. This sub-section talks about the experience of the first author on the first night of the journey.

The essence of travel, meeting people, developing contacts, and exchanging social and cultural elements in the train journey had subsided because of the fear stimulated by the virus. This is evident from the personal account of travel, where nuances of a changed environment in the train compartment were observed with minimal interaction and altered behavior. People refrained from beginning conversations on issues that otherwise would have invited immense discussion; rather, people were seen as being reserved in their personal space, as seen below.

The young promising actor Sushant Singh Rajput has committed suicide. The news has spread like wildfire shocking the nation and people have been questioning the incident all over the internet. However, on the train, there is no such discussion. This is uncanny as the actor belongs to the same region where the train is headed. Such topics form the basis of conversation in the Indian train travel experience. I can hear that people are listening to this news on their phones but no one has initiated any conversation around these lines. (Field Notes, 14th June 2020)

The above vignette reflects the sense of fear and suspicion among fellow travelers who chose not to talk about the incident of high magnitude involving the actor who represents the aspirations of young migrant men of Bihar. The ordinary space of the train compartment transformed into a territory of fear. It was different from the space of social and cultural interaction that enabled place-making during ordinary train journeys. The passengers had a sense of the dangers that exist in traveling with others and had taken the best possible precautions, which in turn shaped the travel space. Similar nuances of preventive measures were showcased by the administration, where the Ticket Collectors (TC) were also adorned in facemasks, face shields, and gloves as shown in the figure below.



Fig 4. TCs with Protective Gear(left), Soldiers in a Social Bubble (right) Source: First Author

While the fear of the other's body was at a height, not all groups followed social distancing. This could be seen with the Central Armed Police Force (CAPF) personnel traveling to Assam for their duty (Photograph 4, Right). These people exhibited a different form of social interaction wherein they formed a social bubble. The people in the bubble distanced themselves from others and formed a small, exclusive group of people who agreed to limit their social interactions strictly to each other to reduce

the risk of virus transmission. This reflects the management of the COVID-19 virus on the level of a traveling group.

3.2.2 The Next Morning

Mornings are the busiest hours for train journeys as the train approaches the destination stations. At the same time, people on the train begin the day with their daily routines. Hawkers and vendors see this as an opportunity to sell essential items such as toothbrushes, paper soap, gutka, and newspapers. This is the time when the train compartment is most active. People move to and fro in the aisle to seek vacant toilets, washbasins, and other essential items. Owing to the restrictions on the train, only a few food items were allowed by the railway authorities, which included vending tea, water, and the morning breakfast. The attitude of people was as indifferent as the preceding night. The morning saw a reinforcement of people's attitude towards the train space and fellow passengers. This could be understood through the sense of smell, where the day began with people using sanitizers to clean their hands, whose aroma was all over the place in the train compartment. This is evident from the observation made in the morning.

The morning began with the smell of sanitisers in the train compartment. People have also been applying medical lotion to the gate handles and doors to disinfect the potential transmission from these surfaces. Most of the travellers preferred to just lay down on their berths and not get down at all to avoid using toilet facilities and prevent themselves from viral contact. (Field Notes, 15th June 2020)



Fig 5. Morning Routine, Source: First Author

The stations at the destination reflected similar nuances of a changed landscape. Places like Katihar railway station serve as a junction of several transport routes and have a large number of people deboarding the train. As a result of which there are usually a large number of passengers waiting at the gate of the railway coaches to deboard and an even larger number of people on the platform, which include relatives of the passengers, coolies, and people boarding the train to occupy the vacant seats. However, this time the emptiness of the destination platform narrated a different story. The strict measures adopted by the railway authorities at the Katihar Railway Station resonated with the effect of surveillance and organization in the making of the station landscape. Evidence from the field observation sheds light on how the imagination and experience of railway stations are tweaked.

The train enters a vacant platform with a few coolies allowed to serve the alighting passengers. Relatives and acquaintances are not allowed on the platform. There were fewer people to board as the train reached the station 40 minutes earlier than its scheduled time. The absence of people, shops, and vendors narrates an entirely different story. Not only it is different from past experiences, but it varies by a substantial degree from New Delhi Railway Station. (Field notes, 15th June 2020)

This section brings out the differential experience of travelling on the train during the pandemic. It narrates something as ordinary as travelling is a rich spatial phenomenon when looked at through the lens of ethnographic analysis. Furthermore, this section contrasts the spatial experience of travelling before and during the pandemic.

3.3 Destination

This section deals with the existing contrast between metropolitan and provincial management of COVID-19 by authorities and people. It also extends the conversation of the pandemic to home spaces, based on the experience of the first author in the home quarantine.

3.3.1 Exiting the Railway Station

Reaching the destination station brings a sense of joy, an essence of topophilia upon returning. However, arriving from a metropolitan city like Delhi, which was experiencing the colossal impact of COVID-19, involved huge risks as the metropolitan cities became the nodal points of viral spread by passengers who brought the virus from other countries. The perspective of provincial authorities considered every passenger as a potential virus carrier. Adhering to the state advisories, passengers were scanned, filtered, classified, tracked, and mapped based on their travel history and future destinations. This change in the stance of authorities led to a change in the way public spaces were regulated. Management was a crucial aspect in the fight against COVID-19 with well-regulated spaces and awareness among people. In comparison to the New Delhi Railway Station, the use of a larger number of police personnel, efficient signs and symbols, properly laid routes, queues for thermal scanning of passengers, monitoring the health status of passengers through the government-mandated Aarogya Setu app, and enlisting the origin of travel and final destination at Katihar Railway Station showed conviction towards better management of the disease. Adding to it, continuous announcements to lay down instructions and the cooperation by deboarded travellers by following the norms set by the railway authorities made the railway station an extremely regulated space. The authorities channelised mobility and altered the landscape with signs, symbols, sound and surveillance to make the corona management effective. Such provisions were also present at New Delhi Railway Station, but the stricter norms and surveillance at Katihar changed the landscape of the railway station and laid an example of better preparedness and management during a crisis. This is evident in the narrative and the photograph from the field observation given below.



Fig 6. People in Queue waiting to get Thermally Scanned and Enlisted, Source: First Author

Railway Police Force (RPF) personnel are placed at regular intervals. They instruct the deboarding passengers to follow the arrow on the ground and avoid touching railings or stepping on the foot-over bridges. The instructions mean that the passengers must walk down to platform no. 2, cross the railway tracks using the overbridge and get themselves enlisted and thermally scanned at the exit on platform no. 1. Everyone is channelized on this route and thermal scanners are used to detect the temperature. All the people who pass the thermal scan need to enlist their source and destination stations as well as their contact numbers. This is done to quarantine people who have travelled in the same compartment, lest anyone develops symptoms later. Passengers are asked to show the 'green status' in the Aarogya Setu app to proceed further. People who do not have the app are being asked the same questions regarding their health and hygiene that are asked in the app. (Field Notes, 15th June 2020).

The difference in approach in metropolitan and provincial management could be attributed to the different situations of coronavirus transmission in both places. While containment zones and community transmission are the principal areas of

concern for a metropolis like New Delhi, transport routes are the only potential threat to a provincial region like Katihar. Hence, strict regulations and restrictions were the key for provincial states to tackle the present situation. These measures were reflected in the field as well as in this section.

3.3.2 The Home Quarantine

Departing the railway station and heading towards home involves excitement, meeting family and friends or acquaintances coming to receive the traveller at the platform, or bargaining with the local taxi drivers. All of this means an interaction with friendly spaces and people. The experience of the first author, in the following sub-sections, narrates the way these places and people, once taken for granted, changed with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Greetings upon meeting with elders in India involves bowing down and touching their feet as a mark of respect. This ritual is foregone considering the notion of social distancing and physical contact. At the same time, the administration had advised people to follow a seven-day home quarantine. This involved being isolated in the home space and keeping zero or minimal contact with friends, relatives, and peers. This meant a change in the everyday life of people in the house in an attempt to isolate the people coming from affected areas. The first author was also disposed to a similar facility; the excerpt from fieldnotes is given below.

The automatic boot of the car opened, and I was asked to put in my luggage. I was asked to take the rear seat in the car. The customary tradition of touching the parent's feet is foregone to keep physical distance. I sat on the seat adjacent to that of the driver on the rear seat and the journey to my hometown was completed in 40 minutes. I entered the quarantine room prepared for me by my family. This room is a guest room 10 metres away from the house and is put to use during wedding ceremonies or for storing rations. The room was tidied and accessories were placed. (Field Notes, 15th June 2020).

Quarantine as a concept has largely been unknown to people in India. It was only during the pandemic that people got to know about the term and the mechanism to put it into effect. The travelling bodies that returned from the metro cities were associated with disease-ridden and infected bodies. The potential carrier of the virus was stigmatised, and dissociated from common gatherings for the mandated number of days. The act of quarantine destabilized the social relations between the travellers, and their family and friends. This lies in contradiction to the social ties in the smaller towns of India, which celebrate togetherness and promote social ties among people and communities.

A quarantine facility, while transforming the way home spaces are imagined and performed, also provided insights into the positionality of the person. As already discussed in section 5.1, from the narrative of a fellow passenger, the facility of home quarantine is a luxury and is limited to a certain class of people. The management of the pandemic at the level of individual households was thus an enormous task. It is also important to acknowledge that the situation of COVID-19 cases and its transmission rate also shaped the behaviour of people and consequently the space around them. The precautions that were undertaken at the level of the home in metropolitan areas like Delhi, which had a significant number of cases, were much higher than in a provincial town like Katihar or Purnea. The perception of danger from COVID-19 and the measures undertaken to resolve them also depended on the flux of cases, which eventually shaped the locality and the home spaces. A comparison of the first author's experience of making up home spaces in Delhi and Purnea sheds light on this issue, evident from the narrative below.

In Kalyan Vihar [Delhi], the perception of managing coronavirus was to restrict the movement of individuals and avoid public spaces as much as possible. The cab driver facing problems reaching the pick-up point was a result of these measures. While in Purnea, the authorities are working with rigour but the common people's perception of managing the issue is restricted to quarantine. People are seen moving around the city without masks or other protective gear. (Field Notes, 15th June 2020).

This furthers our understanding of the differential management of virus between metro cities and provincial towns, which in turn shape the way home, public and everyday life are imagined and performed. It signifies that in the region where the cases were high, management of the virus was transformed into a burden to the common people. However, in regions where cases were minimal, the authorities took up the responsibility of resisting the virus while the response from the people was negligent. More so, it was only those families having travellers, who had to make quarantine arrangements to protect themselves from the virus.

4 Conclusion

This study has looked into the changes in the spatial dynamics brought about by COVID-19 in everyday spaces through an auto-ethnographic account of mobility. It brought out the issue of what it means to move in the height of the pandemic between two locations of different scales, and the dynamics that unfold in this process. The auto-ethnographic method was used as interviews were difficult because of the sense of fear among people associated with the viral transmission. This study has dealt

with the pandemic geographies of everyday life mediated by mobility. The journey was divided into three parts: reaching the railway station and boarding the train, the train journey, and de-boarding and reaching home, each dealing in explicit ways with the reconfiguration of spaces amidst the pandemic.

In the first part, which talked about booking a cab, the cab journey, and the experience of the railway stations, we see that the social dynamics of ridership⁽²⁾ changed right from the beginning of the journey, as a mode of cab sharing was limited to just one passenger. At the same time, the difficulties faced by the cab driver in reaching the location because of blocked routes reflect a changed mobility pattern in the city. Hence, navigation within the city spaces became an issue as mobility was restricted. This happened because the ground reality was different than the Artificial Intelligence (AI) based city navigation maps as authorities restricted mobility to curb the transmission. Furthermore, the non-functional traffic lights and the driver's manoeuvre on the road represent a lack of surveillance in the virus-hit, near-to-abandoned city. The COVID-19 pandemic also saw the death of public spaces⁽⁵⁾ with limited interaction in the city spaces of Delhi.

Railway stations in metropolitan cities acted as the nodes of transmission and regulation. Tactical urbanism⁽⁴⁾ was implemented by the railway authorities at the New Delhi Railway Station through announcements and symbols such as circle marks and posters to not only create public awareness but also to remind people of the expected behaviour. While the absence of shopkeepers, vendors, hawkers, and beggars added to the pandemic-hit railway station landscape, the lack of authorities to manage travellers' safety precautions was evident.

In the second part of the journey, notable differences occurred within the space of train cabins. The pandemic changed human behaviour⁽⁵⁾ with people trying to minimize contact between the train and the railway platforms and performing social distancing measures. The mundane spaces of the train compartments transformed into a territory of fear. This impacted sociability⁽¹⁾ as people avoided social interaction. New spatial and temporal rhythms⁽⁶⁾ were evident in the journey as people formed a social bubble as a close-knit group to avoid external contact. At the same time, people preferred to let go of their morning routines and chose to remain on their berths to avoid contact. Travelling on the railways was not business as usual, not only from the management point of view but also for the people. Usage of masks, continuous sanitization, restrictive movement and interaction inside the train created a sense of distrust and suspicion among fellow travellers.

In the third part of the journey, which threw light upon deboarding the train and reaching home, a change of hands at administration also reflected changes in the way spaces were regulated in the smaller towns of India. The Katihar Railway Station scrutinized incoming passengers rigorously with more police personnel, signs, symbols, and announcements channelling people onto specific routes. Here every traveller was treated as a potential carrier of the virus, creating a distinct geography of metropolitan fear pertinent to the premises of the small-town railway station. A comparison of provincial and metropolitan railway stations brings out the stark contrast in surveillance and management that shaped the landscape, station spaces, and mobility between departing and arriving passengers.

Noteworthy here is also the relationship between cities and towns. COVID-19 was not a common person's disease originating at home but a virus that had arrived on a plane from abroad in the big city. As such, it redefined the relationship between cities and towns, where towns were averse to the big city, resisting the flow, cutting off the linkages, and regulating travelled/mobile bodies through stricter surveillance and mapping.

Home spaces were put to multiple usages⁽⁷⁾, an alteration that served as a quarantine space and temporary residence to ward off potential transmission. These home quarantine spaces (though classed) and the people quarantined into them were not free of the stigma of carrying the deadly disease and changed how people interacted with them in small-town home/social settings in India. The notion of the home as the safest place to be was at the centre of the coronavirus management strategy, the boundaries of which were to be guarded against the virus. However, the home-returned mobile body breached these safety nets destabilising the safe boundaries of healthy space against viral infection. The quarantine space represented those fears that reconfigured spatial and social relationships in the home.

Altogether, a study on pandemic-induced mobility can help us better prepare for future pandemics. In this paper, we saw a contrast in administrative policy at the metropolis and a sub-urban town. The authors put forward the view that the administration at the metropolitan centres were lacklustre in managing the pandemic while in the town they were prudent. This goes against the contrary viewpoint that cities are better at managing issues such as disease in a developing country like India. This understanding puts the sub-urban towns at a higher pedestal in terms of administrative practices, which can then be an exemplar in disease mitigation, city management, and curtailing impacts of future pandemics.

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