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## Mobility as survival and freedom: Pandemic, Immobility and its implications for women and queer migrants<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*This paper intends to move beyond the common knowledge of how pandemic restricts mobility at large and provokes us to think about those for whom mobility restriction was a way of life much before the coronavirus arrived. Looking at shadow pandemic of gender-based mobility restrictions of women and non-male actors in conservative societies in South Asia, in this paper I argue that social deconstruction of “immobility” is embedded in the process of gendering the pandemic. Drawing from interviews conducted on the Indian immigrants in Germany over a year during and after the global lock down, this paper explores how covid-induced immobility mimics an already established framework of coerced immobility based on gender that acts as a motivation of migration for women and non-male actors at some level. Referring to Ayelet Shachar’s idea of shifting borders, I locate the moral borders at home as a crucial competitor of physical borders of the barbed wire, that often provokes women and non-male actors to take the leap of faith for survival and better livelihood.*

**Keywords:** Covid-19; coronavirus; pandemic; shadow pandemic; mobility; immigration; border; ayelet shachar; supervised mobility; mobility restriction; gender and mobility; gender and migration; gender and pandemic

### Introduction

When covid-19 broke and most of the governments across the world imposed lockdown between and within their countries to make a global lockdown possible for almost half a year in 2020, the pandemic arrived in different forms for different categories of people – especially with reference to how mobility restrictions came with a variety of implications for different communities! Mobility restrictions, or ‘immobility’, as discussed extensively in Biao’s recent work (2020) in relation to the coronavirus pandemic, meant absolutely different things to different people. For some, it was a boon, for some it was a bane, for several others, the implications were apparently indifferent because their lives have been immobile and restricted already even before the pandemic, and for some others, restrictions meant a double jeopardy. In that light, social deconstruction of “immobility” is embedded in the process of gendering the pandemic. Ayona Datta (2020) has grappled with this in her work on cityscapes and gender mobility with far-reaching consequences. Also, located in the discourse of border and social demarcations as Ayelet Shachar points out in her latest work on shifting borders (2021), immobility through the lens of gender especially during a pandemic can be understood with new insights.

Consequently, in this paper, I am interested in those for whom mobility restriction was already a social reality in their everyday experiences even before the pandemic not because they lack

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physical capacity to move, but because they live in socially crippling circumstances. As a matter of fact, for several women and queer people across the world, restricted mobility is a social norm, it has collective sanction and cultural approval.

### *Conceptual Framework*

Patriarchy (Walby, 1989) as a structure of domination is built around the understanding that women's place is at home, in the so-called private sphere. Although women at large regularly contest this structure at different levels in their everyday lives and practices (Palriwala and Uberoi, 2008), the bifurcation between the public and the private is quite strongly embedded in several societies. This divide between the home and the world, as Tagore (1916) called it in his famous novel with the same title (original title in Bangla: Ghore Baire), acts like an invisible border and women and other non-male actors in several cultures are forbidden from crossing that line. Since this already offers the normative structure in several societies, especially in societies in the Global South including the South Asian countries like India, the coronavirus pandemic brought forth a double impact as a consequence of this existing demarcation – one for the sake of gender(ed) performance, another for the sake of health safety. Therefore, echoing Ayelet Sachar's position that border is not a fixed category and both its meanings and impositions keep changing in relation to different contexts, in this paper I will focus on the Indian women and queer people in Germany and discuss how the immobility imposed due to the pandemic meant further impositions on their already restricted lives in the home country.

Mobility restrictions as traditions passed on through moral policing is not new in countries like India, or for that matter several countries across the world continent. Women and girls are regularly monitored at home, they are expected to follow night curfews, the families do not allow them to go out unless in certain specific outfits, and rarely alone. The rationale behind such prohibitions are manifold – that it is unsafe for women and girls to be alone outside, especially in the dark, that they might be raped and molested, that it shows poorly on their characters and the family values instilled in them if they are found 'loitering'. In this connection, Shilpa Padhke et. al (2011) have carried out an interesting work on the women in Mumbai and their access to transport and public spaces as sites of mobility contestations. They locate the term 'loitering' in the centre of discussion and argue that non-purposive strolls are culturally suspicious particularly when it comes to any non-male actor in India; such actions cannot be practiced without resistance from the mainstream conservative society because if one loiters, one is either a potential victim (e.g. women) or a perpetrator (e.g. a transgender).

In that light, mobility restriction lays down a situation where women are prohibited from free mobility in public spaces because those spaces are unsafe and those public spaces continue to remain unsafe because one hardly finds women there. Public spaces as a male-dominated site has ensured that women and other non-male actors are not welcome or comfortable in these spaces. This is so much normalized in the everyday lives in some societies that unless pointed out, the irregularity never crosses our minds.

As much as these restrictions control women's mobility and freedom, it poses similar challenges to other non-male actors too e.g. the queer people. India is still far from decriminalizing homosexuality, especially socially and culturally. Therefore, it is often dangerous for practicing homosexuals to be out at large, to engage into sartorial expressions that demonstrate their gender fluidity or preference or to freely roam and again, loiter – in



public spaces. Consequently, women and queer people are often found to be walking or traveling in groups from one place to another. This serves two purposes – firstly, the collectivity ensures a certain level of safety on the roads and secondly, their peers are often approved of by their families, who view this solidarity also as mutual checks. However, such peer acceptance of the family does not imply they are liberal and accept their children's choices; it is often that the families are ignorant of the intimacies within the peer group and underestimate the impact such solidarities can have on individuals.

Coming to the pandemic-era, its beginning came with a global lockdown – which meant that the women and queer people, who are already disallowed by their families to move freely, are now also prohibited by the government to step out. So coupled with the filial restriction, now they also face state embargo – both joining hands to impose immobility. Such immobility has already triggered domestic violence, denial of access to education, emotional loss due to weakening of solidarity among women and queer people with their peers. We have come across several reports and studies demonstrating how lockdowns have severely affected the way non-male actors navigate socially and exploit social bonds and networks to survive (Taub, 2002). Since freedom of mobility is integral to freedom of expression, among other things, several women and queer people, especially those who felt vulnerable in this format of 'lockdown' living, have already demonstrated helplessness and diminishing survival chances because of the pandemic.

#### *Methodological strategy*

In relation to this, I will explore two typical cases here. This paper is based on the interviews conducted during the pandemic between November, 2020 and October, 2021). During this period, I conducted about 45 interviews with women and queer people from India in Germany. The interviews were structured mainly as long conversations with open-ended questions. The moot point of these interviews was to document migrant stories of pandemic experiences. Through these interviews, I met women and non-male actors sharing their experiences of immobility during the pandemic and found several strands of commonality of experiences. Consequently, this paper is the outcome of those interactions where I argue that social organization of immobility is quintessentially gendered and the pandemic has brought strong consequences for those who are already socially immobile due to pre-existing restrictions.

These two cases are also part of my ongoing project on the pandemic-mobility interface where I focus on the Indian immigrant communities in Germany. In that light, several insights of this paper emerge from my larger project<sup>3</sup>. I arrived at my participants through snowball sampling. I collected primary data through interviews conducted both through digital interface e.g. video calls and face-to-face interviews. Although the original methodology was to conduct ethnography; the lingering effect of the pandemic has ruled out that possibility. Consequently, I replaced ethnography with extensive interviews with semi and unstructured questionnaires, and non-participant observations. Throughout the period of the interviews and interactions, I maintained full disclosure by sharing the consent forms with them. We agreed to maintain

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<sup>3</sup> Project titled: 'Indian High-skilled Migrants in Germany: Transnational Practices and Prospects' funded by Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions, duration: 2021-23).

their anonymity and use only fictitious names and credentials in this paper, including in the project.

### *Cases*

The first case is of a young woman from India who arrived in Germany just after the global lockdown was eased and she was allowed by both the German and Indian government to travel through the air bubble. Let's call her Ira. The second case is that of a gay man from India pursuing his doctoral program in Germany who managed to come back to Germany from his visit to his home town in Kolkata just before the pandemic hit Europe. Let's call him Kabir. Both Ira and Kabir were contacted during the pandemic. From that standpoint, I approached my field digitally, like several other social science researchers during the pandemic, and met these participants only later in Germany, once social distancing was gradually relaxed and both the parties (the researcher and the participants) were fully vaccinated.

I first started talking to Ira when she was still in India. She had already got admission at a German university and was awaiting an easing of the lockdown. Our initial interactions were limited – she would be available for short conversations and small talks. She informed that she lived with her family and there were many people at home so it was difficult to talk at length. During our digital communications, often she would disappear from the video calls abruptly or become unresponsive and shut her video camera. She explained that because of the lockdown, her extended family members are living in the same house; consequently, she did not have privacy to talk freely. This appeared to be a logical explanation although I remain sceptic of her overall demeanor. Later, after she arrived in Germany, we still continued with our Zoom calls, until it became possible to meet onsite. In our onsite interaction I found her to be extremely interactive and engaging, unlike the way she was in India. When asked, she said:

“I would mostly be depressed. My parents never wanted me to come to Germany all alone. They are conservative people – they would hardly allow me to stay the night at a friend's place, forget about moving to another country. But it was my dream to go abroad (sic) and see the world. In fact, my family never wanted me to study so much. So I applied without their knowledge. I was hoping that I will tell them about my decision and quickly be able to come to Germany right after that but then the pandemic happened. So I had to stay back indefinitely, with a family who completely disapproved of my decision to move. They would often scold me, shout at me for applying at universities in Germany without consulting them; my mother tried to talk me out of the entire plan too. Because of the pandemic, I could not go to my best friend's place either – that was my rescue zone (sic) – to avoid my parents and their strict nature, I would often just go to her house and spend time – several of our other friends would join us there too. It is, in fact, in her house that I learnt about this university in Germany that offers interesting programs in my subject.....but with the pandemic and lockdown, no such thing was possible anymore. I felt suffocated – I did not have any assurance when and if at all I will be able to come to Germany and I had no opportunity howsoever to go out of home, even for some time.”

Of all the conversations that I have had with Ira, this one stood out insofar as understanding the social implications of supervised mobility or relative immobility is concerned. It clearly demonstrates that as a woman in India, her experience when it came to mobility and free



movements remained essentially conditional, bounded by a patriarchal bargain where the border could at best be extended till her best friend's house in the neighbourhood. Similar experiences were shared by several other participants insofar as mobility restrictions and friendship solidarities are concerned. It is also interesting to observe that she actually looked forward to the immigration process in the hope that migration would liberate her. From that point, it is perhaps safe to argue that immigration as an experience helped her access some of her freedom, despite the pandemic even in Germany, because she could now dismiss the household border and its socially imposed demarcations. This observation both challenges and reinforces Shachar's idea of shifting border and cartographic dilemma; but before that let me share the second case in point.

Coming to the next case, I met Kabir through one of my existing participants who is a gay-rights activist in Germany and knows Kabir through the solidarity network. Kabir is a graduate student at a university in Berlin and grew up in Kolkata, that happens to be my hometown too. This helped us bond faster, because we both spoke in Bangla. Although I was still a cultural insider while interacting with Ira, with Kabir, the identification was more immediate – we were familiar with each other's neighbourhood and identified a few common friends too. In the first interaction, I learnt that they are an active member of the queer community in Germany and have lived in Germany for three years already – before that, they lived in the UK for pursuing a Master's degree. It was during our first formal interaction and perhaps because of the immediate familiarity, Kabir blurted out even without asking:

“I am so glad I could manage to come back to Berlin before the global lockdown!”

For a researcher, this unprovoked response was visibly pregnant with several possible interpretations; so I decided to probe – “why? What would go wrong if you stayed back with your own family in your hometown during a pandemic?”

Apt came the answer – “Well, for starters, I would not even live to tell you my story!” To this, Kabir paused, took a strong and heavy breath and continued, “My family, although they know I am gay, refuses to acknowledge the fact. They are visibly embarrassed by me and are much relieved that I do not live with them, so that they do not have to explain about me and my demeanour in family functions. They detest my clothing, my gait, my voice. While they are not actively abusive – they have never hit me or anything (sic), but they would rather I stay inside the house or take the family car when I go out while in Calcutta, and not walk around the neighbourhood. They don't want people to gossip about me. So you can only imagine how it would be if I was forced to live with them, in the same house, indefinitely, and not escape anywhere.....as it stands, whenever I visit them, which I have to because they are growing old and my brother is much younger, I hardly socialize with my extended family – I have friends in the city who are like family and I spend time with them. So my parents are my obligations, but my friends are the real source of fresh air whenever I am in Calcutta.....but in Berlin, I can go out, walk around, however I want! That's liberating! I wear my experimental clothes.....so although all these came to a halt because of limited mobility (sic), I could nevertheless breathe in peace at my own room in my WG. Imagine not being able to go out and not being able to stay at home either! I have lived in India during my teenage and already faced strict mobility restrictions. I know how it is to always have embargo.”

*Analysis and Conclusion*

Needless to say, this as a conversation starter ended with extensive discussions on how queer people are often locked inside their houses, by their own families, just to avoid public scrutiny. Kabir also communicated that as a teenager, they were subject to sexual violence on the streets in two Indian cities; after which, their parents would often stop them from late-nights and out-of-town travels. They emphasized that they left India to pursue a Master's degree in the UK specifically so that they could escape such mobility restrictions. It is interesting to observe that although Kabir is anatomically a male (they identify that way and I write this with their full consent) and Ira identifies herself as a heterosexual woman, they are united by the patriarchal domination of male gaze (Manlove, 2007), control over bodies of women and non-male actors (Foucault, 1975) or consequent imposition of territoriality. From that standpoint, biological male is not a privilege in conservative societies unless coupled with heterosexuality as a mechanism for dominating all other sexual categories. Also, like Ira, Kabir too, exploited immigration as a pathway to freedom and mobility – again both contesting and reiterating Shachar's theory that borders are not fixed and often come with preconditions.

What is particularly interesting is Kabir's is not an isolated case but his experiences of coerced immobility and sexual vulnerability in public spaces in India are shared by several other participants in my research. Another participant in my research, Madhusudan (or Mandy as their friends call them) reported that they too were subject to molestation in school and later by a distant relative and they finally escaped "such captivities"<sup>4</sup> only by winning scholarships to study abroad. Mandy currently works and lives in Hamburg, and relies on their friends for community support. In a similar fashion, Rabiya B., a Chennai-based software engineer and also my participant confided that she left her job in India to pursue higher education in Germany after her parents insisted she got married to a boy of their choice against her own will. She further mentioned that her friends already in Germany helped her find a course and an initial accommodation in Cologne so that she could migrate.

What emerges, among other things, is the significance of the feminist networks that the participants exploit for surviving immobility and daring mobility. Scholars like Chandra Mohanty (2013) have written extensively on the transnational feminist solidarities and friendships that often become the only mechanism for sustenance. Even within the context of autonomy and agency of the non-male actors including women (Boyd, 2006), the ability to operationalize mobility is directly contingent upon one's access to support system for infrastructural and often more crucially, emotional resolve. It is interesting to note that transnational feminist network as a conceptual framework finds relevance at the height of a crisis for gendering the pandemic and analyzing im/mobility experiences under exceptional circumstances. Consequently, though forced immobility induced by the pandemic appear to be the new normal for some, for several other people, mobility restrictions were normalized much before Covid-19. Inability to exercise free mobility is not a pandemic-specific situation, it pre-existed Covid-19 but undoubtedly exacerbated during the pandemic. Such shadow pandemics (Datta, 2020<sup>5</sup>) infest our social lives at large and it is imperative that we do not

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<sup>4</sup> A term they used in the interviews

<sup>5</sup> Ayona Datta published and spoke extensively on this in the third session of Corona Conversations: Mobility in a (post)Covid Future, moderated by Amrita Datta, hosted by the Global South Studies Centre, University of Cologne and sponsored by the DAAD. Her session can be found at: <https://gssc.uni-koeln.de/veranstaltungen/webinare/recordings-corona-conversations-exploring-the-future-of-mobility-in-a-post-covid-world#c113924>



isolate these phenomena as singular instances in the epochs in history but universalize the problems. Also, as we witness here and several of my participants shared, including Ira, Kabir, Mandy and Rabiya B., have somewhere welcomed their immigrant status and explored immigration as an escape mechanism to end the mobility restriction already faced at home – indicating that Covid-19 as a pandemic does not only invite certain medical comorbidities that make it more challenging for certain populations to survive the pandemic, but several social comorbidities too (Cohen, 2020). In other words, people who already face several social restrictions in terms of free mobility in different societies all across the world, find it socially more difficult to survive the pandemic than others. From that standpoint, immigration as an experience or migrant as a political and social status that Shachar problematizes in her work, are located at the crossroads of a cartographic dilemma acting as a sword that cuts on both sides.

In this relation, I find Ayelet Shachar's latest work on shifting borders relevant as a theoretical model. Shachar maintains that borders, like humans, can move and with them shift the rights of migrants in relation to the responsibility of state towards them. She locates the rights of the migrants at the epicenter of understanding the shifting nature of borders, and insists that border is no longer limited to the physical spaces but national or domestic borders can now involve extra-territorial stakeholders to redefine the contours of human navigation. Echoing Shachar, I maintain that the immigrants in context and people similar to them are already subject to border control even before they received the immigrant status, thereby subject to multiple restrictions and denial of rights that a cartographic restriction could only accentuate and exacerbate. Taking cue from Shachar, I further argue that health-induced mobility restriction imposed by the state is the extra-territorial entity that reinforces border control for women and queer people in conservative societies who are already living under forced immobility and denial of access to resources (read freedom) enforced by their families who demarcate their mobility threshold and keep redrawing the lines arbitrarily. Therefore, by the time these people are facing the physical border as restraints, they already have experienced mobility control twice at home – once because of their gender, and again because of the pandemic.

From that standpoint, borders are not just shifting, they often multiply. Also, borders are not just physical demarcations, they are embodied in humans as agents of legal and moral authority. Therefore, as much as the police and border control officials control the displaced people and refugees, 'loitering' around the barbed wire, in some societies, families impersonate as the moral police and organize similar control mechanisms. So the bigger question from that perspective is – what happens to people (who are not even migrants, therefore, do not share the potential vulnerabilities) who are facing borders at „home“? It also invites a second question that – does the household pressure end for such people even after immigration? As Shachar too points out, border, one that is moral, can control in absentia. Therefore, legal borders as moral codes of living can perhaps defy physical demarcations and control bodies beyond a visible cartography. There are several studies that reiterate such claims including the Turkish migrants in Germany and the Netherlands, Pakistani women migrants in the UK (Day et al., 1997, Werbner, 2004) to name a few. However, these questions can only be anticipated.

Next, the term 'loitering' is an appropriate expression here to compare the mobility and vulnerability of women and queer people migrating from their home countries that have already denied them free mobility, to the host countries – in search of that mobility and

freedom. The term ‚loitering‘ is in direct opposition to the term ‚immobility‘ – while on the one hand, it means hovering around freely, without purpose – an exercise that invite immediate control of moral authorities in some societies, it also epitomizes the uncertainties experienced by individual and communities always subject to external supervision and judgement.

As the participants here narrated, a lot of women and queer people survive through solidarity, friendships and maintaining a physical social network – not just in the digital space but a lot of informal and formal meetings to share each other’s stories and experiences and this is true for all over the world. Now with Covid and the mobility restrictions, these solidarity networks are suffering and undergoing transformations due to the pandemic. This puts strain on the transnational network of especially those people for whom mobility itself is a daring act. Put in the context of Shachar’s work, systematic denial of their right to free mobility that often is their only survival strategy, first through morals and then through, in Max Weber’s (1972) language ‚legal-rationale‘ mechanisms (state-enforced lockdowns), not just mimic the already-existing limitations and make these communities even more vulnerable – beyond the pandemic, but also readjusts the systematic denial of rights to these communities facilitated by the two actors – the family and society at large (domesticity) and the state.

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