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My curious mind:
Agency, design justice, and care motifs in older women's experiences with smartphone and social media

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I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and have conformed to the regulations on the use and declaration of Generative AI, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. I hereby certify that no Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) tools have been used in the creation of the thesis.

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Thesis abstract

মোৰ কৌতূহলী মন [*My curious mind*]: Agency, design justice, and care motifs in older women's experiences with smartphone and social media

Priyanka Borpujari

This thesis interrogates the experiences of older women in their use of smartphones and social media. The number of those aged above 60 in India is set to rise to 320 million by 2050. Even though there is now an emergence of active ageing in urban India, there is still a gap in the understanding of the lives of older women, and the ways in which they navigate their sense of agency and the online world. This dissertation argues that middle-class older women in India are creating and claiming space on the Internet and social media; spaces that were not designed for them. In doing so, they are expressing a sense of agency which is a fragile accomplishment negotiated in and with families, platforms, and institutions. Through the lens of feminist gerontology and the methodological approach of patchwork ethnography and intimate ethnography, this research with women from the state of Assam in India, probes the ways in which older women are making attempts at reclaiming their sense of agency over their lives: through, with, and despite, the smartphone. This dissertation contributes to the way we comprehend the empirical field: ethnographic drawings and teaching how to use tools are part of how the field is produced, through the moral grammar of sharing knowledge. Finally, given the growing population of older people globally, this dissertation reveals the wider implications on the way we may study ageing and technology, without treating empowerment as the only horizon. It does so by demonstrating and questioning the institutional demand of anonymity of research participants that contradicts participants' own desires for recognition.

Prologue: The screen view

Each time Priyamvada[1] drapes her saree or mekhela saador[2] for an event, she gets Kabir to take a photo of herself, with the pink curtain as a backdrop. If the event that she is heading out to is during the day, she also gets him to photograph her outside their main door, where potted plants and three Ashoka trees are lined up. Sometimes, her feline friends join her, which makes her sparkle. She gently tugs at the pallu[3] of the saree or the mekhela saador — the site where the artistry of the weave or print is best visible — so that it appears to flow naturally, as if she was carefully careless. Most often, when she is back home from the event — and if she is too tired, then perhaps a day later — she posts the photos onto one of her many groups on Facebook.

The photos are accompanied by detailed descriptions of the fabric, the weave, how she matched it with a necklace, and whether she had received it as a gift or had purchased it herself. The group — comprising 2700 women as members from across India as well as some from the diaspora living abroad — cheer each others' posts. "*I have introduced the* mekhela saador *to many of them*," she says, hinting at the way in which Assam's traditional attire is beginning to be noticed in mainland India through mainstream circuits only in recent years.

Priyamvada has so far posted 395 times in the group. This is a recent phenomenon for the 74-year-old; her daughter would know. The daughter watched her mother getting dressed with just the neon night lamp turned on, even though there was a brighter light bulb hanging right above the mirror. "*I don't like my face*," she would say, and that's how her daughter remembers her mother to feel about herself. Photos that were developed at the studio and brought home would leave Priyamvada feeling sour; in one group photo from her son's birthday, she had scribbled on her face with a pen. The old photo album brings back memories of Priyamvada remarking at each photo where she appears smiling; the remarks all being dismissive of her own self. She resisted being photographed.

But something changed in the last few years: she has been getting dressed under bright light, she is eager to be photographed, she has learnt to strike a particular pose. Her smiles reveal a twinkle in her eyes. The comments on Facebook are equally glowing.

****

[1] This is not her real name. All research participants in this dissertation have been similarly pseudonymised.
[2] Unlike the saree which is a single long fabric, the "mekhela saador" is the traditional two-part garment worn by women across Assam. The mekhela is the bottom half, like a tall cylindrical skirt, that is pleated together at the waist. The saador is like a long and wide scarf: one edge is neatly tucked into the pleats at the waist, and the other circles the body, and pleated up to the left shoulder.
[3] "Pallu" refers to the loose end of a traditional Indian saree and is often more decorative than the rest of the fabric.

Madhuri drapes her mekhela saador swiftly, pinning the drapes to the blouse and by the petticoat, after a morning wherein, if she were to list the tasks she completed, there would be at least fifty ticked checkboxes. The 65-year-old wakes up just after five in the morning, and then — like a factory where all machines sing and dance together as soon as the switch has been turned on — she sweeps, swabs, cleans, chops, cooks, tidies up, and then finally, heads for a shower, and then it's already eight in the morning. She quickly munches on whatever she has made as breakfast for her husband and son, and sips the spiced black tea from the pot that was made by her husband leisurely in their Duliajan home.

On this specific morning, as I helped her with the pleats while admiring her mekhela saador, she asked me if I would like to wear one of her own, to be chosen from the cupboard. "*I have a new petticoat that I haven't even washed*," she tells me, when I tell her that I had only carried a pair of jeans and a kurta for the overnight stay with her.

The previous night, sitting on the bed under the mosquito net with her — she and her husband had decided that I would sleep with her in bed, while he would be on another bed in another room — she showed me the literary group that she is a part of, on Facebook. The group, headed by a local poet and writer whom she refers to as "Sir", is the collective writing pad for people like Madhuri, who write essays and poetry based on prompts sent to them by Sir. Under the blanket and under the blue light illuminating her hands and face, she read out some of the poetry she has written.

****

In the afternoons, after a late lunch, Sukanya sits with her phone and leans on the headboard of the bed, in the apartment she and her late husband had purchased in Guwahati. They had moved to Bombay in the late 1970s to pursue their jobs as engineers. Since then, like anyone building lives in their karmabhoomi (work land), buying a flat was one way of maintaining ties with the janmabhoomi (the homeland) beyond annual visits. So now she was here, trying to make sense of the different types of documents to process the sale of a small plot of land that was first owned by her late father-in-law, and then by her late husband. Apart from regular bureaucratic delays that one has to simply gulp down, Sukanya was facing two hurdles.

The first was that there were different documents, each claiming different realities: one stated that the plot is owned by the revenue department, the other stated that the land is owned by her late husband. Her planned trips to Guwahati — three thousands kilometres northeast of Bombay — were no longer made with a return ticket, and so this time, her supposed month-long stay turned into nine months. "*In such a duration, a baby is produced, but the circle office cannot seem to figure out how to convert the land deed so that I can actually sell the land*," she told me, angrily, with her eyes glued to YouTube.

Her second hurdle was the recent digitisation of land records in Assam. During her unexpected nine-month stay in Guwahati, she found that the land records — a stack of documents, carefully slid into separate plastic folders — would soon become obsolete because everything would henceforth be available only online. But there was a glitch: the app that had been created was only used as a trial, which meant that only a certain portion of all land records in the state were digitised. There was no way to find out which ones were in the system, and which ones were still stacked behind dusty shelves of some warehouse.

When a second version of the app was launched, it had several errors. Sukanya thought it was her inability to be tech savvy that led her to an empty phone screen, but the innumerable trips to the circle office, to meet that one clerk whom she paid some money for his tea and sweets, also yielded nothing.

So here she was, under a blanket borrowed from her brother-in-law — because she hadn't felt the need to stock up the flat — while scrolling through YouTube for news about Bombay, her home far away.

"*That minister's son is a crook, and he was involved in the suicide of that actor, because the actor knew that the minister's son had sexually assaulted this girl who has now died*," she told me.

"*How do you verify this news*?" I asked her, my old journalist instinct kicking in.

She turned to me, widened her eyes, lowered her glasses on the bridge of her nose and said, "*I am not the one to verify. But shouldn't the truth be revealed*?"

****

These vignettes, of the smartphone as a carrier, connector and disruptor, reveal that the smartphone is not merely a tool for connectivity for older women in India. It is a part of the fabric of their lives as they get older; the dependence on this palm machine reveals fissures of infrastructure, and fixtures of new ways of seeing oneself. These stories — and the many others that are part of my ethnographic research of women's experiences with the smartphone in India — bring to light what it means to age at a time of heightened digital dependence. It also reveals the tiny shifts in the power play between humans and machines; particularly with humans whose gendered identities become levers in what they can and cannot do with machines.

This dissertation argues that middle-class older women in India are creating and claiming space on the Internet and social media; spaces that were not designed for them. In doing so, they are expressing a sense of agency which is a fragile accomplishment negotiated in and with families, platforms, and institutions; agency often takes the form of co-agency. Older women inhabit the precarious environments — digital and otherwise — through relations of kinship and care that are not defined by lineage, duty or normative familial roles. They are defined by practice, bearing witness and offering small yet sustainable forms of companionship.

This dissertation makes three interventions. First, the friction of tools, translation, consent boxes, and manuals within the online field is part of the empirical field. Second, ethnographic drawings and teaching are not embellishments; they are part of how the field is produced, through the moral grammar of sharing knowledge. Third, there is an ethical trouble around naming: anonymity can be an institutional demand that contradicts participants' own desires for recognition.

The empirical basis of this research is: (i) an online survey in English, Hindi and Assamese that was completed by 175 women who are active on social media and are above the age of 60 (ii) ethnographic fieldwork in several cities and towns of Assam in India's northeast, and in Mumbai in India's west. The survey led the pathway to selecting the ethnographic participants. The research emerges from several interstices: between physical and online spaces; between being a daughter and a researcher; between feminist ethnography, autoethnography and intimate ethnography; between writing and sketching; between longed-for immersion and the constraints of neoliberal university regimes.

****

This dissertation is structured as follows: first, I lay the context by giving a background of the shifting dynamics of ageing in India, an understanding of India's global middle class, how India navigates the Internet, and finally, how the Internet and gender intersect in 21st century India.

The conceptual framework of this research is a motif woven with three elements: agency, design justice, and care. Through the lens of feminist gerontology, I demonstrate the gendered and class differences in ageing, their impact on power relations and care networks, and the negotiations with how digital infrastructures are designed.

My methodology is grounded in feminist ethnography, autoethnography and intimate ethnography, comprising the survey and ethnographic fieldwork in India. The responses to the survey revealed a diversity of digital agency that disrupts assumptions and stereotypes of how older women in India might navigate the digital world on their smartphones. The research continued when I returned to Ireland, through further online engagement with the women who had graciously opened their doors, their hearts and their stories for my research. This research was inspired by the new digital practices in my mother's life after she stumbled upon Facebook, and her digital practice became the fulcrum of the ethnography with my research participants. The research has been guided by the ideas, ethos and praxis of feminist ethnography by holding together asymmetrical situations and spaces with intimacy and care, with relational ethics as my talisman. My ethnography comprises five themes (chapters).

The first chapter "Women, Men, Machines" finds how some women embrace new tools while others abstain. Their responses to machines are the product of long histories of gendered socialisation in which women learn to doubt their own capacity, to rely on men for instruction, to accept repair as a

masculine domain, and that their labour is expected but their competence is uncertain. Ageing intensifies these expectations.

The second chapter “Learning New Tools” finds that women negotiate the desire to learn within asymmetrical moral economies of labour and care. Here, agency is a fragile accomplishment made possible — and often undone — by husbands’ permissions, sons’ anxieties, daughters’ fatigue, and the material infrastructures that quietly enable or disable movement and learning.

The third chapter “Teaching Phone Tools as Methodology” argues that knowledge production is not an extractive process of ethnographic observing, but an embodied and affective practice of tending. This is done through ethnographic vignettes in the form of drawings, wherein I demonstrate the processes of navigating different phone tools.

The fourth chapter “Kinning Through Time” finds that care and kinship in later life are dynamic and central to the understanding of how older women sustain themselves in the face of institutional withdrawal, fractured family networks, and uneven social support. I argue that kinship is transformed not only within the field, but also within anthropology: the ethnographer is not just an observer, but is shaped by these care worlds and is accountable to them.

The fifth chapter “Housewife Literature” finds women writing against erasure. In finding new avenues for their creative writing online, they are pushing against the narratives of ageing. I write about their claim to the online space against erasing their names in the face of institutional paternalism that views them as “vulnerable” and demands their anonymity, despite their preference to be named.

Ultimately, the stories in this research tell us much about the affect of ageing, the women’s equal desire to care and be cared for, and their attempts at writing new scripts for themselves, while navigating fragile systems. This ethnography is, thus, the story of that cohort of people who may seem “past their prime”, but are finding new ways of discovering what it means to walk along with digital tools that seem to be made and marketed for those who are in their “biological prime”.

Weaving a Context

Ageing in India

There are 140 million people in India above the age of 60 (UN, 2019); a number set to rise to 320 million by 2050 — nearly the same as the current population of USA (Bloom et al., 2021). The Longitudinal Aging Study in India (LASI, n.d.), which was conceptualised in 2006, obtained scientific and comprehensive data on the health, social and economic aspects of aging in India. The first wave of LASI (2017–2019) enrolled more than 73,396 individuals aged 45 and older from across India, making it the largest health and retirement study in the world. LASI researchers have found that India's lack of policies to adequately address the needs of an ageing cohort will leave this population with their specific needs excluded (Bloom et al., 2021).

Because the Census of 2021 was delayed in India owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, data from the Census of 2011 is all that we have to draw our understanding of ageing. The average male:female sex ratio is 1000:940, but in the age bracket above 60, the ratio is 1000:1022. By the age of 80, there are 1,980 women per 1,000 men. Another survey found that 48 percent of women over 60 are widows, compared to 15 percent of men (Gupta & Sekher, 2017).

Then there is the National Health Family Survey (NFHS) in India, which is one of the largest cross-sectional surveys in the world and plays a very important role in seeing the health sector's growth in India. One analysis of NFHS data found that while the majority of older people live in India with other family members, a fifth of all older people live alone or only with their spouse; an average of six percent older people are living alone, although this varies by state (James, 2022). Another analysis of NFHS found a higher proportion of older women living alone (Rajan & Kumar, 2024). Co-residing with a spouse and living with an adult child were found to be associated with a higher level of "life satisfaction" (Maddux, 2017) compared to living alone (Kandapan et al., 2023).

The Indian Constitution's Directive Principles of State Policy views ageing similar to being ill or disabled; as an "undeserved want"[4]. In 1973, India's criminal law penalised anyone found to be neglecting their "helpless parents" (Sen, 2024, p. 37). Two subsequent legal interventions — in 1989 and 1996 — recommended monthly allowances for ageing parents, along with providence of food and shelter. In overlooking the needs of older parents who were assumed to have no choice of their own in their well-being, the State was reinforcing ideas of their vulnerability and unproductivity (ibid).

When the United Nations General Assembly observed 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons, a National Policy was introduced by India's Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, which recognised the need for interventions in the areas of health, finance, shelter and overall welfare. However, it continued to emphasise the role of the family "to discharge its caring responsibilities... [to] sensitise the young on the necessity and desirability of intergenerational bonding" (NPOP, 1999,

[4] Constitution of India, Articles 36-51.

p. 8). In 2007, the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act recognised anyone above the age of 60 as "senior citizens". The Act promoted the concept of "ageing in place" — with the support of community, government and the private sector — and institutional care was to be the last resort (Sen, 2024, p. 39; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2009).

Much of the research on ageing — particularly within sociology and anthropology — have delved into care networks (Brosius & Mandoki, 2020; Brijnath, 2009, 2014; Buch, 2014; Caldwell, 2007; Da Roit, 2010; Degiuli, 2010; Glenn, 2010; Gubrium & Sankar, 1990; Ahlin, 2023; Kleinman, 2009; Leinaweaver; 2010; Long & Harris, 2010; Russell, 2007; Stevenson, 2014; Zhang, 2007). Situated delicately between autonomy and fragility, age becomes that marker of identity that is constantly shifting, with passing years bringing in the possibilities of health risks, and changing ecosystems in a person's external world leading to a wide variation in their experiences. Even so, notions of care and affect bind the experience of ageing and any variable with it. Care and affect can be subjective experiences, and yet, because of the specificity of the weave of time with biology, they lend themselves as become part of the warp and weft of a society's way of determining priorities and defining policies.

In India, caring for the elders, with changes in their health and well-being, has largely been the remit of adult children (Lamb, 2000, 2009; Brijnath, 2014; Shankardass & Rajan, 2018) and within multi-generational family systems, providing material and emotional care, fostering family intimacy, logistical division of labour and resources, and cultural education of core social values to younger generations (Lamb, 2020, p. 469). This family system has given way to nuclear families, thanks to migration into cities within the country and to other countries (Cohen, 1998; Rajan & Kumar, 2024; Ahlin, 2023; Chakravarti & Bakshi, 2024). The rise of the nuclear family in India has been viewed as the axe that has torn apart Indian cultural values of familial care. Turn-of-the-century popular culture has repeatedly depicted this trope, blaming modernisation as the reason why adult children are not able to care for their ageing parents (Deb, 2024, p. 205). The joint-family system is perceived as the symbol of tradition, even as it exerts much pressure on daughters-in-law (Lamb, 2009, p. 32).

Like other aspects of India where contradictory narratives exist starkly, 21st century India sits between the expectations of intergenerational care, and the contemporary realities that such care practices are not always possible. Recent works on ageing in India show how older adults in urban India navigate the landscape of their emotions and psyche in the face of shifting cultural practices, "within a complex network of intersectional identities, and political and affective lives, of being and becoming" (Chakravarti & Bakshi, 2024, p. 7; Dey, 2015; Gangopadhyay, 2021). Changing gender norms have meant that urban middle-class women are more highly educated, older at marriage, and entering the workforce in the hundreds of thousands (Radhakrishnan, 2008). Thus, with a different sense of agency for themselves, as compared to their mothers and mothers-in-law, many women are simultaneously less inclined and less able to co-reside with and care for their parents-in-law (Lamb,

2009, p. 49-50). This has led to a growing business of hiring and training youths as paid caregivers for those adults who find themselves living alone, in the absence of their own adult children (Sen, 2024, p. 34). It is in this context that old-age homes are "a result of negotiating with the emotions of being uncared for, rejected, or treated as a burden" (Sen, 2024, p. 41), while senior-focused residencies are being actively marketed in urban India (Samanta, 2021; Lamb, 2009).

In her ethnography of active ageing in India, Lamb aims to "refute dominant assumptions that older persons are simply passive objects — being acted upon and left behind rather than acting — incapable of creative agency, critical self-reflection, and change" (Lamb, 2009, p. 17). She has found that older people are "actively involved in fashioning new modes of life for themselves and their descendants" (Lamb, 2009, p. 17). While India's seniors have been bearing witness to modern transformations since the turn of the century, they also "find themselves in the unique position of having grown up in one world and now making their lives in a radically different one" (Lamb, 2009, p. 45). They are questioning which form of lifestyle is better for themselves.

One factor of this lifestyle change has been middle-class non-resident Indians earning their salaries in a currency stronger than the Indian rupee, which enables them to hire carers for their parents, in their own physical absence (Ahlin, 2023; Deb, 2024). Regular phone calls have taken the form of digital kinning (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020), giving rise to transnational care collectives (Ahlin, 2023). Researching the ways in which adult children — who have migrated to Oman for work — integrate digital technologies into care practices for their ageing parents in Kerala in southern India, Ahlin argues that such practices can be viewed as "global assemblages of human and nonhuman entities" which she calls "transnational care collectives" (2023, p. 9). Her research has shown the evolution of communication technology: a decade ago, video calls were restricted to Skype and only available on the desktop computer. Now, within seconds, a person across the planet can be viewed on our phones, especially since the spread of WhatsApp, which is much easier to use, even for older adults (Cowling, 2016; Pahwa, 2019). Scholars peering into the braid of migration and media argue that the simple act of calling is more significant than the content of what is discussed during those calls; even if conversations cover only the mundane daily life (Licoppe, 2004; Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005; Wilding, 2006; Wajcman, 2016; Vertovec, 2004; Haenssgen, 2018).

While the infrastructures of care have moved from domestic tending to those that are mediated by the phone, older adults — especially those in urban India — have also found new ways to navigate retirement, as compared to those in previous generations. Retirement is no longer just a phase of becoming grandparents, or killing time by watching TV (Basu, 1996; Prakash, 1999) or sewing and knitting (Bambawale, 1990). Older women, however, have been preoccupied with household duties (Chakravarty, 1996) and their "free time" has been occupied by tending to socio-cultural norms of participating in family functions and rituals (Prakash, 1999).

Perceptions of ageing have shifted with the possibility of a new life stage of late adulthood, identified not merely as closeness to physical debilitation and eventually death, but with productive

and creative engagement with life (Gurian, 2013). In the 1990s, Western Europe mounted a public campaign to promote 'Active Ageing' (Ney, 2005; Scott, 2018; Lazar, et al., 2017). Similar ideologies of active, healthy ageing have seeped into urban India: older people are joining clubs, developing new friendships, getting physically fit, and pursuing new hobbies (Lamb, 2020; Samanta, 2018; Samanta, 2019). This new outlook towards ageing is largely visible among India's middle-class.

India's Global Middle Class

Scholars have argued that the Indian middle class — as a "native elite in its own image" — is largely a product of British imperialism (Varma, 1998, p. 2; see also Ahmed, 2017; Fuller et al., 2014; Hoque, 2016; Sridharan, 2004; Fernandes, 2006; Varma, 2007), when Western education to support the expanding bureaucracy produced a new class of educated professionals. Fernandes (2009) has argued that the middle class has been conceptualised as a component of India's dominant power structure, helping to sustain and legitimise existing social, economic, and political systems.

While "a certain lifestyle and mindset are enough for someone to 'feel' middle class" (Pande, 2024, p. xi; van Dijk, 2017) in India, three aspects become determining factors: "economic resources; education and occupation status; and attitudes, self-perception, and mindset" (ibid).

In the decades following its independence from the British empire in 1947, India's development goals had limited global relations. But that changed in 1991, when the economy was opened to foreign investment and trade. Within five years, imports doubled, exports tripled, and foreign capital investment quintupled (Derné, 2005, p. 178). This, in turn, created a new urban middle class that had more disposable income, and a new set of values and lifestyles (Fernandes, 2009; Aslany, 2019). The post-1990s era has seen mixed results of the economic liberalisation: even as increased consumption of goods and services gave rise to the middle class in India (Krishna & Hatekar, 2017; Chen & Feng, 2019), there has also been a rise in poverty and inequality, worsening labour conditions, jobless growth, populist democratisation, and digital infrastructures and supply-chain resilience (Menon & Nigam, 2007; Carswell & De Neve, 2014; Neveling, 2014; Dey & Grappi, 2015).

Between 1989 and 1999, the number of people considered to be part of the middle class rose to somewhere between 100 and 250 million, which is two to five times higher than previous estimates (Sridharan 2004, p. 412–413). Giri & Subramanian (2025) have used consumption based on purchasing-power parity to measure India's middle-class. Spending capacity has meant that lower caste households have also entered the new middle class, such that they sit alongside the upper caste middle-class (Krishnan & Hatekar, 2017, p. 45-46).

India's leap into the new millennium was characterised by threads hanging onto old traditions but decorated with new dazzling tassels, of aspirations beyond one's immediate diameter. India's booming IT industry and service sector catapulted young professionals from smaller towns to careers

in global economic hubs like Bangalore, New Delhi, and Mumbai, as well as internationally. This has reinforced an India of "global Indianness", as a "set of beliefs and practices that are at once tied to a global lifestyle and to a deep sense of belonging to the Indian nation" (Radhakrishnan, 2008, p. 8). This new urban culture in India (Beinhocker et al., 2007; Fernandes, 2006; Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase, 2008) has meant incomes — at least among the middle-class — have enabled a new economic model built around "consumptive labour" (Joseph, 2002) that caters to older populations.

However, with growing economic divides, the trope of 'two Indias' emerged starkly: economically-deprived urban dwellers and corrupt governments at all levels, against modern middle-class urbanites and 'cool capitalists' in cities aiming to be "world-class" (van Dijk, 2017, p. 32). This is best visible in the movies churned out from Bollywood: Indians are cast as globe-trotting multimillionaires, falling in love in a country that has a bright future (Kuldova, 2014).

The idea of a modern India also transpires in shifting gender dynamics. Even though Indian society has been largely patriarchal (Simon & Hasan, 2025), women in India have been visible in the public sphere, ranging from right-wing Hindu politics to international beauty pageants. These representations have also engaged the diaspora in important ways (Rai, 1995; Sarkar, 1995; Oza, 2001). India of the new century has hailed the urban employed middle-class "new Indian woman", as the empowered symbol of India (Dhawan, 2010, p. 46). This urban woman of a global India "enthusiastically embraced the emergence of the nation into a global arena" when she began to consume newly-available commodities and brands, thanks to the economic liberalisation (Oza, 2006, p. 17; Das, 2012; Gupta, 2016).

Consumption, which has been the route for Indians to be part of a contemporary global narrative, has meant that upwardly mobile Indians are looking online for all their needs (Rai, 2019, p. 14). Shifting imaginaries of class and the affective labour undergirds middle-class life in India. It is in this light that the middle-class expects ageing to be one that is productive and healthy, with later life aspirations encouraged. For example, non-resident Indians have their parents visit them for long stints, thus enabling the seniors an insight into a different lifestyle in a foreign land, albeit as babysitters to their grandchildren (Varrel, 2011; Ludher, 2013; Kõu et al., 2017). The access to market-driven caregiving is thus determined by one's privileges of class, caste, gender, and location.

But infrastructures, institutions, and intimate acts of calculation of navigating spaces reveals a friction between what is expected of gendered roles of older women, and how they would like to chart their years ahead (Lahiri-Dutt & Sil, 2014; Nagesh et al., 2025).

India, Gender, and the Internet

Readily accessible mobile phones at lower price points have had a tremendous and multifaceted impact across all facets of life in India: from business to politics, as well as interpersonal relationships, even though increased democratisation as a promise has not yet been fulfilled and have

only reared new inequities (Jeffrey & Doron, 2013; Vertovec, 2004; Gajjala & Verma, 2018; Haenssgen, 2019; Arora, 2024; Ahlin, 2023). The gap in availability and accessibility has meant that different groups, especially those in the margins, have found new ways to use the Internet on the mobile, even as they continue to be invisible to mainstream research on internet and culture (Rangaswamy & Cuttrell, 2012; Rangaswamy & Arora, 2015; Kumar, 2014; Arora, 2024).

From broadband and internet through USB dongles, to cheap, Chinese-made mobile handsets adapted for an Indian market, all economic groups have been able to connect to the Internet (Rangaswamy & Yamsani, 2011; Kumar & Rangaswamy, 2013; Jeffrey & Doron, 2013). The mobile in India has opened a range of possibilities with:

> "...rhythms rooted in patterns of work, information, bodily movement, pleasure, consumption, and caste, gender, and class reproduction frame our diagrammatic understanding of the distributed agency transforming postcolonial practice in urban India today" (Rai, 2019, p. 109).

The mobile phone is thus embedded into everyday lives, even as gendered negotiations are made for its access.

Social media reflects and reveals human society, and even impacts them in ways as far as systems develop, change, and evolve. There are nearly 403.4 million Facebook users in India alone, making it the leading country in terms of Facebook audience size (Thuy, 2025). As of January 2022, 98.5 percent of global active users of Facebook accessed it from their smartphones (ibid). While male users outnumbered female users, the numbers flip in ages above 65: women outnumber men in Facebook use (ibid).

According to the National Family Healthy Survey of 2019 to 2021, in the age group of 15-49, one-third of women and slightly over half of men have ever used the Internet (IIPS, 2021). Seventy-nine percent of women have a bank or savings account that they use themselves; 54 percent of women have a mobile phone that they use themselves. Seventy-one percent of women who have a mobile phone can read text messages (ibid). Age limitations of the NFHS data have to be considered while making sense of this data, even as they do indicate mobile phone ownership patterns in India. Here again, the politics of demographic silences reveal how women's access is "measured" in narrow technocratic terms — bank accounts, phone access — without considering the quality of that access or control.

In his study on the use of social media in a Southern Indian town in flux — from agrarian to emerging as an IT hub — Venkatraman (2017) found that boundaries between work and life blur across class, caste, age and gender, and they influence how social media is used in different contexts. Social media brought in societal changes, but within local traditions and practices norms: people would send a 'friend request' only to those with similar backgrounds, specifically with regard to caste

and class; giving rise to the sense of online otherness with other people. Online spaces thus become zones of symbolic violence, where misrecognition is not accidental but structurally conditioned.

While social media allows people the means to explore their self-expression by creating multiple selves (Davis, 2012; Michikyan & Subrahmanyam, 2012; Michikyan et al., 2014), people also bring their own traditions into social media, be it in terms of gender, kinship, age, caste, religion, class etc. Thus, identity as self-presentation goes beyond face-to-face interactions, and extends to online interactions (Yang & Brown, 2016). People build divides or alliances across their differences; identity categories are omitted or acknowledged (Kozinets, 2020, p. 119). In the Indian context, social media becomes a space for performative practices, towards showcasing how normative Indian traditions are upheld (Venkatraman, 2017, p. 3).

Even so, urban Indian youth from socio-economically disadvantaged communities are quick to navigate social boundaries and technological hurdles, towards becoming members of a global community (Kumar, 2014, p. 1122). Online communities in India, mostly in the English language and operated by the middle-class, can hence be viewed as "both as a middle-class luxury and steeped in individuality and neo-liberal desires" (Phadke, 2020, p. 282). Such online spaces thus pave the way for tactical agency to emerge.

Research from different parts of India (Tenhunen, 2008; Doron, 2012; Tacchi et al., 2012; Jouhki, 2013; Sambasivan et al., 2018; Mohan et al., 2020) have found that the mobile phone is a significant asset in the lives of women, even though there are several barriers to their access. Women negotiate everyday agency through their use of the mobile phone (Masika & Bailur, 2015). One study found that married women are prevented from speaking to their parents too often by their in-laws for fear that it would hamper their ability to adjust to their new homes (Menon, 2011, p. 32). Domestic workers owning a mobile phone face frictions in their obligations between home and work, reinforcing gendered and economic inequalities (Malhotra & Ling, 2020).

Some families allow younger female members to access phones and social media only from home for presumed safety (Venkatraman, 2017, p. 38). A similar line of women's presence online threatening their dignity and safety was echoed by a member of the Women Commission of the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, who blamed women's phone usage for the increase in rapes (Rashid, 2021). Thus, a moral economy determines ownership and usage of the mobile phone.

Borborah and Das (2022) have found how socio-economic class is a key variable in the gendered use of mobile phones and digital payment technology among vegetable vendors in Guwahati. While most of the women vendors lacked digital literacy, they never felt the need for a mobile phone because of their market and family obligations (Borborah & Das, 2022, p. 523). The digital stratification meant that even though women were owning their businesses, "agency at the individual and collective levels are also shaped by the patriarchal and socioeconomic norms", that controls their mobility (Borborah & Das, 2022, p. 528).

Thus, the idea of technology as being gendered (Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1991; Cockburn & Ormrod, 1993) can be extended to mobile technologies in India, through the prism of "a gendered and spatial binary between a Westernized and Indian masculinist outside" (Rai, 2019, p. 114). In India, online spaces also serve as sites where traditional social norms that govern the public sphere are continued. They become reconfigured arenas where anonymity and activism enable new and diverse expressions of sexuality, thus reshaping gendered public spaces (Arora & Scheiber, 2017, p. 417). The intimate thus becomes political: messaging apps and social media are not just modes of connection, but acts of moral world-making within the premises of affective labour and its gendered weight.

An example of the reshaping gendered public spaces is a study of women's blogs in India, which found how reflections on everyday personal experiences were "important resources for feminist research and also valuable artefacts for study in other fields like history and sociology, media and digital cultures" as they pushed against "the victimhood narratives that can often dominate popular writing about women and new media" (Kasturi, 2019, p. 4-5), especially in the context of South Asian women and, more broadly, women from the Global South (Kapur, 2012; Sandhu, 2022). Online platforms have thus enabled women to derive a sense of "pleasure presumably heightened by the feeling of control that comes with representing herself" (Rocamora, 2011, p. 418). Women's engagement in pleasure and leisure in online spaces serve as signposts to understand how they are resisting patriarchal limits, even when such actions may not be typically recognised as overt forms of political resistance (Kirmani, 2020, p. 320).

Women continue to suffer at the hands of patriarchy across all socio-economic classes, religions and castes. Yet, they are railing against norms that have been laid down for them. The twining of everyday resistance with new incomes has enabled the access to digital affordances in the face of gendered technology. The braid of negotiations of these different strands has given rise to an epoch of layered possibilities, where resistance is not merely an act that tears walls, but is one where the phone and its screen becomes the wall through which new ideas are sprouting.

Where does this desire to be part of the global narrative leave greying, middle-class, upwardly mobile India? On the one hand, the heightened digitalisation across all sectors has left marginalised groups — including older people — dependent on others for basic needs, no matter their level of education. Far from being an equal-paced leveller, technology tends to discriminate against those who do not have a basic knowledge of computers. According to one survey conducted in India's capital, 75 percent of older persons said that lack of computer skills and digital illiteracy was adversely affecting their life in old age; moreover, digital illiteracy was higher among older women (The Hindu Business Line, 2017). The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) took note of the challenges faced by older people and issued a circular in 2017 with instructions to commercial banks, "to be sensitive to the requirements of senior citizens and differently-abled persons" (Narasimhan, 2017).

But once again, like everything else about India, that's a partial reality: Samanta (2019) views Internet spaces as "surrogate places" for later life non-kin sociality towards enriching a sense of self

for older Indians. This is a departure from the conventional image of an older Indian person who is only associated with their adult children and extended family. A heightened consumer culture has also translated into an evolution of a leisure culture for upper-middle-class older adults in India: luxury senior retirement ventures, travel/holiday packages, and dating platforms (Tripathi & Samanta, 2023; Samanta, 2024; Banerjee, 2023). Samanta views this as a new "celebration of a project on the self where the responsibility to 'age well' rests with the individual" (Samanta, 2018, p. 94).

But how does the smartphone and the blue light from social media shape the contours of older women in India? Is it merely a device or just a membrane, holding that which refuses to be fit within strict confines of transaction and familial devotion? What happens when ageing is not simply about "ageing well" but an attempt at exploring something different, while institutions and infrastructures recede? Is there space for alternative narratives that defy conclusive typologies? Is there space for the ambivalence of grief and celebration, of creating and withering, of scripting and remembering?

I looked around the vastness of India, through the varied literatures on ageing and women's lives and the newfound joys of social media. Like every traveller tired of searching, I returned to the first draft, the first words, the origin story: Assam.

Assam Narrative Weaves

At first glance, a sense of intergenerational reciprocity turned me toward Assam for my research. Situated in the remote corner of India's northeast, Assam is connected to mainland India by a tiny strip of land (Hazarika, 1995, p. xlv). The Brahmaputra river — originating in the Himalayas, flowing east towards Tibet, turning southwest into India's Northeast, then turning south towards Bangladesh and finally discharging into the Bay of Bengal — is the life-force of most of Assam. It is the generous provider and the mighty destroyer. The Brahmaputra's sedimentation leaves a rich layer of topsoil, making Assam among the most fertile regions of the Indian subcontinent. Agriculture, fishery, and festivals are all tied to the river's flow; the riparian flow determines the way some of the ethnic groups build their homes (Borpujari, 2014).

Assam was part of the Bengal Presidency during the rule of the British Empire. The imposition of the Bengali language by the British in the 1800s — and English-educated Bengali men being brought to run the administration — meant that people in Assam viewed Bengali as a tool of subjugation. Assamese youth needing a higher education fought to reclaim their language and demand political rights (Barooah-Pisharoty, 2023, p. 367-368). Fast forward to 1947: when India became independent from the British Empire, Assam became a state of its own. In subsequent years, the myriad ethnicities native to India's northeast demanded their autonomy from Assam: violent insurgencies erupted when nonviolent means of identity assertion failed. Today, India's northeast comprises seven states, of which Assam is the largest in geographical size, population, and political clout.

But the microscope on Assam is a personal one. Both my parents hail from Assam, and Assamese is their mother-tongue. My father was already living and working in Bombay (now Mumbai)[5] when his marriage was arranged with my mother, a journalist in Assam's capital Guwahati. She moved to Bombay after their marriage. My childhood memories are filled with her translating articles from English newspapers and magazines into Assamese, and sending them by post to magazines in Assam (Borpujari, 2024a, p. 188).

My parents raised my brother and I three thousand kilometers away from their homeland. During our annual summer vacations in Assam — in Guwahati in my mother's home, and three hundred kilometers further northeast in Jorhat in my father's home — I discovered how different Assam is from Bombay. I belonged to Assam, I belonged to Bombay, and yet, I belonged to neither place. In Bombay, my brother and I were each the only Assamese students in our respective schools.

Visiting Assam, cousins laughed when we spoke Assamese, even as my mother would painstakingly teach us the Assamese script during other holidays. Most people we encountered in Bombay had only ever heard of Calcutta (now Kolkata) as being in the east, and nothing beyond. To them, India's northeast was a mystery, an exotic mountain land of tribes steeped in mist and romance (Hazarika, 1985, p. xlvii), and a region they'd dare not venture into: only the news of violence during the years of insurgency[6] made it to the national news. It was either violence or the annual floods — when the mighty Brahmaputra overflowed — that mainland India would be reminded of Assam's existence.

On the other hand, my cousins in Assam could not fathom living near the sea like our coastal city of Bombay. My mother would overload her suitcase with gifts for every generation in the extended family: Bombay was the commercial capital of India where the best goods were available. After two months in Assam, and watching my mother, grandmother and aunties bawling during goodbyes, we would carry the same suitcase, filled with *khorisa* (fermented bamboo shoots) and different types of *pitha* (sweets made of rice flour) that would keep Assam alive in our Bombay home for several weeks thereafter.

I grew up in this identity dissonance. My friends' native towns were just a short train ride away. For us, it was nearly three days on the train. I grew up seeing distorted narratives of Assam in the mainstream media, making me internally scream, "*No no no, you got it all wrong*." Now, I see my mother age, take to the smartphone, enjoy new forms of connectivity, and express agency in her mid seventies. Yet, there is an assumption of what old age is for middle-class Assamese women like her, and once again, I am internally screaming, "*No no no, you got it all wrong*."

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[5] The city's name changed from Bombay to Mumbai in 1997, which was an outcome of a Marathi nationalistic movement accompanying anti-immigrant sentiment and violence. Throughout this ethnography, wherever I mention my own life as well as to refer to events prior to 1997, I refer to the city as "Bombay".

[6] The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) is an insurgent outfit born out of the decades-long sentiment of claiming rights as sons-of-the-soil and yet being ignored by the Central government of India. It was designated a terrorist organisation in 1990.

This is partly why I turn my lens to research the lives of older women in Assam. It's a cohort whose lives have been sparsely researched.

Assam is also somewhat of an outlier, from the perspective of "regional genderscape" whereby the "particularities of space and geographical location within which gendered roles and gender relations are enacted and experienced" (Datta, 2020, p. 4). The matrilineal societies among ethnic groups in regions surrounding Assam might have influenced women's relative freedom (Behal, 2002; Debi, 1994; Gogoi, 1992; Medhi, 2023). Edward Gait, a British administrator of the Bengal Presidency of British India, wrote about Assam that "the wives of the Rajas and peasants alike never veil their faces before anybody, and they move about freely in the market places with bare heads" (Gait, 1906, p. 138).

By the 19th century, social reformers across India were challenging the inhumaneness of Sati[7]. Even though Sati was fairly uncommon in Assam, the waves of encouraging widow remarriage had touched Assam too. The first Assamese language magazine *Orunodoi* that began publishing in 1856 encouraged "an attitude of scepticism regarding some of the age-old beliefs and superstition" (Misra, 1985, p. 1565). Many of the debates on widow remarriage took place on the pages of *Orunodoi*: preeminent writer Gunabhiram Baruah wrote about marrying a widow in 1872 after his wife had passed away (Das, 1971, p. 225). Similarly, Jaduram Deka Baruah — who wrote the first Assamese dictionary in the 1800s — also married a widow (Devi, 2002, p. 26).

This historical background is essential in understanding how late 19th century Assam saw the rise of many female writers: Bishnupriya Devi, Swarnalata Barua, Padmavati Devi Phukanani, Jamuneswari Khatoniyar and Tejaswi Barua. Prominent writers in the 20th century were Nalini Bala Devi, Pushpalata Das, Chandraprabha Saikiani, Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi and Indira Goswami (Barooah-Pisharoty, 2023, p. 243–246). The Assam Andolan in the late 1970s and early 1980s — a movement towards preserving the Assamese identity in the face of unprecedented migration from the newly-independent nation of Bangladesh — saw the participation of many women, young and old. Patriarchal rituals like Karwa Chauth — whereby a wife fasts all day for her husband's longevity, which is common in northern and central India — is not practised in Assam (Bhattacharyya, 2020). Women in Assam experience relatively more freedom in their daily lives (Bhattacharyya, 2020, p. 16). All these factors have together "shaped the regional genderscape [of Assam] to render within it softer constructions of classic patriarchy" (Bhattacharyya, 2020, p. 17).

Growing up in Bombay in the 1980s and 1990s, I often heard girls being "married off" when they turned 18. But not within my extended family in Assam: girls were encouraged to get a university degree, and 25 was considered the "right" age of marriage. My mother — like many women born in the early 1950s — earned a Master's degree, and even worked for a few years before

[7] Sati was a practice among some Hindu communities in different parts of India, whereby a widow would immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. It was banned in the 17th century by Mughal emperors; the British administration ruled it illegal in 1829. The Sati Prevention Act was enacted in 1987. The custom is no longer practiced in India, but was a significant part of the discourse on gender and widowhood.

marriage. Some even completed their graduation degree after they were married. This is more visible among the middle-class and upper-castes in Assam, but a vast majority may not have received a higher education.

Concurrently, practices like witch-hunting (Nath, 2014; Handique & Nath, 2025) and child marriages (Khanam & Laskar, 2015; Sen et al., 2025) continue to take place in Assam, along with violence in public and private spheres (Mahjebeen, 2019; Vauquline, 2015; Das & Wani, 2025). During this research, I saw firsthand how older women continue to be victims of domestic violence. Such realities, along with tending to existing socio-cultural values, slice through the illusion of gender parity within Assam's relatively progressive modern society, even through the continued insistence on women's education, their mobility, employability, and political ambitions (Bhattacharyya, 2009, 2013). Educated Assamese wives in middle-class and so-called modern families follow the everyday gendered norms, while balancing entertaining guests and teaching their children for exams (Bhattacharyya 2020, p. 17).

Young middle class women in Assam are thus negotiating what is possible within the lines that have been drawn around them. They are hungry to balance a career, marriage and motherhood, while paying heed to the needs of the marital family.

So where does that leave the older women, and the ways in which they negotiate space: private, public, online? This question stemmed from a more embodied experience, as I negotiated care over distance: while cheering for Priyamvada as she slowly turned on the lights while draping a saree; in directing her pose for a photo, which she would post on her Facebook group.

Priyamvada — whom you met at the beginning of this chapter — is my mother. I don't know what she may have felt watching me drape her saree on my own when I was 15. But I know what it feels, as her daughter, with the roles reversed. I have watched her bloom slowly before the mirror, blossom proudly with her new literary status, and claim her place on the Internet with photos of herself wearing whatever she wants to: with confidence that almost seems like a defiance.

This research is an ode to her, and the many women in Assam like her, who are brushed aside as being "old women": What would they know about Facebook and selfies? What would they know about new tools like DeepSeek? What would they know about land deals and big politics? What would they want to write about now?

They know it all. They want to learn more; live bigger. This is their story.

Weaving a Motif of Three Elements: Conceptual Framework



I have always been fascinated by the Assamese গছ weave pattern.

From a distance, it only seems like a triangle, atop a narrow vertical rectangle, and two patterns that edge out as curls.

But look closely: it is a composition, an ecosystem.

A tree branches out, with a flower in its centre. Flanking the tree's trunk are two birds. Sometimes, two flowers.

The Assamese গছ (*gos*; tree) weave pattern; each of the elements completing the motif.

As an Assamese woman who can identify the Assameseness of this fabric upon any *mekhela saador* from a distance, no matter who wears it and where, I take inspiration from this motif to weave the manner in which I approach my research on Assam's older women's experiences of using smartphone and social media.

In taking the গছ motif as my organising image, I am not simply decorating the framework with a local symbol. I am also making a methodological claim. The tree, the birds, the flower and the fabric insist that concepts, practices and relations cannot be separated.

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The experiences of Assam's older women — of the ways in which they navigate life, longing, leisure and more; with, through and adjacent to smartphones in their hands — are varied. It is impossible to imagine the many possibilities, including and beyond the binaries of "good experience" and "bad experience". Dissecting the question alone brings up different determinants that could impact experience: the woman's age, the duration of her use of a smartphone, the conditions and resources that have enabled her to have a smartphone in her hand, the duration of her being part of social media, the specific affordances within the different social media accounts that she may be active on, and the broad and subjective definition of "being active" on social media. The complexity of understanding the experience hence arises from the multiplicity of these different factors in question.

Largely inspired by the women in my family in India — older women who are active on social media — I approach this question through two main concepts. The first is that of agency. The second is that of design justice, which can be extended to the idea of how digital systems are designed. Thus, agency and digital justice are the two main alleyways through which "experience" is investigated; through which the methods of this research are designed.

This dissertation thus probes two central concepts that I see as foundational especially in regards to entanglement of older women, smartphones, and social media: agency and design justice. These will be probed through the lens of feminist gerontology, for the manner in which such theorising enables a broader perspective on ageing, by taking into account gendered differences and their impact on power relations.



If feminist gerontology is the tree within the গছ (*gos*) motif, agency and design justice are the birds flanking the tree. A composite, an ecosystem, woven together as an ethnography. But what about that flower within the tree? Affect, care, intimacy, fun, loitering, resistance: they emerge in their own time and space, as unexpected, even serendipitous blooms, that are only possible through emic ways of looking and inhabiting the ethnography.

Feminist gerontology, agency and design justice are not three discrete variables to be tested against Assam's older women, but mutually sustaining elements in an ecosystem of meaning. The smartphone, when held in a palm, is a site where life-course histories, gendered labour, infrastructural design, and small acts of joy or refusal come together. The গছ motif therefore functions as a conceptual assemblage that keeps theory and ethnography entangled, and resists any temptation to treat older women's digital lives as either purely technological or purely social.

On feminist gerontology

Feminist gerontology evolved as a combination of feminist theory and critical gerontology, which enables a focused view on power relations and how they intersect across one's life-course (Hooyman et. al, 2002; p. 3). It evolved from the problem of othering that has been prominent in the scholarship on ageing: "Written from the outside, it is about them — the old — not us" (Twigg, 2004, p. 64). Critical gerontology acknowledges the stages of metamorphosis of one's body with time, and even the possible loss of function. It challenges simplistic portrayals of ageing that depict later life as an unavoidable slide into decline and dependency. Instead, it views ageing as entangled with cultural, social, economic, and political structures — as well as assumptions of ageing — by looking closely at a person's lifelong human experience (Cole et al., 1993; Gullette, 2000). Thus, while it "considers how political, socioeconomic and related factors interact to shape and determine the experience of growing old" (Overbo & Minkler, 1993, p. 289). These factors have in turn shaped the field of gerontology at large, by questioning the gaps and biases in research on ageing .

However, gerontology has largely ignored the experiences of ageing women (Ray, 1996; Browne, 1998; McFadden, 2001). Women have featured in gerontology largely from the perspective of their role as caregivers, and the many forms of inequities thereof (Abel, 1991; Baines et. al, 1991; Calasanti & Bailey, 1991; Gottlieb, 1989; Hooyman & Gonyea, 1995; Richardson, 1999; Stoller, 1993).

This has also been the case within feminist scholarship. While feminists have delved into the ways in which gender is embedded in all relationships — individual as well as institutional encounters — they have largely ignored age in their view of the world as being intersectional, tending to the varied ways our various identities and locations define our specific realities. While the idea of intersectionality has been expanded in specific geographical and cultural contexts to widen its ambit — from Indigenous feminist theory to Dalit feminist theory — age as determining one's reality has been largely absent in deliberations of power relations that comes with the hierarchies that are a function of the temporal influence on one's body, and thus, old age and age relations (Calasanti, et. al, 2006, p. 14; see also Calasanti & Slevin, 2006; Freixas et al., 2012, p. 46).

Simply including women in the scope of research doesn't make it a feminist one. The difference lies in the emphasis on probing power relations that stem from the many different identity markers that bear upon our existence as humans, and the varied forms of inequities that thereby arise. In doing so, feminist research is often that which pushes for research that is stuck in a time capsule and waiting to be seen from a distance. The very emphasis on probing and problematising power relations means that it holds up a torch for corrective action. Feminist research is not static: because our lives and hence experiences, of privileges and marginalities, is constantly moving. This hence enables a purview of the world as a dynamic one, where actions have consequences based on one's position in any sphere.

Feminist gerontology thus evolved in the mid 1990s as a response to incorporating the intersectionality of markers of identity that would amplify or alleviate an individual's life-course upon getting older. It is not simply a matter of diversity of one's research (Hooyman, et. al, 2002; Calasanti & Zajicek, 1993; Twigg & Martin, 2015), but because a growing older population globally requires understanding of their life trajectories, that might determine their needs and choices, within specific contexts (Freixas et al, 2012, p. 47; see also Garner, 1999). Feminist gerontology aims to move beyond viewing age-based oppression as an inevitable "et cetera" on a list of oppressions (Calasanti et. al, 2006, p. 13).

At the same time, feminist gerontology urges us to consider "how people conceive and implement government and other public policies such as care-related policies that often assume that a family member, that is, a woman, will be available and willing to provide it" (Calasanti, 2004, p. 306). Thus, in many ways, feminist gerontology has evolved from the interrogation of who provides labour in private and public spheres; how care-giving is intertwined with labour that is often gendered and unpaid; how such caregiving is hence devalued: all of which has gendered ramifications especially in the face of ageing populations. Most importantly, feminist gerontology brings to light the value — in terms of adequate compensation — the necessary work of care. However, can all caregiving be compensated with money?

The intertwining of social inequalities based on race, ethnicity, caste, class, and sexual preference with gender thus provides the humus necessary for the enriched manner in understanding power relations from the perspective of disadvantaged groups, by "privileging their knowledge" (Calasanti, 2004, p. 306) and rejecting a binary way of viewing a person's experience. In doing so, it advocates for structural change towards supporting social and economic justice (Hooyman, et. al, 2002). This is largely done by integrating a life-course approach, wherein old age is considered as just one phase of a person's life; such that their choices at old age are determined by early influences in life, based on time, period, and cohort (Moody, 1999; O'Rand, 1996; Stoller & Gibson, 1993). Lifecourse perspective emerged in sociology and psychology in the late 1960s, by analysing cohorts — a collection of individuals within a system at a common time or period (Dannefer & Settersten, 2010, p. 5), enabling longitudinal studies to become a fundamental approach in researching ageing.

Ageing is thus viewed as not only a biological process, but as one that is also socially constructed (Elder, 1975; Dannefer, 2003; Foster & Walker, 2021). The life-course perspective focuses on the ways in which an individual's life is "affected by the circumstances and actions of others"; what we better understand as social ties (Dannefer & Settersten, 2010, p. 4). It thus gives the possibility of recognising diversity among older populations, such that the diversity is based on the experiences of their earlier life experiences. It does so by also acknowledging that while earlier life experiences might be unique, they can also be collective experiences as a cohort.

Such a lifecourse perspective would also explain the different ways in which older people are addressed. There is a cultural difference in the way terms are used: whereas "elderly" is a commonly

used term among gerontologists in India, it is frowned upon in the West (Bowman & Lim, 2021). Some researchers have (see Calasanti & Slevin, 2001) preferred to use the term “old” rather than “older”: “old” is perceived as being socially constructed and hence stigmatised, whereas “older” presumably is more acceptable (Calasanti, 2004, p. 305).

Rooted in the understanding of feminist gerontology is the concept of intersectionality which received recognition because of the work of lawyer and critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw. She found how Black women in the United States were disproportionately judged in the courts because of their dual disadvantage stemming from their gender and race. She argued that “....because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).

Intersectionality theory has since been applied to scholarship across varied disciplines and across geographical cultures. However, geographic and cultural specific feminist theorisations have provided a refined framework through which intersectionality can be understood, as beyond what Crenshaw had theorised. Menon (2015) has argued that intersectionality as a universal framework does not capture the complexity of feminism and feminist politics in India. Rege (2006) and Paik (2021) have demonstrated the myriad ways through which Dalits have expanded, challenged, and revolutionized feminism. Gole (2022) has provided a succinct outline of the ways in which mainstream feminist activism in India has grappled with inequality since the 1970s, and how this indicates the need to rethink intersectionality in a context of graded inequality. While I am not explicitly using intersectionality theory in my research, it finds its way inevitably, because of the very premise of feminist gerontology.

Feminist gerontology, which gives the tools to viewing the diversity of life experiences because of its theorisation as a combination of critical gerontology and the life-course perspective, thus offers the optimal framework through which the life experiences of older women in Assam — as a cohort in the age group of sixty to eighty — can be understood. It allows for the diversity of their experiences in ageing to be acknowledged, and more so when we choose to look at the smartphone in their palms.

Taken together, these strands allow me to treat ageing not as a biological fate but as a moral and political relation structured by gendered labour regimes, caste and class hierarchies, and increasingly by digital infrastructures. In Assam, the smartphone becomes one of the places where these relations are negotiated. Who buys the device, who pays for data, who reads which messages, who is added to which family WhatsApp group, who is expected to be available for care or surveillance at a distance: all of these are life course questions as much as they are technical ones. A feminist gerontological lens helps me to see older Assamese women not only as carers or dependants, but as situated actors whose digital practices condense decades of work, sacrifice, exclusion and aspiration. It makes visible how late-life experimentation with smartphones is shaped by earlier

education, marriage, migration and class trajectories, and how, in turn, these experiments subtly reorder intergenerational obligations and the distribution of care.

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When Priyamvada, Madhuri, Sukanya take to the smartphone, they might be doing what the rest of the world in this century is doing nearly every hour of their waking lives. But, far from becoming just an act of automated behaviour of picking the phone, there is a sense of a willful act: not merely in picking the phone, but the chain reaction of what they do next with it, through it, beyond it, in spite of it. In doing so, there is the possibility of going beyond the assumptions of the concerns of older people — as being only about illnesses, and a uni-directional view of their frail health. This is something I encountered when I began my research: my mother, her friends and many others in her cohort were finding new ways of enjoying themselves upon turning seventy. Older women in other Global Majority countries were similarly engaging with the world in new ways unlike they had in earlier years of their lives, and while illnesses were present, it was not the main character in their lives. My mother was the main character in her life at seventy — not her deceased husband, not the achievements of her children.

But the literature I began to read on ageing in this century were predominantly from the Global Minority countries. This body of research has been dominated by "medicalised and biologised approaches" which viewed ageing as one to be stuck within the discourse of "ageing-as-problem" (Dannefer & Phillipson, 2010, p. xxi). It's not that my mother does not have her pains and niggles, some that last longer than she prefers. But there are others like her, who rest on the infrastructure and laurels of their own previous life experiences, and are finding new ways to exercise big and small choices. They are, as feminist gerontologists assert, sidestepping the social denigration that is associated with ageing. In embarking on a feminist gerontological approach, I am walking on the footsteps of scholars who have duly credited older women "as needed and welcomed contributors to the socio-political world, not merely as casualties of the system" (Hooyman et al., 2002, p. 9). This contribution of older women to society — if I dare use the term "contribution" — needs an entry point of inquiry. I do this by exploring the concept of agency, to understand the entanglement between older women, smartphones, and social media.

On agency

The concept of agency is tied to one's ability to make choices and decisions for themselves. Are they always good choices? That may not be so, but being agential beings implies having the ability to make such decisions. Such an ability stems from a sense of belief and conviction that making choices is possible. Often, the choices available are not the best options. A person may have to choose between the devil and the deep sea, because those are the only options available to her, and that would not entirely be an act of her agency. But within that fractal of space and time and the available choices, a choice is still being made; there is still an expression and act of agency. Such a perspective of agency also implies that a person — irrespective of their marginalities — is making choices that seem the best for her, all things considered.

When a woman suffers violence at the hands of her intimate partner, what she does next — or does not — is her agency in action, irrespective of whether those next steps — or none thereof — tend to her wounds, safeguard her immediate safety, or protect her from future abuse. A person in relative poverty spending her savings on a smartphone instead of saving that money in the bank as a rainy day fund: that is her agency in action, irrespective of whether that is a sensible choice.

Most concerns of agency are tied to those living with different marginalities. So what about the wife of a millionaire, who is not permitted to take a job but has the freedom — and provided with the economic means — to go shopping and long brunches? Would the concept of being an agential being apply to her? Are her ways of spending money, her moments of agential exercise? Is it still the exercising of agency when the wife resorts to having sex with younger men, long after her tears have dried from finding her rich husband's rolodex of mistresses in every city that he travels for business? Is the exercising of agency by this wife based on her marginality of not being allowed to work, and of being the wife who is cheated on — irrespective of her class position?

Where then, does this leave the idea of "learned helplessness" (Seligman, 1972), whereby a person does not view their choices as their own, but view them as being made for them, as the result of fate? How would a person with a *few* choices laid before them exercise their agency, when there is a *perspective* of no choices being available? People living in the margins of society are often faced with limited choices. What is the shift that enables a person living in the margins to view themselves as without any choice at all?

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I write these words as my own ideas of what agency might be, based on whatever I have heard throughout my life as a woman, witnessing the lives of other women — because being a woman in a patriarchal world is sometimes a willful act (Ahmed, 2014) — and from my nearly two decades of being a journalist, reporting on issues of human rights and justice. I have learnt what agency can

and cannot be, what its limits and expanse might be, based on the thousands of hours of meeting people across various positions of privileges and marginalities. So I do understand what agency means and *can* look like, by bearing witness to the countless humans I have encountered, as I attempted to not do three things through my words: do not make anyone a hero, do not make anyone a victim, do not make anyone a villain. Because, within different fractals of time and space, each of us could be either of those, and our own sense of how we exert agency can hence differ.

What interests me then is not whether someone "chooses," but how the field of possible choices is produced — and by whom. For me, agency is not a free property of the individual; it is a *situated capacity* that emerges within relations of domination and care. It is distributed across kin, neighbours, employers, police, platforms, bureaucracies. It lives in the compromises people craft to endure, in refusals that remain opaque to outsiders, in the slow work of maintaining dignity when law and custom narrow the horizon of the possible. What looks like preference can be survival's moral economy; what looks like resignation can be rational adaptation to policies that exhaust.

But how have scholars analysed this concept?

Economists explain agency as a result of a person's rational response to incentives, whereas anthropologists put their emphasis on social and cultural influences to explain human agency. But despite these disagreements, the premise that humans are capable of goal-directed agency and of choosing between different actions is not generally in dispute (List, 2023, p. 466). Philosopher John Maier (2015) has furthered this argument by suggesting an idea of ''agentive possibility'' that is based on the availability of options, and thereby choices between different possibilities, from the mundane everyday ones to those that are considered as life-altering (Maier, 2015; as cited in List, 2023, p. 468).

From a feminist perspective, agency is "...the ability to act on behalf of what you value and what you have reason to value" (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007, p. 383). What one values, thus, can extend beyond the material sphere (of ownership of goods), to physical and psychological ones (the freedom of movement; the freedom to make important decisions). Sociologist Anthony Giddens has argued that "human agency should be viewed not as a sequence of discrete acts involving choice and planning, but as the reflexive monitoring and rationalisation of a continuous flow of conduct" (Gidden, 1979; as cited in Chattopadhyay, 2023, p. 238). Cultural values and social systems exist not just in the world around us but also in the way we understand them. Our actions help create and change them over time. This view of agency doesn't assume people always follow strict, logical rules. Instead, it locates choices as influenced by daily social practices, and not by fixed laws. Agency, hence, as viewed from the feminist lens, can be viewed as one that enables us to understand women's position in society — across cultures — as well as offers a recipe to alter women's status when they might be oppressed (Strathern, 1988, p. 26-28). In my research, this is visible in the ways in which older women choose to buy household items online, or continue to pursue theatre as a new passion, or resist being erased online.

For women, the question of agency — be it within moral, personal or social realms — has risen out of the experience of subordination. While women's experiences of subordination might be charted throughout different locations and points of time in history, the distinction of the public versus the private does little to change that status of subordination. Their bodies have been sites of subordination; the home has been the petri dish where power relations are experimented and enforced. The body is not merely a private terrain but a regulatory frontier where family expectations, market demands, and state rules converge. Agency, then, is not heroism against power, nor acquiescence to it, but navigation *within* it: a practice of re-allocating risk and care, opening tiny corridors of manoeuvre, sometimes at great cost. I attend to these costs — and to the infrastructures that open or close options — so that agency is understood not as individual will, but as the uneven distribution of possibility.

Feminist economist Naila Kabeer views agency as being either passive (when action is taken in the context of limited choices), or active (one where the behaviour has a purpose). She further argues that a greater effectiveness of agency enables a woman to be efficient in performing the roles and responsibilities ascribed to her, whereas agency that is transformative enables a woman to defy and challenge the restrictions before her, vis-a-vis the roles and responsibilities (Kabeer, 2005, p. 15). Referring to the violence inflicted on women during the partition of the Indian subcontinent, anthropologist Veena Das implores us to view women's ability to survive through pain as "doing of little things" that are not the same as "passive submission but of an active engagement" (Das, 1999; p. 11-12; also sec Das, 1995). Thus, agency as "socially unfettered" free will of an individual is dependent on her ability to exercise rational choice (Ahearn, 2001, p. 114; Wilson, 2008, p. 83).

In a similar vein, feminist political theorist Nancy Hirschmann extends the concept of negative and positive freedom (Berlin, 1969). She argues that negative freedom highlights the significance of personal autonomy, which is crucial for promoting women's rights, especially in matters of discrimination and reproductive freedom. In contrast, positive freedom stresses the importance of understanding the context in which choices can be made, ensuring that these decisions are influenced by and tied to the surrounding circumstances, and in terms of "the desiring subject, in terms of her preferences, will and identity" (Hirschmann, 2003, p. 30; as cited in Madhok, 2014, p. 54). Constraints imposed by patriarchal power results in women sometimes making choices that secure their future rather than address their immediate needs (Agarwal, 1994, p. 434–5).

In making the connection between empowerment and agency, Kabeer makes the case for empowerment as a series of processes that enable the ability to make choices, to those who have been denied such abilities (Kabeer, 2005, p. 13). She argues that "alternatives must not only exist, they must also be *seen* to exist" (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14; italics in the original). This is perhaps best understood in the context of intimate partner violence. In her research on the ways in women living in a slum in Mumbai endured, resisted and coped with marital abuse, Chattopadhyay (2023) found that some of the women were placating their husbands — by cooking the meal that the husband likes, as one example — to gain a sense of control of their lives and thus ensuring peace in the home, albeit

temporarily (p. 238). But being a victim of abuse — and not walking out from an abusive relationship — cannot simply be viewed as an exercise of one's choice, as a sense of agency in (non)action. But their ways of resisting abuse, and finding ways to cope have been deemed as exerting their agency, which Chattopadhyay (2023) views as a manner of "romanticising" it (p. 237). So a person making everyday choices to resist abuse and maintain shards of dignity are a way of managing how they may exert their agency: "like keeping a bucket under a roof that is leaking from multiple places" (Chattopadhyay, 2023, p. 237). Feminist scholar Kalpana Wilson (2008) thus argues that the label assigned on someone as being oppressed and lacking in choices essentialises them as victims, and such a process in turn denies them agency. She writes:

> "This not only shifts emphasis away from any systematic analysis of specific oppressive social structures and institutions (particularly material ones), it also — by equating 'oppression' with 'victimhood' — fails to acknowledge the possibility of those who are oppressed themselves engaging in struggle for structural change (Wilson, 2008, p. 85).

This can also be traced historically, with the manner in which the experiences of oppression of Black and colonised women were dismissed in colonial discourses, such that any mention of them was in the context of them needing to be "rescued" from "their" men and/or "backward" societies (Mani, 1987; Mohanty, 1991). The discourse on women from Global Majority countries — or regions that are considered "third world" and/or postcolonial countries — has largely been on their victimhood, and the ways in which their agency can be discovered or unearthed. They have been viewed as victims of the patriarchal structures in their society, as well as other hierarchies that were cemented during colonial rule in these countries. Wilson goes so far to state that White women as missionaries have contributed to the "infantilisation" of Black and colonised women (Wilson, 2008, p. 84). At the same time, within development discourses, women are expected to empower themselves by exercising their own agency, but it is expected that such transformations take place within the development interventions and their inherent dynamics of power (Wilson, 2008, p. 86). But the dilemma for feminists is when free will and free action are wielded to exercise the subordination of others, and making choices and exercising autonomy that reinforce existing forms of power and control. So, is there is a way to retain the intellectual idea of emancipatory personal autonomy without that becoming the shorthand for actions that reiterate subordination of others in relative marginalities?

In her seminal text "*Under Western Eyes"*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) describes how "third world women" were constructed as a "homogeneous 'powerless' group often located as implicit victims of particular socio-economic systems" in Western feminist discourse (Mohanty, 1991, p. 57). She argued that:

> "...universal images of 'the third world Woman' (the veiled woman, chaste virgin, etc.), images constructed from adding the 'third world difference' to 'sexual difference', are predicated upon (and hence obviously bring into sharper focus) assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated and having control over their own lives" (Mohanty, 1991, p. 74).

Even if the idea of subordination can be extrapolated to be a general one for women throughout history, the idea of agency exists in varied ways, and sometimes, even in conflicting manners. Anthropologist Saba Mahmood argues that the study of agency has largely been to interrogate how women "contribute to reproducing their own domination, and how do they resist or subvert it" (Mahmood, 2001, p. 205). She reminds us how the scholarship on agency among women in the Arab world largely viewed women as being "passive and submissive beings, shackled by structures of male authority", and that women might employ "instruments of their oppression as means to assert their value both collectively, through the ceremonies they organise and stage... [which] in itself is a means of resisting and setting limits to domination" (Boddy, 1989, p. 345; as cited in Mahmood, 2001, p. 206). While Kabeer argues that agency implies actively exercising choice in a manner that challenges power relations (Kabeer, 2005, p. 15), Mahmood tells us that such an analysis of agency — which is expressed in a manner that defies norms and traditions — is "a product of feminism's dual character as both an analytical and a politically prescriptive project" (ibid). Chattopadhyay goes so far as to deem it to be "unethical" to infuse a sense of agency "when the act of living itself is a victory against structural violence and insidious forms of inequalities" (Chattopadhyay, 2023, p. 20).

Mahmood thus views the definition of human agency as autonomy in the face of power to be a limited one, owing to its failure in understanding "the lives of women whose desire, affect, and will have been shaped by nonliberal tradition" (Mahmood, 2001, p. 203). Mahmood calls for rethinking agency "not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood, 2001, p. 203). She thus cautions us against jumping into conclusions about any form of expression of agency as being a form of resistance, but to analyse such actions as something possible only because existing power relations have disempowered some. Such a purview is best exemplified by Chattopadhyay's provoking question: "Does the feminist project of 'recovering agency' say more about us as feminist scholars, than women who may not see themselves in such terms?" (Chattopadhyay, 2023, p. 175).

Within the neoliberal discourse, the onus of change is placed on the individual rather than larger systems (Wilson, 2008, p. 83). Mahmood hence argues for dissociating the idea of agency from emancipation, and cautions against labelling of agentive and emancipatory actions, when they may not be so.

So how might we view those whose pursuits and desires, valid as they may be, are not to subvert norms? Mahmood argues that within the remit of feminist politics that emphasise a quest for

freedom, a woman not seeking her own liberation is viewed as problematic. In the context of Arab women, their own articulation of sex segregation has been viewed as their marginalisation from the public spheres (Ahmed, 1982; Wikan, 1991). Mahmood argues that if the potential for effecting change is shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts, then its definition cannot be determined in advance. Instead, it must be understood through an analysis of the particular concepts that allow for the possibility of certain ways of existing. From this perspective, what might seem like troubling passivity or compliance could actually represent a form of agency — one that must be interpreted within the discourses and structures of subordination that shape its possibility. Agency thus does not reside solely in actions that bring about transformation or progress, but also in those that uphold continuity, preserve stability, or resist disruption (Mahmood, 2001, p. 212).

This reiterates the need to view agency as not only "a temporally embedded process of social engagement" (Emirbayer & Mische 1998, p. 963), but also as "being spatially embedded" (Datta, 2020, p. 4). In the context of this research, feminist geographer Anindita Datta's argument of specific forms of agency being exerted only within specific geographical contexts holds strong ground. Her argument sits alongside that of other feminist geographers whose scholarship highlights the historical and geographical variation in gendered roles and relations, as well as the impact of practices and discourses that are specific to location (Domosh & Seager, 2001; Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1999). Datta's conceptualisation of regional genderscapes in India theorises "women's lived spaces as a product of realms of nature, social relations, meaning and agency which come together to determine women's mobility and participation in society and their agency and autonomy within specific locations" (Datta, 2011, 2005).

There are numerous examples of the manner in which space determines the extent to which a person is able to exercise her agency. For example, Chattopadhyay found that migration to a larger city renders a sense of relative anonymity, which in turn provides a person a sense of agency; an example of that is the ways in which they earned a living, by hoodwinking their relatives back home (p. 39). It is hence immanent to analyse older women's agency in the context of their changing status in their geographical, social and cultural context, and based on the availability and access to resources and care (Morell, et al., 2020).

"Older", "middle-class", "women", "Assam": I thread these words into a string that together, they might conjure a specific image. However, a singular description of "older middle-class women in Assam" simply cannot be fitted into a neat box when attempting to understand their subjective agential actions. Nobody should be made to fit into a box in the first place. But in studying their lives from a lifecourse perspective, it becomes all the more imperative to hold their subjectivities together: their past, their skin cast, the forms of their subjugation, the forms of their emancipations, and their lives within the socio-political milieu in which they were raised as girls, married as young women, and in which they age as older women.

Further, agency can be viewed as a teleological destination. The good life — led with autonomy and agency — cannot be viewed as something "waiting to be discovered as persons travel further on the linear continuum of progress" (Madhok, 2014, p. 30). What makes such a teleological linear assumption even more challenging is the reality of a body that is ageing biologically, which essentially is to say that the body withers as time passes. One attempt at such a teleological destination in exercising agency among older people is self-care, which has been found to be the most predominant form of health care among old people (Stoller & Gibson, 2000). Self-care is a gendered idea and practice: older women have been found to exercise a wider repertoire of self-care than men (George, 2001; Calasanti, 2004, p. 311). According to Ahlin, (2024), care practices mediated through the smartphone and Internet-mediated connections across geographical space are "global assemblages of human and nonhuman entities" (p. 9) which she terms as "transnational care collectives" (ibid). Care practices mediated through the smartphone, the Internet and social media can become forms of exercising agency.

But to what extent can agency be exercised, with and through systems of connectivity, encompassing their affordances and limitations? Or is it too far-fetched to assume any form of agency for older women in Assam, with the smartphone in their palms? Is the gadget imbued with extraordinary powers of enabling transformation, when they are created within systems that come with their inherent dynamics of power? How systems are designed determine the manner in which they open or limit avenues for those accessing such systems.

Agency, as herein explicated, is not a private property of the will but a situated capacity, patterned by kinship, markets, and the state. Design, as this project sees it, is one of the chief mechanisms through which these capacities are organised: it allocates visibility, time, and risk. The smartphone in an older woman's hand is therefore not merely a tool but a gatekeeper: widening or narrowing her horizon of the possible as infrastructures, interfaces, and policies determine her moves.

Design justice, then, is not an aesthetic preference. It is a politics of life: who defines the problem, whose labour is presumed, whose attention is extracted. To move from agency to design justice and to gather it as a form of the conceptual assemblage in this project is thus to shift the question from "*did she choose*?" to "*how were her choices architected, by whom, and to whose benefit*?" This is the question that guides the next section and much of the larger discussion of this dissertation.

I therefore approach older Assamese women's engagements with smartphones as a field in which different forms of agency become legible. Some acts may resemble Kabeer's passive agency (when quietly accepting a family member's decision about which app may be used), while others are more active or even transformative (when insisting on learning a ride hailing app in order to travel alone). At times, their use of the phone continues through existing moral orders, in Mahmood's sense (when deepening devotional practices or extending care obligations). At other times, it unsettles the

regional genderscape that Datta describes (when late-night video calls, online shopping, or theatre rehearsals redraw expectations about where an older woman should be and what she should be doing).

Rather than asking whether these practices are resistant enough, I treat them as situated negotiations of possibility. The smartphone is not a magic key to autonomy, but a device through which the distribution of options, risks and responsibilities in later life becomes visible and, occasionally, open to renegotiation.

On design justice

Before we delve into the idea of design justice, design has to be first understood in its abstraction as well as in its tangible, tactile manifestation. Design organises who benefits and who bears costs; this section shows how and why that matters for older women in Assam using smartphones.

Design organises who benefits and who bears costs. While design might be the remit of professionals, design's fundamental philosophical underpinnings determine how objects, processes, systems and institutions can be envisaged by combining existing knowledge and new technologies. Design is an attempt to impose structures that would provide meaningful order on the world and its functioning. This means that anything that is designed — objects, processes, systems, institutions — are accompanied by inherent and biased assumptions, which tend to be based on existing structures of power and hierarchies, thereby delivering benefits and burdens, depending on who utilises them. Thus, much of our everyday experiences of objects, processes, systems, and institutions are dependent on *who* designs them and *how* they have been designed and for *whom*; as such they impact our lives, even as we are largely not able to participate in the processes in which they are designed. In their seminal book *Design Justice*, Sasha Costanza-Chock explains the depth in which design mediates our realities:

> "In particular, the people who are most adversely affected by design decisions — about visual culture, new technologies, the planning of our communities, or the structure of our political and economic systems — tend to have the least influence on those decisions and how they are made" (Costanza-Chock, 2020, p. 20).

In the context of who uses a smartphone, this means who is able — or not able — to navigate the many contours of a system that aims to be intuitive and hence inclusive in its design; yet it excludes those who are painstakingly quadrupedaling through a system — manifested through a gadget — that has a prefix, the assumption, an arrogance even, of being "smart". If, as Langdon Winner reminds us, 'artifacts have politics' (1980), then design is one of the ways agency is patterned

in practice: devices and infrastructures distribute visibility, time, and risk, shaping what older women can do, when, and with whom. In this sense, agency appears not as pure will but as a capacity structured by designed environments — interfaces and policies that widen or narrow the horizon of the possible.

The development of technology is rooted in knowledge systems, practices and products, despite frictions at various stages; the end result often dependent on existing unequal distribution of resources across society (Wajcman, 1991). This has a precursor in the ways in which indigenous peoples' ways of imposing meaningful order on the world have been attacked thanks to centuries of colonialism. Srinivisan (2017) argues that such systems are further decimated in the face of newer sociotechnical systems. Indigenous knowledge systems are dismissed to make way for tools that emerge from expensive labs; sometimes they are culturally appropriated and sold by institutions in the Global Minority for higher capitalist margins, whose profits are not shared with the original creators. This reproduces a colonial political economy (Irani, 2018).

On a more specific scale, the affordances of specific objects and technologies are also rooted in a manner that assumes that their users are the dominant group within a society. Costanza-Chock writes that in the context of the US, this dominant group means "(cis) male, white, heterosexual, 'able-bodied', literate, college educated, not a young child and not elderly, with broadband internet access, with a smartphone" (Costanza-Chock, 2020, p. 77). This reflects only a small percentage of humanity, especially in the context of technologies — smartphones, spirometers, seatbelts — that are aimed for global use. If this dominant group has the economic power to access the technologies being designed and their affordances, then design excludes the needs of the wide spectrum of marginalised groups; they are even excluded as potential contributors to better design.

Affordances can be defined as "an object's properties that show the possible actions users can take with it, thereby suggesting how they may interact with that object. For instance, a button can look as if it needs to be turned or pushed" (Interaction Design Foundation, n.d.). The term is used in various fields: for instance, "technology affordances" in the domain of human-computer interaction (Gaver, 1991; Norman, 2006). People in marginalised groups experience disaffordance (Wittkower, 2016) of the same system or technology that the dominant group might view as an affordance: thus, the absence of a ramp on a bus or a non-functioning elevator at a subway station are disaffordances for those using a wheelchair, the need for a numbered code to access the banking app on the smartphone is a disaffordance to someone with undiagnosed dementia. STS scholar Ruha Benjamin (2016) explains how the spirometer — a device that helps assess lung capacity — was built with a "race correction" button, because pulmonologists were of the view that "race" determined lung capacity. Benjamin thus argues that technological disaffordances are essentially examples of "discriminatory design", because they normalise racial hierarchies within underlying sociotechnical systems (Benjamin, 2016, p. 148).

My own experience with a spirometer was fifteen years ago, when my father was given one right after undergoing a complex coronary artery bypass surgery, during which the surgeons had to also manage his recent pulmonary edema. The spirometer had three coloured balls in three different columns. He was expected to take the pipe leading to the columns into his mouth and inhale deeply, such that his inhalation would raise each ball. The more he would inhale, the higher each ball would go; the aim was to inhale so deep that each of the balls would rise together, and this would, in turn, strengthen his lung capacity and eliminate any recurrence of pulmonary edema. But my father struggled with it, and as a tired 24-year-old caregiver in the hospital, I would lose my patience when he complained about not wanting to do it. One time, he threw the plastic spirometer towards me and told me to try it before him. I wiped the mouth of the pipe, and inhaled. One ball managed to rise up, but it left me gasping. I realised how the doctors had not given him — or me — adequate instruction about the functioning of the spirometer, and instead demanded him to master it, without taking into account that he had only recently undergone surgery. What was meant to be a helpful tool became the point of constant friction between him and me, until the day I tried it myself. Far from the design of the tool, the expectations of the doctor only amplified this tool's disaffordance on the path towards my father's recovery.

Technologies — and those who deploy them — continue to be designed in a manner that reproduces existing power inequalities. This also translates into the realm when "institutions frame and scope 'problems' for designers to 'solve' in ways that systematically render structural inequality, history, and community resistance invisible" (Costanza-Chock, 2020, p. 27). Institutions designing public spaces erect fences to determine how people ought to move from A to B; whereas "desire paths" — trails that emerge over time due to human or animal traffic — are one example of resistance against paths that only lengthen the distance of movement. In other words, modern design processes aim to reproduce a sense of a singular world.

Anthropologist and development theorist Arturo Escobar (2018) urges a decolonial approach to design grounded in collaborations specific to place rather than universal solutions. Drawing on the Zapatista call for "a world where many worlds fit" (Marcos, 2000), he names this "pluriversal thinking": the insistence that distinct ways of being, knowing, and valuing coexist and must not be flattened into a single "universal" user or path. This is not mere cultural pluralism but an ontological claim with design consequences: build infrastructures that allow different lifeways to endure on their own terms. Modern design too often enforces a one-world ontology — the standard user, the standard route — while lived worlds multiply around it. Desire paths are not errors in the landscape but vernacular proposals for other ways of moving, caring, and knowing. The politics of decolonial design treats these proposals as starting points, collaborating with situated collectives so options are produced from within, not imposed from above. In Assam, this means reading older women's phone practices — Assamese scripts and fonts, shared devices and logins, proxy use, paper–digital hybrids — as evidence of a pluriverse already in motion. Design justice, in Escobar's sense, is less about retrofitting

accessibility to a universal tool than about recognising and resourcing these many worlds, so that agency is organised on their terms rather than the market's.

The existence — and thereafter recognition — of discriminatory design has given rise to a body of work that envisages a different way of designing; and even designing for the margins (McDowell & Chinchilla, 2016). One such line of research is grounded in participatory action and codesign — which also has similarities and alliance in practice with feminist research methodologies — that emphasises involving the community with shared research questions and actions (Dewey, 1933; Lewin, 1946; Freire, 1972; Fals-Borda, 1987; Smith, 2013). Such research and co-design practices move the locus of designing away from the labs to the people who might benefit from the design of systems or products in question, and such a process can be conducted by delving into alternative histories of technology that are "erased by mainstream design theory and history, both in scholarly and popular writing" (Costanza-Chock, 2020, p. 13). This also means investing the time and resources to understand how innovations *do* take place at home and in slum alleys, and away from hierarchical innovation labs. Digital cultures in the Global Majority countries reveal the ways in which the youth have found ways — sometimes techno-solutionist — to find pleasure, leisure, and spaces for self-actualisation (Chan, 2014; Arora, 2024). At the same time, social movements have been the unintended springboard for innovation, especially in the realm of media tools, because of the ways in which traditional legacy news media at large has largely misrepresent — and even attack — social movements[8]. Alternative media have thus emerged out of the necessity to correct those narratives (Downing, 2000); social media platform Twitter (until the time it was rebranded as X) and instant messaging service Telegram are examples of these.

As I witness older women going online — writing, posting photos, using apps that make their lives easier — this is possibly the beginning of an unorganised movement, whereby they are reclaiming their time, by claiming their space and writing new narratives about and for themselves; a movement that has been mediated by social media and its affordances. In keeping with the decolonial premise of "nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 1988), I treat these practices as guidance rather than data to be mined: older women co-define questions, review interpretations (in accessible Assamese formats), and can contest or veto claims about their lives. This stance resonates with Black feminist thought's longstanding influence on design, media, and communication. As Safiya Noble proposes in Black Feminist Technology Studies, it is an epistemology attentive to how gendered and racialised identities are produced across digital and analogue systems (2018, p. 172). Here, too, the point is not to speak for but to *build with*, so that analysis and design are answerable to those whose worlds they aim to reconfigure.

[8] This generalisation has led to an emergence of alternative news media organisations that focus their reporting on social movements. Examples of these are Democracy Now! and Waging Nonviolence — both registered in the US — that cover people's movements from across the world. In India, two examples of these that I have closely worked with are CGNet Swara and Samadrusti. In my journalism career, I have extensively reported on social movements, despite the fact that legacy news media are reluctant to provide ample news space for such reportage.

Such an epistemological approach has also led to the rise of participatory research within technology design, which encompasses user-led innovation, participatory design, and feminist human-computer interaction (HCI) (Schuler & Namioka, 1993; Von Hippel, 2005; Bardzell, 2010).

This has led to the emergence of different strands of participatory design. Value-sensitive design (VSD) prioritises values held by designers, even if these values might actually differ from those for whom something is being designed. Contrasting the predominant assumption of the universality of needs and experiences, user-centered design (UCD) as a process is:

> "based upon an explicit understanding of users, tasks, and environments; is driven and refined by user-centered evaluation; and addresses the whole user experience. The process involves users throughout the design and development process and it is iterative" (Digital.gov, n.d.)

Yet participation is not a panacea. Value-sensitive design risks smuggling in the designer's values as universal; User-centred design risks narrow sampling while presenting itself as neutral.

I therefore make two commitments explicit: first, name who counts as a "user" and why; second, establish shared governance over interpretation and release. In other words, rather than retrofitting inclusions to a pre-given tool, the work is to disclose whose options are being produced, whose are ruled out, and to organise design so that possibilities are widened on the terms of those older women whose lives are at stake.

The concept of "design justice" is thus a design approach that aims to be more cognisant of values, choices, marginalities, and power hierarchies, and as such this is how it is operationalised within this project as a whole. Arising out of the Allied Media Conference which subsequently birthed the Design Justice Network, "design justice is a framework for analysis of how design distributes benefits and burdens between various groups of people" (Costanza-Chock, 2020, p. 23).

As a framework, design justice urges designers — of objects, processes, systems and institutions — to think of design beyond its benefactory purpose, such that they consider how even the best intentions are sometimes still limiting or exclusionary. Design justice is hence a lens for how we view the world, and how we work: it is an epistemology, as well as methodology.

Much of the principles of design justice have been based on feminist epistemologies (Bernal, 1998; Collins, 2002; Harding, 2004). This means going past the supposed universal design process — which is never actually universal, because of the rich diversity in our world in many different ways — but designing through conversations, empathy, and understanding the experiences of those who might be most in need of a design intervention. Design justice principles have also been based on the disability justice movement and its focus on questioning the assumptions of people's bodies and how they move. From the perspective of intersectional feminism, design justice urges designers to view the world from the lens of social justice values. This means heeding to the ways in which design's benefits and burdens are distributed in unequal ways, as well as to "counter white supremacy,

cisheteropatriarchy, capitalism, ableism, and settler colonialism" (Costanza-Chock, 2020, p. 68). This ought to be a framework at every stage of design processes, starting from the way in which a design problem is understood.

Recognising that an epistemology and methodology that centres on not repeating the mistakes of reproducing existing inequalities, design justice calls for a deeper reflection into the values, practices, narratives, sites and pedagogies of design processes (Costanza-Chock, 2020, p. 24). Each of these aspects are hence the yardstick for analysis on the ways in which older women in my research navigate the smartphone, and their lives, with and despite its presence.

What does design justice as epistemological and methodological frameworks mean, given the previously elaborated historical missteps in design processes? It means going beyond universal assumptions and focusing on specific needs, and thereby the specificities of designs. It means a deeper probe into the values of the people and even communities for whom the design is being created, rather than the values held by the designer. It means asking a fundamental question of who gets to be a designer (of objects, processes, systems and institutions). It means avoiding the temptation to replicate old ideas that have not worked before, and instead listen deeper to communities that have managed to figure their solutions, even if they might be in an ad hoc manner. One example of this is the way in which an iPad-based self-assessment tool for older people in Boston failed, while a paper brochure was more successful. The lesson learnt? Not everything needs an app or a technology solution (Costanza-Chock et al., 2018; see also Broussard, 2018). Design justice means resisting the urge to create something new, rather than repairing something that is old: we see the slow disappearance of cobblers or dressmakers across the world, whose main task is repairing. Or, as Costanza-Chock puts it succinctly: "Don't start by building a new table; start by coming to the table" (Costanza-Chock, 2020, p. 84).

Design justice also means taking a deeper probe into the perception of, and actual access to, affordances. An example of this is the existence of elevators at some subway stations within any transport network, such that it is a perceptible but unavailable affordance for those with different levels of mobility — including wheelchair users — when getting on the subway becomes a gamble, with not knowing which station might have an elevator and which may not. From a disability rights perspective — which does not mean that the perspective is only applicable to those with disabilities — it means not simply making wheelchairs more comfortable in their use, or creating medical innovations and solutions that would make wheelchair use redundant. It also means (re)constructing built environments — streets, subways, buildings, bathrooms — to make movement by wheelchairs possible (Kafer, 2013).

But can all designs be inclusive to everyone: from their conceptualisation, creation, a sense of ownership, and even adequate credit for creation? Can a design that is inclusive to everyone actually deliver something that solves the original problem? Does a design need to tick all the boxes in an accessibility checklist? Such tensions will exist and may not always be resolved, but design justice as

a framework offers “a prism through which to generate a far wider rainbow of possible choices, each better tailored to reflect the needs of a specific group of people” (Costanza-Chock, 2020, p. 230).

If design is an iterative process — of envisaging the world, listening to the responses of those designs from the world, then designing differently, such that it impacts all of us — then design becomes a speculation (Willis, 2006. p. 80; Di Salvo & Lukens, 2009). Might it thus be possible to view this research also as an abductive and thereby speculative process? Ethnography and anthropology presupposes that we draw inferences from what we know and what we don’t know, and thus, the concept of agency and resistance emerging from my fieldwork among older women in Assam are a speculation in the larger realm of designing a different view of the world: a different view of older women and their world, a different view of older women and their world with a smartphone in their palms.

Those in the margins of society have always felt that the world is not built for them. Older women have largely been marginalised, due to the double identities based on gender and age; they are further pushed to the margins based on other markers of identity like caste, race, ethnicity, class, nationality, location. But each time I tell people about my research, I am told about older women in their families who are defying the existing assumptions in different ways, including their level of activity on social media. This is a cohort that is making use of whatever is available, even as the design of digital tools reveal how older people are not considered when these tools are being designed.

I see this in the way that Priyamvada has managed to write long texts in the Assamese script on her phone; I see this in the way Sukanya, Anima and Maya seek me out to understand the functioning of ride-hailing apps. But more than them seeking me out, it was my imperative that they learn this, even as I tried to hide away my irritations with some aspects of the way the apps are designed. But while showing them how to use the apps — and thereby hoping that they would feel a bit mobile in their cities and towns — I realised that the slow process of showing them how to understand the apps was tied to an unspoken, undemanded, unexpected reciprocity of care. They, the ones who have held me as a toddler, are not relying on me to help them make sense of a world where smartphones have become the axis of existence. These micro-pedagogies show care as co-produced and reveal where design offloads labour onto kin, a topic underpinning much of my field encounters.

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Attending to design justice allows me to read older women’s digital improvisations not as individual shortcomings but as diagnoses of a system that has not imagined them as users. The handwritten notebooks that translate icons into Assamese instructions, the shared passwords, the delegation of certain tasks to grandchildren, the repeated mis-taps on cluttered interfaces: these are not merely anecdotes. They are evidence that the smartphone, banking app or ride hailing platform have

been built around another body, another life course, another presumed literacy. At the same time, these practices are vernacular design interventions which carve desire paths through hostile or indifferent infrastructures. By placing these everyday tactics in conversation with design justice, I shift the focus from whether older women can adapt to the digital to how sociotechnical systems could be reconfigured to answer to their timelines, languages and ethics of care. Design becomes, in this sense, one of the key mechanisms through which agency and inequality are organised in Assam, and a crucial site for any attempt to widen the horizon of the possible in late life.

I did not expect to ground my research in the ideas of care, even though feminist gerontology centres care: care is political, because caregiving is labour, caregiving is gendered, and care-receiving exposes power hierarchies. But through the years and months of my research, and the many points of interactions and introspections, in their homes, during meals and at bedtime, in the crowded market or dusty government offices or at loud weddings, through long-distance video calls, something that I had initially missed looking at theoretically and conceptually was always alive: care.

On care

If feminist gerontology is the tree within the *gos* motif, and agency and design justice are the birds flanking the tree, then they together exist only because they are woven on a fabric. Without the fabric, there is no motif at all. That fabric, for my research, is care. A fabric that also happens to be woven slowly with care. That image captures what a growing body of anthropological work on ageing and care has insisted upon: that later life is never only about individual bodies growing old, but about the dense, uneven, often invisible relations that sustain and constrain those lives over time (Cohen, 1998; Lamb, 2000; Danely, 2017; Buch, 2015).

Anthropologists of ageing have shown that longer lives and shifting demographic profiles do not simply produce more old people, they reconfigure projects of meaning, value, and relationality across generations. Ethnographies from several countries — India, Japan, Botswana (to name a few) — attend to how older age becomes a site where anxieties about good kinship, moral personhood and national futures are played out through everyday practices of care and abandonment (Cohen, 1998; Livingston, 2005; Lamb, 2000; Danely, 2022). Ageing societies foreground new genres of historicity and imagination, as people rework what counts as a life well lived in conditions of extended longevity and economic uncertainty (Fischer, 2015; Kaufman & Morgan, 2005). Buch's review of the anthropology of ageing and care captures this shift by treating care as both resource and relational practice, tracing how it circulates across bodies, households, institutions and states in later life (Buch, 2015).

Within this literature, care is not a soft background to the real business of ageing. It is the terrain on which ageing becomes livable or precarious. Care is understood as labour: emotion and

social organisation required to “maintain, sustain, and repair the world” in which lives unfold, in Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher’s influential formulation (Tronto & Fisher, 1990). At the same time, work on care in later life cautions against treating care as a single moral good. Care can be supportive and oppressive, intimate and bureaucratic, encompassing solidarity, and deeply unequal. It is always shaped by gendered, classed, casteist and racialised divisions of labour that are themselves reworked by population ageing, welfare reforms and global care chains (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2004; Glenn, 2010; Buch, 2015).

McKearney and Amrith (2021) show how state policies, market logic and household arrangements organise care in profoundly different ways, and how these arrangements then define who is rendered dependent, deserving, or disposable. Care is often coded as private, feminised and economically devalued labour, while the ideal citizen is imagined as independent and self-reliant, especially in Euro-American contexts (Fraser & Gordon, 2003; Held, 2006; Fineman, 2005). Feminist scholars have long argued that this configuration obscures how all lives are sustained through webs of interdependence, and how those webs are unequally recognised and rewarded (Abel & Nelson, 1990; Kittay, 1999, 2019).

For older people, these structural arrangements matter acutely. Later life care is often imagined in public debates through a narrow focus on dependency and burden, obscuring the multiplicity of older people’s roles as carers, workers and citizens, and the ways care in later life reverberates across families, communities and nations (Buch, 2015). Ethnographic work has traced how older age becomes a node where global political economies, moral projects, and intimate vulnerabilities intersect: from pension reforms and austerity measures that reallocate care responsibilities to families; to community-based clinics and volunteer networks that emerge in response (Cabot, 2016; Muehlebach, 2012; Coe, 2019). Care in later life is thus a critical site for understanding how increased longevity reshapes not only the experience of ageing, but the meanings and consequences of life itself (Buch, 2015).

Anthropologists of ageing have also focused on the temporal and affective complexities of care. Work in Japan, India and Southern Africa has shown how caring for older kin involves living with uncertainty about the pace of bodily decline, the adequacy of one’s actions and the limits of cure, and how these uncertainties generate particular forms of mourning, hope and ethical striving (Kleinman, 2009; Danely, 2014; Taylor, 2008; Livingston, 2012; Lamb, 2000; Chakravarti & Bakshi, 2024). Care is saturated with memories of past obligations and anticipations of future dependency, and is evaluated through culturally specific ideas about good age, proper kinship and a dignified death (Lamb, 2000; Danely, 2015).

In many settings, welfare retrenchment and demographic ageing coincide, so that older people rely more heavily on unpaid kin care, migrant care workers and informal networks, all of which are structured by inequalities of gender, class and citizenship (Buch, 2018; Coe, 2019; Yarris, 2017). When care is outsourced to low paid migrant women, global care chains connect older age in one

context to the reorganisation of care in another, as carers' own children and elders need to be looked after by others in their absence (Hochschild, 2001; Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2004; Amrith, 2017).

At the same time, ethnographic studies of care in families and communities challenge the assumption that there is a single proper way to care. Care can be minimal, routinised, even seemingly detached, and yet still be experienced as adequate and ethical in local terms (Aulino, 2019). Kinship itself is often made and remade through acts of caring, as shared food, bodily labour, and everyday attentiveness generate relations that endure beyond legal or genetic ties (Carsten, 1997; 2000). In later life, grandparents, fictive kin, neighbours and religious communities all become important figures in diffuse "care collectives", particularly in contexts of migration, urbanisation and illness (Coe, 2019; Read & van der Geest, 2019; Ahlin, 2023; Reece, 2020).

Digital technologies have become central to these care collectives. Work on transnational families has highlighted how phones, messaging apps and social media mediate care "at a distance", allowing migrants and those who remain behind to monitor health, coordinate support and maintain emotional presence across borders (Hromadžić & Palmberger, 2018; Baldassar & Wilding, 2020). In Indian transnational families, Ahlin (2023) shows how older parents' careful tending of their mobile phones is itself an act of care for absent kin, since the device keeps the "care collective" alive through calls, reminders and shared images. In this literature, devices are not neutral conduits. They have to be charged, protected, understood, their interfaces navigated and their glitches managed, often through gendered and generational division of labour. Caring for the device, and learning how to use it, becomes part of the everyday work of caring for one another.

These insights are crucial for my own focus on older middle class women in Assam and their engagements with smartphones and social media. While the anthropology of ageing has been particularly attentive to care in relation to bodily decline, dementia, institutionalisation and end of life, older women in my fieldwork are often experimenting with new forms of digital sociability, leisure and self-making alongside their responsibilities as carers and recipients of care. Their lives certainly involve illness, loss and fear of dependency, but these are not the only, or even primary, frames through which they understand their phones. Instead, smartphones appear as tools for staying informed, remaining connected to dispersed kin, sustaining friendships and even crafting new publics for their voices and creativity. At the same time, these practices are deeply embedded in moral economies of care that are shaped by gender, caste, class and regional histories.

Feminist scholarship on the ethics of care provides an important bridge here. Tronto and others have argued that care should be seen as a central political value that exposes the fiction of autonomous subjects and highlights our mutual dependencies (Tronto & Fisher, 1990; Tronto, 2015; Held, 2006; Kittay, 1999). In later life, this ethic of care collides with ageist and gendered assumptions that older women are primarily carers for others or drains on resources, rather than subjects of desire, fun or political agency. Bringing care to the centre of analyses of ageing allows us to trace how increased longevity intensifies the stakes of social reproduction, as care responsibilities

extend over longer periods and are redistributed across generations and institutions (Buch, 2015). In Assam, these tensions are refracted through regional genderscapes, middle-class respectability, expectations of daughters-in-law, and the legacies of women's unpaid labour across the life course.

When my mother or her contemporaries insist that a friend must learn a new app, this becomes part of a feminist politics of care. Helping a sister-in-law or neighbour navigate WhatsApp, write in Assamese script or book a ride is not only an act of technical assistance. It is an assertion that older women should not be left behind; that they deserve access to mobility, information and pleasure. It recalls earlier moments of care in their shared biographies, such as help in acclimatising to a new marital home, and translates those obligations into the digital present. In this sense, digital skill sharing functions as what Buch might call a "resource" for later life, but it is also a relational practice that continually renegotiates who is responsible for whom and on what terms (Buch, 2015).

I also attend to how smartphone mediated care for and by older Assamese women is organised by state policies, market infrastructures and platform design. The phone is entangled with banking regulations, welfare schemes delivered through apps, commercial platforms and attention economies. For this thesis, care is not an afterthought to feminist gerontology, agency or design justice. It is the conceptual fabric that allows me to hold these strands together. I understand care as a multi-scalar, historically-situated set of practices, institutions and moral projects through which older Assamese women's lives with smartphones become possible, meaningful and contested. Building on the anthropology of ageing and care, I treat their digital practices as forms of caring for others and for self, but also as sites where dependence, obligation, surveillance and autonomy are constantly renegotiated. At the same time, their stories invite a rethinking of dominant narratives in this literature that centre decline and institutional care, by foregrounding older women in the Global Majority as active participants in emerging "care collectives" that are mediated by digital technologies, regional histories and feminist ethics of mutual holding.

Methodology: Yarns, Needles, Hems

Under the night canopies of fine netted fabric atop large beds — that might have birthed children and now cradle grandchildren — was where much of my ethnography took place. These temporary nocturnal canopies, erected carefully by stretching different coloured strings attached to the four ends of the mosquito nets and fixed on different nails or window grills or curtain rods, provided the intimate space where several women in four towns and cities in Assam in India's northeast talked to me about their lives, their dreams, their hopes, their prayers. These canopies lit up with the blue light emanating from their smartphones, as they showed me what they loved doing: reading essays, checking photos of friends and family members, watching YouTube videos, or simply talking to a friend who also might be similarly laid on the bed, inside the mosquito net, awake at night, elsewhere.

My methodology emerges from these interstices and intersections: between physical and online spaces; between Assam and Bombay; between daughter and researcher; between feminist ethnography, autoethnography and intimate ethnography; between writing and sketching; between longed-for ethnographic immersion and the constraints of neoliberal university regimes. It is also shaped by the recursive movements of self-reflexivity that run throughout the research: moments of uncertainty about my positionality; the recognition of how my own linguistic, emotional and technological histories shaped the questions I asked; and the ongoing negotiation of what it means to study those whose lives are entangled with mine.

Alongside the embodied encounters in kitchens, bedrooms and courtyards, the project also relied on survey work that extended my field beyond the physical: an online survey in English, Hindi and Assamese that reached 175 women across India. The survey responses did not simply precede ethnography but became part of its texture, providing both a clearer sense of women's digital practices and a mirror through which I interrogated my own assumptions, particularly about class, region and generational difference.

These diverse materials — conversations whispered beneath mosquito nets; WhatsApp notes to myself typed hurriedly after emotional exchanges; transcriptions that forced me to confront the cadence and accent of my own Assamese; survey responses from women I would never meet; photographs later translated into sketches; my growing awareness of how my own presence shaped every encounter — together form the methodological fabric of this thesis.

In this chapter, I stitch these elements together through the metaphor and practice of patchwork, recognising the seams as sites of knowledge rather than flaws, and embracing the imperfect, improvisational, yet deeply relational nature of doing ethnography in a world shaped by digital technologies, gendered care, and unequal academic economies.

Patchwork as Motif and Method

My research took place across several months and different periods of time in various towns and cities of Assam, as well as in my home city of Bombay in western India. The research did not end when I left India. When I returned to Ireland, it continued through online engagement with the women who had graciously opened their doors, their hearts, and their stories. I spent days, nights and weeks with many of them in their homes: talking in kitchens and at dining tables, participating in household chores, accompanying them on errands, attending weddings and, at times, sleeping beside them on their beds. In total, I made two three-month-long trips to India. The first trip was akin to reconnaissance. I had already been in touch with the women before I went to India during the second trip. I spent at least two nights with each of the women, in their home, and accompanying them in their everyday lives. I stayed in touch with them over WhatsApp for several months after I returned to Ireland.

Many of our most intimate conversations unfolded within the cosy confines of the mosquito net, many of which I was tasked with erecting. I would attempt to wake when they woke, but often, by the time my eyes opened, they had already left the bed to begin their day. I would then untie the strings of the canopy, fold the mosquito net neatly and stow it away until that small bundle of thin fabric would again become a protective shelter for the night.

These nets were often old and had suffered tiny tears, yet large enough for just one determined mosquito to enter and destroy a night's sleep. Rather than discarding the entire net, small pieces of fabric — scraps from other worn garments — were patched in and carefully sewn with a single thread. Some nets carried several such patches. On some nights, a patch that prevented a mosquito from entering also shielded my eyes from the brightness of a night lamp and allowed me to sleep. A repair made out of necessity became an unexpected comfort. A small, improvised act of care held together the fragile fabric of rest and intimacy.

The motive of the patchwork was to hold together something torn. The motif of the patchwork became my research methodology, enabling a way of doing ethnography that responds to the circumstances at hand. Working within a university structure that did not bind me to a single discipline, and drawing on nineteen years of practising journalism — asking direct and tangential questions, cultivating an ethos of "do not victimise, do not idolise, do not villainise" — the approach that resonates most strongly with my practice is anthropology and its varied ethnographic forms. Instead of fighting the "tear" in the classic model of long, uninterrupted fieldwork, patchwork becomes both image and method: rather than lamenting a compromised immersion, I work with yarn, needle and hem to fashion a different, situated mode of ethnographic stitching.

Patchwork Ethnography

The figure of the ethnographer who visits a village, community or family for many months, year after year, has long shaped the understanding of ethnography. It remains a powerful imaginary, but also a "romanticism that has been embedded into the ethos of ethnography" (Appleton & Bennett, 2021, p. 203). At the same time, anthropologists have questioned where and what the "field" is (Candea, 2007; Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Marcus, 1995). Ethnographers are expected to produce "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973, p. 10) that are often assumed to require long-term immersion. Yet how thick must immersion be in order to produce thick description, and for whom is such immersion possible?

In recent years, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, research that entails travelling and interacting with people for extended periods has faced a moment of reckoning. Structural inequalities — who can undertake such research, under what conditions and with which passports — have come into sharper relief. While my research was not directly interrupted by COVID-19, the structures within which my PhD programme is situated have profoundly shaped what kind of methodology is possible.

I arrived in Ireland with a PhD stipend that seemed adequate from afar. Only upon arrival did the full extent of the housing crisis and high cost of living become apparent. The stipend barely covered living costs for a single person, let alone for those with dependants. There were no dedicated research funds. Non-EU students like myself must pay a high fee each year to renew the Irish Residence Permit. Universities have introduced lottery systems for student accommodation. Securing a roof over my head required more than fifty emails and multiple fifteen-minute viewings of rooms that were windowless, cramped, shared, each at rents of not less than €800 per month.

Under these conditions, I wondered whether it made sense to be based in Ireland at all when my research field was elsewhere. But the terms of my stipend meant I could not legally be outside Ireland for more than six months each year. At the same time, I could not risk relinquishing my accommodation to spend extended periods in India: there was no guarantee of finding another place on my return. Ethical approval from my university was arduous and slow to arrive, delaying the start of fieldwork. All this unfolded alongside the emotional labour of receiving news of deaths in the extended family, worrying about my mother's health and hoping that emergency calls would not come.

These circumstances are not simply a personal lament or a list of grievances. They are structural, and are specific to the passports we carry. Visa regimes, airfares, remittance obligations and institutional timelines all shape who can do "classic" fieldwork and how. My struggles are not unique; they connect me to a wider generation of scholars who face various combinations of precarity, care responsibilities and institutional constraints.

It is in this context that patchwork ethnography becomes crucial (Günel et al., 2020; Günel & Watanabe, 2023, 2024). Drawing from their experiences as English-as-a-second-language speakers with families and fields thousands of miles apart, anthropologists Gökçe Günel and Chika Watanabe argue that the "field" and "outsiderness" exist in fluid relation to "home" and insiderness (Günel & Watanabe, 2024, p. 137). Their articulation of patchwork ethnography grounds methodology in the realities of contemporary academia:

> "Neoliberal university labour conditions, expectations of work-life balance, environmental concerns, and feminist and decolonial critiques have demanded a rethinking of fieldwork as a process that entails spending a year or longer in a faraway place. Family obligations, precarity, other hidden, stigmatized, or unspoken factors — and most recently COVID-19 — have made long-term, in-person fieldwork difficult, if not impossible, for many scholars. If sociocultural anthropology is to remain not only relevant but also doable for a diverse group of people in the coming decades, research through fieldwork cannot be an exclusive privilege for the few" (Günel & Watanabe, 2023, p. 131).

Encountering patchwork ethnography as both manifesto and methodological framework gave me respite from the weight of structural limitations, and permission to think of my research in terms of possibility rather than failure. Patchwork ethnography aims to render ethnographic research more inclusive, not only for those who can afford long stretches of time "in the field". It calls for a "seam-full" engagement with knowledge production by foregrounding the seams in our research: the indeterminacies between "data" and daily life, the movements between sites and home, the editing decisions that shape ethnographic stories (Günel & Watanabe, 2023).

Patchwork ethnography enables a researcher to claim that "it is the circumstance which defined the method rather than the method defining the circumstance" (Amit, 2000, p. 11). It is as much an epistemological stance as a methodological one. I understand my methodology as a response to Sarah Pink's call for ethnographic practice to take "principled form" through "continued creative practice, intervention and future-making" (Pink, 2018, p. 206). Because I wanted to understand how older women experienced the smartphone and social media — and more specifically, in how they learn to use them, how they navigate them, and what they are doing with them — I approached my research with a multiplicity of methods. My research hence weaves together different methods and practices, some planned and systematic, others improvised. These include an online survey in three languages, limited netnography, multi-sited ethnography, sketching as ethnography and ongoing online engagement. The specific contours of this work were fashioned on the go: through what in India is called "jugaad".

Jugaad is a colloquial term for frugal innovation. It is both verb and noun, referring to improvisation in the face of scarce resources and rigid social systems (Arora, 2019, p. 71). Often

glossed as “hacking” in Western contexts, jugaad lacks the moral suspicion that clings to hacking. Instead, it describes creative manoeuvres to survive and to access basic necessities. Arora (2019) describes the widely circulated tale of dhaba owners on highways in northern India who re-engineer washing machines to churn yogurt en masse to make lassi. Sekhsaria (2011, 2023) has argued for more engagement with innovation in non-English languages — like jugaad — because these are more representative of the lived realities and challenges faced by communities in their respective contexts and geographies.

Jugaad became central to every stage of my research. It shaped how I travelled, where I stayed, how I contacted participants and, later, how I wrote. When I lost a notebook full of fieldwork notes on a Dublin bus after I had returned from fieldwork in India, I went through every possible route to recover it, but eventually gave up and relied on timestamps of photographs on my phone to reconstruct the chronology of events. Most of my ethnography draws on hours of transcribed recordings, including pauses. Some of my reflections are now mediated through memory, photographs and WhatsApp notes to myself.

Anthropologists have been challenged for relying on memory, particularly when researching their own families, on the grounds that such accounts are somehow less legitimate unless mediated by a third party (Wall, 2008, p. 45). This insistence on written records alone reflects a positivist attitude (Wall, 2008; Ottenberg, 1990). My practice sits differently. In the field, pulling out a notebook during intimate moments would have foregrounded my role as observer. My phone was already in my hand, and so were my participants’ phones. It was less intrusive to type brief notes to myself in WhatsApp than to break the flow of our conversations. These digital notes, alongside photographs and recordings, form part of the patchwork archive of this research.

Seen through patchwork ethnography, these interruptions and jugaad interventions are not failures but materials. They offer “a way to write *with* rather than against the interruptions and disruptions of fieldwork” (Günel and Watanabe, 2023, p. 133, italics in original). The need for such contingency planning has become so pressing that the Wenner-Gren Foundation now requires applicants to include a detailed “Plan B” in methodological designs, acknowledging that life intrudes on even the best-laid plans. This recognition also opens space for gendered modes of research that account for interruptions due to childbirth and care, and for decolonial praxis that interrogates who can travel, who can stay, who is funded and who is considered legitimate (Smith, 1999).

When one picks up a piece of fabric, one rarely knows whether it will eventually become part of a blanket or a rug. A patchwork quilt is an assembly of patches with different textures and fibres, varied softness and sizes. My research similarly assembles devices, narratives and methods over punctuated periods of time. The quilt — as object of jugaad and care — fulfils a need for warmth and protection, while honouring that every patch bears its own history.

In practical terms, my patchwork included two trips to India for ethnography, an online survey, online “lurking” on participants’ social media profiles (Muñiz & Schau, 2005) and regular

video calls. The first trip functioned as reconnaissance to refine and narrow my research questions. After this, I created an online survey in English, Hindi and Assamese. The survey, which targeted women over sixty who use smartphones and social media, included multiple-choice, open-ended and numerical questions, and remained open for 46 days, gathering 175 responses, 40 of them in Assamese. Analysing these responses helped sharpen the questions I carried back into the field.

The survey ended with a question asking if respondents would be willing to share more about their experiences. Among those who responded "yes" and provided contact details, I contacted the women who had completed the survey in Assamese. The phone conversations that followed functioned as a scoping exercise to understand their smartphone practices and to gauge whether they might welcome a home visit. They also helped me with cultivating rapport (Harrington, 2003, p. 599).

Fields as Interfaces: Online and Offline

Mobile phones, email and messaging applications unfold a series of interfaces in the field. Waltorp conceptualises "an ethnography where the field takes the form of an interface: a field of ambiguous condition because it links together those things that it at the same time separates" (Waltorp, 2018). The ethnographic field, once imagined as a distant and bounded location, now often exists across shared digital platforms, with each person inhabiting different rooms within the same "place". Fieldwork, then, is a "mutually produced interface instigated by the curiosity of the experimental anthropologist" (Waltorp, 2018, p. 127). In my case, one of my "fields" is the social media profile of my research participants.

Danah Boyd's notion of "digital publics" is helpful here. She describes digital publics as social spaces constructed "through networked technologies and the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice" (Boyd, 2011, p. 39). Social media platforms, and the interactions within them, are such publics. Connecting with my participants through their social media profiles, and "lurking" on their posts (Muñiz & Schau, 2005), I was less interested in individual posts as content than in how these older women constructed a "presentation of Self" (Papacharissi, 2009) within these digital publics. This online observation provided me with questions to explore in person: why a certain photograph was posted, why a specific literary group was joined, what it meant to "like" or share certain content.

In India, my multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) took me to Guwahati, Jorhat, Duliajan and Dibrugarh in Assam, as well as to Bombay. I spent time and interviewed nine women. Eight of them were strangers to me at the outset, reached through the survey. The ninth was my mother. My research thus spans a spectrum from intimate familiarity to formal acquaintance.

If patchwork ethnography provides the fabric of my methodology, then the main epistemological patches are (i) intimate ethnography (ii) autoethnography and feminist ethnography

(iii) sketching as ethnography. None of these patches is central or marginal in a hierarchical sense. Together, they form the quilt of this research.

Between autoethnography and intimate ethnography

My research began by witnessing my mother's curiosity with the smartphone and Facebook, and then her slow uptake of other social media. I saw how it had, after my father's death, opened her to a literary world beyond what she had always known: that writers only get published in magazines, that writers are only those whose books are published. My curiosity about how this gadget had become part of her life had become mine: I was constantly showing her how to navigate the various functions and tools, often with emotional outbursts that took us both back to old painful memories of not being good listeners to each other. I began to notice that this was not something that was unique to my mother: my aunties — by kin, and by generational acquaintance — were on a similar learning curve, with the help of their own children or grandchildren.

During one of my fieldwork visits to my birth town of Jorhat in Assam, I saw my mother showing her sister-in-law how to type in Assamese on Facebook. "*Look here, it is very easy*." Very quickly, it became obvious to me that this research is not simply about observing how my mother and other aunties were taking to this new device that opened new avenues for them, but about immersing myself through a process of bearing witness to how they have arrived at this point. In many ways, hence, my research began even before the start of my MA (Borpujari, 2021) and then the PhD; perhaps it began when I began to first notice that they were changing the way they viewed the world, ever so slightly and slowly. In many ways, I saw that they were "people [who are] trapped in history and history is trapped in them" (Baldwin, 1985, p. 163). They were the bearers of legacies and rituals; they were renegotiating what was expected of them as older Assamese women.

The idea of neutrality, while definitely having a significant bearing on the results of a research, often overlooks the cultural and societal contexts of the research, thus obfuscating the researcher's own position and thereby their interpretations of the data gathered. Perhaps the case for this is well articulated in the following text:

> "Eurocentric tendency to assume that those of us who have been trained to analyse people's lives are better able to understand them than the people whose lives they actually are. I have come to have great respect for people's abilities to understand their own lives. And I have learned to listen, not just to what they tell me about the particulars of their lives, but also to the ways in which they define themselves for themselves" (Brown, 1991, p. 90).

We are not living in objective bubbles; the life-course of research participants is as important to be understood, while researching about a singular aspect of their life: a person brings forth in their later years their lifestyle based on their earlier years.

Owing to the challenges of conducting research "in the field" across a wide span of time, it became clearer to me that the only way to understand how older women in India were experiencing the smartphone and social media into their lives, was not only conducting ethnographic fieldwork, but by also anchoring my research in witnessing this multilayered experience in my mother's life. This process has been theorised as intimate ethnography (Waterston & Rylko-Bauer, 2006), when each of the anthropologists were researching life histories of their father and mother, respectively, but with the dual role of being daughters as well as anthropologists. They recognised the "interplay of roles: as the daughter chronicles a family narrative, the anthropologist contextualizes the story, situating it in larger history and political economy" (Waterston & Rylko-Bauer, 2006, p. 397). In undertaking such a process of academic rigour accompanying the complexities of emotions and ethics, while also being a daughter, they were not only writing their respective parent's individual histories, but also of wider political, cultural phenomena.

Personal experiences have often peeped into the pages of various forms of genres of writing anthropology, in the process of explaining the phenomenology of experience of cultures; these have provided the gateway to research analysis. The intimate space that develops over time between the researcher and the research participant allows for such personal experiences and reflections to be woven seamlessly into the text; such personal vignettes help us see the many challenges, contradictions and complexities when attempting to research people's lives, by inserting oneself into their lives, whether suddenly or slowly.

But the intimate space already exists when the researcher is an intimate other of the research participant: a sibling, a friend, a partner, or a parent (Ellis, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Instead of obstructing the analytical lens, the intimate space becomes "a legitimate starting point for critical inquiry into the relations between history and biography that could be captured in ethnography" (Waterston, 2025, p. 301). This also means that while researching one's own parents, the dynamics of power between the researcher and the research participant exist even prior to the research projects. This extends most with the control of the narrative (Waterston & Rylko-Bauer, 2006, p. 405), when the lines might blur with memories of past events between the daughter and parent. Hence, intimate ethnography is not an attempt at investigating *the* truth; it is not the space for correcting wrongs of the past within the relationship. Waterston and Rylko-Bauer write:

> "We are of the view that our job as ethnographers in these life-history projects is to work toward capturing truthfulness, the embodiment of experience and how it is understood so that it resonates as true, even if some facts are not empirically correct. We realize that this is where ethnographic writing borders on art. We also understand that this is where ethnographic

> writing borders on political project, because this kind of 'truth' is critical to the task of 'never forgetting' and of resisting the erasure of history" (Waterston & Rylko-Bauer, 2006, p. 408).

The aim then is to ask what might be "true" for the intimate other whose life we research, and thereby, their views about their own lives and their place in the world, which thus becomes a cultural, political process on uncovering.

This has a bearing on where and how interviews might be conducted. Similar to Rylko-Bauer, who had to skip the idea of conducting systematic interviews with her mother (Waterston & Rylko-Bauer, 2006, p. 406), I had to weave my specific questions with my mother — as well as with the other women who kindly opened their homes to me — when they were cooking, by asking them about their specific way of cooking a typical Assamese dish, and nudging the conversation in the direction of their sense of agency: from the time they were a daughter, then a daughter-in-law, then a mother, (and in some cases) to being a mother-in-law. While the eight women in my research patiently responded to my questions while cutting vegetables or travelling on a bus together, my mother almost always refused to sit *with* me *for* an interview, even though she sat *with* me *for* endless cups of chaai and conversations about everything and nothing. It was during such episodes that we would converse about life and experiences, which I would later fill into my notebook or send a quick audio note to myself on my phone.

Waterston (2025) argues that the self is not the focus of intimate ethnography, even though the research participant is someone in close relation (p. 302). And I largely agree with this argument, especially since I was advised by my university's ethics committee to refrain from adopting intimate ethnography as my main methodology, because, in their eyes, it was only meant for experienced researchers (Borpujari, 2024b). But it was not simply the concern of the ethics committee that made me wonder if it would be correct to call my research methodology "intimate ethnography", let alone undertake it.

As I progressed meeting with the research participants — all of them strangers, and one among them being my mother's acquaintance — I noticed that much of my time with the women was spent on showing them tools on their smartphones. Tools that they were curious about, tools which I deemed might be useful to them. It became clear to me that the process and praxis of such epistemology is grounded in autoethnography, for the way it provides a way to reveal "multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739), while at the same time, creating the possibility for the assumption that culture flows through the self (Adams & Manning, 2015, p. 352).

The lines blurred between being an insider and outsider, between ethnographer and teacher, were hence blurred. My research hours were enriched by conversations with other people in my extended family and friends in Bombay and across Assam, who shared similar observations about the older women in their lives as I had with the women in my research. This was especially true when I

was trying to make sense of the tools on the smartphone, and the affordances it allows — and disallows — for a cohort that is not digitally native (McCulloch, 2019). This process began with the questions my research participants had about my survey and the ways I helped them navigate it.

My decision to be part of the process in the ways that my research participants were learning new tools on their phone from me — or, my decision to use my privileged position in this context — fits within the framework of autoethnographic praxis (Allen & Piercy, 2005; Pelias, 2014). It was at these many moments of my research that I was turning the lens towards myself: as the person who knows a bit more about the smartphone, as the person instructing on how these tools ought to be used. Implicating my *self* into the process of the research is what made these aspects of my research autoethnographic (Adams & Manning, 2015, p. 351).

Relational Ethics, Care and Naming

Trust and positionality are central to this patchwork. To my mother, I was a daughter who needed to complete a thesis, but also a daughter prone to asking difficult questions about patriarchy and gender. Before asking certain questions, I had to reassure her, and several of the other research participants, that I was not seeking to blame or confront them, but trying to understand their decisions. I had to resist the urge to respond or correct, and instead allow silences and pauses to unfold. Sometimes I did not return to certain lines of questioning, because respecting discomfort mattered more than generating data.

This is in line with Carolyn Ellis's notion of "relational ethics" (2007), which emphasises obligations to participants as people with whom we have ongoing relationships. Relational ethics calls for attentiveness to the potential harms of exposure, even when formal consent is obtained. It also resonates with feminist ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2005), which prioritise relationships, interdependence and attentiveness over abstract universal rules and which understand ethics as fluid and context-specific (Tronto & Fisher, 1990; Kittay, 1999).

I stayed in the homes of my research participants. I depended on their hospitality and care. Showing them how to use their smartphones does not "repay" this generosity. It is part of a reciprocal relation but does not balance it out. Gender shaped these interactions in obvious and subtle ways. My participants often made decisions for me "because you are a girl travelling alone". My own gender, in turn, shaped my interest in ageing and digital technology through a feminist lens. My gender thus became "an entry point into complex systems of meaning and power" (Visweswaran, 1997, p. 616).

Feminist scholarship is acutely aware of difference between researcher and participants, and seeks not to erase but to work carefully with those differences (Naples, 2021; Davis & Craven, 2020; Nagar & Geiger, 2007). In my case, the age gap between myself and my participants, their seniority and my status as a younger woman, made me initially hesitant to ask them about their lives. I worried

it was presumptuous. Yet their willingness to share stories, including frustrations about technology, suggested an openness that challenged any simple hierarchy.

One of the most complicated ethical tensions concerned anonymity. The ethics committee at my university insisted that participants be treated as "vulnerable" and not be named (Borpujari, 2024b). I had applied to my university's ethics committee with the possibility of two consent forms: one before I would begin my ethnographic research, and the second for when I would have concluded my research. The second consent form was intended for the possible scenario that a woman might want to change her position on anonymity (she would have signed on to be anonymous in her first consent form). Such an idea was dismissed, and anonymity was expected. Several of my participants, however, explicitly asked to be named. They wanted their lives and words to be attached to their names. They did not see themselves as vulnerable in the way the institution imagined. Rather than treating this as a simple conflict with a single solution, I approached it as an ongoing ethical conversation, which I discuss in detail in the chapter "Housewife Literature".

In practical terms, I use pseudonyms for all participants in this thesis, in line with institutional requirements; I refer to my mother without her real name. At the same time, I have discussed with my research participants how their contributions will be represented in future, within less constrained formats, such as public writing or collaborative projects. In this way, I attempt to hold together my obligation to comply with institutional ethical protocols that shape my capacity to complete this degree, my commitment to feminist and relational ethics that take participants' wishes seriously, and my responsibility to the longer temporal horizon of the relationships themselves, which exceed the life of the thesis. This partial resolution is imperfect, but it reflects the patchwork nature of ethical practice: stitched together across competing obligations, never entirely seamless.

Feminist Ethnography

Following from the relational ethics that infused my encounters in the field, feminist ethnography offers another crucial frame for thinking about how knowledge is produced in situations marked by asymmetry, intimacy and care. While participant observation — as developed in Malinowski's long-term engagement in the Trobriand Islands — has long emphasised everyday immersion, feminist scholars have questioned its tendency to cast people as "silent and inactive objects" rather than as active social actors (Buch & Staller, 2014, p. 111; Lewin, 2006). Feminist critiques have pointed out the limits of a model in which the ethnographer observes and interprets, while those she studies are positioned as vessels from whom knowledge is extracted. In response, they have called for "an egalitarian research process characterized by authenticity, reciprocity and intersubjectivity" (Stacey, 1991, p. 112).

This shift is not simply methodological. It is also political. The feminist approach foregrounds gender as something that shapes every stage of research and every interpretative choice. They insist

that ethnography does not become feminist by default but becomes feminist in the hands of those who deliberately work against hierarchical, extractive modes of knowledge-making (Reinharz, 1992, p. 48). Anti-oppressive principles and empowerment practices have long been central to feminist research (Dominelli & McLeod, 1989; Featherstone, 1997; Langan & Day, 1992).

For feminist ethnographers, the responsibility we hold toward the people with whom we work extends beyond formal ethical procedures. Buch and Staller (2014) have noted that ethnography is always rooted in relationships, and therefore in obligations. Patricia McNamara's long-term research with former adolescent inpatients in Australia illustrates this clearly: her participants insisted on telling their own stories and demanded that the research empower, rather than simply represent, them (McNamara, 2009, pp. 163–170). Their insistence that they "not be reported upon by others" (ibid) captures a core feminist concern: that ethnography should not reproduce the inequalities it seeks to document.

In my own research, these concerns were filtered through age, generational difference, and the cultural scripts of respectability between older Assamese women and a younger woman researcher. Their seniority initially made me hesitant to ask about their lives. In many ways, I felt I was "studying up" (Nader, 1969). Yet their openness to sharing life histories, frustrations and moments of vulnerability signalled a recognition of "multiple subjective truths that do not undermine researchers' professionalism" (Yusupova, 2024, p. 2; see also Mohanty, 1984; Gani & Khan, 2024).

Language further entangled these feminist commitments. Although I grew up in Bombay and attended an English-medium school, Assamese was the language of my home. I learned to recognise the Assamese alphabet through books my parents brought from Assam, but on visits to Assam I was often told by cousins that my Assamese was "*broken*". This produced a long-standing insecurity about not being "Assamese enough". During fieldwork, however, women who had never met me before expressed surprise and delight at my Assamese, "*in spite of growing up in Bombay*". Listening back to my audio recordings, I am acutely aware of my accent, hesitations and mistakes. Yet, as in Binazirbonu Yusupova's work in Tashkent bazaars (2024) — where older women praised her imperfect Uzbek as a sign of deep connection — my participants celebrated my efforts as a form of cultural continuity (p. 6). Their praise pointed to a cultural intimacy that softened the edges of my linguistic insecurity.

Feminist ethnography has long embraced such complexities. Ruth Behar's encounter with Esperanza Hernández, the Mexican street peddler whose story she rendered alongside her own, broke down analytic boundaries and foregrounded "the intersubjectivity of knowledge production" (Buch & Staller, 2014, p. 115; Behar, 1993). The feminist project here is not to eliminate the researcher's presence but to situate it honestly within the research encounter. My own practice — combining intimate ethnography with autoethnography — emerges from this tradition.

Feminist ethnography is also, crucially, oriented toward praxis. It is not content to produce knowledge that remains on a library shelf. It seeks to inform policy, advocacy and social

transformation. Ethnography can offer "the perfect window through which to access women's wisdom and experience" (McNamara, 2009, p. 161). But I am wary of the language of "giving women voice" (Finch, 1984), because, as Arundhati Roy reminds us, voices are not missing: "There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard" (Roy, 2004). My aim is not to bestow voice but to document and honour the ruptures, resistances and quiet transformations in older women's lives that might otherwise remain unheard.

My research took the form of praxis when I found myself teaching women how to use their phones: not in a formal workshop sense, but in daily, embodied, relational ways. These teaching moments created a form of opacity that eludes straightforward textual representation. The texture of these exchanges — their doubts, my instructions; their hesitations, my reassurances — carried an affective weight that words often flattened. The cardinal rule of writing ethnography — to show, rather than tell — became difficult to live up to when the very scenes I wanted to show unfolded through gesture, movement, proximity. It was here that drawing and sketching became not merely supplementary tools, but a form of ethnography in themselves; a way of capturing what language alone could not hold.

Sketches

As I transcribed the many hours of my conversations of the women I spent my days and nights and weeks with, there was one theme that kept coming up repeatedly. I was teaching them different apps and tools on their phones. Sometimes it was just a small thing that needed a better understanding ("*Where are all the photos that I receive on WhatsApp saved*?"). But with several of them, it meant explaining to them the purpose of a specific app, and how it would help them in their lives: ride-hailing apps that would help them get around easily, instant payment apps that could avoid a trip to the bank.

But listening to the transcripts, it became evidently clear that the *mise en scène* (Artaud 1958) of such encounters would be limited with linear written narratives ("*Here, look, if you press the 'like' symbol a bit longer, then you can see other emojis too, like love or sad or laugh...*"). Such moments of interactions mediated through the phone, and for its better use, needed ethnographic acknowledgement, but without the patterns of what I heard in the many hours of my transcripts. Each of these encounters were similar and yet different, revealing different frictions. Hence the chapter "Teaching Phone Tools" — where I discuss teaching phone tools as an ethnographic intervention — is largely based on sketches from such moments.

While I was showing how to use a specific tool on their phone, I was also photographing the process whenever I could. These photographs became the basis for my drawings, and I have tried to stay true to the photographs. But I have also included elements that depict the specificity of the

location and thereby the culture of where such encounters take place. These are visible as mementos on the wall: a photograph, a cultural artefact, a calendar.

Several scholars have argued that the relationship between drawing and taking notes during fieldwork is akin to an ongoing conversation, wherein they have laid the emphasis on a new way of viewing rather than the skills and ability to draw (Fredriksson, 2023, p. 42; see also Ramos, 2004; Berger, 2007; Becker, 2007; Taussig, 2009; Kuschnir, 2011). However, I insist that my drawings are not fieldnotes but are ethnographies in themselves. Anthropologist Tim Ingold wrote: "Where studying *of* is a process of othering, studying *with* is a process of togethering" (Ingold, 2011, p. 226).

Moreover, drawing gives the freedom to express ethnographic moments in different ways (Causey, 2016; Grimshaw, 2008; Chitra, 2024). Like Bonanno (n.d.), drawing scenes from the fieldwork also helps "render visible the contradictions and ambiguities of my position as an ethnographer". I argue that my sketches *as* ethnography allows for a process of togethering, more so when the actions within this process were about learning to use the phone together. I was thus able to encompass the textures and tensions within my ethnographic encounters, while paying heed to the ways in which the women were being challenged because of the ways the apps were designed.

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Given the multiplicity of my research methodology, my ethnography is not a typical narrative with a plot that has a beginning, a middle, a dramatic turn, a revelation, and an end. Instead, I take inspiration from the vignette-style narratives of Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano (1973, 1982, 2009, 2017). By writing to be read (Waterston & Vesperi, 2009), and by writing about a region of Asia without the project being in relation to colonialism, neocolonialism, globalisation, and civilisationalism, I am hoping to attend to Kuan-Hsing Chen's invitation of "Asia as Method" (2010). By doing so, I am adhering to similar calls for decolonising anthropology (Harrison, 1997), but taking a step further by resisting the urge to view Assam — and older women — singularly through the lens of postcoloniality. It is not simply a perspective of rejecting the West as the only reference point, but it is an attempt to develop new reference points that tend to the complexity around regional patterns of the region.

Patches of different fabrics with varied patterns form tapestries and quilts, often in ways that cannot be replicated. Once the final hem is knotted and the needle put away, the eye adjusts to the composition. It is rarely perfect, almost never repeatable: every patchwork quilt is created from specific scraps, specific hands, and specific constraints. My methodology is such a patchwork. It is shaped by mosquito nets and smartphones, visas and rent, WhatsApp notes and lost notebooks, Assam and Ireland, daughters and mothers, online publics and offline kitchens, translated surveys and imperfect Assamese, words and sketches.

Patchwork ethnography, intimate and autoethnographic practice, feminist ethics of care, and sketching as ethnography together form the methodological quilt that underpins this thesis. This chapter has sought to make visible the seams, interruptions and improvisations through which this quilt has been assembled. What holds these disparate elements together is not a claim to methodological purity, but a commitment to relationality, accountability and attentiveness. The patchwork not only reflects the conditions under which this research became possible; it also mirrors the lives I study.

Older Assamese women's digital practices are themselves patchworks: of memory and aspiration, of loss and reorientation, of constraints and small openings. In the chapters that follow, I draw on this methodological quilt to explore how older women in Assam are using smartphones and social media to navigate ageing, belonging, creativity and care. The yarn, needles and hems of this chapter are the infrastructure that make that exploration possible.

Intermezzo: A Survey Journey

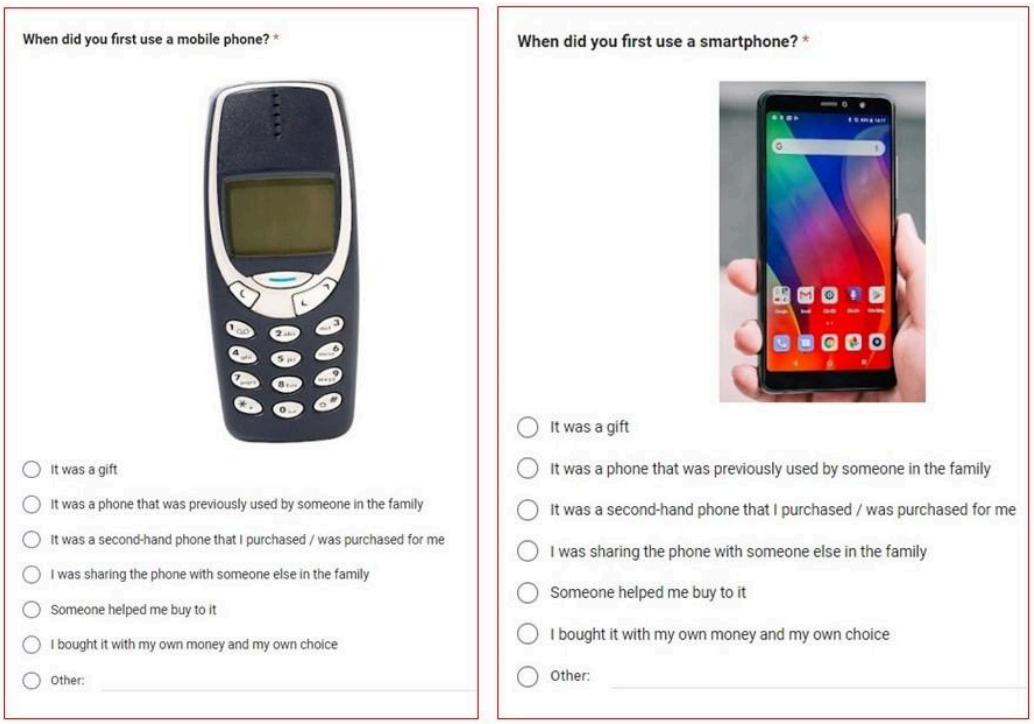
My online surveys in three languages were out there, in the universe, for 46 days. This universe was not just the Internet; it included conversations with people and circulating it across various online groups and networks. The survey was a situated intervention into the vast, uneven terrain of older women's experiences with smartphones and social media in India. The process of creating the survey was a multi-staged one: designing, testing, receiving feedback, redesigning, and making tweaks to it, even after it was launched. I include these processes because their analysis — from a design justice framework — reveals the various aspects that I had not considered because of the blind spots in my own perception, as well as in the infrastructure and affordances of online survey platforms.

Previous research has shown the challenges in accessing a robust data set that would represent the different experiences of ageing (Rosales & Fernández-Ardèvol, 2016; Rosales et al., 2018). I undertook the process of purposeful sampling to yield "insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations" (Patton, 2002, p. 230). The sampling criteria of my survey were women above the age of 60, residing in India, owning a smartphone, and active on social media. While there is no single definition of being "active on social media" (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019), I define it as using social media to facilitate various forms of "direct exchanges" among users (Verduyn et al., 2017, p. 281).

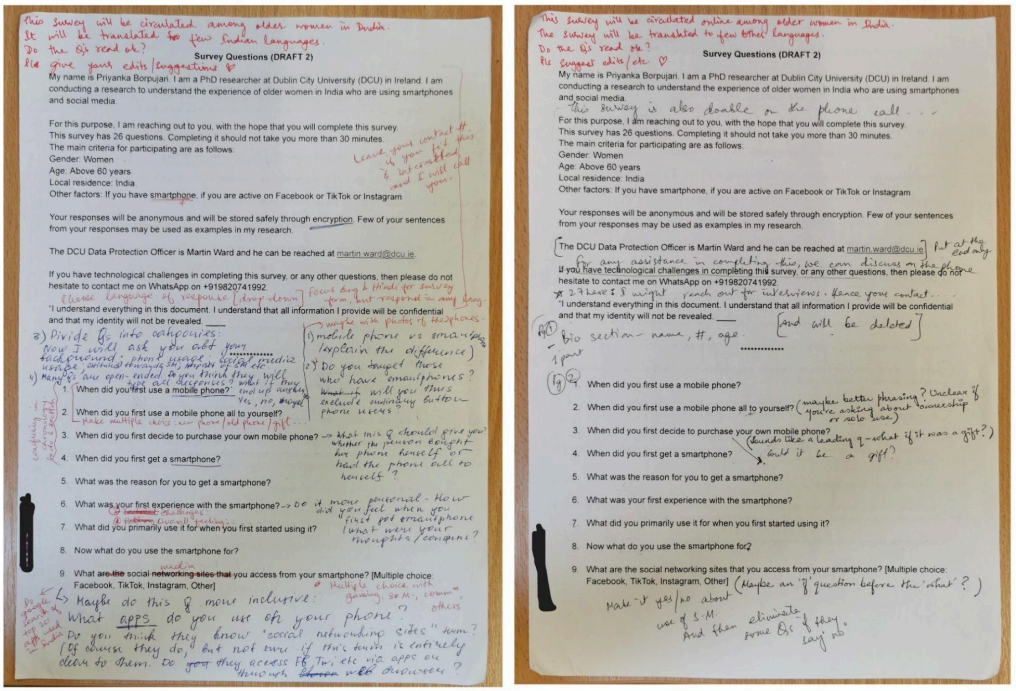
I turned to my peers — fellow PhD researchers — to gather their views about the survey questions, requesting them to read it as if it was someone in their family who fit the survey eligibility criteria. A persistent question pertained to the sequence of the first four questions in the first draft:

Q-1. When did you first use a mobile phone?
Q-2. When did you first use a mobile phone all to yourself?
Q-3. When did you first decide to purchase your own mobile phone?
Q-4. When did you first get a smartphone?

My colleagues suggested that I make it explicit that Q-1 is about a mobile handset that is not a smartphone. One colleague suggested that I add a photograph of an old Nokia mobile handset with Q-1, and a photo of a generic smartphone next to Q-4. This was an important suggestion: previous research has found that photographs help respondents "narrow down the associated interpretations compared to text that may help to guide respondents focus on specific aspects of interest" (Silber et al., 2018, p. 4).



This diptych shows the 2 questions as they appeared on the Google Form survey, one below the other. The photographs of the respective phone handsets were included, so that understanding the questions would be easier.



This diptych shows the feedback provided to me by two of my PhD peers, on the survey I had intended to circulate. It only shows the first page of the survey sheet, to illustrate the depth of their feedback. Photo credit: Priyanka Borpujari

While my draft had several open-ended questions, towards eliciting rich and complex accounts and narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2013), my peers suggested converting some into multiple choice questions that could generate a fixed response: age, location, social media apps they use, emotions and experiences with using the smartphone the first time. My peers worried that older women may not have the dexterity and the patience to type detailed responses.

It would have been presumptuous to assume that this demographic would be comfortable spending thirty minutes completing a survey, and that they would be able to navigate the online survey. From a design justice framework, I had to bear in mind that digital literacy — defined as "the set of skills associated with the use of ICT that every individual should develop to be able to perform in a computerized society" (Martinez-Alcala et al., 2018) — is varied among older adults (Friemel, 2016; van Deursen et al., 2016).

Being able to use a smartphone and social media does not guarantee that all tools enabled by the smartphone will be easy to navigate. I spent several hours poring over the best tools possible in creating a survey for a demographic like mine; the design concepts of user interface (UI) and user experience (UX) were in the foreground more than the phrasing of the questions. My burning questions were: Is the survey tool or platform mobile-friendly? Is it compatible for those who are not accustomed to filling online forms? Can the form be accessed without consuming too much internet bandwidth? Whom am I excluding when I design the survey only in English? Whom am I excluding when I design the survey only in English, Hindi and Assamese? What would be the scientific justifications for designing a survey in only three languages?

I proceeded with Google Forms as the survey platform for its relative ease with use and because preserving the data would be easier within the institutional infrastructure where Google apps were dominantly used. The original draft of the survey included a long introductory note detailing the survey eligibility criteria, and information deemed necessary within GDPR[9] about confidentiality, data preservation, and consent. My peers suggested making that note shorter, and including my phone number, in case anyone would prefer to complete the survey over the phone.

Older people have more difficulty in using touch interfaces in comparison to the younger population, due to complexity in accessing information both in terms of functionality and interface design (Page, 2014). However, very little is known about digital literacy among older adults in India.

What could be possible in terms of a web survey among older women in India — based on the affordances of digital tools? How could such surveys be designed better? Design justice was not only an epistemic decision, but a methodological lever. Design justice was not only a yardstick of analysis in which older women in my research navigate the smartphone, but an epistemic infrastructure where

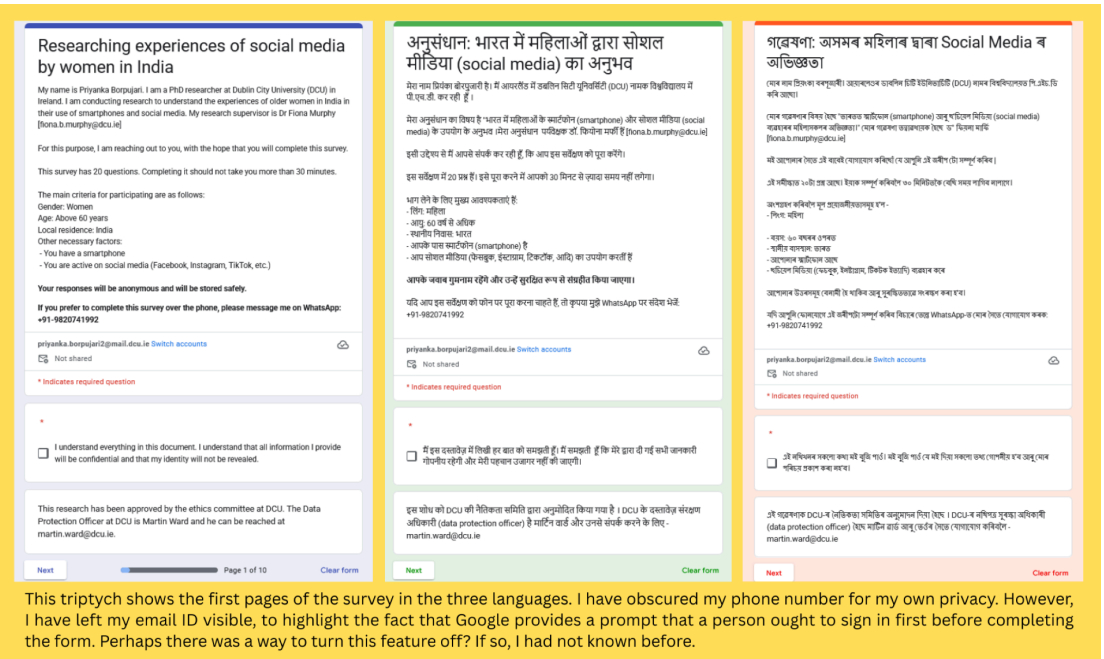
[9] The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is a comprehensive EU law that governs data privacy and protection for individuals within the European Union, and this included my university's location in the EU, where my data would be saved for my research.

digital improvisations are necessary in the absence of a system that does not imagine them as users. This epistemic infrastructure meant making careful choices with the survey.

Survey Design Choices

Because it was impossible to capture the experiences of older women across India given the linguistic and cultural diversity, I created the survey in three major Indian languages: English, Hindi, Assamese. English and Hindi would make the survey suitable for a pan-India audience. I chose Assamese because of my own ease with it, and knowing that I intended to conduct my ethnography with women who identify themselves as Assamese, and/or speak Assamese, and/or live in Assam. The trilingual choice was to assess if there might be wide variations in responses.

A prerequisite sentence to be included in the survey — towards adhering to the norms of my university's ethics committee — was the inclusion of the following sentence: "The DCU Data Protection Officer is Martin Ward and he can be reached at martin.ward@dcu.ie." Given that there is no colloquial word in Hindi or Assamese for the word "data", I translated it as the word that means "document". Taking on the feedback from my peers, the survey had twenty questions in total.[10] Of these, ten were a mix of demographic questions (age, marital status, location), multiple-answer and multiple-choice questions, and dichotomous ("yes"/"no") questions. These were aimed at enabling a systematic way of analysing the results and generating data on several variables: first experience in usage of a mobile phone and a smartphone, apps that are used, the first social media account that was created, the people with whom they interact on social media, and the types of their posts on social media.



This triptych shows the first pages of the survey in the three languages. I have obscured my phone number for my own privacy. However, I have left my email ID visible, to highlight the fact that Google provides a prompt that a person ought to sign in first before completing the form. Perhaps there was a way to turn this feature off? If so, I had not known before.

[10] The English language survey can be found in Appendix C.

In survey practice, scrolling design — wherein the entire survey is displayed on one screen — is often selected for web surveys when it is assumed that the survey would be completed on a smartphone (Silber et al., 2018, p. 4). However, I opted for the multi-page format of Google Forms, assuming that having a survey with 20 questions on a single page would lead to endless scrolling, which might get a research participant to drop it midway. The survey hence had 10 pages (or "section", as labelled within Google Forms), following the introductory page.

Even though I was creating the survey on my desktop computer, I experimented with text size, line spacing, and optical zoom function on my own smartphone repeatedly. It was best to assume that the women might complete the survey on a smartphone. This assumption was right, as out of the 175 women who completed the survey, 158 of them completed it on a smartphone (Appendix D). Only two open-ended questions were visible on a single section page to avoid the boredom that could arise from endless scrolling.

Following the first introductory page, the survey began with demographic questions: for the question on age, a list of age ranges was provided; a dropdown option with numerics could run the risk of error. Further, I was constantly reminding myself that this demographic of women above 60 may not necessarily be comfortable with the format of the online survey. Hence, there were several multiple-choice questions. For example: a list of nine emotions to choose from on their first experience with the smartphone; a list of 20 apps to choose from on the social media apps that they access from the smartphone.

Ultimately, every decision for the survey was deeply considered. The frictions in the design process were not methodological inconveniences but an empirical reminder that the digital is unevenly accessible.

Into The Internet Wild



This triptych shows the 3 posters that were created, in English, Hindi and Assamese, inviting people to participate in the survey. Along with a shortened URL of the survey form, and a QR code which also bore the survey form, I added my phone number in case anyone would want to reach out to me directly.

I had created a poster in each of the three languages, which included — apart from the criteria of people invited to complete the survey — a shortened URL of the survey form, as well as my phone number. I shared these across various social media accounts, as well as emails to specific people. Many suggested that I share the poster and survey URL via WhatsApp, since that was deemed the best way to circulate. It became very clear that the primary format of sharing information was WhatsApp for everyone, including older adults (Cowling, 2016; Pahwa, 2021). In the Global South, WhatsApp has been the venue "for self-expression, social belonging, and livelihood" especially during the COVID-19 (Arora, 2024, p. 16; see also Ahlin, 2023; Gajjala & Verma, 2018).

One friend texted that she had completed the English survey thrice, after speaking to her mother and two aunties. I texted her back: "No no! I need them to complete it themselves!" She promptly replied that that was not going to happen; they wouldn't care less about any survey. A day later, another friend emailed me that she had completed the survey after talking to her grandmother. That's when I inserted another single-choice question at the end of the survey:

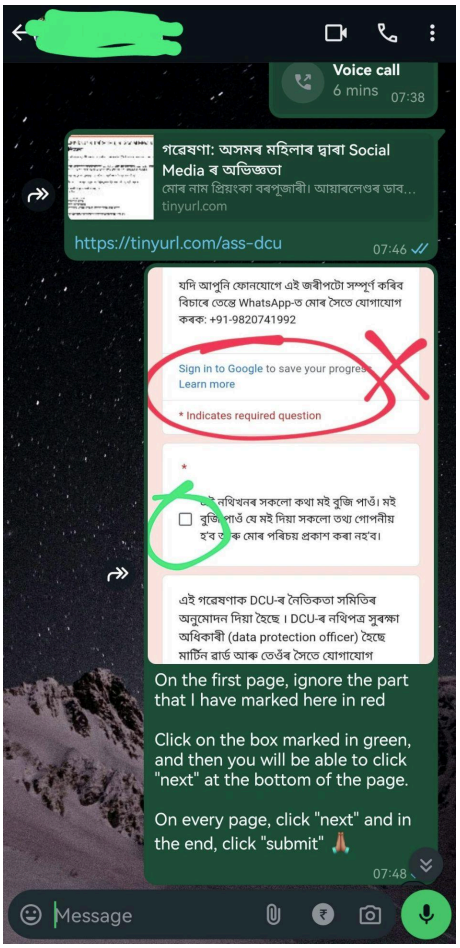
> We have come to the end of this survey. How did you complete this survey?
>
> ☐ By myself
>
> ☐ With the help of someone else

Thus, respondents E-1 to E-24 in English, H-1 in Hindi, and A-1 to A-3 in Assamese may have completed the survey on their own or with the help of someone. I still include them in my survey results because this unexpected element was yet another part of the process of rolling out a survey, with my own biases, no matter how far I tried to envisage all challenges.

As the days rolled by and my mornings began with looking up how many more surveys had been completed, I got worried that I would not receive enough responses. Another friend told me that the only way I could ensure that the survey be circulated was to call up people individually on the phone, explain my research to them, and request them to circulate the survey among their family, friends and other networks. Thus began a series of phone calls, a week after the survey was underway. I called up several people who were leading grassroots movements in different parts of India; I called up friends whom I hadn't spoken to in years. Just like the way that my mother had found long-lost friends on Facebook (Borpujari, 2024a, p. 188), I reached out to nearly twenty old friends and acquaintances via text messages and phone calls.

Many women who were willing to complete the survey would call or text me to say that they were not able to progress with the survey because they were not able to click the "Next" button that showed up at the bottom of the first page. I spoke to them on the phone, and told them that they needed to click the consent statement first — which I had marked as a mandatory field while creating the survey form — to be able to proceed with the survey. I shared a screenshot of the first page from

my phone, and marked out in red that they did not need to sign into Google to complete the form. I also marked the box in green, where the consent statement is written, which they needed to click. Many of them did not know what clicking on a form meant, even though a sentence popped up in red with an asterisk “This is a required question.” I had to tell them during a phone call or written text that they needed to click it and it would show a correct-tick sign, and that only then they could progress to “Next”. This was another reminder that people did not know how to proceed, and how those of us who are digitally-native take certain digital tools and symbols for granted. It was a reminder once again how we ought to question whether “any given affordance is equally perceptible to all people, or whether it systematically privileges some kinds of people over others” (Costanza-Chock, 2019, p. 27).



Three women (H-15, H-19, and A-39) completed the survey via a WhatsApp video call with me. They gave me detailed responses to the open-ended questions: H-19 shared that it did not bother her that there were no ride-sharing taxi services in her town since she had her own scooter. Similarly, A-39 detailed how she enjoys living alone, even though her son’s family lives nearby.

Should I have concentrated only on phone call-based surveys for the depth of responses, instead of attempting to get a large data set? Each of the three phone-based surveys took place because someone related to each of the women had coordinated the logistics: by talking to them first to seek their interest in completing my survey, then coordinating with them across time zones.

While female friends knew at least one woman in their family who fit the criteria for my survey, male friends repeatedly said that they did not know any older woman in their family and wider network who used smartphones and social media. One conversation with a male friend in Assam made me doubt the entire rationale of my research. Our conversation took place over WhatsApp; a mix of English and a transliteration of Assamese to Roman script:



That conversation left me feeling adrift with my research. Was I looking in the wrong direction entirely? Was my mother's story an outlier, in the face of a larger script for how an older woman ought to behave and lead her days and nights?

A cursory glance at the responses to my research as they trickled in erased any doubt. They not only validated the rationale of my work, but also the larger scope of narratives of older women that haven't been heard emphatically.

Throughout the process of the survey, it became evident that design justice as a framework was clearly "a verb and a noun" (Costanza-Chock, 2019, p. 16). Designing an online survey for a demographic with varying levels of digital literacy was not simply a process of iterations with a scientific basis, or an artistic endeavour towards meeting visual aesthetics. These unexpected encounters with digital tools and technology revealed a wide diversity in the degree of digital literacy among the 175 women who completed the survey.

Seeds Sprouting under Open Questions

I closed the survey (Appendix C) on day 46, when I had received a total of 175 completed surveys: 90 in English, 45 in Hindi, and 40 in Assamese. Many of those who responded in the Hindi and Assamese surveys typed their responses in transliteration, in the Roman script, and often peppered with words and phrases in English. Responses were collated in two main types: those from which graphs could be created (Appendix D), and those which contained varying lengths of texts as response to the open-ended questions.

There were seven questions in the survey that would lead to a better understanding about what they were thinking, feeling, experiencing, as they used their smartphones and social media. Using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, I coded the respondents with alphanumeric identifiers, based on the language of the survey: E-1 to E-90 are the respondents in English, H-1 to H-45 in Hindi, and A-1 to A-40 in Assamese. Categorising the coded responses, four main themes emerged:

- Diversity of older women's digital agency
- Intergenerational and gendered labour of learning
- Affective practices of care, curiosity, and mutual teaching
- Ambivalent connections

Diversity of older women's digital agency

Many of the respondents expressed multiple motivations for creating their social media accounts, and therefore they were assigned multiple codes. For example: "Receiving information, updates, news, listening to music, looking at recent pictures, videos" (E-11). It was essential to code each of the bits within this response into different codes, because of the wide variety of interests. Learning about the world, current events, or what other people were doing was a motivating reason for many of the women:

> "To be informed" (E-84)

> "सीखने के लिए" (H-14)
> [*To learn*]

> "गाना सुने के लिए, गेम खेलने के लिए" (H-26)
> [*To listen to music, to play games*]

> "Samay ke sath chalne ki aur jankariyan janne kie" (H-24)
> [*To walk with the times and to receive new information*]

> "आधुनिक तकनिक के फायदे के लिये" (H-10)
> [*To benefit from new technology*]

Many responded that sharing — texts, photos, videos — was a motivation for being online:

> "I wanted to post photographs and explain about the roses hybridised by my husband" (E-53)

"A student told me it was a good way to send info to students and connect with them for meetings of various Societies/ Clubs in the College where I was teaching" (E-69)

"ফেচবুকৰ জৰিয়তে সাহিত্য চর্চা কৰা" (A-29)
[*To discuss about literature through/on Facebook*]

Similarly, many women enjoyed posting their own writings, or photos of what they might have created: crafts, painting, poetry, translations, short texts about their cats. What they were posting was not merely information to be shared, but accomplishments:

মই অনুবাদ কৰি আৰু নিজেও গল্প কবিতা, ভ্রমন কাহিনী লিখি ভাল পাওঁ। বহু কেইটা গোটৰ মই top contributor (A-3)
[*I like to translate, as well as write my own stories and poetry, and travelogues. I am the top contributor in many (online) groups*]

"Any nice dress that I have worn, I share photos on friends groups on WhatsApp (H-15)

"এতিয়া আমি বহু কথা জানি লৈ সজাগ হৈ থাকিব পাৰো। আমাৰ জীৱনটো এতিয়া বেছি অর্থপূর্ণ।" (A-6)
[*Now we can learn about many things and stay vigilant. Our lives are now more meaningful*]

"মই মোৰ জীৱনটো পৃথক টুলি ভাবো কাৰণ নতুন প্রজন্মৰ সৈতে খোজ কাঢ়িবলৈ মই ভাল পাওঁ। আমাৰ আইতাইঁতে আজৰি সময়ত গাওঁখনৰ খৱৰ ৰাখিছিল নিজে গৈ, কিছুমান খৱৰ গম নাপাইছিল । কিন্তু এতিয়া আমি নিজৰ আজৰি পৰত ম'বাইলটো হাতত ললেই ক'ত কি হৈছে গম পাওঁ ।" (A-22)
[*I think of my life as different because I like to walk with the new generation. Our grandmothers would keep track of news in the village by going out themselves, but they would not get some other news and information. But now, in our spare moments, we have the mobile in our palms and get informed about everything and every place*]

"स्मार्ट फोन के कारण जरूरत की चीजें,सामान घर में बुलाया जा सकता है। टिकिट बुकिंग करना, अपॉइंटमेंटस्, सब हम खुद कर सकते हैं। पहले ऐसा नहीं होता था। दूसरे को बताना पडता था।" (H-10)
[*Because of the smartphone, we can order items that we need to be delivered home. Booking tickets, appointments: we can do this on our own. It was not like this before; we had to tell others*]

"মোৰ কৌতূহলী মন" (A-40)
[*My curious mind*]

My translation follows the exact sequence of the words as they were written, without any verb. In translating the words of the person I have denoted as A-40, my use of the word "curious" does not do justice in translating "koutuholi", because it is not a word used colloquially. After trawling through synonyms for "curious", no word explains best what A-40 expresses, with a sense of vastness that can be experienced in just those three words.

Everyone had their own reasons for joining social media platforms but it was notable how many of them became active contributors rather than passive consumers, sharing their own creations and accomplishments, or simply material they found interesting or inspiring. In doing so, they were exercising digital agency, of which there is a wide diversity, based on their interests.

Intergenerational and gendered labour of learning and teaching

The main ways that the women learnt to use the smartphone and social media were through their family, or with the help of other people. Within the code of "family", it was apt to create a sub-code called "children" for when the respondents specifically mentioned their children having introduced them to the smartphone or social media. But there were others who mentioned other members of their family, like nieces, or the husband. Many respondents stated that their family helped, but that they too explored on their own:

> "My husband helped me initially but later I got the hang of it" (E-22)

There were those who added more details along with the words "on my own":

> "Learnt by trial and error. My daughter helped me navigate banking apps" (E-52)

> "यूट्यूब का इस्तेमाल किया भजन सुनने में
> 2 साल पहले एक फोन खरीदा
> चलाते चलाते सीखा
> डर लगता था फोन चलाने में
> अपने बच्चो से फोन पर बात करने के लिए फोन लिया" (H-14)
> [*I use YouTube to listen to bhajans. Two years ago I bought a phone. I learned to use it on the go. I used to be scared to use the phone. I got the phone to talk to my children*]

> "कुछ तो खुद ही कोशिश की, और कभी-कभी अपनो से मदद ली" (H-43)
> [*Some I managed with my own efforts; and sometimes took the help of my people*]

> "My daughter was leaving to study in USA, so she taught me to use WhatsApp" (E-5)

"मै प्रोफेसर थी तो मैने माँबाईल,युट्यूब का उपयोग शैक्षणिक प्रयोजन के लिये किया" (H-17)
[*I was a professor, and hence I had to use my mobile phone and YouTube for educational purposes*]

"My daughter helped me out for few days then I on my own started figuring things out" (E-87)

For many, becoming part of social media was initially a passive act. It involved the convincing of another person in their lives, and they described so in as many words. Each of these responses has an element of passivity that reveals that the survey respondent might have needed some level of convincing to join social media, although, as noted above, most went on to become active contributors.

"মোৰ নতুন কথা জনাৰ আগ্ৰহ আছে । সৰু ল'ৰাটোৱে স্মাৰ্টফোন এতা আনি হাতত দি প্ৰাৰম্ভিক ব্যৱহাৰ খিনি শিকাই দিলে; লগতে বিভিন্ন চছিয়েল মিডিয়া আৰু অন্যান্য এপবোৰ ডাউনলোড আৰু ব্যৱহাৰ কৰিবলৈ শিকালে । পাছলৈ ফোনটো পিটিকি পিটিকি সকলো কথা জনা হ'লো ।" (A-35)
[*I am always eager to learn new things. My younger son put a smartphone in my hand and showed me the initial ways to use it, and also helped me download several social media apps. Later, playing around the phone* pitiki-pitiki*, I learnt everything*]

Respondent A-35 uses the onomatopoeia of "pitiki-pitiki", which, in Assamese, translates to "pressing"; but in this sentence, she is conveying the act — and sound — of pressing down buttons. Or playing around. This is perhaps the primary way these older women learnt to navigate the smartphone and the different social media apps: pitiki-pitiki, by playing around, learning on the go, seeking some help here, asking a question there, and slowly finding that this gadget in their palm opened different avenues in varied aspects of their lives.

Affective practices of care, curiosity, and mutual teaching

"Connecting" emerged as a predominant theme from the wide variety of responses across all the survey questions. These meant connecting with family, friends, long-lost friends, and networking. However, one response summarises the main themes that have emerged from this question, and in this whole survey in general: of connectedness, and of being informed.

"Easy and quick access to interesting information, staying in touch with people that matter to me" (E-42)

“पहले के लोगों को एक दूसरे से संचार करने में बहुत मुश्किल होती थी मिलने में और पहुंचने में काफी समय लग जाता था” (H-4)
[*Earlier, people struggled a lot to communicate with family members; it would take a lot of time to travel and meet*]

“ইচ্ছা কৰিলেই সকলোৰে লগত যোগাযোগ কৰিব পাৰি । পুৰণি লগ বন্ধুবোৰ বিচাৰি পাইছো । একাকীত্বতা নোহোৱা হৈছে ।” (A-35)
[*I can connect with anyone at any time I wish. I am able to find old friends. Loneliness has disappeared*]

At the centre of the idea of connecting and sharing was the moral economy of care, which was now expressed through the digital infrastructure. Social media became the carrier of care without any expectation of reciprocity. This care was extended in the form of sharing, but also in receiving — and holding — news and information that could determine next steps of action.

“You come to know how your friends, family are doing. Sometimes you can cheer up a friend who is feeling low, sometimes you have some news to share whether it be good or bad” (E-44)

“একোটা অতি গুৰুত্বপূর্ণ বা বিপদৰ সময়ত আমি কম সময়ৰ ভিতৰতে ব্যৱস্থা লব পাৰোঁ আৰু ব্যক্তিগত ভাৱে লগ নোপোৱাকৈও কিছুমান কাম কৰিব পাৰোঁ” (A-2)
[*In a very important or dangerous situation, we can take action in a short period of time and do some things without meeting in person*]

সামাজিক সাংস্কৃতিক, অর্থনৈতিক বিকাশৰ ক্ষেত্রত আগ বঢ়াই যোৱাৰ বাবে কৰা প্রচেষ্টা বোৰ। (A-8)
[*The different ways in which one can progress in social, cultural, economic realms*]

Through their photos and travelogues and translations and prayers and poetry and crochet and songs, the women are attempting that primal human need and function: to connect with another. One of the women wrote:

নিজেই ভাল বুলি ভৱা,আনে প্রশংসা কৰা কামৰ ফটো বা লিখনি দি ভাল লাগে... অন্যৰ লিখা পঢ়ি সুন্দৰ কমেন্ট এটা দিয়াটো মোৰ নৈতিক দায়িত্ব। (A-25)
[*I like to post writings that I think are good, and which people too comment with their praise. It is my moral duty to read what others have written and comment on them beautifully*]

A-25 considers commenting a moral duty of reciprocity. It is not just a flippant task of thumbslamming on the phone, but one of measured care. This sense of wanting to connect was not merely for moments of creation, but for moments of memory:

> “আমি ডাঙৰ হোৱা যুগ টোৰ গান বোৰ,অসমীয়া হিন্দী বাঙালী বা পশ্চিমীয়া,যিয়েই নহওঁক,সুৰ ,কথা আৰু গায়কীৰ ফালৰ পৰা অতি উন্নত মানৰ আছিল। হঠাৎ তেনে কিবা বহুদিন বিচাৰি থকা গান পালে মই মোৰ এইবোৰৰ মূল্য বুজা বন্ধু বান্ধৱী লৈ পঠাই দিওঁ। তেতিয়া তেওঁলোকে You made my day বুলি যদি কয়, that makes my day too” (A-2)
> [*When we were growing up, we listened to Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, and even Western music. All of them had a unique type of tone and note. Suddenly, after finding those songs that I might have been searching for a long time, believing them to be of value, I send them to my friends. They reply to me with ‘You made my day’, and that makes my day too*]

> “Xomoi etiya dhuniya ke paar hoi jaai” (A-31)
> [*Time passes by beautifully now*]

A-31’s response translates more literally into, “Time crosses over beautifully now”. So time is viewed as something that has to cross over — a path, a bridge — from one side to the other.

Ambivalent connections

Most responses alluded to the many different ways of connectedness: whether it is the widening of social networks, or reconnecting with old friends, or speedier communication. On the other hand, “more information” as a theme emerged based on the responses of feeling more aware about the world, with access to various types of news and information.

While many respondents wrote positively of the new doors opened by social media, several also described the way communication had become less personal and more sterile, with phones and devices sometimes substituting for rather than supplementing real-world interactions:

> “Yes, but I feel that social media lacks that personal touch, which I used to experience when I met my friends offline earlier. People are just your acquaintances nowadays, not deep friends” (E-84)

> “पहले हम पत्र लिखा करते थे। आज भी उन पुराने पत्रों की महक मन में बसी हुई है। आजकल सोशल मीडिया की वज़ह से फोन पर ही ज्यादातर काम हो जाते हैं। लेकिन पत्रों जैसी भावनात्मकता इसमें नहीं है। जो कि सबसे जरूरी है क्योंकि यही हमेंशा मनुष्य बनाती है। दुनिया में सम्वेदना और भावना शेष रखने के लिए इंसान को वर्चुअल और मशीनीकरण से बाहर निकलने की जरूरत है।” (H-20)

[*Earlier, we would write letters. Even today, the scent of those old letters linger in my mind. Nowadays because of social media, most of the work gets done over the phone. But it lacks the emotional touch of letters; and this is very necessary becuase this is what makes us human. To maintain emotions and compassion in this world, it is important that humans get out of the virtual and mechanisation*]

"আনৰযায় ঘৰলৈ গৈ খবৰ লোৱা ৰ প্ৰথা প্ৰায় নোহোৱা হৈছে, ম'বাইল ত মগ্ন হৈ বহু কথা জনা যায় যদিও বহু সময় অদৰকাৰী কথা চাই সময় নষ্ট হয়" (A-15)
[*Checking on others by visiting their homes has almost disappeared; we learn a lot of things by being absorbed in the mobile, even though a lot of time is also lost in watching unnecessary things]*

"Becoming more addicted to the mobile phone, even getting no time to have long discussion with family members" (A-13)

"মানুহৰ মাজত যোগাযোগ artificial হৈ পৰিছে" (A-11)
[*Communication among people has become artificial*]

"হাতৰ কামবোৰ কৰিবলৈ মন নোযোৱা হ'ল অথচ অনবৰতে ব্যস্ত যেন ভাৱ, আলহী -অতিথিৰ প্ৰতি অমনোযোগিতা, নিশাৰ টোপনি ক্ষতি ইত্যাদি" (A-15)
[*We have lost interest in doing things with our hands even though there is a sense of busyness all the time; loss of attention towards guests; loss of sleep at night, etc.*]

Many respondents saw the benefits of social media when compared to their lives in earlier years, and compared to women of previous generations.

"Older women, not very much older than me, people in my generation itself who have not opted to be exposed, I find their outlook remains confined to the household or may be narrow. So here, I would say the presence of social media helps in a big way" (E-43)

"पुराने दोस्त,स्कूल के बचपन के साथी, 40/50 साल बाद फिर जुड गये हैं।कभी कभी उनसे मिलना, चाय, गपशप तथा पिकनिक होने लगी।पहले हमारी दुनिया छोटी थी। अब दायरा बडा हो गया है।" (H-10)
[*Old friends from school have reunited after 40-50 years. Now we meet sometimes, over chaai, conversations and even picnics. Earlier, our world was small. Now our horizons are wider*]

আমাৰ মাহতে যোৰহাটৰ চাৰিবেৰৰ মাজত আবদ্ধ হৈ জীৱন কটালে আমি চকুৰে দেখাৰ উপৰিও বহুত বস্তু চচিয়েল মিডিয়াত দেখা পাওঁব" (A-7)
[Our mothers spent their lives being trapped in four walls in Jorhat town. But we are able to see many things on social media, besides those that we can see with our eyes]

There were others who reflected how they have become more confident to share about themselves on a public platform like social media, while others noted that the smartphone has made it easier to get work done.

"এতিয়া আহ-যাহ বোৰ কমিল। ঘৰলৈ আলহী আদি নহা হ'ল। এক নিসঙ্গতাবোধ আহে মাজে মাজে। লগ নোপোৱাৰ দুখ হয়। অন্যহাতে ফোনতে ডাক্তৰৰ পৰামর্শ আদি লব পৰা হ'লো। ফোন কৰিলে দোকানৰ পৰা বস্তু আহে,দৰৰ আহে। কিছুমান কথা সহজ হ'ল।" (A-9)
[*People don't visit each other's homes anymore. There is a sense of loneliness sometimes. It is sad that we don't meet now. On the other hand, I can get the doctor's advice over a phone call. And we can get items delivered over the phone, so there are some advantages too*]

"My parents did not have social media & perhaps they did not need it. I am bombarded with information, good & useless. Apart from News which I am regular I do absent myself from social media frequently. I avoid posting anything personal." (E-29)

"Pehle sab sath me rehte the ab sab phone me rahte hai" (H-31)
[*Earlier, we all lived together, but now we are living within the phone*]

These themes reveal that there is no technosolutionism here, or a grand narrative of social media alone delivering the tools to exercising agency. If at all, it only reveals how social media — and the smartphone — are but tools that embody emotional textures, while also shaping them.

Laying Fertile Ground For Ethnography

I had initially imagined the survey as a simple collection of data: what possible ethnographic trails might the responses scatter like breadcrumbs? Yet, as I began designing the survey, it became clear that this was a situated intervention into the vast, uneven terrain of older women's experiences with smartphones and social media. The design process revealed an entanglement of lives, digital practices and socio-technical mediations. The trilingual format brought cultural specificity into view, allowing meanings, metaphors and frustrations to surface. Their answers showed motivations, ambivalences and unexpected digital fluencies that resisted the flattening assumptions attached to ageing. The survey also revealed that relationships structure the very conditions under which digital tools are encountered. Smartphones become sites of intergenerational negotiation.

Although the open-ended responses pointed toward themes of connection, learning, independence and empowerment, they also voiced critique: of digital fatigue and fractured intimacies. Coding these responses could offer patterns, but it could not account for the emotional textures that shaped them.

The comparative questions risked imposing a linear narrative of progress — "life is better now than before" — where women's experiences were, in fact, layered, contingent and ambivalent. The women in this study do not enter the digital sphere as passive users. They arrive through relations: daughters who teach them, grandchildren who insist they practise, friends who troubleshoot. A more dialogical, slow conversation about time and technology would have yielded richer insights, but such depth lies beyond what a survey can hold. For that reason, the survey does not stand apart from ethnography, but opens the path toward it.

The survey reveals a diversity of digital agency that unsettles stereotypes of older adults (Lin et al., 2004). Women buy their own smartphones, join social media to sustain relationships stretched across geography, search for news and recipes, share poetry, recount travels, express devotion, and — perhaps most importantly — discover new ways of inhabiting time. They describe digital life with curiosity, pleasure, boredom, ambivalence and critique. In their accounts, digital life appears as both emancipatory and alienating, never reducible to a single narrative.

The survey also exposes infrastructural and linguistic inequalities that shape knowledge production: the struggle to click a consent box; the absence of an everyday word for "data"; the labour of translation across three languages; hesitations around scrolling or typing; the reliance on voice notes and phone calls; the recurrent need for another person to assist. These frictions are not methodological inconveniences: they are empirical realities, reminders that the digital is unevenly accessible and always mediated through broader hierarchies of class, literacy and infrastructure.

The survey cannot be understood as a preliminary phase before "real" ethnography. The calls from women asking why the "Next" button would not work; friends completing surveys for their

aunties; daughters coordinating video calls so their mothers could speak: these moments reveal the ethics of care and mediation structuring digital life long before I stepped into anyone's home.

As I transitioned from the survey to the more intimate encounters of ethnography, these findings offered a map. The unwritten pauses between words, the gestures accompanying mistakes, require ethnography's slower, relational attention.

The survey does not close a chapter; it opens one. It sowed the seeds for a deeper inquiry into how older women live with technology, how they learn and unlearn, how they distribute care and authority, and how they reimagine their place within families, communities and the world. What follows is not a correction of the survey's limitations but an unfolding of its implications. The survey laid the ground for my ethnographic work, where "doing digital" became a relational and embodied practice. The survey was not a prelude but already a field: alive with care, translation, and repair.

Many among the 175 who responded to the survey marked "yes" to being interviewed and provided their contact details in confidence that their anonymity would be maintained. Of these were 22 respondents to the Assamese survey. The subsequent stage of research — conversations on the phone, sending them a Friend request on Facebook, lurking online to watch what they post online (Muñiz & Schau, 2005), ethnography with them in the spaces they inhabit, staying in touch after I returned to Ireland — was conducted from among this cohort of 22.

The following pages of this dissertation is based on ethnography — in the field and online — with nine of these women.

Women, Men, Machines

Washing machines

It was only after I started working and earning money that I purchased a washing machine for our Mumbai home. Throughout my childhood, my mother washed our clothes. My father washed the heavier items: curtains, bedsheets and bed covers, and his own clothes. After attaining puberty respectively, my brother and I washed our own underwear. My mother wanted, pleaded, nagged for a washing machine, but my father refused to buy one, giving us several reasons: high electric consumption, that it would require manoeuvring of the plumbing system for water supply and water drainage, that it wasn't a big task if we each wash our daily clothes ourselves. As a child, his reasons seemed valid: I would even brag to friends that my father helped my mother in the washing. When I purchased the washing machine in 2014 — because both my parents were now older and I did not like either of them straining their bodies with the washing — my father couldn't protest. It was my money, my choice.

Looking back, that moment was not just about purchasing a machine. It was also about altering the moral order that had governed our household for decades. My father, who was suspicious of this new thing called the mobile phone, could not protest when I purchased my first ever mobile phone in 2004, with the money I had earned from my first summer internship. Over the years, as I found better jobs and my bank balance slowly fattened, I was able to buy the washing machine.

My earning power became a way to recognise my mother's labour; it allowed me to decide whose labour deserved to be minimal, and whose suffering could no longer be justified through the rhetoric of frugality. This simple financial gesture comes alive with an ethical charge: it is a daughter quietly unsettling the long-held assumption that a woman's — a wife's, a mother's — bodily endurance is the natural currency of domestic life. In choosing the machine, I was choosing a different moral vocabulary for our home.

The washing machine didn't arrive easily in Sukanya's home either. She and her late husband were both educated as engineers; she was the first female chemical engineer in the whole of Assam, when she graduated in 1973. A few years later, the newly-married couple migrated to Bombay and lived in a small room with another Assamese family in a working-class neighbourhood. After her daughter was born, Sukanya left her infant with her mother in Assam for two years, while she continued with her job as an engineering professor in Bombay; it was only when the couple had saved enough to buy a small flat that they brought the now two-year-old daughter to live with them.

Sukanya's husband was concerned about the high electricity bills from using the washing machine, and had their house help wash all the clothes. They educated their daughter who became a medical doctor, and migrated to the US in the early 2000s. The couple sold that tiny flat and bought

one that was larger, on the fourth floor, with modern amenities. They maintained an active social life, even as Sukanya got busy chasing pension documents after she retired from her job.

Sometime during that busyness, Sukanya bought herself a washing machine. Her husband continued working as an engineer at a construction company until April 2021, when he died at the peak of the deaths caused by the Delta variant of COVID-19. She grieved his death alone, and got busy running between government offices for the ensuing exhausting paperwork.

Her househelp comes every afternoon to wash dishes, and sweep and swab the floors. When Sukanya moved to Guwahati for a few months — to deal with paperwork related to her late husband's property — she washed her clothes herself, even through agonising pain in her arm after a fall.

Both men — my father and Sukanya's husband — viewed the cost of electricity consumption as being more significant than the cost of human labour. Both also worried about the costs associated with fixing them, if they were to break down. I know my father would have tinkered it on his own, but only up to a point, before a mechanic would have to be called on, who would charge a fee. A machine that would lessen the physical burden on the wife is viewed as unnecessary because of its financial burden: at purchase, and later, for its maintenance. Human labour is thus seen as the right kind of labour, rather than machine labour. If technology is socially pervasive, it is also gendered; neither technology nor gender could be understood in isolation from the other (Lohan & Faulkner 2004, p. 319).

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Reflecting on the ways in which these two men — beloved husbands — valued electricity over their respective wives' bodies, domestic life becomes organised around what is considered real cost, and what is considered negligible. Electricity is the real cost, and women's labour is an unspoken necessity. The sweat in the humid bathrooms — and the uncounted strain on women's backs, shoulders, joints — becomes an unspoken moral expectation. I grew up believing these trade-offs were reasonable. His contribution — in washing the curtains and bedding — reinforced his argument that the chore was not an undue burden. He recognised that washing the heavy clothes took a toll on *any* body. But these items were not the ones that were washed on a daily basis; perhaps once a month. But in doing so, he ignored the daily toil my mother endured. Hence, his refusal to buy a washing machine was based on a perception that it was a machine needed only for heavy items, and not for the smaller, everyday ones. Such reasoning, I realised later, reflects a moral economy in which the monetary is elevated and the corporeal is discounted, especially the supposedly low-level and yet endless everyday task that is considered women's work. This hierarchy is not simply economic; it is deeply ethical. It was a hierarchy of tasks based on the economic arithmetic of what can be afforded, and what can be viewed as an extravagant purchase, within the milieu of a middle-class in 1990s

Mumbai, where purchasing power was limited to those for basic necessities. Only what was needed was purchased; anything extra was deemed extravagant.

Lohan and Faulkner (2004) suggest that we cannot understand technology and gender without the other, given how both are socially constructed and pervasive (p. 319). Bray (2007) has elaborated how "men are viewed as having a natural affinity with technology, whereas women supposedly fear or dislike it" (p. 38). Hence, women are often viewed as passive recipients rather than active contributors to innovation. Technology is almost always associated with masculinity; this has shaped everyday gender experiences, from the way histories have been written (or omitted), how people are chosen (or overlooked) in education and employment, and how newer technologies are designed. Technology thus becomes a lever of power, especially when technological progress is perceived as the first sprout to herald societal progress (Bray, 2007, p. 38; see also Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1988, 1991; Suchman, 2007; Wajcman, 2004, 2010).

For Brazilian development economist Roldan Muradian (2019), it is essential to distinguish between frugality as a choice and frugality as a social condition. The washing machine not only exposes domestic frugality for my mother and Sukanya, but serves as a fulcrum to exercise authority and competence. The stories with the washing machines reveal a moral and societal warp wherein female labour is naturalised and expected without question; where technological intervention is only based on the man's decision. Anything beyond is deemed unnecessary, even excessive. That the daughter, now financially independent, bypasses the paternal and patriarchal veto, is not merely a functional shift; it is a rupture in that domestic fabric.

The use — or non-use — of a domestic machine as an arbiter of labour reveals the infrastructures of dependency that shape everyday life. The machine is no longer an inert object, but become the arbiters of moral and material roles, which are inscripted into their design (Akrich, 1992; Latour, 1992). They become socially-charged artefacts entangled in gender, age, and moral expectation. Bodily strain becomes a virtue in itself, especially for women whose work is rarely acknowledged in any other way. Introducing a machine disrupts this moral structure: suggesting that ease is permissible and that women's exhaustion should not be the silent cornerstone of family life.

Such an expectation also transpires with the caring of machines even after they have entered the home: I had forgotten what year I had bought the washing machine. I texted my mother if she remembered, and she replied, "14 October 2014". I asked her how did she remember the exact month. She sent me a photo of one section of a piece of paper, browning. There it was: "Owners Manual: LG Washing Machine". Above it, were words written in blue ink: "Purchased on October 10, 2014, from Vijay Electronics". My mother thus preserved this document all these years, as an act of bearing responsibility for that arbiter of labour. Maintaining the manual for the washing machine was her way of caring for a machine that alleviated her labour.

As I look at the photo of that yellowing paper she sent me, and think carefully about ageing and technology, I see how the preservation of that manual carries a moral weight that exceeds the

practical. It was not just a piece of paper that had accumulated in one of her drawers. She was preserving the memory of the moment when the burden on her body shifted, however slightly, from flesh to machine. In this sense, the manual becomes a kind of ethical artefact, an acknowledgement that this machine entered her life not as a luxury, but as a companion in the intimate struggle of daily work. Her care for the manual reveals a broader truth about the moral worlds older women inhabit. They are expected to care not only for people, but also for the objects that make their labour possible, and they do so with quiet seriousness.

As my mother ages, I see how her relation to technology is shaped by more than competence or fear. It is shaped by a deeply ingrained sense of duty. The machine that lightens her workload simultaneously becomes one more entity she must safeguard. The manual becomes a symbolic contract: *If this machine is to take care of me, then I must take care of it*. For ageing women, the promise of technological assistance is often accompanied by the anxiety of technological failure. So they guard these objects with a care that mirrors the devotion they have long been expected to give to the household itself. Looking at that yellowing piece of paper, I understood something about my mother's carefulness that I had not recognised before. The manual was both proof of ownership and a reassurance that she possessed the knowledge needed to maintain the machine.

Documents are a form of protection for the world's vulnerable, as they choose to leave home or are forced out of their homes (Horton & Heyman, 2020; Thomson, 2018). In the context of ageing, knowledge becomes a form of protection. When machines fail, older women fear not only inconvenience, but exposure: the exposure of not knowing, of being dependent, of having to call for help, of not knowing who to call to ask for help. My mother may not know what to do if the machine broke down, but she had the reference code for the machine, to know how to ask for help for it, even if asking for help for herself was never her in her own vocabulary. By holding onto the manual, my mother was holding onto a buffer against that vulnerability.

In this way, her act illuminates a wider pattern. Technology promises ease, yet for ageing women, it also demands a new kind of moral labour. They must not only use these objects but steward them, preserve their documents, safeguard their functioning, and remain vigilant to their breakdowns. Far from eliminating burden, technology redistributes it, creating a subtle obligation to maintain the very devices that promise liberation. My mother's preserved manual, yellowing with time, becomes a quiet archive of these moral negotiations, a small yet profound record of the entanglement between ageing bodies and the machines that share their labour.

Food blender

One afternoon in Guwahati, while meeting different people and attending to different errands throughout the day and across the city, people meeting me were curious about the shoe box I was carrying with me. I told them it wasn't shoes. I chose my words carefully as I responded, because the box needed some explaining, and the reasonings being a long sequence of causation, almost poetic:

"This box is a blender that I had ordered for my Aunty[11]
So that she can blend cooked food more efficiently
Instead of putting them into the mixer-grinder
For her husband, a survivor of cancer
Living with a constricted esophagus
Such that he cannot eat solid foods;
This blender, for the food to puree
And keep him alive with vitality
And make him strong enough so his energy would stretch
To beat her each time he feels insecure in their fifty-year-old marriage."

Maya's husband was no longer sleeping in their bedroom. He would cough a lot at night and would go to the bathroom several times throughout the night; they had both decided that it would be best that he sleeps on a smaller bed in a larger room that functioned as a communal space. Their house, atop a small hill, had rooms in a row: the living room to entertain guests and a dining room, the kitchen where natural light was blocked because of a new building constructed next door, then this long communal room that functioned as generic non-descript space for shelves and a small bed, then the bathroom, and finally, the bedroom. Her husband slept in that middle room; I slept with Maya in her bedroom when I was visiting her a week before carrying along the blender.

Earlier that day, I was with them, when her husband had been to a clinic for esophageal dilation, since he was not able to eat anything for the past two days. I had told Maya that I could help her with anything needed while the procedure was on.

At the clinic, her husband was wincing with general discomfort in his throat. The nurses kept ordering Maya to go to the pharmacy downstairs, to buy some gloves; then once again, to buy some syringes; then again, to make an advance payment. The process aimed at making an unwell person feel at ease is designed to exhaust their already-worried caregivers. Being the "child" among them, I

[11] It is typical of South Asian cultures, where a woman who might be of the same age as one's mother, is addressed as an "Aunty". In India, Aunty is the word that is commonplace in cities; in specific states, other words are used. For example, in Assam, the term that is used is Maahi (mother's sister) or Khuri (father's younger brother's wife), when a person assesses that the older woman might be younger than one's own mother. A much older woman, who could be a grandmother, is addressed as Aaita (which translates to grandmother). In this instance, if I had spoken to people in English while in Assam, I would have used the word Aunty to describe her in the third person; I addressed her as 'Maahi' in the second person.

offered to do the run down and up the stairs: "*I am here now, so let me do it this time*," I told Maya. She did not protest.

Once he was called into the doctor's chambers, her husband laid down. The doctor began to insert very long tubes into his mouth, one by one, of varying diameters. Her husband groaned in pain, as the doctor kept talking to him gently, chiding him for eating a piece of cake two days ago, which had constricted his esophagus. Maya watched on, with a straight face. Her husband coughed out some blood; she winced a bit. Once the procedure was done, her husband lay on that bed for a few extra minutes, wiping his mouth and staring into the ceiling, catching his breath, after what can be best described as a traumatic insertion to enable him to live longer. "*This time it seemed to hurt him more*," Maya later told me. It was an understatement; her own ability to not look away was testimony to all that she had witnessed and endured as his wife and caregiver.

I had booked a vehicle through one of the ride-hailing apps, and we were in their home by lunch. She was concerned that he had not eaten much for over three days; and it was only around late evening that he began to sip some cold water. Throughout the day, we talked about everything and nothing; about how she once loved to write and has now almost entirely stopped writing. "*This is my life now; I cannot go out for too long because he does not like it; we cannot go out now together because people will offer food and it feels bad to refuse it, since he cannot eat anything* solid,"[12] she said, her feet swift and her eyes sunken, tending to one chore after another.

That night, I stayed with them. At about 10pm, we heard her husband go to the bathroom. Standing close to the wall of the bedroom where Maya and I were drifting to sleep, we heard him murmur that he would walk out of the house. She said nothing; he said that she has been talking non-sense behind his back. I worried if he had, earlier in the day, heard anything she had told me in confidence about his past behaviours. When Maya did not respond to his provocations, he dragged the blanket that covered her, pulled her legs and shouted that he would kick her out.

He raised his hand to hit her, all the while hurling abuses towards her and her family; he almost hit me when I tried to intervene. "Get out of the house," he shouted at me. I replied, as calmly as possible, that I will be leaving as soon as the sun came up. Most of his abuses were in a mix of Assamese and English; he yelled at me in English. Maya called up their daughter — a doctor in the US — to apprise her of the situation, and I spoke to her too. She told me not to hesitate to call the police if he hit either of us.

We tried to shut the door, but he wouldn't let us. He held the door with his hands. When he tried to hit her, I intervened and shouted that I am calling the police, but I was shocked how physically strong he was, in spite of his skinny frame. It was around 2am when he calmed down, sitting on the

[12] Quotes that have been translated from Assamese to English are in italics. I do this following the footsteps of anthropologist Susan Seizer (2005), because almost all conversations took place in Assamese, and that is the primary language in which the ethnography was conducted. It is an epistemological standpoint of refusing to make Assamese words foreign by italicising them. The English translation is the foreign language in this ethnography. Words within quotes that are not italicised were uttered in English.

floor near the bathroom, crying, and repeating how much he loved Maya and would do anything for her.

It was a long night of horror in realising that Maya was so deeply embedded in this codependent marriage of nearly 50 years that she couldn't see herself leaving him. Both her children — who work and live in the US with their respective families — had been telling her to leave their father since several years, but she was worried with "*what would people think*"; now more than ever, because it would be bad optics for her to leave behind a man recovering from cancer.

I slept the night with my eyes open. When I was finally awake, I was more angry at Maya than her husband for enabling his violence. He feigned ignorance about what had happened at night, citing early dementia; an hour later, he decided not to talk to me.

I had never found myself in such a situation ever before: I was shocked, confused, angry, worried, and a bit scared. "*How is this sick man so strong*?" Maya asked, more rhetorically than in search of an answer. I responded that she was the one who was making him strong, by toiling away to feed him chicken and daal[13] twice a day. "You allowed this," I told her. She nodded, in agreement, and said: "[*My daughter*] *tells me, 'You don't have that thing called self-respect. The man who tortures you so much; you keep taking care of him. You never oppose him a single day.' I cannot figure it out myself: why don't I oppose him? I actually dislike any form of* oxaanti [*un-peace, conflict*]."

I tried to reason with her: "*But nobody likes* oxaanti*... but is it worth it? The* oxaanti *that runs through your mind... is that any less* oxaanti*?*

As days passed, I tried to make sense of that violent night and the morning after, and my response to her. I realised that maybe she did not need another person to tell her what would be best for her to do, but to support her in any way that she needed.

Before that day had devolved into a violent night, I had seen that it was getting cumbersome for her to pour out the cooked chicken curry, daal and rice into a smaller mixer-grinder used for grinding spices, to turn the meal into a soup-like consistency, so that her husband could eat it. It kept her very busy: washing the mixer after blending spices, cooling the cooked food, pouring it into the mixer-grinder, then pouring it out into a serving bowl. I had shown her the photo of handheld immersion blenders on my phone, suggesting that it would make it much easier for her to blend the food directly in the pot in which she had cooked, or in the bowl in which she would serve him the pureed food. She had liked the idea, and that's why I had ordered it, at my address, knowing that this would give me another opportunity to meet her and see how she would handle it with ease or difficulty.

The blender arrived a week after that violent night. I texted her on WhatsApp that I will come by to give it to her; that I will come to see her even if her husband chased me out. She replied that she

[13] "Daal" is lentils, and is believed to be high in nutrients, and hence often fed to those in convalescence.

did not have the "duxaahos" [*bad-courage*] to chase me out of her house, and that instead, she was asking for my forgiveness, for I was "*sticking by*" her even after all that had happened that night.

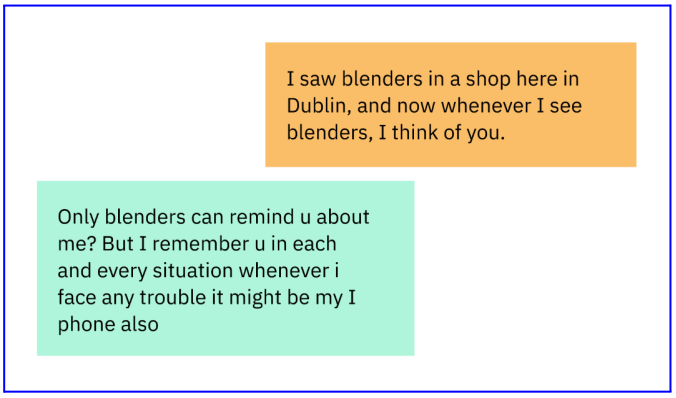
That led me to the afternoon when I was bringing the food blender to Maya's home, when we did not speak about that night — her husband continued to ignore me — and I showed her how to use it. The instructions were minimal. "*I will try again on my own*," she said, as I waved her goodbye, shutting the small gate as I left. Asian koels were roosting and the sky was turning dark. She looked on, her shoulders sagging under the fraying sweater, until I had made it onto the main street and was no longer in her sight. The sky was black.

Maya wasn't sure if the blender would be useful. A week later, when I texted her asking if she was using the blender regularly, she replied to my text, in English, "The blender is my new best friend."

I could not help Maya in her situation in any way other than to help her with the ease that came with this small machine. She could now transfer the cooked food from the cooking pot into the serving bowl, and blend it all directly in the same space; thus minimising the number of times she would have to wash the utensils. Now she only needed to wash the blender blades, while the mixer-grinder could be reserved for its original purpose. It made her life a tiny bit easier.

On my way out of Assam — nearly four weeks after she had been using her new best friend — the blender broke down. I visited her again, and I offered to look into it, using the toolbox in her home. It was a fancy toolbox with several parts. Her husband had seen it in a shop, purchased it, but never used it. "*This is how it is with so many things in our house*," she added. But I was not successful in repairing the blender. I told her that she would have to take it to a hardware shop, and hopefully someone could repair it.

Back in Dublin, I was visiting a store in a working-class neighbourhood, looking for a specific type of screwdriver. It was a shop that is best understood to be one where all the goods are from China: they are cheap, stocked with everything from buckets to balloons, from spoons to screwdrivers, from watches to water bottles. There was also a row of shelves full of blenders. I took a photo of that shelf and sent it as a WhatsApp message to Maya:



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The blender — the tool meant to ease her burdens within the tight frame of her violent marriage — became the lever for our conversations. It eased her time in the kitchen to some extent, but only within what could be possible in her life, with the circumstances at hand.

Post World War II utopia manifested the architecture and assemblages of the kitchen; it delivered the vision of the good life that was championed in the US, and its obsessive desire for giant appliances meant to make life easier for the housewife (de Grazia, 2006, p. 453). Some radical feminists in the 1970s have conferred technology as being oppressive to women (Bray, 2007, p. 39). Cowan's landmark study of household technologies (1983) countered the belief that technology makes our lives easier; the research showed how machines served the purpose of raising cultural standards of cleanliness rather than freeing women from plodding away her hours in domestic existence.

The blender is not just a kitchen appliance. It is a crutch, easing the burden of a woman feeding her abusive husband. Her refusal to leave him cannot be reduced to ignorance, weakness or learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972). This refusal is a complex fidelity to the role of a wife and caregiver, notwithstanding the extreme moral strain. The blender serves to uphold this role while easing some of the burdens across a lifetime that has been shaped by the actions of the people around her (Dannefer & Settersten, 2010; Danely & Lynch, 2013). This is where ageing and gender intersect most painfully: the expectation that women, particularly older women, will persist in care regardless of the cost to themselves.

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The washing machine and the blender do not enter women's lives as neutral tools. They enter as moral actors, acquiring meaning through the specific burdens they alleviate and the specific inequalities they reveal. Both machines operate in very different domestic atmospheres, yet both illuminate a similar logic: technology is never only technical. It is always braided with the moral worlds in which it circulates, and especially with the moral expectations placed on ageing women. When women do fall ill, they persist through household chores; they rest only when their body cannot endure the laboured strain any longer. This pattern persists through the years: an ageing woman continues to tend to those around her, often delaying in responding to her own health needs. The gendered endurance starkly reveals the gendered inequities.

Buying the washing machine represented a quiet refusal to accept the unending bodily labour that had been demanded across decades. Yet, even as it granted my mother relief, she also assumed responsibility for its care, storing its manual as if it were a fragile extension of her own ageing body. For her, the machine was both redemption and obligation. To own it was to admit she deserved ease, but also to shoulder the moral work of ensuring that ease did not break down. The washing machine did not erase the ethic of sacrifice that shaped her life. Instead, it relocated that ethic onto a new material object.

In Maya's home, the blender sustained a woman who had built her life around caregiving, even when that caregiving was entwined with violence and fear. The blender eased the most exhausting part of her routine, yet it also entrenched the moral logic that she should continue to feed and tend to the man who hurt her. It is tempting to see the machine here as a small act of freedom. But in truth, it became a device that enabled the continuation of her suffering, albeit with slightly fewer steps in the kitchen. The violence in her home was not only physical; it was moral. It demanded fidelity from her, endurance without recognition, and the absorption of pain as part of the feminine script. By making that script slightly more manageable, the blender became part of the machinery of her entrapment.

These stories reveal something fundamental about the intersection of ageing and technology. Machines do not enter these women's homes as symbols of modernity or as conveniences celebrated in post-war fantasies of domestic progress. They enter as participants in a moral economy structured around gendered expectations of labour, care, and endurance. Tools that promise relief end up entangled in pre-existing moral relations that define what kind of labour a woman should give, and to whom.

This is why technologies for older women cannot be understood solely in terms of utility or access. They must be understood within the moral frameworks that organise their lives. Ageing women navigate these objects through the weight of long-cultivated responsibilities, fears of breakdown or dependence, and the deeply ingrained belief that their value lies in maintaining the home, even when their own bodies are weakening. Machines may shift the location of strain, but they rarely shift its meaning.

What the washing machines and the blender ultimately show is that technological care cannot be separated from moral care. They carry the imprint of the relationships into which they are introduced, reflecting the specific forms of duty, obligation, sacrifice, and suffering that women have been taught to embody across decades. Women are the default caregivers, "on a 24 hour, 'on call' responsibility" (James, 1992, p. 490). Ageing in women is thus shaped by expectations of duty, by histories of endurance, by the quiet, exhausting ethics that compel them to continue caring even when they are the ones most in need of care.

Here, technology mediates these relations and materialises them. Machines become the objects through which the moral weight of domestic life is negotiated, contested, reinforced, or, at times, very subtly transformed. In the lives of ageing women, technological assistance is never purely practical. It is always entangled with the ethical labour of remaining who they have been asked to be.

Car headlights

At dusk, Anima performed her evening prayers and waved the incense sticks around the house, while shutting the windows in each of the rooms, to prevent mosquitoes from entering. Anima lived in her Guwahati home with her adult son; it was built, brick by brick, over a decade, by her deceased husband, whenever he had managed to save some money to buy the materials and hire masons on daily wage. Anima was only 46 when he died after a prolonged battle with tuberculosis. Their son was 17-years-old then; she later completed the final bits of construction from her own savings as a salaried employee of Assam's handloom promotion office.

Anima said that their home had not been refurbished in a very long time, and hence they were constructing a new room which would be different: tiles instead of the red oxide cement flooring, large sliding windows instead of open space as ventilators close to the ceiling, minimalist shelves instead of wooden aalmirahs with glass panes. As she was about to draw the curtains on one of the windows, she noticed that the headlights were on in their car. Her son had parked the car in the neighbour's compound ever since the masons deconstructed the garage.

Anima grew extremely anxious seeing the headlights on; she began to exclaim how careless "*the boy*" is: her 47-year-old son. She asked me if I knew how to turn it off, and I said I could try, but I too did not know how. I had been to a driving school over a decade ago, and never really drove thereafter; I hesitated to touch this moving machine. I knew it was nothing too serious, because I could not hear the rumbling of a running engine, but I could not be too sure, and her anxiety about it was making me nervous too. What if this was indeed something serious?

Anima called up her son but he wasn't receiving the call; she said that he might be on his bike, on his way home. In the dark, I tried to wiggle in the keys to turn off the headlights, but the alarm went off bip-bip-bip-bip-bip such that it scared both of us. Somehow, that alarm lasted only about ten seconds and I was able to turn it off as mysteriously as I had turned it on.

I asked Anima if she knew anyone around who also had a car, and she remembered someone residing in the next alley. He told her on the phone that he was having his evening tea, and would come by soon. I tried to assure her that it's not a big deal: the engine was definitely off, but she kept repeating "Hey Bhogobaan! Ki hobo etiya!" ["*O God! What will happen now!*"] in a high-pitched tone, walking fast between the car and the gate and onto the street, to see if anyone was passing by.

The neighbour from the next alley — an older man — finally arrived, and managed to turn off the light, as she kept talking about "*the* careless *boy*". I asked the man to show me which were the buttons to turn them off and on; he also showed me how to start the car, and why the alarm was set off. I told him to also show those to Anima, but she laughed nervously: "Naai naai naai, moi xikibo nuwaarim!" ["*No no no, I won't be able to learn*."]

As the chaotic energy between us finally fell, the man smiled and told me that I should learn how to drive a car. I explained to him that I was raised in Bombay, which had the best public transport

in the country, such that nobody ever felt the need to buy a car and drive it. I joked that maybe Anima should learn to drive, but she repeated the same spiel: "*No no no, I won't be able to learn*." Even so, at my insistence, she went onto the passenger seat, while the neighbour showed her how to turn the headlights on, and off.

When her son reached home, he was fuming about the whole situation; I explained to him what had happened. Anima herself did not admonish him as I thought she might. He too acknowledged that yes, she could learn to drive, and if not, at least learn to call a taxi on ride-hailing apps like Uber and Ola[14].

While Anima served him tea, the conversation suddenly turned towards the possible situations in which she might have to go out somewhere while he may not be around to call a taxi. She kept saying that she could find an autorickshaw on the main street; I kept countering her claim by asking her until what time are autorickshaws available at night. "*It will be good if you learnt how to use Uber and Ola, just in case...*"

"*No no no, I won't be able to learn*." She was adamant.

Her adamant denial about learning explained why she panicked so hard upon seeing the headlights turned on: a classic case of ignorance breeding fear. She said she could always depend on her son; I asked what if he was transferred to another town by his employer — since he had told me about such a possibility. She laughed and said that she would follow him.

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Learning to use a new tool or technology can be daunting for anyone. However, as explained in the previous sections, technology is almost always associated with masculinity; this has shaped everyday gender experiences. This is visible in Anima's case; her dependence on her son was perhaps another example of how women have been socialised to fear machines — like the automobile — and to hence depend on another person, usually a man, for their needs. My insistence that learning to use Uber and Ola would bring relative independence to her mobility was not heeded. Even so, I found myself holding my words, while insisting Anima to consider learning how to use a ride-hailing taxi app, let alone learn how to drive. I was conscious of overstepping my idea of care that could fall into the murky terrain of over-parenting (Ryan et al., 1995).

Anima's repeated insistence "*I won't be able to learn*" is not merely a confession of inability. It is the reverberation of countless denials, exclusions, and the internalised scripts of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972). Her dependence on her son is structured as morally and socially right for herself, as well as for her son, in his role as the one who will tend to her needs. Hence, the possibility of technological competence is assumed to be not only as impossible, but also as improper.

[14] Apart from Uber, the other ride hailing apps in India are Ola and Rapido. Rapido was initially only a bike-taxi hailing app and in smaller cities. Currently, all three apps provide cars and bikes for ride-hailing.

"*I won't be able to learn*" almost sounds like "*I should not learn*": a sense of self-imposition from self-denial, a sense of imposition on the son as the one who would drive her around. These are moments that reveal a different type of violence that is directed inward, toward oneself: a sense of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1988) that seeps slow yet steady, through years of false consciousness or mistaken belief (Bhattacharyya, 2009, p. 16; Krais, 1993; Connolly & Healy, 2004), that drills in a sense of one's own subordination. In other words: "The fish do not talk about the water — it is so self-evident that they cannot exist without it" (Riseeuw 1988, p. 5).

Women in classical patriarchal societies actively collude "in the reproduction of their own subordination" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 280). Hence, women "often adhere as far and as long as they possibly can to rules that result in the unfailing devaluation of their labour" (Kandiyoti 1988, p. 280). Anima wasn't able to view her own subordination because of the way she has been socialised; Maya knew her own labour was keeping her violent husband alive; my mother and Sukanya noticed their respective labour in doing the washing but couldn't do much about valuing it within the home, for those burdens to be eased. Even when women notice the acts of symbolic violence, women's protests within the home do not seem loud enough. Sometimes, they are indeed not loud enough "because of the enormous effort it would take to go against their social conditioning and contest male dominance and privilege" (Durey, 2008, p. 75).

This is where we must return to the idea of violence. This is not the spectacular or visible violence that appeared in Maya's story. Instead, it is the slow, ambient, symbolic violence that shapes what women believe they are capable of and what they believe they deserve. Anima has not been beaten or threatened, yet her sense of possibility has been so narrowed by gendered socialisation that her own autonomy feels dangerous to her. Her dependence on her son appears loving and morally right. Yet, it also reflects a moral order in which older women are expected to relinquish technological competence at the very moment when they might need it most. This is a form of harm that does not raise its voice. It speaks in the quiet language of self-doubt and in the inherited belief that some actions are not appropriate for women of her generation.

In this sense, her repeated statement "*No no no, I won't be able to learn*" is not simply the declaration of an older woman who resists new skills. It is the voice of patriarchy that has been internalised down to the bones that it sounds like humility rather than domination. Seen in this light, Anima's and Maya's stories belong to the same moral universe. The violence is not identical, but it arises from the same structural field. Both women live within domestic landscapes where care is demanded of them and autonomy is discouraged. Both have been taught that their value lies in tending to others rather than developing capacities of their own. In these worlds, the cultivation of independence is often treated as unnecessary, inappropriate or disloyal. These are forms of violence that limit horizons, cement dependence, and transform fear into a moral expectation.

These different manifestations of gendered patriarchal relations (Walby, 1990) have transpired into the everyday practices of married women in India (Lahiri-Dutt & Sil, 2014; Rani & Khandelwal,

1992; Ramu, 1989; Shukla & Kapoor 1990; Sarma, 2009), including among middle-class Assamese women within their homes (Chakrabarty 2006, 2012; Bhattacharyya, 2015; Vauquline, 2015).

Anima's affective reaction throughout the hour when the car headlights were on is symbolic of the affective infrastructure of perceived threat when encountering the unfamiliar. Her insistence on not being able to learn how to turn off the lights evokes the need for new technologies to be successfully domesticated (Sørensen & Berg, 1991; Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992; Lie & Sørensen 1996). Such domestication is also an affective process of the development of the skills that are embodied (Ingold, 2000, p. 44).

But that threshold was never crossed with Anima and the car. What might be the ways then to break these fossilised structures of gendered patriarchal relations, that manifest themselves through machines? Could machines truly be the emancipator of women? Do machines alone become the levers, or does it matter that women themselves have to use machines as levers to drive a different engine, towards a different path?

The car becomes the object that exposes these moral boundaries. It is not simply a vehicle that Anima cannot operate. It is a machine she has been taught not to claim. It marks a threshold she has been taught not to cross. She speaks from within a script that treats women's technological incapacity as natural and their dependence as virtuous.

This has profound implications for understanding ageing. The relationship that ageing women develop with technology is shaped by more than fear or lack of access. It is shaped by long histories of moral expectation. These expectations guide what women believe they are permitted to do, what skills they believe are appropriate for them, and what forms of self-reliance they believe they must relinquish. Ageing therefore unfolds within a moral field that has already been structured around gendered inequality.

One woman fears harm from a man. Another fears a machine she has never been permitted to trust. Both fears are produced by the same structural conditions. Both reveal how technologies become sites where violence, care, gender and age intersect. And both remind us that machines cannot transform lives unless women are enabled, and enable themselves, to inhabit those machines as rightful users rather than accidental trespassers. Ageing, in this sense, is shaped by the long history of what women have been told they can do, what they must do, and what they should not do. Technologies such as the car become material objects through which these moral lessons are reinforced or subtly contested.

Second car

Jyoti's world is in many ways so different from Anima's.

Anima lives in Guwahati — Assam's capital — which is also the most cosmopolitan city in northeast India. It is the city where people from the other six states of the northeast come to, to chase big dreams. It is the city.

Jyoti lives in Dibrugarh, 440 kilometers northeast from Guwahati: as the crow flies, it is equidistant to Tibet to its north and Myanmar to its south. Dibrugarh has its own history because of its proximity to the river Brahmaputra and oil refineries like Digboi that were established by the British empire. However, it is still much smaller in comparison to Guwahati, even as people in both cities identify themselves as culturally different.

Jyoti was raised in a small town, in a house right by the railway track. Her father encouraged her and her sisters to ride the bicycle; "*You should be able to get anywhere you want, on your own*," he had said.

After I met her at the shelter for "mentally-challenged" homeless women that she was managing with her husband, we walked towards her car that was parked under a flyover. I was surprised that her husband got into the back seat. She grabbed her massive 1960s-style sunglasses from the glove compartment, pulled me aside facing the winter afternoon sun, and took a selfie of us both. Then she got into the driver's seat of the car, checked the rearview mirror, and drove homeward.

The car had every bit of evidence that it had travelled thousands of miles over the years. We stopped on the way to buy vegetables from vendors who had pointed at me and said, "Aaji aalohi!" [*A guest today!*] We left the highway and entered a narrow alley, and she carefully manoeuvred the car into a narrower strip with sharp turns. "*They built the house and extended the wall so far up the road that even this tiny car cannot go by*!" Her husband got off the car midway, and walked ahead. He extended his hand toward her, gesturing that she could keep inching ahead; bending his head to check the car's proximity to the wall, as she gently swerved around the corner. He had already opened the gates to their home, and she smoothly slid the car into their small compound, with papayas budding on one of their trees.

The two-storey house was painted pink; the living room the shade of lemon green. I carried a large pumpkin from the trunk of the car, as well as my backpack, as they each carried the other vegetables they had purchased.

Jyoti's husband then left the house for some errands, and I remarked how tough it was to drive through the alley, and how she had managed to keep the car safe from a possible dent because of the neighbour's jutting wall. She then told me how her husband would not let her learn to drive at all. She explained how, more than a decade ago, he was learning to drive with the help of a subordinate at his workplace. She would join them in the car, sitting in the rear seat, watching and learning quietly from the rear seat. When she told him that she would like to try to drive, he shushed her. Discreetly, she told

the man who was teaching, that she too would like to drive. Together, they connived to get the car out of the office during work hours, so that she could learn.

One day, when this driving teacher asked her husband to brave it and drive on the highway, he freaked out. She then murmured if she could give it a go instead, and the teacher loudly said yes, which raised her husband's eyebrows. He was bewildered when she drove smoothly on the highway, at a good speed, and even managed a U-turn confidently. "*His mouth stayed open during the entire time I was driving*," she said with a chuckle, while making evening tea for us.

One evening, her husband told her that she had to buy a specific car in the showroom near their home. Sheepishly, he narrated how he went on a short test drive but had managed to scratch one side of the car. There was no option but to buy it. That's how the family got their first car, which was largely driven by Jyoti — the same one that I sat on, whose floor on the back carried stories of all the places it had travelled, with crumbs and twigs as evidence. It was the car, she said, that was used for buying groceries in large quantities, to supply to the shelter. It seemed like a solid car, a reliable one, without any extras: only the space for a cassette tape was now empty.

The next morning, when we had to head out together, Jyoti said that we would be going in the other car. She pulled off an old bedsheet that was covering a metallic grey sedan in the back of the house. "*This is my car.*"

The sedan looked new; she had maintained it well, and it smelled lovely: there was an air freshener on the car's dashboard. The car had a digital dash console, and she touched the screen to turn on the radio. She was wearing a big beige coat, and wore dark lipstick. We got inside the car, and I came out, realising I should open the gate for the car to exit. "*No need; he will do it*," she said, gesturing to her husband. He had already opened the gate for the car to safely exit the threshold of their courtyard and the alley, before the car slowly turned and made its way onto the streets. Adjusting the rearview mirror, she asked, "*What music do you want to listen to*?"

This was a scene that was unusual in many ways: a role reversal of who gets to buy a car, and who gets to drive one. Of who opens the gate and who is in the driving seat of life. Of who catapults the family's status in middle-class India through that totem that moves on four wheels (Krishna & Bajpai, 2015, p. 71).

Jyoti admitted herself that she hadn't seen more than a handful women in Dibrugarh, in their seventies, driving a car. She shared how violent her husband had been to her in the past: "Khub beya beya kotha kobo paarisil" ["*He could say some really horrible things*"].

Because it was so cold and rainy in Dibrugarh, Jyoti asked me if I would rather prefer sleeping on the same bed as her, as there were more blankets there. I did not hesitate to say yes: I had previously seen a mouse scurrying in the room where she was assigning me to sleep. Besides, lying in bed would mean we would have the chance to talk, behind closed doors, about "*that thing*" she had done that finally got her husband to stop being violent.

With the rumble of thunder, a muffler to prevent the draft of cold air drilling into our ears, and under heavy blankets, Jyoti detailed how her husband had long been mourning the sudden death by drowning of their 10-year-old son in the early 1990s. He began to verbally abuse her when she was not able to produce a son for him. Their deceased son had been born more than a decade after she had birthed and raised two daughters. "*I had to do something*," she said. "Bohut kotha aase, tumi buji nepuwaa" ["*There are many things, you won't understand*"].

What could she have done? She kept repeating those words, and left the words trailing, and I could not ask for more details. This conversation had come up right after tea in the evening, when she had been sharing the purchase of the cars, and how she had learnt to drive; how his verbal abuse had stopped by then. Why? "*I had to do something.*"

"*What did you do? Did you call the police*?" I finally asked that rainy stormy night, not being sure what her response might be. Could it be something more heinous?

She paused, and simply said that she called on her daughters — both married and with their own families — as well as other members of the extended family, and collectively informed them how her husband was being nirloijjo [*shameless*] in demanding to marry another woman, to beget a son. She told them that she was ready to go to the police[15]. This, to everyone listening, was something that was unthinkable, shameful, unbelievable. "*That's all I did*," she said softly.

I was expecting that her response would be something more dire, but I realised that what she had done was daring and dire enough, within the context of middle-class Assamese society. "*He became absolutely quiet after that*," she said. The man with a smiling face who touched my head on my way out of Dibrugarh — a gesture of blessing — seemed unlike someone Jyoti had described.

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It was after all of this in their life that she had bought her own car: he could no longer say anything about her choices. Her choice — to learn to drive the car, to buy the car on which he had made a dent, to buy a fancier metallic grey sedan that was reserved for her trips — got him around places. The cars are markers of their middle-class status through the display of their consumption (Saavala, 2010; Krishna & Bajpai, 2015). Here, class and symbolic capital intersected gender to redefine a middle-class woman's sense of self (Rangwala et al., 2020). Even the humble scooter has enabled women in rural India to survive droughts by collectivising and creating savings accounts that benefit them in times of need (Borpujari, 2017). Loans payable through easy installments specifically for women buying two-wheeler vehicles have enabled them a sense of mobility and agency over their lives (Gopalan, 2019). A company selling used cars in India found that women car buyers rose from 16 percent in 2023 to 46 per cent in 2025 (The Financial Express, 2025).

[15] Polygamy is outlawed in India and prohibited under the Hindu Marriage Act. Bigamy carries a punishment of up to seven years of imprisonment under Section 494 of the Indian Penal Code.

Jyoti's relationship with the car unfolds in a moral landscape that is shared with women like Anima and Maya, yet also departs from theirs in subtle and significant ways. She too lives within a world shaped by gendered expectations about who may use machines, and who should not. She too has been taught that certain technologies belong to men, and that a woman's engagement with them is inappropriate or unnecessary. Yet, something in her story resists the weight of these expectations. Her quiet decision to learn how to drive, despite her husband's irritation, reveals a different moral orientation to ageing, dependency and competence.

This quiet resistance is important because it is not dramatic. It does not manifest as confrontation or loud refusal. Instead, it appears in the form of a gradual cultivation of skill. She learned slowly, almost secretly, as if acquiring a forbidden spell. Her desire for mobility was not framed as rebellion, but as a simple need to reach her workplace and to care for herself. That need, however ordinary, carries an ethical force. It reveals how some older women rework the terms of their dependency not by rejecting care, but by redistributing those terms in ways that allow them to move through the world with dignity.

Jyoti's car becomes a tool through which she negotiates her moral place within the household. Her driving challenges the assumption that older women should be driven rather than drive. It challenges the idea that they should wait patiently for the convenience of others. In this sense, her story shows how technological competence can become a form of moral agency. It allows her to loosen the ties of dependency without severing them entirely. She remains committed to the relationships that structure her life, yet she gently shifts their terms.

When compared to Anima's panic at the headlights or Maya's relentless care-work with the blender, Jyoti's driving illuminates a different dimension of ageing and technology. It shows that older women do not always absorb symbolic violence. They sometimes find ways to stretch against it. Her actions are modest, but they gesture toward possibilities that the other stories close down. The small acts of using a clutch, turning a key, or reversing a car become forms of embodied resistance. They disrupt the hidden moral rule that ageing women should inhabit the world through the competencies of others.

Portable battery pack

It was clearly different for Jyoti apropos the car, and hence, with the smartphone. However, fear does not necessarily override curiosity with the smartphone for all the women I spoke to. The ones who are adept at using it — almost all of them — said that the phone size made it less intimidating, as compared to a computer. The widespread visibility of the smartphone in the hands of every age group also seemed to deliver a message to them subconsciously: if everyone can use it, then perhaps, so can I.

I had told Jyoti that I would be following her around the house, with my notebook and phone, recording our conversations and taking photos. I had my phone connected to my portable battery back, as I walked behind her like a puppy. At one point, she asked me to ascertain if the rectangular thing with my phone and its white cord was indeed a battery pack. She also owned one, but had left it behind at an airport. "*I keep needing it, now that I have started my business*," she said, alluding to the pyramid scheme business that she had enrolled herself in. Her evenings were spent — including the ones when I stayed with her — attending webinars by the "trainers" who were teaching recent recruits like herself on how to advance the business. The webinars were hour-long rambles by a young man on how he had managed to secure a high number of sales with his strategies. Jyoti had already invested close to two lakh rupees[16] into the business, which had fetched her a fancy set of Chinaware and some appliances. Being on the phone was a requisite for her to conduct her business effectively, and that meant ensuring that the phone does not run out of battery. A portable battery pack, she felt, was essential.

The next day, she drove into town and we went into an electronics shop. There were two men at the counter, possibly in their forties. One had the demeanour of the main boss; the other was the subordinate. I had previously looked up the specifications needed for a robust portable battery pack, and hence I said that we need to buy one with a capacity of 10,000 mAh: Jyoti had wanted one, just like mine. The man asked who was it for, and she replied that it was for herself.

"*Oh, but* Aaita*, you don't need such a heavy one! Just mAh 2,000 should suffice for you! mAh 10,000 is for people doing* business," the bossman said, addressing her as grandmother, given the age that reflected in her skin and gait.

Jyoti softly replied that she too runs her own business. The bossman shrugged, and asked his assistant to show us one that is mAh 10,000. We were shown two, both at different prices, and as I asked why are they priced differently, the boss man said once again, "*I'm telling you* Aaita*, you don't need the expensive one*."

[16] Two lakh rupees is the Indian way of saying 200,000 rupees (one lakh = 100,000). According to a website that calculates purchasing power parity [https://ppp-calculator.com/], a salary of EUR 8,000 in Ireland or USD 10,000 in the US, would deliver a similar quality of life as one would live with a salary of INR 200,000 in India. Of course, this discounts the wide difference in the cost of living across Indian or American cities. Nevertheless, it helps us understand how big or small an amount can be, especially in the context of investments.

"*What do you think? Which is your one*?" she asked me. I told her the capacity of my portable battery pack. She ended up buying the expensive one. When she asked for a printed receipt — which would also function as a warranty card — the bosman said that their printer was not working and that it would be delivered to her on WhatsApp. A moment later, she received it as a PDF document, but she preferred the paper version, but did not get it. "*That message will be enough if you have a problem*," said the bossman.

When we left the shop, I was fuming with the way he had spoken to her, but did not want to say anything. It was not my place to say anything; I wasn't sure if my anger was justified because I was always told by my mother that I had a tendency to overthink unnecessarily. As we turned towards a street full of garment shops, she slowly said, "*That man's attitude... And his way of talking... Wasn't that wrong? Why will he not let me buy what I want*?"

I chimed with her to say that, yes, it was disappointing that he assumed that an older woman did not need a portable battery pack with higher capacity.

"*I used to go to their shop before but now, after today, I don't feel like going there again*," she said. Soon, we were in a wholesale store for colourful mekhela saador which helped us both erase that bitter taste of the encounter with the bossman.

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That evening, that electronics may have lost a long-time customer. That encounter revealed to me once again how there is an assumption by men about what machines women can and cannot handle. When he said that the ones with a higher capacity were for people doing business, he did not specifically say "businessmen", but his words implied as much. It is yet another instance of men dismissing women's concerns and needs, and gatekeeping their access to technology and machines.

It brought back to my mind ideas of why there are fewer women in STEM in India (Gupta, 2022; Amirtham & Kumar, 2021); the instinctive perception of a scientist is of a man. And perhaps, because of this endless censuring by men, women like Anima have learnt to self-censure themselves, by being so certain of what she won't be able to learn or do, and thus reinforcing sexist and ageist presumptions.

Gender shapes how technology is defined, influencing which skills are valued as significant (Bowker & Star, 1999). An example of this is the electric iron: it becomes technology when a man repairs it, but is not viewed as technology when a woman uses it to iron clothes (Bray, 2007, p. 42). By insisting that she will buy the more expensive portable battery pack, Jyoti was flipping the script of what was assumed and expected: of older women, of older women in a small town, of older women in a small town who desired to invest in technology. She was exercising a sense of resistant agency, towards defending her needs and expressing her will (Ring et al., 2025, p. 3). She was doing so by seeking out my assistance, towards strengthening that sense of agency (ibid, p. 5). She was pushing

back against the ways in which patriarchy practised within private spaces spill into public realms (Walby, 1990).

Learning to drive in secret, acquiring her own vehicle, and navigating digital commerce: Jyoti resists the infrastructures that limit women's technological engagement. Her story is not a tale of empowerment in the liberal sense, but a demonstration of situated agency (Sullivan, 2016): a strategic reordering of domestic and public relations through skill, persistence, quiet defiance, and within designated contexts and intricate webs of beliefs and traditions, all of which were visible in her sense of curiosity.

But a desire to learn something new is not enough, in the face of gatekeeping of access to new tools. Gerontologists have discussed the myths that digitalisation is perceived to be most challenging for older adults (Russel, 2011; Quaan-Haase et al., 2018). In the previous decade, the Internet has been viewed as the youth-absorbent, while older people have been viewed as dragging their heels to gloam onto the Internet, sometimes even unwillingly (Bennett et al., 2008; Selwyn et al., 2003). But recent works have viewed this complex braid of ageing and technology as an iterative process, wherein "technologies are shaping and being shaped by socio-material constructs of age" (Kania-Lundholm & Manchester, 2022, p. 16; see also Peine & Neven, 2021; Lassen, 2017; Wanka & Gallistl, 2018).

Even so, the bossman's insistence that she "*doesn't need*" a high-capacity battery pack is not mere advice: it is an act of bureaucratic paternalism. His failure to acknowledge her as a legitimate user of a palm-sized sophisticated technology reflects a broader pattern in which older women are denied not only access, but intention. Her determination to buy the high-capacity battery pack, even without the paper receipt as she had wanted, becomes a subtle gesture of defiance: an assertion of self-knowledge and legitimacy in the face of patronising concern.

On a macro level, and from the perspective of feminist technology studies, Jyoti's car, and her desire — even need — for a robust portable battery pack goaded "renegotiations of what is to be considered masculine and feminine" (Lie, 2003, p. 21). Technology and gendered relations were implicated within each other (Lohan, 2000, Faulkner, 2001; Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003). Jyoti too lives within a world shaped by gendered expectations about who may use machines, and who should not. She too has been taught that certain technologies belong to men, and that a woman's engagement with them is inappropriate or unnecessary. Her soft insistence on asking for a more powerful portable battery back, despite the disapproval of the shopkeeper, reveals a different moral orientation to ageing, dependency and competence.

In demanding what she wants, she is making room for herself. Her insistence illustrates how ageing women can manipulate the very technologies that once symbolised their exclusion. In her hands, the portable battery pack — like the car — becomes not an emblem of dependence but a quiet assertion of capability.

Seen through this analytical lens, Jyoti's story stands beside those of Anima and Maya as part of the same moral landscape. Yet it widens the horizon slightly. It reveals that ageing and technology do not always reproduce gendered subordination in identical ways. Sometimes technology becomes the medium through which women alter their relationships to vulnerability. Sometimes it becomes a lever through which they adjust the balance of care within the home. Jyoti's story shows that autonomy is not a fixed position but a movement that can emerge gradually within the confines of long-held norms.

This is why her account matters so deeply. It reminds us that the moral life of ageing is not only shaped by resignation. It is also shaped by small acts of reconfiguration. These acts may not transform the structural conditions that shape women's lives, but they shift the felt experience of those conditions. They show how older women can inhabit machines with both caution and courage. Jyoti's car — like the washing machine and the blender — sits within a field of gendered power. Yet in her story it also becomes a site of possibility, where competence produces dignity and where moving through the world becomes a way of quietly remaking one's place within it.

Blankets of care

Gargi moved to the fourth floor flat a decade ago. She was previously living in the house that her husband had built, in another part of Jorhat town; her adult son and his family also lived with them there. Gargi told me that she got married when had just entered the year for her matriculation exam. It was April 1960, of that she was certain: "*April means Bohaag*[17]*, hence all the weddings take place that month*," she added. I replied that my parents' wedding also took place in April.

She confidently tells me that she is eighty years old. I calculate the years: assuming that a person might appear for their matriculation exam[18] at the age of 14 or 15. "*So you were born in 1945*?"

"*Yes, that seems right*."

In the corner of her drawing room was a table that had a rectangular white mat of plastic matting, with red and black cross-stitch embroidery. "*My mother had done this, and towards the end of her time, she did not know who to give it to! She gave it to me. Maa was very skilled in all the crafts*," she said, when she saw me touching it. My jaw dropped: I was touching her heirloom.

I sat on the sofa, noticing the thick wooden arm rests. Even before I could ask, she said, "*That set came with me*," implying that the sofa set was made in 1960 — sixty-five-years ago — and was given as part of her wedding dowry.

The living room extended to a dining area, where there were two refrigerators. She told me to open the second one — the grey one, which looked much older — to remove a tin of biscuits, to have with tea. I was surprised that she would store biscuits in the refrigerator. I opened the door to see that there was no light inside; not even the quiet hum of a running machine. There was no way to repair it since it was very old. When they wanted to sell it, the scrap vendor offered only three hundred rupees (three euros). "*So now it is an extra cupboard, and I store my biscuits and pickles there*," she said. I unabashedly ask for any pickles she might have made: there are jars full of berry pickles, mango pickles, lime pickles, Assamese olive pickles, all of which she had made and stored in old jars.

Like many of the women I met, Gargi, too, repurposed old objects. Just because they were no longer in their optimum health, the machines now had a new life, with a different purpose. It continued to be functional; the ageing body of the refrigerator rendered with renewed dignity, and redetermined worth.

Gargi walked with a little limp around her house, after she pulled a muscle on her lower back. The pain had exacerbated the arthritis in the joints of her legs; in one of them more than the other. In the mornings, it took her a while to land her feet on the ground; she would amble up to the kitchen to heat up some water, pour it into a hot water bag, and place it by her leg. She ambled back slowly to her bamboo chair, with the heating pad thawing her stiff joints. "*After that, I am ready for the day*."

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[17] According to the Hindu solar calendar, Bohaag is the first month of the year.
[18] Matriculation exam refers to the exam at the end of the tenth grade: the Irish equivalent is the junior certificate exam; the US equivalent is the exam at the end of the sophomore year.

I wanted to help her. I told her about the electric blanket that I use in Dublin during winters, to warm my cold bed. Maybe she could use that? I could easily order it online. She was not convinced. Or what if she had an electric kettle, by her bedside, that she could turn on as soon as she woke up, and pour the hot water from it into the hot water bag: thus avoiding the painful slow walk into the kitchen? There is no plug point near my bed, she told me.

Winter swept through the northern hemisphere, and my bed in Dublin began to feel damp every night. I was bundled under a duvet before the TV, wine by my side, my laptop on my lap. I received a call on my phone: it was my mother. I checked the twin clocks on my phone: it was 9pm in Dublin, 2:30am in India. My eyes opened wide, I received her call with anticipatory worry.

"*I cannot sleep. My lower back hurts. It began suddenly after the guests left last week... What are you doing? Did you eat your dinner?*"

I was relieved that she was *only* in pain, and nothing more. She was alone in her quiet night of pain. I was not beside her, to apply a balm, or to simply walk to the kitchen, to get some hot water for her hot water bag.

Next morning, I ordered an electric blanket: the ads on Amazon for the many varieties of such blankets had images of women, holding them to their lower legs. One advertisement mentioned it as a relief for women with menstrual cramps. A day later, the package reached my mother, and over the phone, she sighed. "*What was the need for this? I am scared of these electrical things*." Two days later, she sent me a message:

> "Thank you for this electrical thing. I am feeling comfortable now. But still scared to sleep with it on bed [*sic*]."

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The electric blanket was no longer merely a mesh of copper wires covered in fleece to survive damp winters. It became an arbiter of care, revealing the infrastructures of dependency that shape ageing and the entanglements of care. It was no longer an inert object; it replaced the labour involved in creating a rubbery pouch into a hot water bag of comfort. The electric blanket thus became the arbiter of moral and material duties and responsibilities, which are inscripted into their design (Akrich, 1992; Latour, 1992).

The electric blanket does more than provide warmth and in facilitating daily life. The electric innovation eases pain when support and care are not in close proximity. It is a new addition to the repository of artefacts that are simply given, unasked. The embroidered table mat is to protect the table for cup ring stains; the cupboard was given as a way to hold together the items for a future envisioned with children. The old refrigerator that once preserved nutrition is now cared for, even

through its limited capacity. It stands not simply as a memory of what it once used to be, but as one that is cared for, by putting it to use.

My desire to feel useful — even through a distance — is manifested with the suggestion of an electric blanket. The blanket hence stands in for the warmth that distance makes impossible. It is an artefact that reorganises the moral economy of care. While analysing three Indian short stories where older people seek sources of validation in cherished objects, Ira Raja (2023) has argued that objects such a bed or a blanket "appear to exceed their limited understanding as passive recipients of externally imposed meaning" (p. 3). Artefacts like the electric blanket shift responsibility between bodies, between generations, and between places. They reveal the emotional labour embedded in acts of giving, receiving, or refusing technological help.

The online purchase of an electric blanket through international bank transfers demonstrates how care is redistributed when children live far from ageing parents and how machines become surrogates for physical presence. While phone calls and text messages become "constitutive of the relationship" in transnational families, (Wajcman, 2016, p. 149; Ahlin, 2023), the act of making a purchase becomes an attempt at caring merely beyond words, and with actions that matter.

In each of these moments, ageing intensifies the weight of the expectations of care. The older a woman becomes, the more she is understood as someone who must rely on others rather than on her own latent capacities. Ageing does not create these constraints. It thickens them. It makes the boundaries feel more natural, more inevitable, more anchored in the logic that older women should withdraw from certain forms of agency and hand them over to *others more capable* in their orbit. The machines in their lives become reminders of these shifting and shrinking zones of possibility.

This is why it becomes important to see machines — even an electric blanket — not only as tools within domestic life, but as moral artefacts. It becomes a midnight conversation topic: even amidst the pain, "*Have you eaten*?" is a form of transnational care. The impulse to receive a call — knowing the weight of timezones — is a form of care. The conversation, however mundane, becomes the membrane through which care is enacted transnationally (Ahlin, 2023). Just as the machines in the home become mundane artefacts of daily life, phone conversations and attempts to provide from a distance carry the moral weight of duty. But this was not merely a structuring of care (McKearney & Amrith, 2021) or a cultural expectation of the daughter to care for her mother from afar (Deb, 2024, p. 214). If we are to view the suggestion of an electric blanket or an electric kettle, as forms of care and not as patronising, then the online purchase made despite protests becomes an embodiment of providing care, in the face of what older women understand as their needs.

Machines are thus woven into the everyday ethics that shape how women age, how they relate to others, how they understand their own competence, how they vocalise their own needs, and how they imagine their place in the world. Machines become sites where the unequal distribution of knowledge and confidence becomes visible. They are reminders of the asymmetries that endure long after social conditions appear to have changed.

Connecting the wires

I spent only one night with Anima, so when her son told me that he had insisted that his mother learn to use Ola and Uber, I was not sure if had actually insisted, or had only mentioned it to her a few times in the past. So was her fear overriding his insistence that she learn to use those tools?

Similarly, my mother never attempted to empty the lint filter in the washing machine (it is a top-loading washing machine and hence it is easily accessible). "*What if I do something wrong and break it*?" That was her perennial worry. No amount of showing her how to do it helped ease her nervousness. Even today, it is Kabir — the young man from Bihar, who has made Bombay his home over the past two decades, sells coconuts for a living, cares for my mothers needs, and whose children's education my mother funds — who cleans the lint filter, just before her weekly wash run.

The fear of machines also stems from the fear of it breaking down, and then not knowing how to fix it, or having to spend a lot of money towards fixing it. For Maya, the broken blender meant making an extra trip to the market, to find a streetside hardware shop where the man — it's always a man — would be able to repair it confidently, and not simply play around. Machines can thus ease labour, but when they break down, it adds to the list of chores of women.

In the lives of these women, the systemic framing of older adults as technophobic (Ryan et al., 1995; Loos et al., 2022), slow, or incapable of adaptation has been internalised, rehearsed, even moralised. The women in these vignettes — and as they interact with washing machines, food blenders, cars — reveal an internalised perception of fear towards machines, which in turn reiterate the framing of some older adults as being technophobic.

In bearing witness to the ways in which Maya wouldn't leave her husband, or Anima behaving like a deer caught in headlights, or Jyoti accelerating her life's needs, I was no longer a neutral observer. I found myself as an implicated actor within a web of ethical demands and ambivalent solidarities. Their homes, and the encounters with machines, big or small, became sites of responsibility with discomfort, sites of intervention with care.

There is no single pathway linking age, gender, and technological use: there are none in this ethnography, and the chapters henceforth where the smartphone — and the contours of its use — is the tool under microscopic view. Some women embrace new tools; others abstain. Some live alone; others live online. What matters is not whether technology is used or avoided, but the conditions of possibility that determine one's capacity and desire to participate or refuse. Agency is not absolute, but relational; it is speculative, constrained, calculated, and carefully negotiated.

Whether it is the washing machine that was withheld for decades, the blender that eased the labour of feeding a violent husband, the car whose headlights produced panic, the battery pack that became a site of contested competence, the electric blanket that travelled across continents: each object exposes the moral architecture within which these women live and age. These machines

become moral devices that bring into view the social conditions through which ageing women negotiate dignity, dependence and responsibility.

The women's responses to these machines are not technical in nature. They are the product of long histories of gendered socialisation in which women learn to doubt their own capacity, to rely on men for instruction, to accept repair as a masculine domain, and to internalise the idea that their labour is expected but their competence is uncertain. Ageing intensifies these expectations. The older a woman becomes, the more she is positioned as fragile, slow, reluctant or incapable. What appears as hesitation is in fact the accumulated effect of symbolic violence, the kind that operates quietly by shaping what women believe they can and cannot do, and by making these beliefs feel natural rather than imposed.

Women who refuse to make machines part of their lives are following the script of internalised exclusion, even condescension. Machines — washing machines, blenders, cars, smartphones — operate not just in the domestic realm, but in the moral field of the everyday. They distribute dignity, determine worth, and expose divisions within gendered ageing. For the women in these stories, machines both relieve and aggravate their burdens. The machines are not apolitical tools, but are threads for a larger intricate loom, where the tensions and knots are not only functional, but profoundly political. Old machines find new purpose with time; newer ones struggle to be homed.

At the same time, machines redistribute care in ways that reshape intimate and intergenerational relations. A washing machine relieves a mother of physical strain but also introduces new obligations of maintenance and anxiety. A blender lightens the load of a caregiver who has already endured decades of emotional and physical violence.

Yet within these constraints, agency persists. Some women take risks, learn in secret and claim forms of competence that challenge the assumptions that surround them. Others repurpose old machines, manage their fears or enact quieter forms of resistance. Their actions are not gestures of empowerment in the conventional sense. They are situated responses to the moral demands of their environments, shaped by loss, obligation and the desire for a life lived with a measure of control.

The question then is not whether women should be encouraged to use technology, or whether technology can be assumed to liberate them. The deeper question is how the moral worlds surrounding technology can be reconfigured so that women do not have to fight internal battles simply to touch a screen or turn a switch. Liberation does not emerge from the machine alone. It emerges from the ability to inhabit that machine without fear, without shame and without the moral weight of inherited dependence. These machines show how class, gender and history converge in the everyday negotiations that determine who is allowed to handle modernity and who is shielded from it.

The stories reveal that ageing women do not simply encounter machines. They negotiate them, resist them, fear them, repurpose them, and occasionally master them. Machines become extensions of the moral field in which they live. They illuminate the fragility and the resilience that

shape the everyday. They show how domestic life is filled with both vulnerability and ingenuity. And they remind us that the struggle for technological confidence is also a struggle for dignity.

Learning New Tools

New textbooks

The year was 1960. Gargi was fourteen — or fifteen? — when she got married to a man who had a job with Assam's agriculture department. He was twice her age. After they got married, he was posted to a farm in Shillong[19]. Next, he was transferred to Khanapara — in the outskirts of the big city of Guwahati — where a new agricultural training centre had opened. Their daughter was born in 1963; the son in 1965.

"*To think of it, we were just little girls*," the 80-year-old said, as our curried fingers dried after our lunch: we were too engrossed in conversation to get up and wash our hands, and tidy the dishes from the dining table.

Months after their son was born, Gargi's husband got a chance to do his MSc on deputation from his government job. That meant that he would be leading a college life at the agriculture university in Jorhat: studying, and living in a dorm. So what was Gargi supposed to do, with two babies?

"*I went to my mother's place in Nagaon*." There — almost two hundred kilometres away — she finally appeared for and passed her matriculation exam, then completed her higher secondary, and even enrolled in the first year of college. "*When I had exams, I held him in my arms, and would study aloud in a sing-song tune, to put him to sleep,*" she said, almost touching the inside of her elbow, to indicate how little her son was. "*I am surprised now as I think back, how did I do it*," Gargi reminisced, cackling, as she was wont of, when speaking of her achievements or her silliness. "*My mother was with me and she would look after my children; my daughter was enrolled in kindergarten nearby. But we also had* baahiraa maanuh *[outside people / helpers] at home, so there was no worry. My father was alive too; he was the principal at a school*," Gargi explained, about how she got the xubidhaa [*opportunity / chance / convenience*] to continue her studies.

A few years later, her husband was posted in the Garo Hills region (of now Meghalaya). A professor of English and Assamese literature who hailed from Nagaon was also posted there at that time. He had found Gargi's contact from her father. "*The* professor *advised me to study; he said I could go to college some days of the week, and that he would help me with anything. Look at my luck to pursue my education! I completed my* BA degree in Education*, but in Assamese* medium," she narrated. Immediately thereafter, her husband was transferred to Khanapara again. A kindergarten near their home was keen to have Gargi join them as a teacher, but her husband didn't let her take up the job. "*He told me, 'Just like the way you did* kosto *[laboured] to get your education, now work*

[19] Shillong is the capital of the state of Meghalaya, south of Assam. It wasn't until 1972 that Meghalaya was carved out of the southern part of Assam into a new state.

hard to educate the children. We don't have any obhaab *[scarcity].' And he was right. But I did not want to work for the money. They had invited me to work there; I hadn't even thought about getting a job. But there was another thing: if there was another* transfer *for his job, I would have to leave that job*," she explained, adding that her husband "*never put any* baadhaa" [*hurdles / obstruction*] for her to do anything she had wanted.

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In relative terms, Renuka was much older when she got married. She was twenty-one and was still enrolled in a degree course. She completed her degree after she got married; her husband was a lawyer. I was visiting her one afternoon with Rupali — Renuka's (deceased) older sister's daughter-in-law — whom I had known since a few years. Rupali was making a courtesy visit to Renuka, and I had joined her.

Renuka sat in a wicker chair in one of the rooms in the L-shaped "Assam-type" house[20]: thick wooden beams above her head, the white walls a grid of black wooden slates. A sturdy bed with carvings on the four posts takes up most of the space; Renuka sits on this chair by the room's door. "*I don't sleep in the afternoon; I just sit here in his room, and shut my eyes for a bit*," she said. We knew whose room it is, even if his name was not mentioned: her younger son, who died a few years after her husband passed away. Renuka carries the grief of losing one of her three children by sitting in his room all day.

Her husband was already a lawyer when Renuka was married to him; the piles of hardbound books in black cover that lined his office stoked her curiosity. His office was an outer room that was part of the house. She pursued that curiosity, at the Government Law College, not too far from this Guwahati house where she entered as a young bride, and now lives all alone. A young man, employed by her son who is a judge in another city of Assam, lives with Renuka as her caregiver, her errands boy, her cook, her security guard, and her occasional conversation companion.

"*I went to classes just for one year. I would cook for everyone, feed everyone, and then go to class. My mother-in-law was around too...*" Renuka paused, indicating that having a mother-in-law at home meant being in top form, with tending to her duties and responsibilities as a daughter-in-law. She stopped going to classes and studied the remaining two years at home; she appeared for the exams and received a law degree. I remarked that it was quite an achievement to have pursued a professional degree after marriage and after having children. She nodded, her eyes vacant, and the weight of her

[20] "Assam-type" house is eponymous to Assam and the rest of northeast India, but indicates a style of architecture that combined indigenous knowledge of working with wood, reed, mud and clay, and the expertise of British engineers, from the late 1800s onwards. Built on elevated floors, the roof trusses and vertical posts use wooden logs; the houses have sloping roofs, wide verandahs, and resembles Tudor architecture.

achievement only being empty words from my mouth. She was happy to see me, and enquired about my mother.

I wanted to know more; the vacant eyes once may have seen the ins and outs of courtrooms, and reams of dense and obtuse legal documents before they were digitised and hidden in crypts. Did she practice law?

"*I did one case. It was a murder case. I finished it*."

"*What do you mean? Did you send him to* jail*, or rescued him from jail*?"

"*No, I rescued him*!" she replied with a laugh, the first time that the colour in her rose-in-milk skin comes alive.

Rupali and Renuka caught up on family news and updates. When Renuka shared her memories of how she pursued a degree, Rupali — who is in her fifties — shared something I had never heard before:

> "*After my Masters degree in Delhi, I returned to Guwahati and I, too, had enrolled in the* law college*. I was already a Science teacher at a new* school *near our home, but I still wanted to study* law*. I would teach in the mornings, and attend the law classes in the evening. I even sat for the exams in the first* semester*! But then, my marriage got arranged, and it was all over. I really wanted to study* law*; I would've been a good lawyer...*"

I have known Rupali for a few years now. Whenever we would meet, we would spend long hours doing supoti [*banter, but with a significant dose of humorous criticism*]; something that is often visible in intergenerational relationships when it is akin to friendship. During our supoti, she often won the debates. When she remarked before Renuka that she would have been a good lawyer, I knew what she was talking about. She would have been a convincing lawyer. But I also know the man she got married to: a man who prefers a simple life, often ordering her to make him some tea, and is the first to disappear in moments of crisis. Over the years, even though she would tell him to make his own tea, what I saw that day was a possibly-brilliant lawyer who was tamed by marriage.

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For both Gargi and Renuka, marriage did not prevent them from pursuing their curiosity. This was based on what their respective husbands allowed them. Freedom, then, was not a right they were born with, but something that was given to them by the benevolence of the men they married, within a system that expects fulfilling duties of the women as wives. Education was not viewed as a stepping stone towards something to be done with that degree; the husbands viewed it as almost nonchalant about their respective wives' education. It was allowed, as long as it did not come in the way of them performing their duties and obligations of a wife, daughter-in-law, and a mother.

But there was a limit to how far they could seek freedom to pursue their curiosity: obligations of the family derail women's ability to fulfil their potential, as it was in the case of Rupali. Marriage derailing women's education or pursuit of careers has long been documented across the world, including in India (Nagdeve & Pradhan, 2023; Smith, 2012; Ghislandi et al., 2020; Chandel et al., 2024). However, women like Gargi and Renuka continued to pursue a higher education even after new strings of attachment had tied them down as individuals. What matters is not how far they could pursue education after marriage, but the conditions of possibility that shaped their capacity to engage in educational endeavours, or derail them. In choosing education after marriage and childbirth, they were active in exercising their agency (Kabeer, 2005), but what they could (or could not) pursue thereafter was limited.

Gargi's and Renuka's sense of agency might seem to be reduced because of their position as married women, but that sense of agency was relational: it was not merely an end of autonomy, but of choices made while navigating complex familial and obligatory terrains within a moral landscape. Within the arena of patriarchal norms determining the paths of women's lives, both women were able to pursue an education after they got married, and after they had birthed children. Even though Renuka does not say it, it would not be such a wild guess that her family too would have hired help at home, especially for the tasks of cleaning the house and maintaining the outdoors. Similarly, the relative economic privilege that afforded hired help enabled Gargi's mother to care for her children, such that the hired help would tend to the other issues of the house. It is in this context of relative privilege that both women were able to take the pause from household chores and responsibilities to pursue an education.

The agency for both women to pick up the books once again was thus a "co-agency" (Glăveanu, 2023, p. 5): what was possible depended on their relationship with their specific environments. For Gargi, that meant staying in her mother's home and having the support of hired help; for Renuka, that meant the unspoken support of her husband's home office whose books drove her to pursue her degree, and possibly her mother-in-law and assumed hired help. This was embedded within the spatial accommodation of her parents' home and their economic privilege (Datta, 2020).

That co-agency was missing for Rupali in a pre-emptive manner, in the unspoken knowledge that it may not be possible for a newly-married bride to understand what negotiations would have to be parsed through and pursued within the structures of marriage and a new marital home that she would be stepping into, towards the pursuit of her own desires.

That co-agency was also short-lived for Renuka, when she had to discontinue going to classes. It can be assumed that the weight of her roles — as a wife, daughter-in-law and mother — bore heavy on her everyday life. For her to be able to pursue her higher education until the end goal of obtaining a law degree meant surrendering the classroom hours.

Nevertheless, having that approval to study again meant marking that agentic choice with deliberation and endurance. Their endurance of the strain in their pursuit for education and learning is

striking. Even through the bounds of their marital and motherly responsibilities, they stretched their bodies to accommodate their desires. While Gargi cradled her toddler and lulled him to sleep, Renuka cooked and fed her children before rushing to classes. Here again, their youthful bodies stretched to be the bridge between mothering their children and nurturing their own intellectual selves. In exploring for themselves what might be possible, their choices and opportunities were rendered intelligible by placing them within wider stories of who they have been, who they are, and who they could be becoming (Glăveanu, 2023, p. 5).

Education was a symbol of stretching what could be possible. But the practicality of what happened next says much more about the weight of that symbol. All three women earned higher education degrees, but that does not necessarily imply a triumph of agency over pre-determined obligations. Performing the duties of a mother, wife, daughter-in-law: the women expressly stated that these duties were their priority. For Gargi and Renuka, education became a symbol of how generous a husband is, thus articulating different "regimes of power and discipline" (Mahmood, 2001, p. 217) than what meets the eye at first glance.

Making an attempt to learn something new, and even pursuing their curiosity, marked a sense of competency in the face of obligations and these regimes of power and discipline. It exposed the vulnerability of their position in the family as wives, daughters-in-law, mothers. When Gargi's husband instructs her to drop the idea of having a job and to instead focus on their children's education, it exposes what kinds of knowledge they are permitted to claim as their own. Their pursuit of learning — with a toddler in their arms, cooking for all before heading to college, evening classes — hammers in their endurance. In choosing the freedoms afforded to them by benevolent husbands, and in choosing to not pursue whatever could have come next, these women, as they get older, do not wince about opportunities lost, but accept the path that they walked on as their story. It even becomes something that can be joked about, by drawing in personality traits: Rupali could have been a good lawyer because she knows how to win every debate with younger women in her inner circle. There is a sense of resignation about fate for which there is no mourning. In laughing together about what could have been, there is no teleological destination here, other than a sense of acceptance of what is.

But this is far from a story of pessimism: "Pessimism is for those who are privileged and can afford to live with despair" (Arora, 2024, p. 12). In focusing on the details of their stories of what was possible and what they accomplished, how they can cackle and laugh and still remember the joy of winning a case in the court, these women are inadvertently taking a political stance against being reduced to caricatures of loss based on what was not permitted.

Am I meant to learn this?

There are things my mother does on the smartphone that she would never attempt on the laptop. Even so, the learning curve was rocky for her. The smartphone came into her life right after my father passed away in 2016 (Borpujari, 2024a), my brother and I became her teachers for different tools. We showed her how the smartphone was an extension of the previous simpler mobile phone that she had used for making and receiving calls, and to send and receive text messages. One app at a time, she learnt how to send messages on WhatsApp, and use other apps.

One time, when we were traveling to Jorhat, the evening tea time became a mini school. Sitting in the verandah which has borne witness to two generations of toddlers crawling and three generations of elders blessing the younger ones during ceremonies, the school took place on the dining table, with saah [*tea*] and samosa as accompaniments. My mother was showing her sister-in-law how to type in Assamese on Facebook. "*Look here, it is very easy*," I heard my mother say repeatedly. I peeped from behind, watching how they each had their respective phones in their hands, engrossed in the screen, while the photos of their respective husbands — brothers, both long dead — looked at them from the lemon green wall.

My mother told her to long-press one of the consonants, for a pop-up of different variants of that consonant, ready to be conjugated with another consonant, for a third specific conjugate consonant. "*Look here, it is very easy*," my mother said.

I chuckled when I kept hearing my mother say this. I reminded her how it took me hours to teach her some of the basics of the smartphone, let alone writing — texting — Assamese conjugate consonants. One of the first things that I had insisted on, when she got the smartphone, was to have a notebook, to write down the instructions I was giving. I was a decade younger, and would lose my temper easily, when she would forget some functions, which seemed basic in my eyes. She had found a half-used notebook that belonged to one of us, and had used it to write down her notes, in her own words, to remember some of the key functions of the smartphone and various how-tos. Each time she struggled with something and reached for me, I would tell her to consult her own notes. She was not happy with that: it meant going to her drawer, pulling out the notebook, and trying to find that specific item that she was looking for. Like looking for the meaning of a word in a dictionary that was not designed in an alphabetic order. It definitely caused a lot of friction, but that's also because she wanted to learn new tools. Each time she saw me doing something new on the phone, she wanted to learn: "*Teach me too*." I would feign busyness to avoid the arduous task. But her pursuit of learning — even mastering — the smartphone, won.

For the purpose of my research, I asked my mother how did she learn the different tools and functions. She had a vague response: "*I learnt it all from you, and sometimes I asked others when you were not around*." I could not fight that response; I could not blame her for not remembering details. I did not remember them either. It was akin to trying to remember if a child first learnt to find a hidden

ball or first climb the stairs on their own. Perhaps that's why parents write down these developmental milestones for the first couple of years of the child's life? My mother's smartphone-learning milestones did not seem significant enough to be recorded in a similar colourful scrapbook. What remains, instead, is that notebook, that became her living map, that helped her navigate the smartphone and its tools. Not remembering the specific chronology of her progress with the smartphone is testament to the fact how smartphones have become embedded in our everyday digitised lives.

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My mother's notebook was thus more than a learning tool. It is a quiet claim to independence, even as it triggered tension with me, when I insisted she use it as a way to avoid repeated requests for help. These moments were emotionally dense, containing within them the ethical weight of caregiving, and the delicate negotiation between enabling competence and preserving emotional closeness (Ahlin, 2023). The smartphone — with the notebook — becomes a medium through which curiosity, love, frustration, and the longing for dignity play out in small but meaningful ways.

The notebook becomes more than a pragmatic aid. It is a materialisation of a moral economy of learning, where competence is distributed and negotiated rather than simply acquired. My mother is not just a "late adopter" who gradually acquires skills (McCulloch, 2019). She is someone who insists on being able to act in a world that was not configured with her in mind. The friction between us, my impatience, and her insistence on "*teach me too*" show that learning here is also an arena where care, obligation and irritation are continually recalibrated. The notebook registers not only what she needs to remember but also what she refuses to relinquish: a claim to independence that is articulated through the smallest of technical gestures.

The notebook is also her personal artefact of the digital becoming integrated into our everyday lives: "a social space, and a pathway to explore our identities, relationships, and cultures" (Arora, 2024, p. 21). By writing her own notes on how to use the smartphone and its various apps, she was making her markings on a map that is never given to people like her, when systems and processes are designed. Digital tools are structured and designed in such a manner that they reproduce the unequal distribution of benefits and burdens that is visible all around us (Costanza-Chock, 2020, p. 19). There is no well-defined manual on how to use WhatsApp; a person would have to know where to search online to find such a manual or tutorial or self-help video. From a design justice perspective, the affordances of the smartphone and the apps — and their various promises — might be equally available, but are not perceptible (Costanza-Chock, 2020, p. 38). By writing in a notebook, my mother was making an attempt to fill the gap for that what was not designed for her.

In insisting that her sister-in-law also learn something that she had herself found to have been beneficial for her, my mother was resisting the typologies of older people's uptake of technology. She

was busting the myths about older people's relationship to technology (Loos et al., 2022). In doing so, she was joining a long line of contemporaries who had challenged the assumptions that they are incapable of learning new technologies, and using them (Durick et al., 2013).

Helping her sister-in-law learn a new digital tool was another gesture of care; something that was already practised over several decades of both women marrying into the same family. The braid of technologies and care practices is translated through the situatedness, the specificities, and the detail of the relation between both women (Code, 2015). No longer young brides, but as widows, their care for each other was mediated through the smartphone; it was almost a moral act of ensuring that her contemporary is not left behind, harking back to the time when her sister-in-law helped her in her initiation into the new marital home.

From this angle, their interaction is not only an instance of interpersonal kindness but an example of a feminist ethics of care in practice (Tronto, 2009; Tronto & Fisher, 1990). Care here is about attending to vulnerability, refusing to naturalise abandonment; whether digital or social, as the inevitable condition of old age. This shared project of learning and teaching does not abolish the structural hierarchies that shape their lives, yet it quietly redistributes dignity and competence between them. It shows how feminist care is not only about doing for others, but also about insisting that others be recognised as capable, and about creating the conditions in which they can continue to act in the world on their own terms.

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Since the 1980s, Sangita was an active member of the Assamese diaspora in Bombay. Her husband worked in the Hindi film industry, and she maintained her own social life and was comfortable navigating the city on public transport. When her husband died suddenly, she and her adult sons found that he didn't plan his finances well; they also ran into trouble with land ownership with their extended family in Assam. She now lives in a two-bedroom apartment with both her sons in a far-away eastern suburb of Bombay; the younger one had been married since two years. They were living as comfortably as possible within their means after the financial downfall.

"*I only go upstairs to visit Mr* Saikia," she said, referring to another family from the Assamese diaspora, who had previously moved to the same apartment complex. "*These days, I am very scared; I might fall* jotey-totey [*anywhere* / *here and there*]," she repeated. My mother told her that she was thinking too much; Nandini — who had also joined us from upstairs to take a break from caring for her husband who was living with dementia — told her the same. "*Look at me: if* Saikia [her husband; referring to him by his surname] *was not in this state, I would have been roaming around everywhere*!" Nandini said, almost jumping to the edge of her seat on the sofa, as if to emphasise her own indirect immobility. She hadn't been able to step out of the house for over two years; her son,

who lives two kilometers away, facilitates grocery deliveries, and would swing by almost daily, for a cup of tea.

Sangita was in her early seventies, and she walked around the house swiftly. Both my mother and Nandini remarked that even though she had lost some weight, she was looking healthy enough. After her daughter-in-law served us tea and snacks, and after catching up over old conversations, I told Sangita that her son could simply book a taxi on Ola or Uber, and all she had to do was to sit in the car, and it would take her to the doorstep of any place.

"*But my sons won't let me go; they fear that I will fall, and even I am scared. Why invite unnecessary hassles into their lives if I were to fall*," she kept saying. We kept telling her that there is no way she could fall, as she would be transported door-to-door.

When her son returned home from an errand and met us, he echoed the same words as his mother: "*She is scared that she will fall. It's not good for her to travel like that.*" Perhaps it was not my place to convince her against what she perceived as unsafe.

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Sangita's story, replete with the affect of fear and speculative incompetence, brings into sharp focus how mobility is shaped less by bodily capability than by relational dynamics. Her fear of falling is not just about physical risk; it is about the potential burden her fall might place on her sons. This fear has been reinforced by their own reluctance to encourage her movement, creating a loop of hesitation, caution, and containment. What she needs is not just physical assistance but moral permission: an affirmation that she is still allowed to make decisions for herself, to go out into the world, to retain a sense of self-sufficiency in the face of her sons' caution, that would mean a willful act of movement (Ahmed, 2014).

With their father long gone when they were too young, Sangita's sons were typifying the idea of their ageing for their mother as "almost apocalyptic" (Cohen, 1999, p. 87). Notwithstanding that her children were sons, such an attitude is by default a paternalistic one. They had decided her fate, her ability, her mobility, her restrictions. It is a manifestation of their care for their mother, but it is not without a gnawing sense of viewing her as someone who cannot make decisions of her own, for herself. Herein lies the great paradox of what might give wings to the possibility of learning and growing, with their age and despite their age. Protectionist care prevents the possibility of mobility. This view of their mother as inherently vulnerable sits uncomfortably with the possibilities of her autonomy, based on "the materiality" of her body, "rather than her rational mind" (Chakravarti, 2024, p. 27; see also Fineman, 2021).

In witnessing how fear to move around had enveloped her body and her sense of self, I noticed my own perception of how we view ageing bodies. In her defiant refusal to learn how to call for a taxi using one of the many ride-hailing apps, Sangita was defying the culture of viewing ageing

bodies in active capacities, despite them moving away from asserting their agility (Tulle, 2008; Mukherjee, 2024). On one hand, she was asserting that her bodily need be respected; on the other hand, that need could be perceived as an embodied frailty that had taken a hold of her psyche. It is in this thin icy ground of morality that agency is negotiated. Agency thus does not reside solely in actions that bring about transformation or progress, but also in those that uphold continuity, preserve stability, or resist disruption (Mahmood, 2001, p. 212).

On the other hand, as Mrs Saikia and my mother insisted on Sangita to move around a bit — by each respectively sharing her own desire to go places, and explaining the ease of travel made possible with ride-hailing apps. Both women were extending their care towards one of their contemporaries. This was also visible in the way my mother was teaching her sister-in-law how to type in Assamese. Her repetitive "*Look here, it is very easy*" was her way of alleviating any fears of ageing that might limit one's ability to learn. My mother did not tell her sister-in-law that it had taken her a long time herself to learn the many bits and bobs of the smartphone and social media; she did not tell her about the many moments where she and I had clashed over her inability to retain information about basic functionalities. Instead, she was demonstrating the fabric of a society held together with deep emotional ties (Lamb, 1999); it was a recognition of extending care over generations of entering the same household as daughters-in-law, several decades ago.

But more than those filial ties, what links both stories is an idea of care as a moral practice among the women themselves, in insisting upon each other to learn new tools. The sister-in-law's life would not be incomplete without learning to type in Assamese. Sangita's life would not be incomplete without traveling to distant places within her own city. But the women who were insisting their contemporaries to learn new tools were embodying a sense of collaborative care by sharing their affective relationalities (Biswas, 2024, p. 96). This collaborative care is an active one; it is based on the deep personal relationship shared as contemporaries, and thereby makes it an agentic form of care which is practised without any duty, obligation, or remuneration.

Such collaborative care practices — embodied through an affective insistence on learning new tools — find their soil in the terrain of communities and friendships. This makes it an almost feminist act of solidarity, of how societies hold each other when there is nothing specific to be gained in the simple act of sharing and encouraging.

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What if Sangita's sons had an encouraging attitude towards her? One of her worries about falling was the possible burden on her sons. But had they given her the *permission* to travel, maybe she would?

Six weeks after that meeting with Sangita, my mother received a call from her one evening. Sangita had made a plan: an award-winning Assamese film was being screened in central Bombay,

and the director of the film was someone Sangita was related to. She wanted to watch the movie, and so — in consultation with her sons — it was decided that they would book a taxi for her, meet my mother, and together head to the cinema.

My mother was excited. Something had shifted in the energy field, from fear to excitement. When she arrived, Sangita kept repeating, as if in disbelief, as if trying to convince herself, "Ekebaare xubidhaa!" [*Absolutely convenient*!] They both rushed out, knowing too well that there would be traffic along the route to the cinema.

Hours later, when they were back, Sangita was glowing, while my mother looked a bit worried. "*It was so good to go and meet so many old acquaintances*!" Sangita said, adding that she was thinking of staying the night with my mother, so that the next day, on her way homeward, she and my mother could visit another Assamese friend, who was unwell for a while. "*I want to take this chance to visit her while I am already out of the house*," she said.

The next day, they visited two Assamese friends in two different locations. My mother booked her a taxi on the ride-hailing app, and then returned home herself, tired and ready to relax with the smartphone in her hand.

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Sangita did make that leap, afterall. Her sons trusted their mother's inherent resilience, in *allowing* her to travel alone. The overnight stay was an unplanned one. Sangita and her sons knew that she was in safe hands. The sense of collaborative care thus extended once more to the ageing present, based on the decades of trust that had been built. Sangita's ailments as an "apocalyptic" (Cohen, 1999, p. 87) fate were suspended for that one day, which emboldened her to stretch it to a night in a different home and a foreign bed, and then to another day outdoors. Her previously defiant refusal to travel alone on a ride-hailing taxi was slowly chipping away, when she understood the convenience afforded by the synergy of economic privilege, and the real-time geolocation afforded by the smartphone. The reality of what was available converged with imagining the possible (Glăveanu, 2023, p. 4), such that together, they transformed Sangita's course of action, even though temporally, for just that day.

The sense of frailty that had defined her idea of herself, as well as in the eyes of her sons, was challenged when she decided to travel to the other side of the megapolis to watch a movie. She did not do this alone: she trusted my mother for company, and in doing so, took a leap of faith in trusting that my mother would ensure that she is cared for. In doing so, Sangita was negotiating her agency, past the morality of what she should not do and what she could do. The collaborative care in the company of other women provides containment for ageing bodies, such that the frailties and accompanying anxieties are cradled gently.

This is not to say that she was no longer vulnerable. Having the option of ordering a taxi fit within the neoliberal discourse such that the onus of her movement — and thus her agency — was

placed on the individual rather than larger systems (Wilson, 2008) and scripted texts of how an older woman ought to live.

Her decision to watch the movie was mediated through conversations with her sons, with them arranging the taxi for her. But it showed her the agentic possibility to explore that convenience by telling my mother that she would like to stay the night; it was not a request that she expressed, but a desire. Expressing desires is possible in the open sky without the dark clouds of judgements and condescension.

Sangita's legs did not suddenly stop feeling shaky, and the risk of a fall did not magically disappear. What changed was the moral configuration around her body: sons who, after much hesitation, agreed to the plan; a friend who offered companionship; the concrete convenience of ride hailing apps that could carry her door to door. Together, these elements reorganised what counted as a reasonable desire for an older woman, so that her wish to watch a film and visit friends could be treated as legitimate rather than excessive. In this sense, the care extended between them was not only protective, but was also quietly feminist: so that fear did not automatically override wish, and so that the right to be protected did not silently cancel the right to act.

This is where the feminist ethics of care and the politics of possibility intersect. Care, in Sangita's case, is not simply an individual disposition to be kind. It is a way of governing what is thinkable for an ageing woman, which paths are opened up to her and which are quietly closed. My mother's insistence that it is feasible and safe for her to travel, and her willingness to share the journey, pushes care beyond the register of protection into one of solidarity, where safeguarding another's body includes safeguarding her access to joy, sociability and movement.

Theatre & online shopping

One Saturday afternoon in February, when the streets in the outskirts of Duliajan in northern Assam were quiet, a school's playground was filled with children and young adults playing cricket. On the ungrassed narrow strip between the vast ground and the two-storey yellow building were twenty children running back and forth. Occasionally, they were opening their mouths, letting their tongues loose and exhaling loudly as their eyes widened. They giggled as soon as they closed their mouths, until their instructor — a man wearing a casual jacket and a colourful bandana — instructed them to repeat that. "*Become like* Kali," he shouted through the cacophony, as the cherubic faces tried to embody the Hindu goddess' fierceness for a few moments.

Then came the jumping jacks, and several of them were panting within seconds. But not Madhuri: she kept jumping, and then handed me her cardigan as her body warmed with that intense activity. "*Come on, boys and girls, even* Madhuri Baidew[21] *is doing it better than you*!" the instructor shouted. His words did not faze Madhuri; she continued onto the next exercise, of widening her legs, and bending down to touch her toes with the opposite arm, in a fast motion.

Madhuri is 63-years-old and the second-oldest in this theatre class. She did not hesitate to perform any of the warm-up exercises despite wearing a beautiful dusty-rose mekhela saador. As the sky began to develop an orange tint and the koels head to roost noisily, all theatre students headed into one of the classrooms. The furniture had already been moved to the edges to create an empty space in the middle, where they all sat on the floor. For the next two hours, the instructor — who had created this theatre group that was open for anyone to join — gave the students two sentences to enact in specific roles, and in the format of the pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire/Ramos, 1972), the students gave each other detailed feedback. The instructor's words were largely limited to providing prompts, and minimal suggestions. Next, they formed pairs, and were asked to enact a statement to their partner only through facial expressions: "*Today, while coming to class, I saw such a cute dog*!" No words were heard, but many giggles. A room full of contorted faces. When the electricity suddenly went off, the students instantly retrieved their phones and continued contorting their faces under the phone's torch. The instructor told them to be serious in a strict tone, but the students — all children except for four women in their sixties — knew that he was a benevolent teacher, who knew the balancing act of guiding them with kindness and tough words.

It did not matter that the darkness became active ground for mosquitoes. When the lights came on, the students put their phones away and were engrossed in what their teacher was saying. When it was time to leave, they gathered around me, and insisted on a group selfie; it was delightfully surprising how energetic, curious and bold they were. Some boys suddenly started singing

[21] Baidew means "elder sister" in Assamese. It is an honorific for any woman that is older, but not old enough to be of the previous generation. But I addressed Madhuri as Khuri, knowing that she is 63-years-old, and thus could have been my mother's or father's younger sister.

Bihu songs, and while others joined in clapping and singing along, Madhuri was among the first to start the Bihu dance, and others soon joined in.

"*The children are extremely committed; imagine wanting to come to school for a few hours even over the weekend*," one of Madhuri's friends and theatre mates told me, as the three of us walked towards a chaai shop on our way out of the school. I remarked that they too were very dedicated, to pursue theatre with the children. "*Ah, this is nothing!* Padma Baidew *joined the theatre group in 2018 as soon as she retired. I joined only two years ago*," Madhuri told me. Padma was not present in the class that day, owing to a family commitment. All theatre students were looking forward to a written exam for their theatre class, along with practical exams, to get a certificate. Before heading out, Madhuri told the instructor that she would not be coming to class the next day as she would be traveling to Diburgarh with her guest — pointing at me — for a meeting with her writing group.

Walking together towards Madhuri's home in the cold evening while watching our breath as we spoke, Madhuri shared a bit about herself: she was married after she had earned a degree in Hindi literature, and yet another to qualify her as a teacher. When her son was just a month old, she saw the vacancy for a Hindi teacher at a school near her mother's home, but missed that opportunity when someone else more qualified was hired. But there was a vacancy again when her second son was born and she got the job. "*He came to me as a sign of good luck*," she said. She taught Hindi at that high school, and a few years later at another closer home in Duliajan, before she retired in 2022.

At one point of our conversation — the flow of which was easier while walking for almost forty minutes (Vergunst & Ingold, 2008) — we talked about the women in her family, and the factors that impacted their lives. Madhuri's mother was married at thirteen and soon had five children; she was not allowed to take up a job by her in-laws. They were a rich family, and needed their daughter-in-law to tend to the affairs of the home, which included keeping an eye on the vast paddy cultivation and the enormous milk supply from the cattle.

Madhuri has four sisters and a brother. One of them is a seamstress and gets very busy during the time of festivals; she was also the one who took care of Madhuri's older son when Madhuri got her first job. Another sister was busy caring for her husband who was recovering from cancer. The third sister lives not far from Madhuri, but is restricted to her home: "*She cannot leave the house. Her man is not like mine. He won't let her go out; would keep calling and asking about her whereabouts. Even her sons do the same! Why do you need to go out, they ask. But they don't realise that their own* Jethai[22] *goes out freely, but they somehow keep their own mother in* baadhaa [*chains*]."

"Isn't it surprising that this is the case even now?" I asked.

[22] In Assamese, a father's or mother's older sister is called Jethai. Madhuri was referring to herself, as the Jethai to her nephews.

"*Yes... She would like to step out, and she is educated too. We had asked her to join our group trip to* Kashmir*, but she cannot. Her husband won't travel along either. The way my husband and I both match, they do not.*"

"*So how did you two match*?"

"*I don't know; our match was arranged by our parents... somehow, both of us enjoy* kola-xilpi [*the arts*]."

"*I find it very surprising that even now, women are being held back by their husbands...*"

The conversation was interrupted when she stepped into a store to greet someone. Later, Madhuri shared how her childhood Sundays — along with her sisters — were spent in a library near her home. "*As I was grew older, I was its first* librarian*; the* library *turned fifty this year, and they had a small ceremony where they felicitated me.... Look, even if I did not have a job, my husband said he would have wanted me to start a business. What my mother did not get from her husband, I got from mine,*" she said, adding that he had once entered the local administration office to enquire if there was a vacancy for her. I wanted to probe how all four daughters of the same mother had similar childhoods and interests, and yet their lives changed drastically and dramatically upon adulthood.

"*The husband who was diagnosed with cancer... he is a good husband to my sister. Even the one who has a sewing shop has a good husband. Only the other one is weird.*"

"*But can* Khura[23] *talk some sense into him? Because it seems that men tend to pay heed to the words of other men...*" I suggested.

"*Yes, he has told him, but he doesn't like it when people don't listen. We do take her out forcibly sometimes, but we cannot always ask her to accompany us. They will say, 'You are spoiling the woman of our house'. She has two sons, the older one is married. And he behaves the same with his wife too. We recently had a local fair here; my* bowaari[24] *got excited and said that she will set up a stall to sell chicken fry. She wanted to include my sister's* bowaari *too. But that family was deeply upset with that! If I had opposed my* bowaari*, wouldn't that have hurt her? At least she was happy doing what she wanted! Their* bowaari *works at a school, and they don't like that."*

[23] Because I was addressing Madhuri as Khuri, I referred to her husband as Khura (the husband of Khuri).
[24] Bowaari means daughter-in-law in Assamese

During our walk towards her home, Madhuri received several phone calls where logistics of events were discussed. One of the events is the Dibrugarh district convention of the Lekhika[25] Xomaaj [Women Writer's Society]. "*Sometimes I just feel* pogola *[mad], going in so many directions. This was always the case, even when I had a job. But it has gotten worse after* retirement*: earlier I could say that I have* school*, but now I have no excuse with all my time,*" she said with a laugh that conveys more of a sense of happy-busy than frustrated-busy. Continuing with the previous conversation, she adds, "*I am able to have an active life because my husband supports me and my interests. My sister has similar desires but does not receive the support."* It was as if Madhuri was reading my mind, trying to figure out the levers of her freedom.

"Do other women here have similar lives?"

"People here don't hold back their women. But the shraddhaa-bhakti bhaav *[the feeling of respect and devotion] that a woman has towards her husband, that is also a* bandhon *[a commitment / an imprisonment]. Now my husband does not call and ask where am I or why am I late. He just knows that when I am back, I will prepare dinner. He has faith that no matter how challenging it might be for me, the dinner will be served on time. Some women don't realise that without the* shraddhaa-bhakti bhaav *towards the husband, no matter how much money one has, there is no peace. And this cannot be done forcefully; it has to come from within. Now if we both go out together, then upon return, the man will freshen himself and sit, but the woman has to make the tea."*

"So in that way, do you think shraddhaa-bhakti bhaav *is a good thing?"*

*"*Shraddhaa-bhakti bhaav *is not just about touching his feet[26]. But it is my duty."*

"But is it like a duty one cannot escape from, or something you do on your own?"

"It comes naturally... Every woman has that feeling of duty towards her husband and her home. Nowadays, I see that couples are both working, and some women do the cleaning and the men do the cooking. But that is not the case here in Duliajan. In my household, he [her husband] will never enter the kitchen. In the morning, I sweep the courtyard, bathe, cook breakfast and lunch, set

[25] In Assamese language, the male word for a writer is "lekhok", and the word for a female writer is "lekhika".
[26] In Hindu culture, touching another person's feet is an act of paying respect, or observing "shraddhaa". Hindu wedding rituals include a moment where a woman has to touch her husband's feet — similar to Christian wedding vows of a woman needing to "obey" her husband. But Hindus also touch the feet of elders, to seek blessings. In some cultures in other parts of India — but not in Assam — older people are greeted by touching their feet, and the same is done while taking their leave.

the lunch on the table, and only then I would get ready to head to school. When we had cows, I had to milk them too. He never helped a bit; even if I chop all the vegetables in advance, he won't cook it."

"So then this is not shraddhaa-bhakti bhaav*, it is a* bandhon*. It is not a task that you have taken up on your own, but it is* upaai-naai *[helplessness]; a sense of 'I have to do it'. Because men seem to have a choice, and women don't,"* I challenged her.

"Hmmm...."

As we entered her house, I realised that it is best to keep my opinions to myself, but a part of me also wished to continue sifting through her thoughts. The way we viewed gendered division of household chores was different; she took pride in maintaining her home through the everyday various tasks. She made tea for us — including her husband — and was happy to see me devouring the many types of laddoos she has made: of sesame seeds, of coconut, of rice flour, each bound with sticky jaggery. Her husband asked me about my family; they showed me photos of their five-year-old granddaughter on each of their phones and coo like doting grandparents. I showed them photos of my mother and her cat, and they enjoyed seeing it: it was a moment where we bond, beyond me being a researcher but someone with her own story too. The couple talked about their plans for the next day, as each had a meeting with their respective literary groups.

While Madhuri's weekends revolved around the theatre classes, her weekdays were no less busier: for two hours after breakfast and until she had to cook lunch, she was with her pen. Some evenings, after tea, she could pick her pen again, until it was time to make dinner around 9pm. The house chores are now shared with her younger bowaari, who also works as a lawyer. "*Her family have arranged for a woman to clean the rooms upstairs where they both live.*"

Several of Madhuri's evenings during the week are spent on Google Meet with one of her literary groups. Madhuri learnt to use Google Meet during COVID-19 when teachers were trained how to use it. "*That was one good thing that happened because of COVID*," she said.

As she cut vegetables for dinner, and I offered to peel some onions, Madhuri narrated her first encounter with buying something online on Flipkart[27]. "*Two years ago, when I was in* Guwahati *visiting my older son, someone came to deliver an item, and I did not have the exact amount of cash in hand. So I called my son at work and he asked to speak to the delivery boy over the phone, and somehow, the delivery boy was paid[28]! I was intrigued how was that possible! When my son returned from work, he told me he had paid via* Google Pay*. I served tea and then asked him to teach me* GPay *right away. That evening, until it was time for dinner, I kept sending small amounts of money to him*

[27] FlipKart is an Indian online e-commerce site that was established in 2007. Amazon entered India in 2013, and competes with FlipKart.
[28] Several vendors on FlipKart, as well as Amazon and other new e-commerce sites, provide the option of pay-on-delivery.

and others, as a way to learn and practice using GPay. *Later, I ordered something from* FlipKart *here in* Duliajan*, and when the delivery boy came, he was surprised that I was paying for it via* GPay *because he is accustomed for me to pay cash only.*" Madhuri had written about this episode in one of her Facebook literary groups.

Madhuri had previously learnt to order items from Flipkart from her younger son, and was often ordering items needed for her flower garden, or large bags of detergent; even clothes. I asked her if her husband knew how to use either digital tools; she said that he had tried but gave up when he forgot the steps. So how did she remember all the steps?

"*I would keenly observe when my sons would order on* Flipkart*. I would tell them, 'Sit with me and show me what to* click*, and only then I will learn.' So they had to be patient... but there is a boy nearby who has recently passed his* high school *exam. I would call him to teach me; I knew him since he was little. He could not say no to me,*" she said with a laugh.

Another nephew taught her to use Ola and Uber. "*When I visit* Guwahati*, I would nag my son to book me a vehicle to travel around. So now if my husband and I visit* Guwahati *and have to go somewhere, I can just book a taxi myself. But he is not interested in learning these tools*," she added.

Had her husband not felt the need to learn to use these apps? She said when he needed cash, she was the one withdrawing it from the ATM and handed it to him.

"*So it is similar to how, since you do all the housework, it has become convenient for him, and he does not need to learn. Isn't that so*?" I asked.

"*Hmm yes maybe... Okay, don't cut any more onions. That should be enough for the* daal*."*

Madhuri headed to the bathroom while I sat in the dining area where her husband was. "*Both of us sit here at* godhuli *[dusk]. We both have things to do, things to write*," her husband said. A massive photo from their younger son's wedding overlooked the dining table. During dinner, when I accidentally bit onto a bhoot jolokia[29] from the pickle jar, my mouth burned and I was in tears. Her husband, who had finished his meal, ran to the kitchen to bring me more water, sugar, and jaggery, to soothe my tongue. All of us laughed, and so did I, through the tears and the puffing. He turned to his

[29] Bhoot jolokia, or ghost chilli pepper, was certified as the world's by the Guinness World Records, and 170 times hotter than Tabasco sauce. Today, it is the third hottest chilli pepper as per the Scoville ratings.

wife, "*She is* ekebaare ghoruwaa [*extremely homely*[30]]!" Offering me some more water, he said, "*Why don't you stay here longer*?"

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Madhuri's story exemplifies what it means to be a learner throughout life. Her quest to learn, which began in the local library, has continued through her marital years, and into her retirement. Her story embodies the essence of active ageing that is taking hold across middle-class India (Lamb, 2017; Kavedzija & Lamb, 2020; Samanta, 2024). But there is a sense of relational autonomy with this busyness: it is by her own choice, by joining various literary groups and organising their events.

Her affective entanglement with the theatre group is one where she stretches the limits of her body and her age. That she is comfortable sitting with children — taking in instructions from a younger male teacher — is an embodiment of her continued refusal to be marked by incompetence and vulnerability (Lamb, 2000). She refuses her age to be an obstacle. In being among the first to start dancing at the end of the theatre class, she forces her way out of ageing exclusion, and dances her way into being part of a dynamic group. Her active participation distributes dignity, assigns value, and reveals fault lines in the assumptions of gendered aging.

Madhuri's playful enactment with her classmates is akin to acclaimed theatre actor Sabitri Ma from Manipur, who, in her seventies, convinces her audiences that she is, in fact, a bird (Grover, 2024, p. 161). Even though each woman is in two different decades, for Madhuri and Sabitri Ma, their bodies become "a symbol of resistance and a site of protest" (ibid) against what is expected of an ageing female body. In taking to theatre at the age of 63, Madhuri disrupts the binaries of youth and age.

Madhuri's pursuit of a career as a teacher is marked by the paucity of opportunity in a small town, such that the birth of a child is viewed as a sign of good luck. She does not mention the labour of mothering; instead, the birth of her sons are almost accidental, instead of incidental. While Madhuri herself perceives dedication to the husband and the home as a necessity for a woman — something that she takes pride in — her husband's insistence that she take up a job is in contrast to the lives of other women who are restricted to the domestic sphere. When Madhuri spoke of her husband insisting her to take up a job, her words carried a sense of pride, of having found a match who believed that a woman's place is not solely within the home. Madhuri's perception of her match with her husband, for

[30] The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines "homely" as "of or belonging to a home or household, domestic; characteristic or suggestive of home: specially in its coziness, lack of formality, etc." This is the definition I refer to, when using the word "homely" for the translation, which is a common term in Indian English; it refers to making oneself "feel at home" in any situation. If "ghor" means "home", then "ghoruwaa" means "of the home". For a woman, the word often implies a "lady-like" behaviour (Patel, 2004), the word is also used to refer to men, when they drop the facade of being formal and are able to hold conversations easily. This was the context in which Madhuri's husband called me "ghoruwaa", because I was puffing and panting with the chillies in my mouth, without worrying about how I would be perceived. In other words, I was behaving as I would in my own home, in such a situation.

their shared love of the arts, is a marker of the incidental fate in the life of a woman, which determines the path of the rest of her life. Within a patriarchal society wherein men manage to find ways to suit their desires, the incidental fate of being matched with a husband who shares similar interests is a bigger win for the woman.

Madhuri's pride in the freedom that her own husband affords her is in contrast to her sister's husband, who erects hurdles for his wife. That her sister's sons also promote the same ideas of a woman's position in the house — with their mother, and then with the wife — typifies the intergenerational passage of patriarchal norms. The two women, with similar interests, have their life trajectories altered not because of their own choosing, but because of their respective husbands who have determined their fate. Both women carry respective emotional labours of their household: one is *allowed* to explore opportunities beyond the house, the other is not. "Baandhon", which is used to describe a bond, becomes a bondage.The marriage thus becomes the terrain within which domestic morality is practised, in a manner that cannot always be negotiated.

That Madhuri's daughter-in-law's maternal family had sent in a person to help their daughter maintain the house typifies the labour negotiations in a space where freedom is also negotiated. The daughter-in-law is free to put up a stall at the local fair, but she is not free to excuse herself from the labour of keeping the house clean. The duty to keep the house clean assigns a moral value on the labour. When that labour is outsourced to another individual, it does not automatically become an agentive act, but one with a moral weight of gendered class negotiations. The task that was marked for Madhuri — with the list of morning chores before she could head to her job as a teacher — has now been transferred to the daughter-in-law.

The gendered labouring in maintaining the cleanliness of the house is etched in the moral domestic terrain where two generations of husbands are exempt from. Madhuri does not view these chores as interruptions or chains; those are words that she uses to explain her sister's life. Instead, the dignity and choice of her life, as compared to her mother's, and now her sister's, reveals the extent — or the limit — to which she can be a willful subject (Ahmed, 2014) against patriarchal norms.

Madhuri learns how to play around with the smartphone and its tools; the affordances of online apps enables a sense of mobility, financial independence, and consumer choice. Her busyness is something that she has invoked for herself. She is no longer tied down to her job; those hours, at retirement, have opened doors of seizing opportunities and exploring new avenues. Her "spare time" is "occupied" by the acts of living intentionally (Kavedzija & Lamb, 2020; Le Guin, 2017). In doing so, she becomes the person who in a small town of Assam knows how to use digital technology for her ease: something that surprises the delivery boy. But such an act of her learning adds a new layer of digital labour in the face of a husband who refuses to learn such tools himself. Her new knowledge thus becomes a new form of entanglement wherein her curiosity is almost penalised; a moral weight of technological uptake. But she does not say "no" to him. Her explanations of how she uses the apps, and how her husband does not, are not criticisms of him but statements of her reality, devoid of moral

tempering. Her “yes” to her husband’s benevolence, and his need for tea and dinner on time, is a script that she has etched into her bones; her sister, who desires to move around freely, has also said “yes” to the limits placed on her because “the consequences of saying no would be too much” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 55). Both sisters, in many ways, exercise their sense of agency within the limits of what is allowed.

My role as ethnographer is therefore marked by a particular kind of discomfort. I am not simply recording how Madhuri negotiates duty and desire. I am also drawn into the same moral terrain where patriarchal norms are the lever for a woman’s freedom and the measure of its limits. I was entering the ethnographic field with my own pre-conceived notion of what agency looks like for a married woman within the household. In suggesting what agency should look like, I may have inadvertently shut down an avenue of conversation, on Madhuri’s own perspective of agency. I am the ethnographer asking questions, but also repositioned as a girl who eats heartily, misjudges a chilli and laughs too loudly at the table. The breakdown of formal distance, when my mouth burns and everyone rushes to soothe me, is not only a moment of hospitality. It is also a moment in which the gendered scripts of guest, wife, husband and researcher are rearranged and tested. Her husband’s unfailing kindness towards me exemplifies the complexity of men who are generous and attentive, yet whose everyday lives are structured by habits that leave domestic labour unquestioned. The field here is a moral laboratory, where care, responsibility and hierarchy are constantly recalibrated. My own impulses, to help in the kitchen, to press Madhuri gently on her account of duty, become part of the very economy of care and authority I seek to analyse, rather than an interruption from outside it.

In that sense, my presence exposes the unstable position of the feminist ethnographer who is at once sympathetic to Madhuri’s attachments and critical of the terms under which they are lived. I recognise the warmth and humour of this couple, and the sincerity of their concern for me, while also seeing how the same moral order that sustains these relations keeps certain questions unasked, such as who cooks, who rests and who learns to use technology. To write about Madhuri’s life and choices is therefore to write from within this entanglement, where analysis cannot be detached from the ways I am welcomed, fed, corrected and classified.

Doing men's tasks

After my father died, and after my brother and I had moved away from our childhood home to pursue careers elsewhere, my mother was remaking the home based on her needs and desires. Every visit home was marked by new discoveries: old mosaic tiles were replaced with faux wooden flooring; windows had a new metallic gauze panel to prevent the evening mosquitoes; a sturdy table for the gas stove that had been repaired several times over the years was replaced by a granite slab; the rickety second-hand shoe rack was replaced by one with a shiny door that shut with magnets.

Most importantly, there was a fan in the kitchen's ceiling, and a microwave oven.

All of the things that my father was resistant to changing in the house — because he didn't bother about them, because they cost a lot of money, because he considered important prioritising saving for his children's education than fixing the house — my mother had managed to do that for herself, in this home, where she walked in as a bride and now lives alone. Throughout my childhood, my mother was scared at night if my father had to stay overnight in another town for work; she would inform all neighbours that she was alone at home with two children, so that they could expect a call from her at any time of the night.

With my father gone, and my brother and I living away from her, she has not only found courage to sleep every night without needing to inform anyone about her alone-ness, but has managed to refurbish the windows in such a manner that it does not need to be shut at night and yet she can be safe. She did all the talking to the carpenters; she worked with the masons and decided on the colour of the granite slab for the kitchen; she got the electrician to fix a ceiling fan in the kitchen; she walked into an electronic store and bought herself a microwave oven. "*For too long I have suffered staying in the kitchen all day, heating all the food, especially when guests arrive. For too long I have wanted the ease of the microwave oven to reheat the food. Your Papa never allowed one. Now I have bought it. For myself*," she said.

There is a new sense of agency upon the death of my father; a sense of agency that is not openly expressed as such. I asked her if she feels a sense of greater freedom with her husband dead. She vehemently denies that he had curbed her freedom: she would often say how lucky she was that he had never stopped her from going anywhere, anytime, and that he would partake in house chores, especially those pertaining to us kids. Other women, she says, have found more freedom upon the death of their husband, even if that is not explicitly expressed. But not her.

Upon widowhood, my mother was not only forced to learn to live alone, but learned to enjoy that alone-ness. She did this in a manner wherein people live, resist, adapt, and relate through adaptations to the home. Old objects were replaced with new ones, such that they were not merely functional, but were offering a different template to make new memories, by choosing different emotions embodied in these objects. The previously-accepted frugality of her husband was towards a unified vision of saving for the children's education. Now that the children were educated and the

husband was dead, she was rejecting this frugality by teaching herself about the materiality of the objects in her home, down to the specifics: the weight, texture and colour of the granite slab that replaced an old, repeatedly-repaired kitchen table; a metallic gauze of certain density cut to size to fit the windows. This was her willful assertion of an unspoken feminist hope (Ahmed, 2004, p. 183) to reclaim her narrative of how to live her life, now that previous material ties no longer existed. This agency was exercised within a changing terrain of her status as being an older woman, a widow who had inherited her deceased husband's savings, and an empty nester (Asztalos Morell et al., 2020).

Observing the processes over the life-course of my mother — possible because of intimacy with which I as the ethnographer have been situated — enables for a longitudinal view of the aesthetic choices that she has finally been able to make for herself, through the changes she has engineered in the home. These changes were her acts of self-care, by exercising her choice (Calasanti, 2004, p. 31; George, 2001). These choices are not impulsively implemented: they have needed the slow learning of what was once the domain of the man of the house. Of buying necessary furniture and repairing old ones. Of deciding what gadgets are necessary and where the money should be spent. A life led in not making such choices meant limiting sharing opinions on these aspects. Conversely, a life now replete with possibilities — because of her economic class — and decisions to be made has meant learning aspects of the home that were once an alien domain. Within this alien domain of what is considered as men's tasks is where she exercises her agency, and learns to negotiate them with materials, as well as other men who visit the home as workers making those changes as per her desires. She was thus disrupting the lived expression of social conditions that tell women that technological competence is risky, improper or beyond their reach. She was reaching for it all, one object at a time.

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My mother was always nervous to learn to use the laptop, even though she had previously worked at a newspaper and was using the typewriter. That the keyboard layouts are the same for both machines, was not enough assurance. She went to a computer class eons ago, and eventually gave up when she could not understand the concept of the cursor and the mouse. The smartphone, with its more intuitive features, was easier to grasp (Hong et al., 2016; Petrie & Darzentas, 2017; (Díaz-Bossini & Moreno, 2014) .

My own encounter with men and machines has been with my laptops in the past. A male friend would be the one to install Ubuntu software into it, and when I would run into trouble, I would reach out to him. While I would be careful with handling my laptop in and out of the bag, my friend would push open the screen rather harshly, causing me to worry if the near 180-degree open view would break my laptop entirely. Thereafter, the way he would talk to me about my machine would verge on condescension. This was not with just one male friend, but with many other male friends and lovers: lovely kind generous almost-feminist men, who suddenly found themselves to be wearing a

crown, when their technical wisdom was sought with anything related to technology. They transferred their halo to the way they treated machines — even those that were owned by someone else — and it disappointed me immensely.

When I got a new smartphone two years ago, I was worried about protecting its screen because I was sloppy and prone to drop the phone at least once each day. In India, I would have gone to the nearest mobile repair shop, where the man — it's always a man — would carefully fix a screenguard, for three hundred rupees (three euros). As much as I would wait for the annual trip to India to stock up on spices, it would be too frugal of me to delay protecting my phone. Going to a mobile repair shop in Dublin would cost me ten times as much. I took the leap of faith and ordered screenguards online. After much hesitation and several YouTube tutorials, I managed to carefully, neatly, affix a screenguard to my phone.

I had been worried that I would mess it up. My nervousness with technology resembled Anima's assumption of herself: "*I won't be able to learn*." I found myself to be not as different as the women for whom machines were mediated by men; it was a function of being far from the comfort of available resources that nudged me to go beyond my own gendered script of who can do the work best, of handling a smartphone carefully.

It is always a man at a mobile repair shop. The mobile phone, and the instruction manual on how to apply a screenguard to the smartphone, was hence also gendered. It resembled a gender script akin to the ways products are advertised: shaver models inscript male desires to tinker versus female preferences for simplicity (van Oost, 2003) or cars marketed to men as powerful, and to women as reliable (Hubak, 1996). For my mother who gave up learning how to use the laptop, it was the twin socialisations of gender and ageing that had left their mark when she encountered the laptop. She found it challenging (Feist et al., 2010), despite her ambivalent emotions that ranged excitement, hesitation, and fear (Faulkner, 2001; Khandelwal, 2025).

Reliance on the men in my life for helping with my laptop's software or for other tech fixes might prima facie reveal a sense of learned helplessness of my own. Rather than trying to educate myself how these tools work, I chose to run towards the boys. Indeed, there has been substantial research on why there are fewer women in STEM in India (Gupta, 2022; Amirtham & Kumar, 2021). This gendered bias hence becomes visible with the way objects are designed (Constanza-Chock, 2020; Wajcman, 2010). Over a period of time, the ingrained script of "not being good enough for tech" ramifies in the numbers of women in tech and engineering.

In those moments of being patronised, I was angry. But reflecting deeper now, I realise that it was not the lack of access to learning tech tools that had prevented me from fixing my own tech troubles. It was not simply a matter of symbolic violence operated through self-doubt that had shaped my view of what I imagined myself to do. The truth was that the behind-the-scenes intricacies of tech did not interest me one bit. The refusal to learn was also a willful act; in asserting a sense of agency based on preferences. Such a choice is not the script of women contributing to the reproduction of

their own domination. Feminist anthropologist Saba Mahmood argues that when feminist agency is not clearly visible, there is a "tendency to look for expressions and moments of resistance that may suggest a challenge to male domination" (Mahmood, 2001, p. 206). Too often, agency has been understood as acting with one's own will and often to challenge exciting norms or tradition. But in explicitly stating my disinterest in tech, I argue for an idea of agency that is equally vital as a desire for autonomy that deserves its own space and dignity.

The halo of superiority among the men whom I sought out for tech help reminds of the non-neutrality of technology. Who designs technology, under what conditions, and for whose benefit from designing them are aspects which implicate technology in social arrangements that have a bearing on how they can be accessed, learnt about, or used. In thinking about design justice, as a philosophy towards rethinking systems and processes such that they address society's challenges (Costanza-Chock, 2020), existing power inequalities are viewed as being reproduced when men, who claim to be superior *because* they know tech tools better, patronise to those who know less than them. For the person seeking tech help, navigating such relationships then becomes an act of emotional labour in the face of relational autonomy.

Looking at the way I had to teach myself to apply a screenguard on my phone in Dublin, I recognise that I was forced to challenge my own internalised reliance on men. My own previous hesitations that had accumulated over the years and across different devices, forced me to recognise that I was not outside my ethnographic field. I also inhabited its moral territory. I had learned to be delicate, cautious, even timid when handling machines; seeking help from the men in my life had made me feel grateful to a fault. I had internalised the belief that someone else would know better, someone else would fix the problem, someone else would intervene when the object malfunctioned. The gendered scripts surrounding machines had not bypassed me simply because I had travelled, worked abroad or pursued higher education. They remained suspended within me, revealing themselves in the smallest scene and phone screen.

Going beyond that internalised script was suddenly possible because of the relative frugality of my life in Ireland, as compared to India, where it was far easier – and economical — to *seek someone else* to fix my tech problems. The financial challenges of doing a PhD with a stipend that is below minimum wage and in among the most expensive countries in the EU meant that every penny had to be counted; anything beyond the basic necessities felt extravagant. The frugality necessitated a disruption to a long-held normative attitude towards anything pertaining to tech.

In turning the gaze towards myself and my own experience with learning a new way to handle my new smartphone, the ingrained script of refusal to deal with them sits along with the vital need for care for a palm-sized object that mediates life and connectivity with the rest of the world. It was an act of care that was urgent, and albeit nothing compared to the leaps taken by older women when suddenly faced with a life without marital support — it mirrored to me my own sense of hesitation

and prior refusals. In reflecting this experience here in this ethnography, I am implicated in a web of ambivalent solidarities and ethical stances on the notions of agency.

Some lessons learnt

At first glance, the stories in this ethnography might seem to have linear narratives of progress, of women finding their own soil in their psyche and surroundings to stimulate and sprout their curiosity. However, they invite us to reconsider what we mean when we speak of "agency" in later life, and in women's relations to technology, marriage, and kin. It is mediated by the benevolence and care of others. Agency here is a fragile accomplishment made possible, and often undone, by husbands' permissions, sons' anxieties, daughters' fatigue, and the material infrastructures that quietly enable or disable movement and learning.

The quest to learn is the substrate for a sense of agency, and is marked by layered expressions of taking chances, care practices, and making everyday choices. This path towards their quest for more out of their lives is pebbled with overt and subtle conceptions of what is allowed. It is within this terrain that a series of small acts — studying for exams with a toddler, writing notes on smartphone functions, encouraging peers with their mobility, learning to pay for goods online — enable older women to negotiate blobs of freedom. Their relationship to learning new ideas and handling new tools are mediated through relationships marked by friction, dependence, resistance, and subtle assertions of agency.

Marriage does not always clamp desires to explore new interests. But defined walls determine how far such explorations are possible. Men's benevolence emerges as a central operator of this moral economy. Freedom is granted within a structure where women have to prioritise their duties as wives, daughters-in-law, mothers. For women like Gargi and Renuka, it might seem radical that they pursued their education even after they had birthed children. But this pursuit was tolerated rather than encouraged, so long as it did not interfere with the obligations that they were bound to in matrimony. Education was a symbol of stretching what could be possible, even as the realities stretched only to a limit. Their degrees did not guarantee autonomy; instead, they highlighted how much their opportunities depended on their husbands' lenience and the moral politics that shaped their domestic lives.

Sangita's story brings into sharp focus how mobility is shaped less by bodily capability than by relational dynamics. Her fear of falling is not just about physical risk; it is about the potential burden her fall might place on her sons. This fear has been reinforced by their own reluctance to encourage her movement, creating a loop of hesitation, caution, and containment. What she needs is not just physical assistance but moral permission: an affirmation that she is still allowed to make decisions for herself, to go out into the world, to retain a sense of self-sufficiency.

The fragility that had long shaped her self-image, and how her sons saw her, shifted when she chose to cross the city to see a film. That trip was possible by entrusting her fragility and nervousness into the care of an old friend. In doing so, she moves beyond inherited ideas about what she should or should not do as an older woman. Such a practice of collaborative care — intentional and without

inhibition — offers a safe space for ageing bodies, softening both physical weakness and the fears that accompany it.

Her vulnerability persists through the negotiations of the moral terrain of what could be possible and what is the right thing to do, apropos travelling alone across the city. Yet, that trip allowed for the air of agency to be breathed into her conscious being; the desire to extend her limit of being outdoors reveals the weight of the constraints that she — and her sons — had imposed on her, in the name of care.

This collaborative care (Biswas, 2024) is extended between two women when one teaches the other about typing in Assamese on the smartphone. The mother's notebook, carefully filled in her own hand, is more than a learning tool. In sharing notes about what each has learnt, there is a quiet claim to an independent way of writing and expressing. These moments, though not emotionally dense, contain within them the ethical weight of caring across decades for being peers within a same household that is governed by moralistic norms. Each shares her new competence with the smartphone, as they once shared how to be competent brides in the new house that they have been bound to. Technology becomes a medium through which love, affection, trust and fun play out in small but meaningful ways. Co-agency thus names not a harmonious collaboration but a field of moral negotiations in which care, control, generosity and exhaustion are constantly entangled.

Extending the limits of what her body permits was Madhuri's pursuit in theatre, even as her domestic life is mediated by a moral rubric of devotion towards her husband and his needs. While her husband encourages her to pursue a career, it is not without the moral weight of physical and emotional labour. Her story reveals the deep endurance that becomes necessary for women to seize all opportunities and the morsels of freedom, because they are not distributed equally to all.

Madhuri's confidence with her smartphone, using apps that expand her mobility, financial autonomy, and everyday choices, enables her to spend her time after retirement intentionally. But this comes with a new digital responsibility, in the face of her husband's refusal to partake in similar curiosities. In asserting that her husband is unlike other men, she takes on a moral responsibility for his refusal, and does so with an acceptance of this new reality. It is far from fatalism; the combination of enacting the duties of a wife sit together with the ingrained norms of what she knows she cannot — rather, will not — expect of him.

My own earlier deference to male friends for laptop repairs, and the belated decision to fit a screenguard myself, make visible how deeply gendered scripts of competence and incompetence seep into an otherwise mobile, educated life. Disinterest in the technical is not always a symptom of false consciousness. Sometimes it is simply a preference. Yet such preferences are easily read through dominant narratives that conflate not-knowing with inability. Agency does not reside solely in actions that bring about transformation or progress, but also in those that uphold continuity, preserve stability, or resist disruption (Mahmood, 2001, p. 212). The ethnography therefore invites us to distinguish

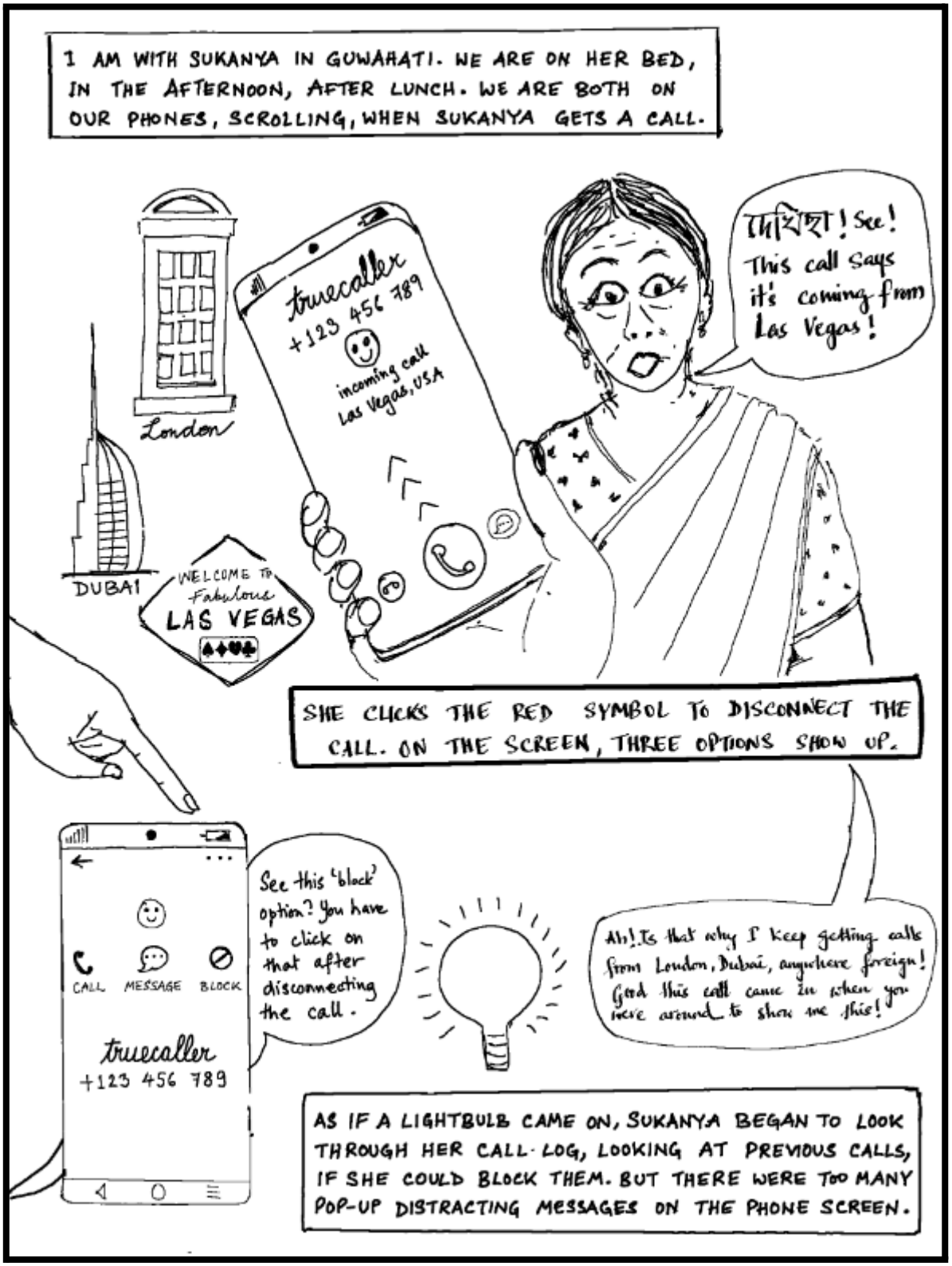
between refusing a skill because it is genuinely irrelevant to one's projects and being positioned as incapable of acquiring it.

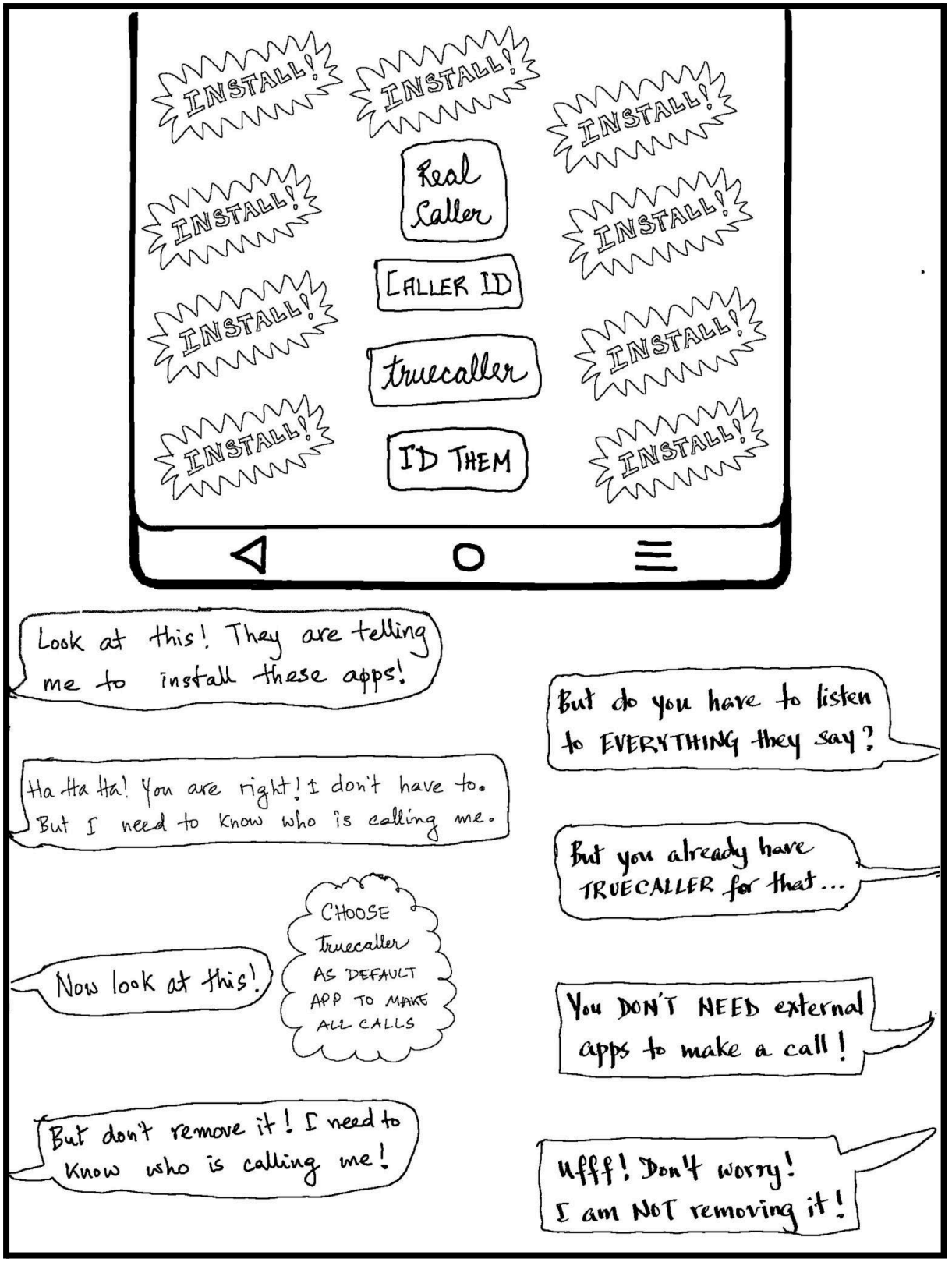
Running through all these stories is a feminist politics of care (Tronto & Fisher, 1990). It appears as control, but also as solidarity. The politics of care exposes how deeply gendered and classed the distribution of care remains: who gives care, who receives it, and whose care counts as expertise. But the small, accumulative practices through which women re-appropriate care are a resource for themselves. Care is used not only to keep households functioning, but to hold open small pockets of time, movement and curiosity. In teaching each other to use phones, in walking together to theatre class, in sharing the risk of travel, they quietly shift the moral centre of care from dependence to co-agency.

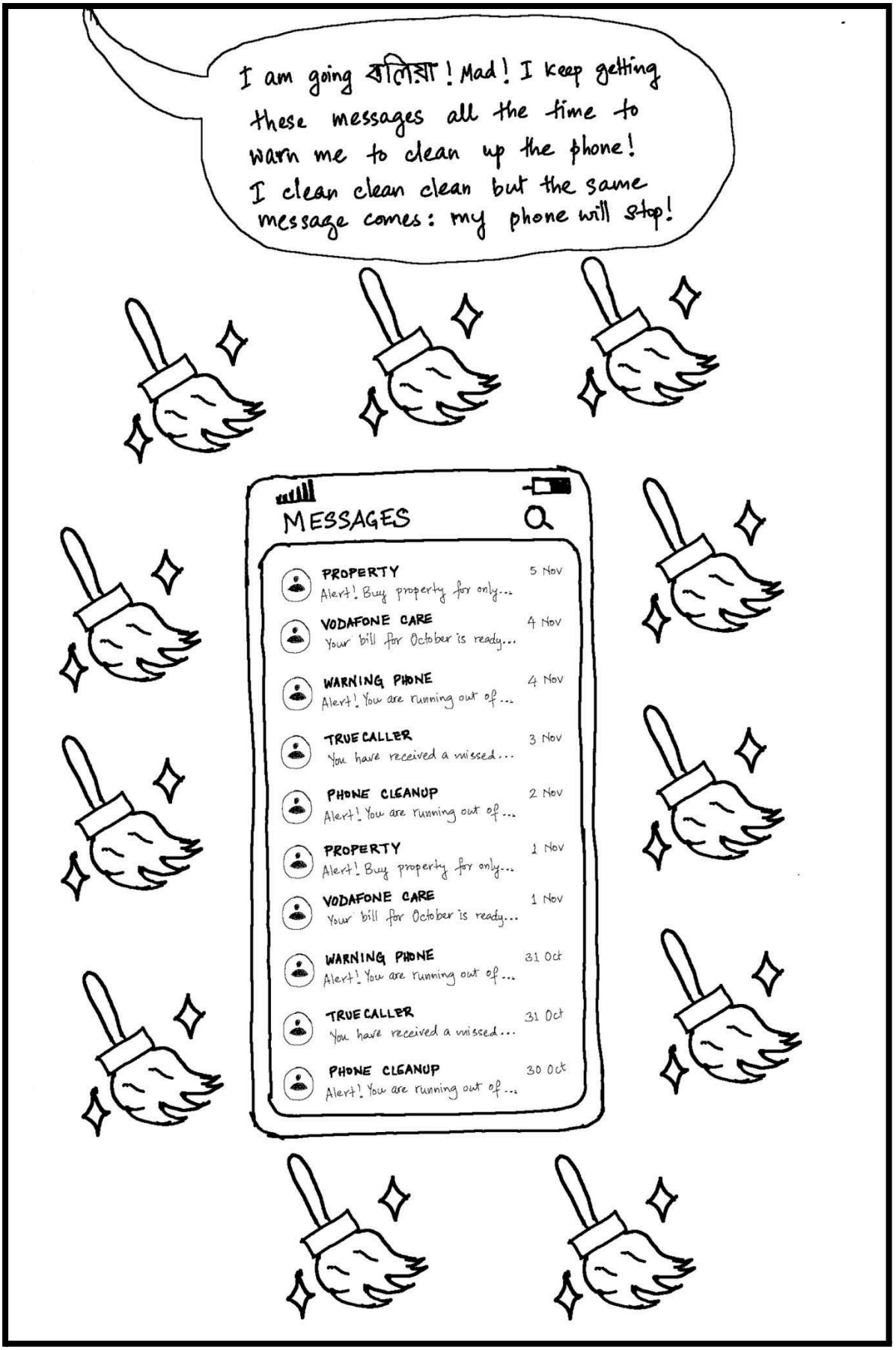
By bearing witness to the ways older women learn about different tools to reconfigure their lives ever so slightly and widely, and by implicating myself in the field of my own ingrained scripts, the lesson that lingers the longest is that learning is never merely about a tool or a singular technical task. It is a political and ethical one. It requires the unlearning of symbolic hierarchies that have long governed women's relation to competence and possibilities. It requires a recognition that these hierarchies have been naturalised not only by those who enforce them, but also by those who live within them and reproduce them: out of habit, fear or love. Such hierarchies do chip away at the edges, but only to the extent that the tools given to them would allow.

Teaching Phone Tools as Methodology

Blocking spam calls




INSTALL!
INSTALL!
INSTALL!
INSTALL!
INSTALL!
INSTALL!
INSTALL!
INSTALL!
Real Caller
CALLER ID
truecaller
ID THEM
Look at this! They are telling me to install these apps!
But do you have to listen to EVERYTHING they say?
Ha Ha Ha! You are right! I don't have to. But I need to know who is calling me.
But you already have TRUECALLER for that...
Now look at this!
CHOOSE Truecaller AS DEFAULT APP TO MAKE ALL CALLS
You DON'T NEED external apps to make a call!
But don't remove it! I need to know who is calling me!
Ufff! Don't worry! I am NOT removing it!


I am going বলিয়া! Mad! I keep getting these messages all the time to warn me to clean up the phone! I clean clean clean but the same message comes: my phone will stop!
MESSAGES
PROPERTY 5 Nov
Alert! Buy property for only...
VODAFONE CARE 4 Nov
Your bill for October is ready...
WARNING PHONE 4 Nov
Alert! You are running out of...
TRUECALLER 3 Nov
You have received a missed...
PHONE CLEANUP 2 Nov
Alert! You are running out of...
PROPERTY 1 Nov
Alert! Buy property for only...
VODAFONE CARE 1 Nov
Your bill for October is ready...
WARNING PHONE 31 Oct
Alert! You are running out of...
TRUECALLER 31 Oct
You have received a missed...
PHONE CLEANUP 30 Oct
Alert! You are running out of...

Sukanya is highly educated — she retired as a professor of engineering at a college in Mumbai — and is deeply informed about everything going on in the world. However, her digital hygiene is limited to simply disconnecting the call. For a digital native person (McCulloch, 2019) and as someone with privileged access to the Internet and digital tools, it would take me just a moment to notice that there is an option to block such calls after disconnecting them. But not so for Sukanya.

****

Before I dive into the ways in which Sukanya struggled with her digital hygiene, I want to detail the rationale behind the ethnography in this chapter taking the form of sketches. As I transcribed the many hours of my conversations of the women I spent my days and nights and weeks with, and as they struggled with some of the tools on their phones, I found that the notebook where I had recorded my fieldnotes was no longer sufficient to explain what was happening. I was no longer simply an observer, but a tutor. The *mise en scène* (Artaud 1958) of such encounters could not be translated to text with linear written narratives. Such moments of interactions repeated throughout the hours of the transcripts. My interactions with them, mediated through the phone, and because of it, was an act based on what we were *seeing* before us, in our palms. What we were seeing was not static, but moving, with the command of the tip of our fingers. Because this was such a visual process, it was appropriate to *show* this process visually, rather than narrate it.

Drawing gives the freedom to express ethnographic moments in different ways (Causey, 2016; Chitra, 2024; Bonanno; n.d.). Drawing ethnographic moments allows for "a metaphor for knowledge, for particular ways of knowing the world" (Grimshaw, 2008, p. 7).

Most of the sketches in this chapter are based on the audio transcripts, and few photos of the screen of the smartphone between us. Presenting ethnography through sketches revealed the embodied practice of doing ethnography with the women, one that "reflects cultural norms about being situated, looking, as well as stylistic and representational conventions" (Geismar 2014, p. 99). My sketches *as* ethnography allows for a process of togethering, more so when the actions within this process were about learning to use the phone together. Rather than freezing it within photography, sketching these scenes "convey an action or object that has duration" (Chitra, 2024, p. 13). By photographing some of their gestures with their phones in their environment — which were translated into sketches in this chapter — I encompass the textures and tensions within those moments of encounters, while paying heed to the ways in which the women were being challenged because of the ways the apps were designed, that had somehow forgotten to include the needs of the non-digitally-native. Such an ethnography hence reveals the possibilities for intervention (Pandian, 2019), through the ways in which the ethnographies are not static images or linear narratives, but are scenes in movement that transform the interaction with the smartphone and its tools.

****

Sukanya's concerns about her digital security and safety cannot simply be explained as ignorance. It reveals how apps — and most digital tools — do not come with a manual or specific instructions. Her gesture of tracing similar previous calls cannot be simplified as correcting previous missteps. It is a continuation of her attempts at ensuring digital safety. But her existing awareness makes it easier for her to learn how to optimise it.

The proliferation of digital scammers has given rise to a proliferation of apps to counter these scammers. The pop-up ads for other apps were tapping into the fear of possible scammers, and her worried expression about being bombarded with these apps were a manifestation of that fear. And it was this fear — stemming from an understanding that people like herself may not know too well that all apps are offering the same feature — that other competing apps have been banking on.

Assuaging her trepidation about these apps and suggesting that she need not pay heed to these messages was my way of assuring her beyond the supposed assurance offered by the competing apps. It becomes a double-edged sword: she feels she needs to protect herself from digital cybercrime, but she feels the need to do that by adhering to whatever is suggested to her.

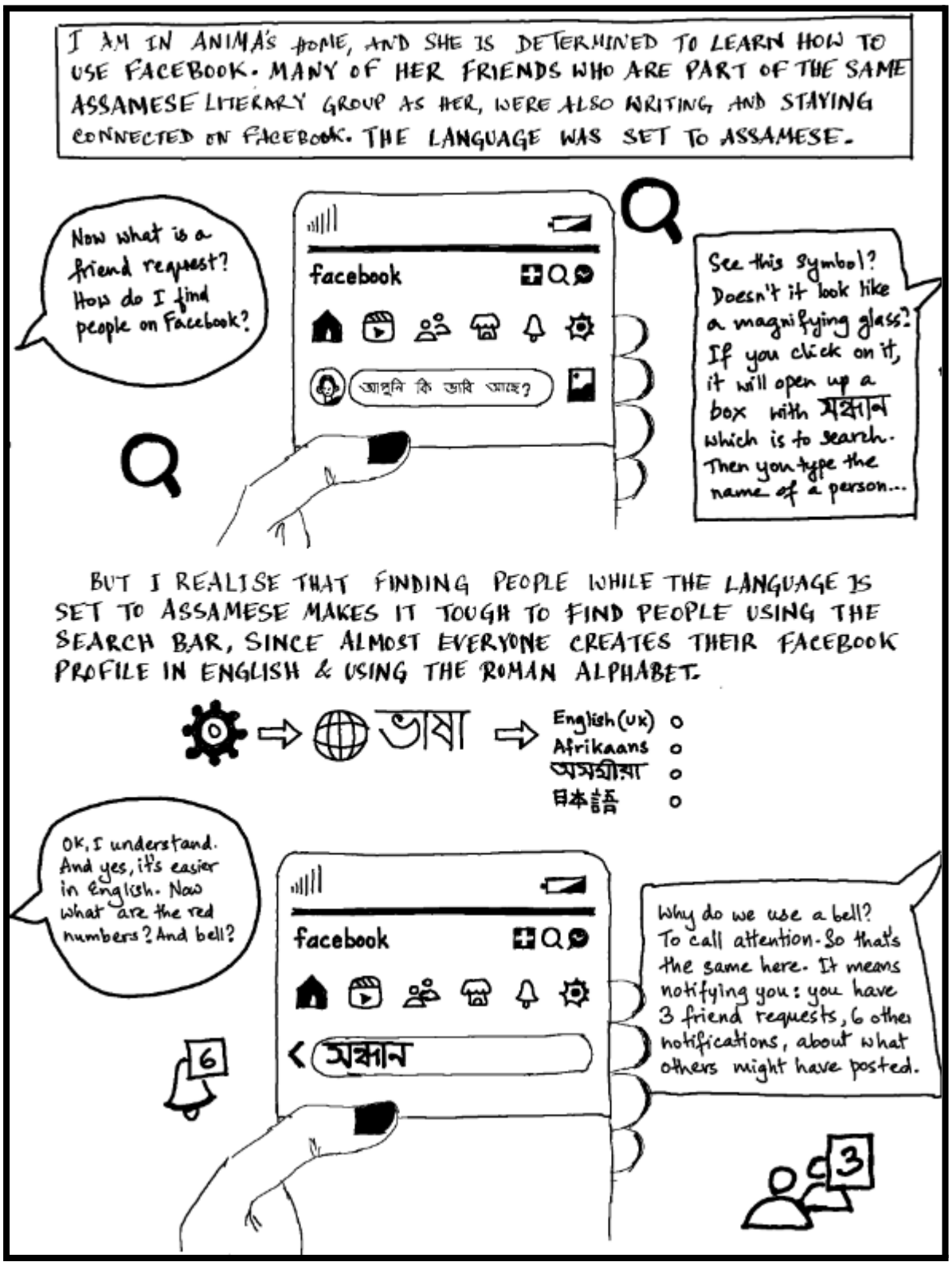
During my ethnography in India in early 2025, I noticed the high frequency of public service advertisements, to make people aware of the threat of scams and to not feel prey to it; prompting viewers to "use their 'common sense' against digital fraud" (Jha, 2024). Such fraud has been of significant concern to financial services and citizens — irrespective of age — who lack the awareness about digital security practices.

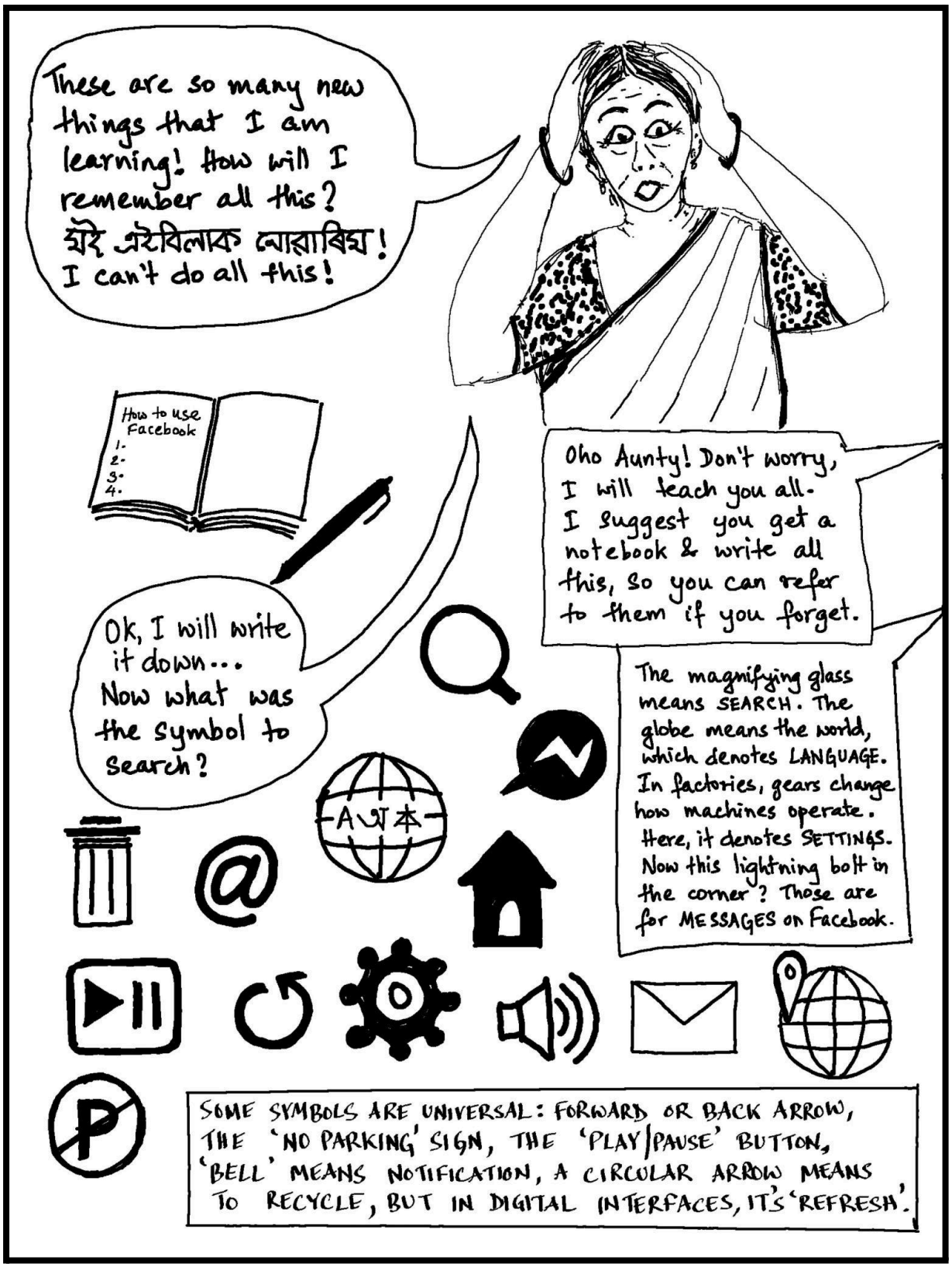
My suggestion that Sukanya did not need the third-party app like TrueCaller to make regular phone calls was unsolicited and yet imperative. Apps in India have been found to leave their data policy and privacy issues in the grey for the consumer (Kanungo et al., 2024; Dixit, 2022). Public service television advertisements, while helpful, fall short in providing answers to questions that might arise. Other digital tools might aim to prevent digital cybercrime, marking a form of technosolutionism (Sætra, 2023). But the presence of a human that she could trust provided a layer of verification when digital infrastructure does not meet its promised assurance.

The repeated warning messages to clear up space in her phone is another example of inducing fear of the phone breaking down. Such messages are similar to the spam calls, but in the pretext of offering a protective element. A phone's internal memory is limited, thus reducing the efficacy of the phone (Singh et al., 2016), even causing phones to freeze — a phenomenon that was noticed specifically in India because of the high volume of morning greeting messages (Purnell, 2018). With the smartphone as "a repository of everyday life and a memory aid" (Doron, 2012, p. 419), the sense of protection and care offered in the form of repeated messages by apps becomes extractive, when relaxed privacy and security regimes have given rise to the leakage of personal data (Shah & Agarwal, 2020).

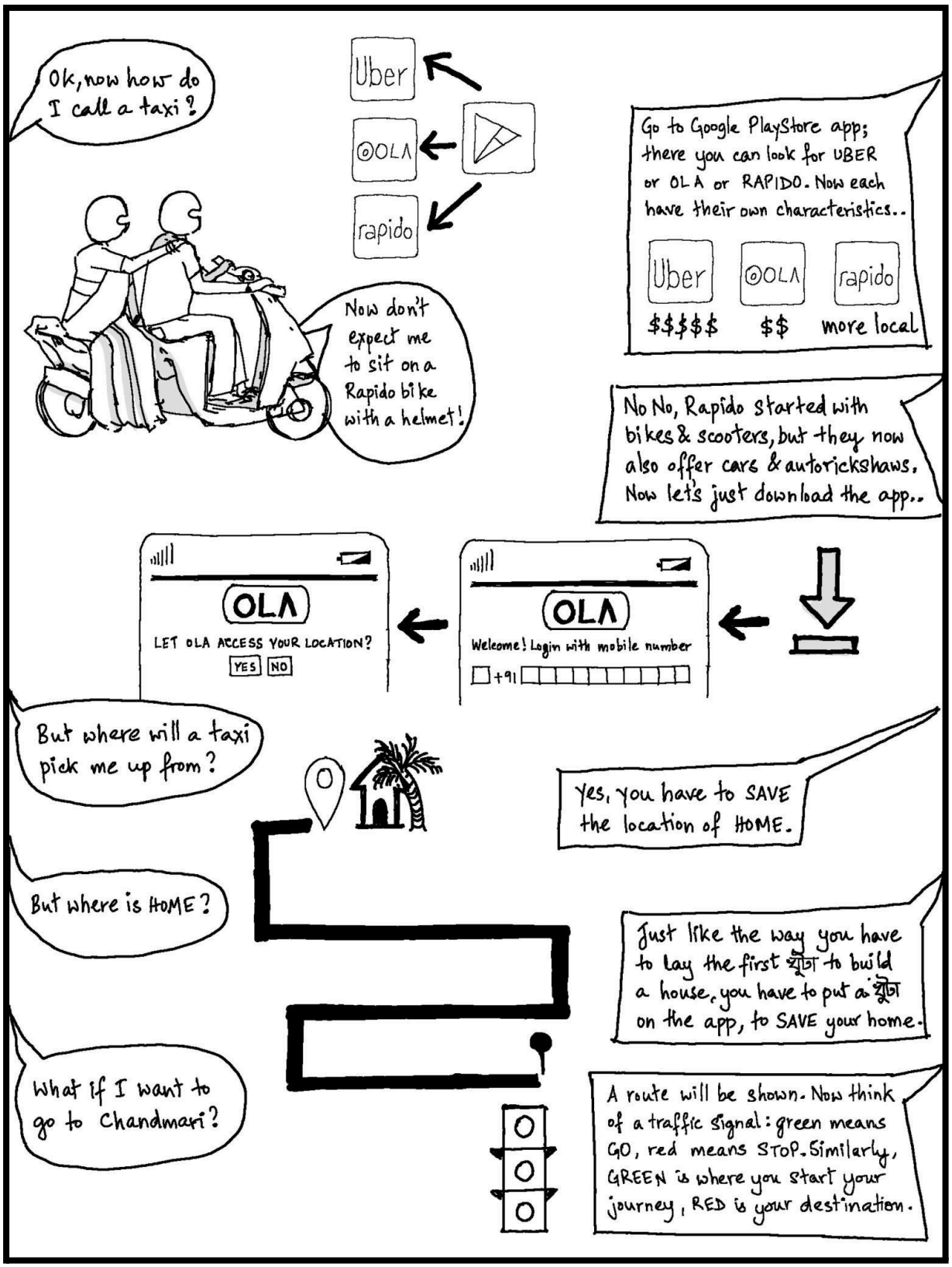
This is where I am deeply implicated as an ethnographer, who is not merely witnessing how older women navigate the barrage of calls and messages. My intervention — by way of blocking the spam callers or advising against downloading more apps — is not pre-mediated, but is part of the fabric of care within the ethnographic field. While third-party apps were eyeing profits in the disguise of care, the ethnographer was implicated in a realistic gesture of discernment of what pops up on the phone screen. Sukanya's desire to be careful is tended to by the ethnographer who offers a form of care by not only bearing witness to moments of doubt and confusion, but also intervening with situated authority. It was an act of knowledge dissemination in the face of limited knowledge frameworks that do not include the concerns of non-digital natives.

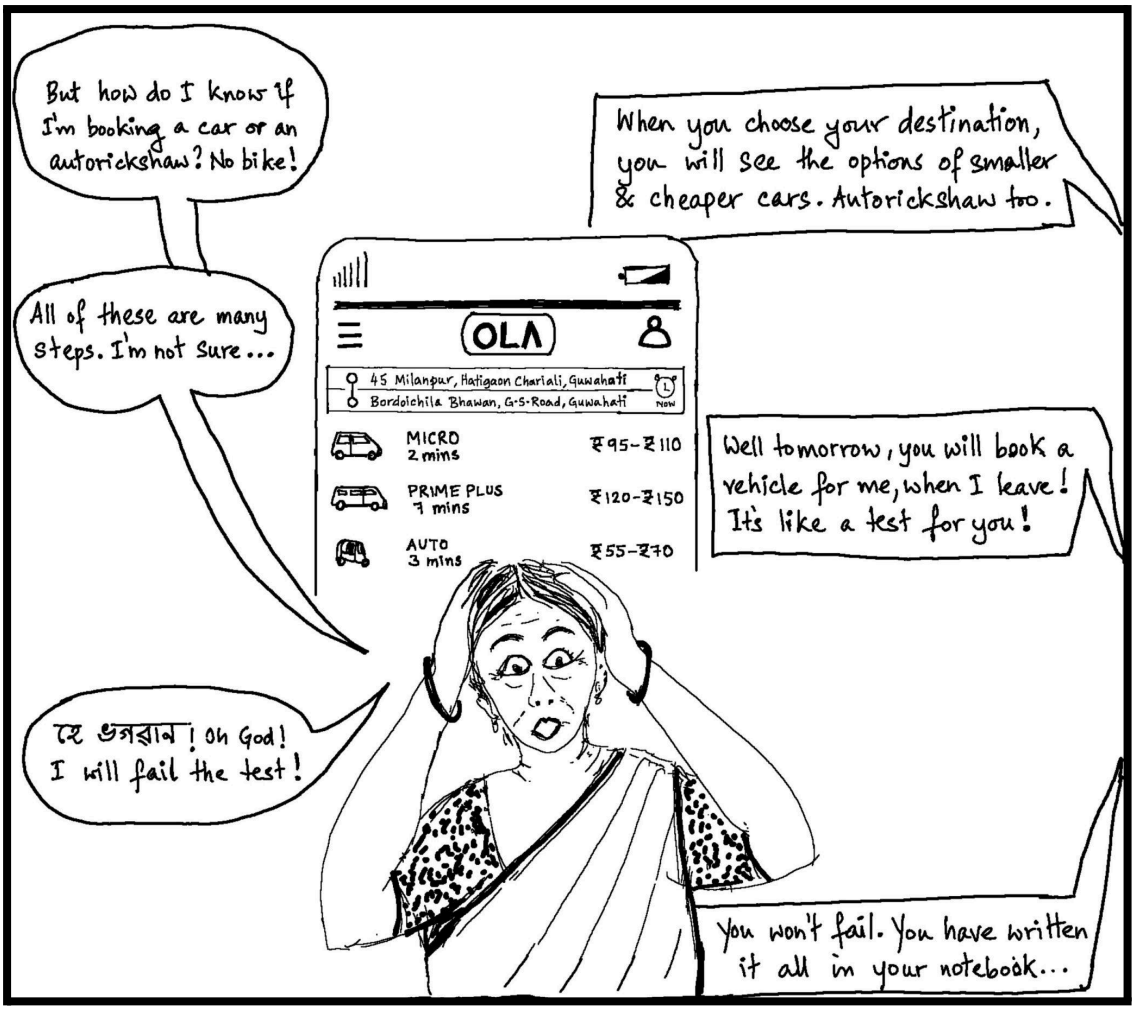
Testing digital language




These are so many new things that I am learning! How will I remember all this? হায়ৈ এইবিলাক মোৰাৰিম! I can't do all this!
How to use Facebook
1.
2.
3.
4.
Oho Aunty! Don't worry, I will teach you all. I suggest you get a notebook & write all this, so you can refer to them if you forget.
Ok, I will write it down... Now what was the symbol to search?
The magnifying glass means SEARCH. The globe means the world, which denotes LANGUAGE. In factories, gears change how machines operate. Here, it denotes SETTINGS. Now this lightning bolt in the corner? Those are for MESSAGES on Facebook.
SOME SYMBOLS ARE UNIVERSAL: FORWARD OR BACK ARROW, THE 'NO PARKING' SIGN, THE 'PLAY/PAUSE' BUTTON, 'BELL' MEANS NOTIFICATION, A CIRCULAR ARROW MEANS TO RECYCLE, BUT IN DIGITAL INTERFACES, IT'S 'REFRESH'.


WHILE I WAS WITH ANIMA, MY MOTHER CALLED HER: THEY BOTH ARE FRIENDS, AND MY MOTHER KNEW I'D BE WITH ANIMA.
I am getting ready for school now, to learn all about Facebook & Ola & Uber. Look, the আইৰনী even told me to get a notebook to write it all down!
Oh that's very good! Learn! Learn everything! আইৰনী is a bit strict, but she explains everything in detail.
Oh! Now I am a আইৰনী! An official teacher now! Haha!
Yes, she's explaining it all, but my brain does not work!
My daughter is very direct & sometimes has a sharp tongue, but she is generous & means well.
How to use Facebook


Ok, now how do I call a taxi?
Uber
OLA
rapido
Go to Google PlayStore app; there you can look for UBER or OLA or RAPIDO. Now each have their own characteristics..
Uber
OLA
rapido
$$$$$
$$
more local
Now don't expect me to sit on a Rapido bike with a helmet!
No No, Rapido started with bikes & scooters, but they now also offer cars & autorickshaws. Now let's just download the app..
OLA
Welcome! Login with mobile number
+91
OLA
LET OLA ACCESS YOUR LOCATION?
YES
NO
But where will a taxi pick me up from?
Yes, you have to SAVE the location of HOME.
But where is HOME?
Just like the way you have to lay the first ইট to build a house, you have to put a ইট on the app, to SAVE your home.
What if I want to go to Chandmari?
A route will be shown. Now think of a traffic signal: green means GO, red means STOP. Similarly, GREEN is where you start your journey, RED is your destination.



Anima's sense of overwhelm with different aspects of the smartphone is not only visible, but something so raw that it reminds us of the challenges with learning a new language. Suggesting that she use a notebook to write down details seemed like the most obvious way in which she could retain new information, and return to it whenever she might find herself stuck. That the recommendation came from her acquaintance — my mother — convinced her that that was the best possible way to proceed with learning something new and daunting.

The mention of symbols that she would be familiar with was a necessary way to get her to *read* Internet language. This was an (auto)ethnographic discovery: I found myself building teaching tools as and when they were needed; I did not enter my field with the intention of being a teacher, nor did I carry a pedagogical toolbox. I had to think on my feet about the best ways to communicate: the bell, the gear, the traffic light were random objects around us, but became touchpoints through which spaces can be navigated.

While digital-natives may not think twice about the symbols popping on a phone screen, it was necessary to explain to her why a ride-hailing app had two colours to show the location of origin

and the location for destination. The relatively quicker adaptability of new digital tools by digital natives reveals the ways in which design processes exclude a vast section of society who may not be digitally-native, or have other visual challenges. While digital-natives have walked in tandem with the evolution of the Internet language, people like Anima find this language to be a daunting one, and one without clear instructions, leading to a sense of "technostress" — which is one of the fallouts of an individual's attempts and struggles to deal with constantly evolving ICTs [information and communication technology] and the changing cognitive and social requirements related to their use" (Tarafdar et al., 2007, p. 303).

Showing Anima the meaning of green and red pin points on a virtual map on her screen was akin to an adult teaching a child about the safe time to cross the street: when the traffic lights turn green. This was thus not simply a gesture of role reversal, but of extending care when navigating outdoor spaces within infrastructures that are cemented with a language of a multitude of symbols.

The multitude of symbols meant that Anima needed constant assurance that she would be able to figure it all out, despite her feelings of overwhelm. This affective dimension of her learning process was a reminder of digital tools that could benefit people like her, but are not easy enough to understand.

When it comes to language diversity on the smartphone, there are two ways of doing it, based on the type of keyboard set up: the first would allow a person to type the word in the Roman alphabet, in transliteration (e.g., xondhaan), and they would be prompted with options for the word in the alphabet of the language (সন্ধান). The other option is for a person to change the keyboard to Assamese, and type the words directly in the Assamese alphabet (সন্ধান). But this might require some effort for words with conjugate consonants.

Anima did not remember how the language on her device was set to Assamese (the second option as described above). Even though it is her primary language, it was challenging for her to navigate the phone when it was set to Assamese: the word "search'" was simple and direct, as compared to সন্ধান [*xondhaan*] whose English translation is closer to "explore". "Search" has become a ubiquitous word within digital parlance that, at least in India, even anyone not speaking English, would know what the word means. Names within phonetic languages are spelled in a singular way while the same name can be spelled in different ways in English — leading to devastating bureaucratic consequences (Borpujari, 2019). The choice of using the Roman alphabet to create one's Facebook account is based on the presumption that the social networking site is situated within the premise of the English language. It underscores the way in which, even though Facebook has nearly 403.4 million users in India alone — making it the leading country in terms of Facebook audience size (Thuy, 2025) — it was not designed for populations that are outside the matrix of domination (Collins, 2002) like Anima: older, woman, non-English speaking, not-digitally-native. People like her are not only excluded from design processes but are not even considered as possible users (Awan et al., 2021), such that it recreates an ageist hierarchy where her knowledge is rendered useless in the face of

someone much younger who is well-versed with the Internet language. A digital tool like a ride-hailing app that could promise her mobility without needing to rely on her son thus renders her incapacitated when there is no clear way for her to learn how to use this promised chariot to freedom.

Anima's desire to keep up with the times did not limit her from exploring challenging digital tools. My mother's insistence that she learn how to use a ride-hailing app was a form of care extended to a peer living across the country. It was a form of quiet support and solidarity for movement that reoriented the idea of care beyond shared physical space, and an extension of ensuring Anima's sense of agency within her city limits (Datta, 2011, 2020). Less than a triumphant escape from the constraint of mobility, my mother's words were gentle redirection for Anima within her own city.

When Anima tells the ethnographer's mother that she is "*getting ready for school*", it is a moment full of self-awareness, humour, and the ways older women reclaim space in learning by framing it on their own terms. The dynamic between her and the ethnographer's mother, the warmth of the "mastorni" joke, the interplay between family knowledge and social respect: they softened the rough edges of a learning process for Anima, and speaks to how learning is rarely about the tool and always about the relationship.

Anima's assumption that Rapido was only a bike taxi service was an example of a brand's identity being stuck in the perception of possible users: people who would be comfortable as pillion riders on a bike taxi. There was no need for Anima to know that Rapido had expanded its services to four-wheelers, because she was never among its target audience. This is less about brands prioritising its resources but more about the systematic manner in which people like her are excluded from design considerations for services that are aimed to be universal (Costanza-Chock, 2020; Gonçalves et al., 2017; Jiang et al., 2020; Riaz et al., 2021; Salman et al., 2023).

In suggesting that Anima take up a notebook to write all that she has learnt, and in assuring her that navigating digital tools is not tough, I was not merely holding onto my notebook of fieldnotes, recording the list of her challenges with digital tools. But I was implicating myself as a daughter, a friend's daughter, who means well, in showing digital tools to someone like her mother. The ride-hailing app's prompt for three types of vehicles, offering a wide difference in fares, seemed daunting for Anima: what if she clicked on the wrong option and ended up with a higher-paying taxi? What if one click would mean a deduction from her bank account? It would have been irresponsible to leave her flailing amid those concerns. In embodying the ontology of doing fieldwork at home (Jahan, 2014; Narayan, 1993; Peirano, 1998; Waterston, 2019), I was not only looking at a common phenomenon with culturally-tinted lenses, but also conducting myself as if I were *at* home: being a responsible younger person within an intergenerational space.

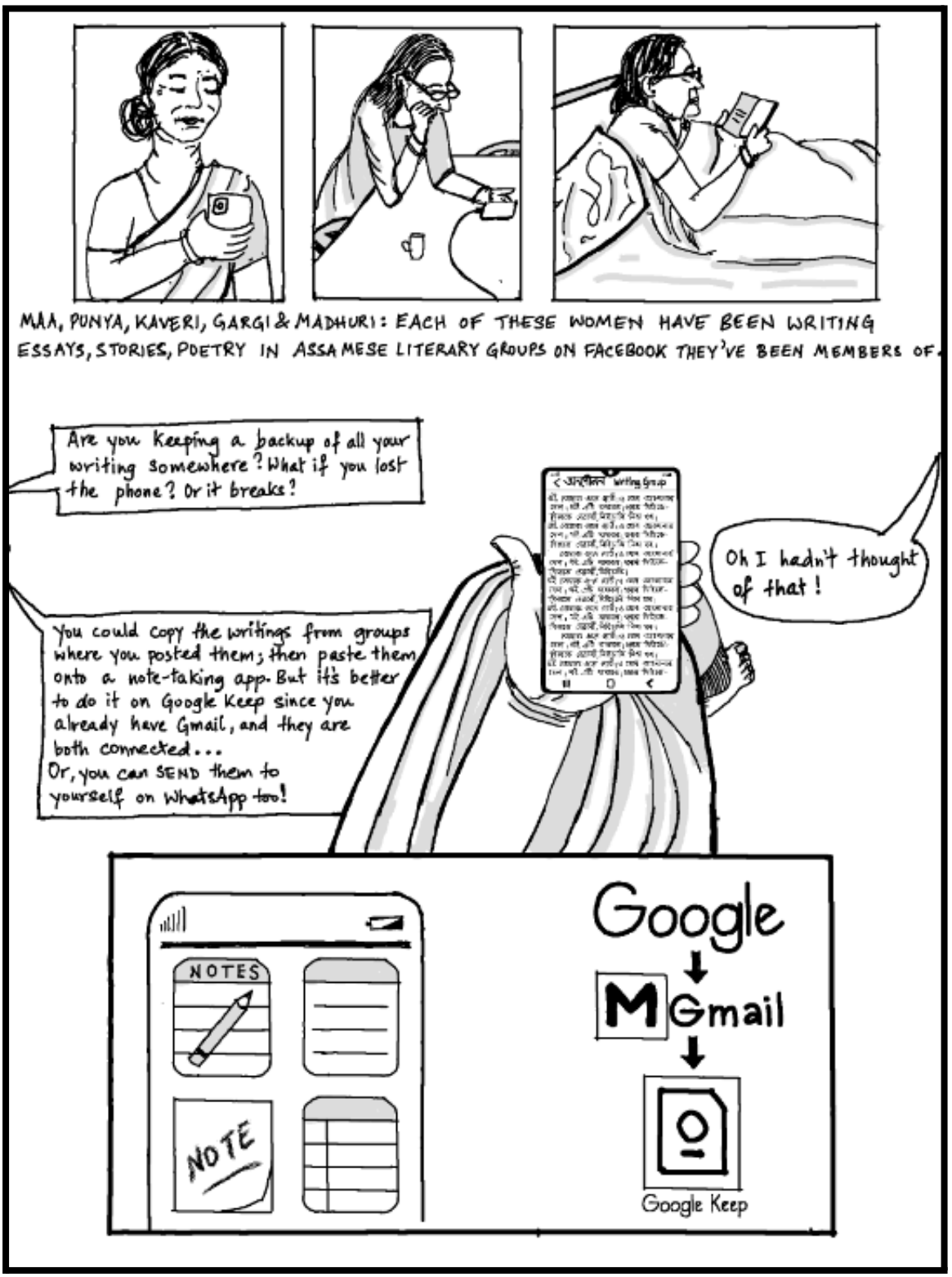
Teaching her how to use Facebook or a ride-hailing app was never intended as part of my research methodology. But sitting thousands of miles and several months away from my fieldwork, I see that demonstrating digital tools to my research participants became an intrinsic part of my research methodology, as I noticed how each of the women met with hurdles of varying degrees, in

relation to their phones. Some of these hurdles cannot be categorised as such: Anima had not even considered learning about ride-hailing apps until I had suggested it to her, which was bolstered by encouragement from my mother. But I had seen how with a little bit of nudge, the women were able to explore new ways to relate with their world, by peeking into the smartphone and all that it had to offer. As soon as I would explain my research, they would tell me, uninitiated, what they loved about the phone, what they hated, what they struggled with. In demonstrating what they struggled with, I was not the emancipator; neither was technology. But the gesture of demonstrating digital tools was as unencumbered as their offering of a meal, of a roof, of care towards a guest, towards someone younger, towards someone working her way through a higher educational degree.

I fell into the role of demonstrating these tools to them like a fish segues from the river to the sea: it was inevitable, necessary, and bridging a significant gap between who designs devices, who uses them, who is derided for not using them. My interventions into the ways they use digital tools are a part of the rubric of feminist epistemology (Harrison, 1997; Lira et al., 2023; Narayanaswamy et al., 2023; Smith, 1999) stemming from the desire to care, which becomes a moral act of noticing and caring-in-practice.

My interventions were situated within a specific frame of time: months later, over a phone call, Anima told me that she had used Ola only once. She was using Facebook more frequently, but only to read what others had posted. Within the rubric of temporality, the conversation on the sofa, with her notebook and phone in hand, there was a shared possibility of agency with her mobility. It was not a promise, but only a glimpse of co-agency (Glăveanu, 2023); mobility, because and through a ride-hailing app and with my nudge, was only a form of speculative agency tempered with time.

Preserving against loss



This sketch vignette is based on nearly similar ethnographic encounters with five women who populate my research. They were actively using Facebook to find their feet as writers, poets, essayists, which was possible because of the affordances of online groups (which I detail in "Housewife Literature"). Most of them were finding their writing acumen based on literary prompts that were posted within the Assamese literary groups on Facebook that they have been members of. Some were first writing a draft version in a notebook, then typing the text onto the online literary groups. For some like my mother and Punya, this meant writing since several years, often without thinking much about the ownership of their literary works. This also meant that there was no backup copy of their writings.

But what about possible data loss? This was not a concern that they had voiced but something that was deeply personal to me. A few years ago, during an overnight bus journey, my backpack containing my laptop and notebooks, among other important items, was stolen. In another episode, I have lost photographs I had made as part of my work as a journalist when I misplaced the removable and portable memory card. A year after my father died, I lost his old photographs to floods: something that he had preserved over several decades. Loss of my notes and photographs continue to gnaw at me, as every once in a while, I remember what they contained. At the same time, I was acutely aware of plagiarism of ideas, if not of entire texts, during my career as a journalist. Protecting one's creative output hence became my personal obsession, besides the fact that data was the new currency (Gates & Matthews, 2014).

I realised that I had carried the sentiment of this obsession to my fieldwork subconsciously, when I noticed that the women had posted their literary craft online, but had not preserved them. Loss of their literary works would render another form of erasure, when they were already writing against erasure; in a society where older women are written off. Even if writing for them was merely a hobby, it still merited preservation.

This preservation did not need any massive task of archiving. My own hacks of preserving digital data would probably be enough, and that's how I introduced them to note-taking apps within the infrastructure where they were writing: on the smartphone. While smartphones have their own native note-taking apps, I feared that the phone being misplaced or not functioning would also mean the loss of the app, and any notes on it. When they showed me their phone, the Gmail icon was prominent, even though not all of them used it frequently. But they had an email ID created on Gmail — which was connected to their Facebook profile — and this meant that the Google Keep app could be synced with it, without worrying about loss of data. Of course, this was subject to them remembering the password of their Gmail account, in case they had to access it from another device. But it did not make sense to get into that depth of information, and I limited my suggestions to them using Google Keep, by copying their texts from the Facebook groups where they had posted their works, and pasting them as notes within Google Keep.

Writing is almost a willful act by the women in my ethnography, even as this has to be preserved against losing the fire that they have kindled within themselves, and with the offering of a digital platform that continues to profit within the same monopolistic tech environment.

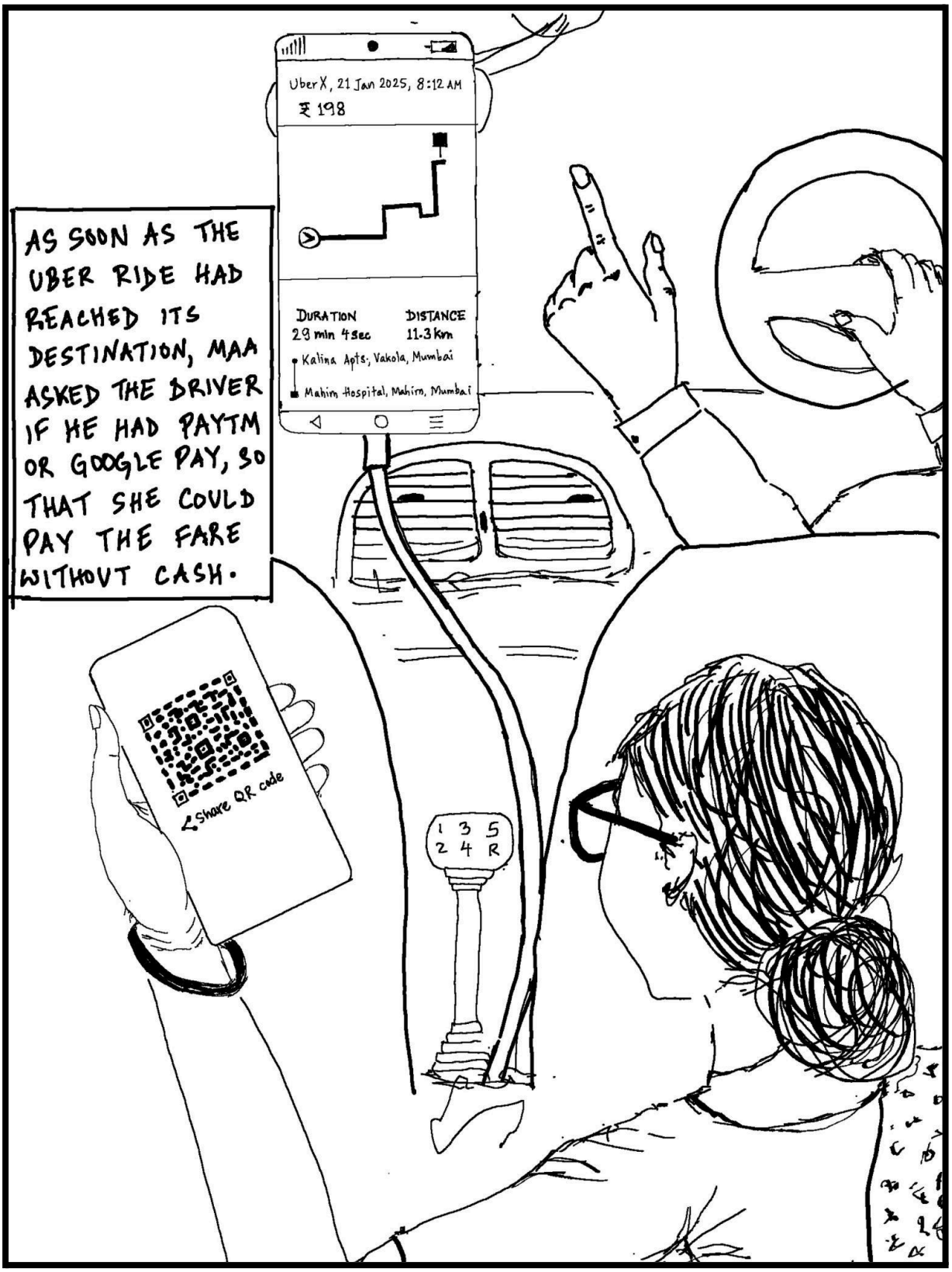
For the women in my ethnography, there is no instruction manual on how to use these tools. There are simple instructions on a carousel on the screen, but these are designed with the presumption that the person knows that they need to click 'next' to arrive at a new screen. For populations that are not digitally-native, there is a higher learning curve to get accustomed to these tools. In showing them how to preserve their literary works, I was not only getting into an instructional role that was not mine to fill, but also extending an act of care horizontally rather than vertically; not from a place of hierarchy. Sharing stories of my own loss meant that they empathised with that grief; they could imagine finding themselves in similar situations. In demonstrating my way of preserving digital data through Google Keep, I was at par with them as a writer. We were not operating within an infrastructure of literary residencies where writers support each other, but we were writers figuring out best practices to be able to write without worrying about loss of our work. This was digital infrastructure of care in the absence of built infrastructures that would recognise us as writers. This was thus creating a possibility of a co-agency enacted through gestures of collaborative care: something that they could extend to with other friends also on their literary paths.

This is where I was suggesting that they undertake an act of jugaad: wherein an app meant for taking notes could be repurposed for long-term preservation and archiving. The affordances of digital tools has been played with and expanded, by users across Global Majority countries (Arora, 2024), because devising such hacks is easier than waiting for something that could be most optimal. In inserting my own hacks into the literary lives of the women, I was not only becoming a part of their literary journeys but also carving a path for tech-enabled epistemology, situated within the politics of gendered politics and ageist assumptions. In downloading the app on their behalf on their phones, I was far from a silent observer but a part of the feminist epistemology where participation in the lives of those being researched is not marginal, but a key lever in the way they conduct their literary lives.

Ultimately, their creative life was an intellectual pursuit that deserved preservation, and in stepping in to do this for them, my intervention was a willful act against speculative erasure in the face of imaginary loss.

Role reversal




AS SOON AS THE UBER RIDE HAD REACHED ITS DESTINATION, MAA ASKED THE DRIVER IF HE HAD PAYTM OR GOOGLE PAY, SO THAT SHE COULD PAY THE FARE WITHOUT CASH.
UberX, 21 Jan 2025, 8:12 AM
₹ 198
DURATION
29 min 4 sec
DISTANCE
11.3 km
Kalina Apts., Vakola, Mumbai
Mahim Hospital, Mahim, Mumbai
Share QR code
1 3 5
2 4 R


Maa, don't worry, I think I have cash...
Uber X, 21 Jan 2025, 8:12 AM
₹ 198
DURATION
29 min 4 sec
DISTANCE
11.3 km
Kalina Apts; Vakola, Mumbai
Mahim Hospital, Mahim, Mumbai
No don't worry, PayTm will be quick.
But do you know how to use it?
I use it all the time!
I never learnt how to use it...
Share QR code
1 3 5
2 4 R
Because you were not in India when PayTm became popular. Meena's daughter taught me..

UPI — Unified Payment Interface — allows instant funds transfer from one bank account to another, via mobile devices. PayTm — like Google Pay, and at least ten other similar third-party apps ("UPI Live Members," n.d.) — enable UPI through the creation of personalised UPI IDs, with the additional option of a QR code for contactless payments. It ensures that personal information is safeguarded, while offering "a seamless, trust-driven solution designed for everyday use, offering both security and flexibility" (Kulkarni, 2025). PayTm, like its competing apps, gained prominence and popularity at a time when the Indian government was pushing for digital payments towards curbing everyday corruption. It has since become a primary mode of payment, as long as one had access to the smartphone, a bank account linked to the UPI app, and a phone number to link it all together.

I was living in Japan from September 2019 and was visiting India for a few days in March 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic entered our lives and I was stuck in India for seven months, when touching another human became the most dangerous act against another. Purchasing food entailed a new form of practice of untouchability, when we would put the cash on a dish, and receive the change from the vendor from the same dish. Debit card machines were covered with plastic, and hence often could not facilitate the transaction. I was able to return to Japan in October 2020; in December 2021, I migrated to Ireland. I travelled to India in October 2023 for the first stage of my ethnography. In the three years of not being in India, the country had transformed into one where the smartphone was akin to a wallet.

I was sceptical at first about adopting this new tool myself: the ease of transaction made me suspicious. But the encounter with my mother changed how I viewed UPI. While the driver said that such payments helped him to keep track of his hourly income, my mother was able to minimise her trips to the bank to withdraw cash. I knew that she had maintained a notebook over the years where she wrote down various "how-to" steps to navigate the digital world; the steps to use ride-hailing apps had also filled those pages. But my surprise at her ease of use of PayTm was not merely a moment of her realising her sense of agency in my absence, but was also a role reversal, in the introduction and demonstrating of new and emerging digital tools. She was now a step ahead of me, with financial mobility. Her physical mobility, which had been enhanced with her ability to call for a taxi using a ride-hailing app — which requires tending to several systematic well-coordinated steps on the phone's screen — now extended to financial mobility, which ensured that she did not have to rely on her daughter for cash transactions.

Over the years, in demonstrating how to use Facebook, ride-hailing apps and other digital tools, the daughter had become the teacher. Now, as if it was a return of the order of the world, the mother was back to being a teacher. There was no smugness about it or any specific expression of pride when the older student was now a teacher. Beyond the affective labour of showing how the world operates, the assumption of older people's slower and late adoption of digital technologies (Loos et al., 2022) was disrupted.

It was the mother's inherent sense of curiosity that nudged her to learn how to use PayTm in the absence of her daughter: her original "teacher". Learning how to use a new digital tool was a reflection of her own agency; but once again, it was possible through the affective labour of someone else's daughter, when her own daughter was not physically present. There was no expectation of reciprocity in such relationships; these were affective gestures of collaborative care. The moment called for demonstrating such tools, without any specific demand or expectation, in the face of constant evolution of digital technology.

However, there is no easy typology here of knowing how to operate digital payment services as a means to financial liberation. In rural India, unreliable Internet connectivity, limited smartphone penetration, low levels of digital literacy, and trust issues related to digital transactions mean that the promise of ease of transaction with UPI is limited (Meganathan, 2024).

Digital payments tools are not a saviour in an environment where varying economic strata require diverse financial services and payment options. But in the moment when my mother was more digitally-proficient than I, the norm of who has easier ability to access digital tools was disrupted. Such disruptions can be extrapolated to the wider Global Majority population that disrupt the Global Minority's scepticism of digital technology (Arora, 2024). At the same time, this cannot be reduced to a case of techno-solutionism (Sætra, 2023). It was a moment of disruption in the ageist assumptions of what older women are able to do, with gentle collaborative care.

Not all teaching is patronising

Several scholars have argued that the relationship between drawing and taking notes during fieldwork is akin to an ongoing conversation wherein they have laid the emphasis on a new way of viewing rather than the skills and ability to draw (Fredriksson 2023, p. 42, see also Ramos, 2004; Berger, 2007; Becker, 2007; Taussig, 2009; Kuschnir, 2011). However, I insist that my drawings are not fieldnotes but are ethnographies in themselves. Anthropologist Tim Ingold wrote: "Where studying *of* is a process of othering, studying *with* is a process of togethering" (Ingold, 2011, p. 226; italics in the original). My sketches *as* ethnography allows for a process of togethering, more so when the actions within this process were about learning to use the phone together.

The task of demonstrating phone tools to the women in my research is not merely a one-way transfer of knowledge, but an ethical, relational, and profoundly situated act. Upon reflection, it was not merely a way of being reciprocal for their time; I am sure none of them would see their own hospitality towards me as something that needed reciprocity. But if I were to understand how they use social media, it meant deeply immersing myself into their own phone uses; seeing what could be done more efficiently and helping them with things that they may not have thought about.

But communities are woven within assistance that comes along when it is not expressed explicitly. It was this sense of community that I was raised in, especially as a child of Assamese migrants to Bombay, and something that I sorely miss while living in Dublin. My parents received help and offered it to others, often extending themselves even without receiving a word of gratitude. It is not moral grammar, but an infrastructure of dependency and diasporic assurance. This is my autoethnographic truth: I bring my values and cultural practices into the field.

Demonstrating how a new tool operates is a complex fidelity towards community, and this is what makes it a crux of feminist ethnography: where the politics of who gives and who receives assistance is not merely a function of who has more knowledge, but is the moral grammar of sharing knowledge. Knowledge production thus becomes not an extractive process through ethnographic observations, but an embodied and affective practice of tending. In other words, I am asking: how do we help without overstepping?

Thus, showing someone how to use a phone app or helping them archive their writing is never just about tools: it's about kinship, care, reciprocity, and the quiet negotiations of authority and trust. The ethnographic moments of teaching opens the possibility for what non-extractive teaching might actually look like in practice. Gestures — of humour, notebooks, metaphors, video calls — weave a practice of affective labour, in the face of learning that is filtered through age, memory, trauma, resilience, and the emotional textures of being a woman who has helped others all her life. And I attempt to model what it means to offer something back.

This was not viewed as patronising, but as support, in the spirit of community. I carried this spirit as an amulet as I met each of the women, knowing that they too, when they were younger, had

spent their days helping others. There is nothing to be spoken here about boundaries, because that word itself implies two different sides. My offer to demonstrate how to navigate certain contours on their phone, as well as that which they may not need yet, stemmed from this aspect of no-sides.

Not knowing what questions to ask, to learn how to use tools, was something I could resonate with. It was not too dissimilar to me stepping into academia after nearly two decades in journalism, and trying to learn a new language of speaking, writing, analysing. The most useful and strategic guides to navigate this new landscape were in the form of informal conversations with peers and the few kind professors who embodied the feminist spirit of creating space at the table, to learn *with* them.

My demonstrating, or even teaching, of phone tools is not a supplement to my ethnography, but is a method: as the way knowledge is co-constructed, as the way trust is built, as the way of inhabiting others' digital lives without treating them as research subjects. It's pedagogy in the most generous, feminist sense: not hierarchical, not transactional, but slow, collaborative, and deeply relational (Freire/Ramos, 1972; Davies & Gannon, 2009; Hooks, 2014; Lira et al., 2023; Smith, 1999).

Such a method challenges the common critiques of "helping" in postcolonial contexts. These critiques cannot be denied, but what I show is that my approach is rooted in mutual care, in shared histories of hospitality, in an ethic of *doing-with* rather than *doing-for*.

Within the context of the ways in which the women in my research are not the primary target of digital tools, teaching them such tools, then, is not just a side activity: it is infrastructure. It is the ground on which my relationships were built, and the means through which my research participants became co-authors of my research. The many moments of metaphors, the decision to teach Google Keep over any other Notes app, the blocking of spam calls: these are all examples of delivering some justice to the dismissal of their existence in the realm of digital design. This is design-justice-in-action (Costanza-Chock, 2020), where technology is adapted to people, not the other way around.

These moments of design-justice-in-action brim with moments of humour, and acknowledgement among older women who aim to reclaim space in learning by framing it on their own terms. The warmth of the "mastorni" joke shows us how learning is rarely about the tool and always about the relationship. Learning as a process, and knowledge, circulates back: when the ethnographer's mother — once a learner — becomes a guide, showing her daughter how to make a UPI payment, and offers her own expertise with the same ease and grace that she extended to others in the past. These reversals — daughter to teacher, mother to mentor — are not about people being "taught"; it's a story about people learning *with* and *through* each other, across generations and technologies.

This chapter does not merely visually describe the digital lives of older women. It shows how these lives are shaped, made easier, more mobile, more visible, through acts of co-learning and collaborative care by sharing affective relationalities (Biswas, 2024, p. 96). It is not about closing the

digital divide. It is about showing a rare phenomenon: that learning can be a site of dignity, memory, and community-building.

Kinning Through Time

Her vertical village

Gargi's husband died in 2004, after being bedridden for several years; she was the one removing and inserting his catheter from his penis, clearing the bedpan and his bottom after he had defecated, wiping and scrubbing down his body and changing his bedsheets daily. A negotiation to tear down the house her husband had built and construct an apartment did not go as planned, and so, Gargi — along with her son — sold that house in 2011 and the space of land surrounding it, and rented a flat in the farthest part of Jorhat town where similar houses were being replaced by flats. She had put the downpayment for the flat she is currently living in, walking to see it being built, brick by brick.

She moved into her current flat — her permanent residence for her years ahead — in 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic. There are four apartment blocks; her son lives in one of them while her biyoni[31] lives in a third. I had arrived at this flat one February afternoon, when she had invited me for lunch. When I reached her door, right next to the elevator, I saw a small shoe rack, with two pairs of shoes. This was my cue to take off my strappy sandals too. I wasn't sure how life might be here for her, away from the comfort of the old Assam-type house with a baari [*vegetable garden*], sunny space to dry clothes, easy access to the door and the street, and a sense of privacy buffered by the front yard lined with flowerbeds. So, how has it been here?

"*I am immensely happy living here. There is no sense of loneliness here, because I have people all around me. And the* poribekh *[environment] is totally different*," she said. I was surprised that with just one question, she alluded to all the possibilities of what one could feel. This was maybe because she had been previously asked about the experience in different ways.

Previously, most vegetables would have grown in the baari, especially the wide range of green leafy vegetables typical to the landscape and Assamese cuisine; the market would have been ventured into for oil, salt, meat and fish. I assumed that it would have been a challenge for Gargi to get herself acquainted with a new market, and new trustworthy vendors. But I was entirely wrong. "*Everything is here at home! A vendor comes into the apartment complex, and shouts out the vegetables he has brought along. Because I struggle to climb up and down, I just shout out to him from the balcony and he comes up and brings whatever I need. It's been such a long time now that I have become* ghoruwaa [*homely*] *here. There is also a shop nearby; if I call them, they just deliver it to the door. For fish too,*

[31] Biyoni refers to the mother of one's offspring's spouse. Gargi's biyoni is her son's mother-in-law (or her daughter-in-law's mother).

a vendor comes here. So I don't need to step out to shop at all," she says, while bringing dishes from the kitchen to serve me lunch.

Gargi served me murighonto with hot rice, but only after checking if I wouldn't mind this beloved Assamese stew of a fish's head and lentils. I confirmed my love for it, and sought her permission to lick up the bowl clean after my second serving of rice. She laughed, approving this gesture of gluttony.

We looked out the window from the dining table, and saw a man climbing down the stairs in the next apartment block. Gargi waved at him; he would always enquire about her, as well as the other neighbours. She was most friendly with the young couple whose door faces her own. Down the hall is another younger woman with her child, whom she would see only sometimes. But almost everyone living in the apartment complex had come to check on her when she was unwell a few months earlier.

"*This morning, someone brought a jika [a type of gourd] from their old home! People here are very good and support each other. We even celebrated* Saraswati Puja[32] *and* Biswakarma Puja[33] *in the car park area, and everyone came together to organise it. There are eighty families here, across four buildings. Not all are the owners, some are rental tenants. But we say that this is our little village*!"

The door bell rang and her househelp walked in, to wash the pots and dishes, clean and swab the floors, and wash her clothes. I asked Gargi if she also washed the *big clothes* [bed linen and curtains]. She replied that there were washing machines everywhere. "*I just need to say the word, and my neighbours will wash them for me. My nextdoor neighbours are a young couple and call out* '*Borma* Borma'[34] *all the time. They would even carry me on their lap if they could*!" she replied, clapping her hands in amusement as she cackled, realising her own words. While the couple heads to work early in the morning, a man delivers their milk a bit later. Gargi collects the milk on their behalf.

"*I went to* Guwahati *for a wedding, but stayed there for twenty days. This couple had my keys, and they opened the doors and watered my plants, and got the house cleaned*," Gargi said, adding that she, too, has the keys to her neighbour's house.

After lunch and before she would settle into her wicker chair for the afternoon where she tends to rest, we stepped outside to the balcony where her clothes were drying. She waved to a woman entering the next building; two stray dogs lying by a scooter lazily opened their eyes to watch the woman walking by. "*I was the oldest daughter, and was the oldest granddaughter in my father's family. Then I was the oldest daughter-in-law in all of the* bonxo*, and now, I am the eldest bura [old*

[32] Saraswati Puja is a festival observed in eastern India dedicated to Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge and the arts. The festival also marks the preparation for the arrival of spring.
[33] Biswakarma Puja is a festival observed in eastern India and Nepal, and is dedicated to Biswakarma, considered as the architect of all gods in Hinduism.
[34] Borma refers to a father's older brother's wife. When Gargi's neighbours address her as Borma, they do so assuming that she is much older than their own parents, but not old enough to be an Aaita [grandmother].

person] in the whole family! And now here too, in the apartment complex, I am the oldest person! Can you imagine how God has kept me alive for so long!" Gargi giggled, her body shaking.

Does she miss the old life, when she lived closer to people from the bonxo? Regaining her composure, she shook her head and said, "*One thing: the way we are living in peace here now, they are not living the same way. We are doing well here, and God is looking upon us.*"

I noticed one of the balconies across from her: within that tiny space, a small garden had been created by its residents. I remarked how beautiful it was. Gargi nodded, adding that her biyoni lives in that same apartment but that her windows and balcony were not visible from this angle. Then, as if to compare how both the older women are aging differently, she said, "*The* biyoni *keeps running to her daughter all the time. She forgets that her daughter is a wife too. Even when I was sick, I wasn't calling my son all the time. My* bowaari *is also busy: she goes to work early in the morning, manages the house, and has students coming to their house for tuition. So she should understand her own daughter's stress a bit. But no, she would just go there and say, 'I am not feeling well today, and so I did not feel like cooking anything.' She should not be such a burden on her daughter.*"

Later that day, Gargi's daughter-in-law invited us to have dinner in her home; she had invited her own mother too. While stepping out the door, Gargi noticed that the young couple's door was slightly ajar. "*Let's go and say hello; they too lived in* Mumbai *previously*."

The young couple — whom Gargi had come to rely on more than she had on her own son — had moved into the apartment only a few months earlier. The couple were getting ready for dinner when we entered their sparsely-furnished home. "*I was telling my wife that you might have a guest staying overnight... there was a new pair of shoes on the* shoe rack *when I came back from work, and it was still there when I got back from the shop just now*," the young man told Gargi.

I was surprised how keenly this young couple were observing Gargi, even as they knew very well that her son lived in the next building. Gargi had told me earlier in the day that even though she had plugged the charger to her phone all night, it hadn't charged at all and wouldn't turn on. So she had gone knocking on their door in the morning, and he had shown her what was wrong. "*Can you believe how silly I was; I didn't push the* charger *all the way into the* phone!" she said, cackling, slapping her forehead.

When Gargi began to learn how to use Facebook on her phone with some help from her grandson, she also joined various literary groups following the suggestions of her sisters-in-law living in Jorhat. She noticed the support of her "*little village*" in another way. She said that she always had a "*bit of hand in writing*", starting with writing for the college magazine. A habit did not develop, but it was only in the two years that she had taken to writing again. "*I wrote one piece, and then another.* Laahe laahe *[slowly slowly], I have written about each of the four seasons."*

Gargi posts her poems on her Facebook 'timeline'. In the Facebook literary group, Gargi prefers to read and comment on other's writings. *"I mostly write my poems as my own* posts*, and*

everyone here loves them," she said, gesturing with her eyes to the surroundings: the residents of the apartment complex.

It was the young couple — not her family — that were assisting her with her phone-based needs more than her son. The next day, when her son came for tea and to chat with me, I suggested to him that he ought to save her poetry and her other writings in a safer tool on the phone, other than simply clicking the "save post" option on Facebook. He wasn't quite aware of different tools on the phone, or on Facebook. But it was her neighbour — and previously, her grandson, before he moved to another city for his education — that had helped Gargi with her everyday digital needs.

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Gargi's appreciation — even passion — for her new way of life exemplifies the minute ways in which older women reconfigure their choices and priorities, after a life of serving people. She has fulfilled her duties as a wife, tending to the vows in health, and in sickness. The affective relationship between a husband and wife is performed with care and untiring commitment. She is not merely a wife when she has to touch his intimate parts, but a care-giver undertaking the ultimate task of tending to a person's vulnerability. But such work of care-giving is not viewed as "work": it is a moral infrastructure of marriage where caring at the edge of life is considered normative.

Stepping into a vertical environment is a shift of her roles and the premise of her life story. From how she reclaimed the desire to study even after her children were born (as we saw in "Learning New Tools"), to reclaiming a new narrative of living in a "vertical village", the life-course perspective (Dannefer & Settersten, 2010; Danley & Lynch, 2013; Komp & Johansson, 2024) of Gargi's life offers a glimpse of all that is possible. The exhausted care-giver is now open to possibilities in living differently. The kitchen garden is replaced by vegetable vendors who climb up to her needs. It does not hint at physical erosion of an older woman. Instead, it embodies a social infrastructure where care is woven with and within economies of transaction. Gargi's life-course includes a move from an Assam-type house to this vertical community, from long-term care of a sick husband to collaborative and even playful forms of dependence, from the kitchen garden to food and fish delivered to the door.

Addressing a stranger in relational terms is common across cultures in India. But by watering Gargi's plants when she is away is an improvised grammar of care. In her absence, the plants are the prosthetics through which the young couple exercises the same care that they would have extended to a "Borma" related by blood. Gargi's ritual of taking their milk from the delivery person is a practice of everyday care within this newly woven fabric of community.

In Janet Carsten's work, houses are not just buildings but key sites where kinship is produced through living, eating, remembering and caring together, rather than through blood alone (Carsten 2000; 2004). Gargi's "vertical village" echoes this. The young couple are part of an emerging fabric of neighbourly relatedness that sits alongside the "bonxo" and the co-resident family. When they notice

that a pair of shoes has been lingering for too long, the shoe rack becomes the site of monitoring that arbitrates care through a simple act of noticing. Gargi's confidence about finding a washing machine in any direction, when she needs the heavier linen to be washed, is a complex fidelity to the idea of a community life in her "vertical village". It bypasses the assumptions of normative care when reliance on neighbours is a functional shift from what should be done, to what could be possible, when hesitation slips away. These gestures of entanglement with the exchange of objects and tasks are not premeditated, but they mediate social life and the many ways in which care endures in the absence of certainty.

The apartment complex has a majority Hindu population; Gargi's son had clarified to me that among the 80 families, there was one Muslim and one Christian family. Community building through celebration of festivals has the weight of Hindu pride, if not explicit Hindu nationalism. The village-making is thus possible because of this common bond through religion (Desai, 2008; Chaudhuri & Jagdale, 2020), in the face of medium-sized towns like Jorhat witnessing a construction boom, giving rise to apartment living (Kumar, 2023; Haidar, 2024). In such a terrain of chosen and celebrated homogeneity, culture is preserved through the enactment of rituals for festivals among hitherto strangers who are now a chosen family. Festivals open the door for a deeper connection beyond filial ties; marriage and household forms become shifting assemblages rather than fixed structures (Carsten et al., 2021).

But more than her own filial ties, Gargi relies more on the young couple for her everyday needs. That her neighbour is her everyday connection for her immediate need — more than her son who lives within the same apartment complex — is an embodiment of a relational autonomy. When she remarks about her biyoni's over-reliance on her daughter, Gargi challenges the expectations of dependence, especially in the mother-daughter relationship (Rastogi & Wampler, 1999; Ahlin, 2023, p. 19). In her work on families and AIDS in Botswana, Koreen Reece shows how interventions and illness redistribute care across kin and non-kin, generating new webs of obligation and dependence that do not always map onto formal kinship categories (Reece, 2022; 2023). Gargi's rebuke of her biyoni's dependence on her daughter, and her own choice to rely on the young couple next door, can be read in this light. She does not erase the vulnerabilities that accompany ageing bodies and slower mobilities. She does not ignore that dwindling competencies might result in potential burden on the bodies of the adult children. There is no evidence either of her son not performing his duties towards her mother. Instead, her independence resists the typologies of expectations afforded by proximity and moralistic ideas of caring for ageing parents (Cohen, 1998; Lamb, 2000).

The dependence shared between Gargi and the young couple is an act of resistance against the typologies of who *should* care for whom. In doing so, she is exercising a sense of agency, through an uneven and yet satisfying fabric of collaborative care (Biswas, 2024), but based on her needs rather than a possibly-paternalistic preemptive one.

Care here is not simply an act of offering protection, service, or objects in need. When her neighbours cheer for the poems written by their octogenarian Borma next door, they are not simply being effusive. Her poems connect with them in another sphere beyond what they know of her. The digital public — those "networked technologies and the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice" (boyd, 2011, p. 39) — among whom Gargi has carved a space for herself becomes an affective public; in the form of a hungry and encouraging audience. It is not only an act of solidarity but also of extending intimacies that are imprinted on an affective map of digital nodes (Ahlin, 2023). Her audience is cheering her new creative flight.

But they are not cheering from their balconies. In cheering within the sphere of social media and through the language of emojis and comments, they are sitting *with* her, and together inhabiting the digital. Their cheers are not limited to the walls of the "vertical village", but are heard and even reverberated for a much larger online audience.

Ultimately, it opens the possibility of different strands of kinship. Care here becomes a distributed, collaborative practice, extending to neighbours, househelp, vendors, dogs, plants and an online audience. It is a form of relational autonomy, where an older woman experiments with which ties to thicken and which to gently loosen, while living on the edge of exhaustion and possibility.

Diasporic witnessing

"*Eat this sweet; I got it from a shop nearby that sells* Bengali *sweets. They also sell our* Mumbai-type food like dhokla; dahi vada*. It's not bad*," Sukanya said, while serving me a white kalakhand with a samosa. I was visiting her in her Guwahati apartment where she was supposed to be living just for a month, to tidy the paperwork pertaining to the ownership of the land that belonged to her late husband. Eight months later, she was still there, waiting, waiting, waiting, for the papers to move between desks and offices, and for officers to open her files. A new app to streamline the process had somehow made the task even more onerous, when only some files had been digitised and some others had not, and there was no way of knowing if her files were accessible on the app or as, well, files.

Meanwhile, Sukanya had learnt to explore the neighbourhood of the apartment which was almost always leased out to tenants. She and her late husband — young engineering graduates with new jobs — had migrated to Bombay in the mid-1970s, and slowly carved a life there, raising their daughter, educating her to become a medical doctor, and sending her off to the US.

In April 2021, when the Delta variant of COVID-19 was killing people like flies falling to the ground, Sukanya's husband, too, succumbed to the virus. Through the next months, Sukanya organised the papers and files in the endless post-mortal ritual of bureaucracy.

Now, Sukanya was in her native home of Assam, in a flat that was larger, well-furnished, and with easy access to her ageing siblings; her brother-in-law lives in the apartment above her. And yet, at sundown, the heart gnawed at her; it was "bejaar": a sense of loneliness so deep that it feels like a physical stab in the heart. I felt it too, when my morning with her extended to the afternoon and beyond. I knew I had to stay the night with her; it felt wrong to walk away.

"*Somehow, I don't feel lonely in Bombay the way I do here. I lived alone there, I live alone here, and yet it feels different. I am* purona maanuh *[long-time local] in Bombay, so everyone knows me there*," Sukanya analysed, as we munched on the hot samosa. Her days in Guwahati were filled with errands: running to the bank, running to the local branch of the city administration, running to the post office. Paperwork, she said, had always kept her busy, even after she had retired from being a professor of chemical engineering at a college in Bombay. "*The calculation for our pension was wrong because the college had not received an updated document on wages. So we had to apply for the pension anew, which meant a lot of running around for three whole years. The superintendent at our college was a very nasty woman who made it tough for all of us.* Uff, *those days were horrible,*" she said, reminiscing how she never got a chance to enjoy retirement.

When I had reached Sukanya's home that day, she was very happy to see me; she said that she could talk to someone openly about Guwahati and its chaos. Not that Bombay wasn't a pit of chaos. But we were both from Bombay even though we were *actually* from Assam. Bombay is where each of us were rooted, and we knew the systems there better. Over the eight months of living in Guwahati,

she had developed some sinaaki [*acquaintances*]: a seamstress that stitched blouses neatly, the shop from where she bought the sweets and samosa, her recently-widowed neighbour in her apartment block. She had also become active within a WhatsApp group comprising women engineers like herself who had graduated from her alma mater: Assam Engineering College in Guwahati.

Sukanya had a daily list of errands around town. I wanted to accompany her, to use the time and space together for conversations, and to witness how she was navigating and negotiating old scripts of power in dusty offices. For her, it was a companionship, albeit fleeting.

We walked to the local municipality office, to have the apartment ownership transferred from her late husband's name to hers, to be able to pay the property tax. She had applied for the name change in 2022 with a fee, but nothing had changed. The office was a generic building located within a residential area. When we entered, she pulled out a neat plastic folder from a red plastic bag; the folder contained several papers clipped together into various groups. After a bit of confusion, the man said that she could pay for the tax for the current year, even though the name transfer was not complete. He asked her for a receipt that contained a specific reference number for her application, but she said she did not have it. The man insisted on that receipt; she insisted back that she did not have it.

When she paid the tax anyway, she kept insisting on a receipt. "Paabo, paabo," the man kept repeating ["*you will get it, you will get it"*]. Asking for the receipt was her way of reducing future bureaucratic hurdles, like the one she had found herself in, when the application-receipt was missing. Once she had the receipt for the paid tax, the man told us to go to the floor above, to speak to an officer, and explain the situation. I knew that Sukanya was getting exhausted, even as her eyebrows creased with a level of intensity that showed her determination to get the work done.

I walked a step ahead to talk to the officer, and spoke first. I said that the flat was in "*my father's name*" and had to be changed to "*my mother's name*", gesturing to her, and that the receipt from having paid one hundred rupees during the application process was not to be found. Sukanya then asked if she could make another application and pay the same amount; it was, after all, not a large amount by any means. The officer said that even as he understood our predicament, the computer system wouldn't allow him to look up the status of her application without the reference number that was only to be found in that lost receipt. "*We have never come across such a situation. Anyone who comes here, always comes with their* receipt*. So take my phone number now...*" He told us to head to the bigger office in Uzan Bazaar — approximately seven kilometers away — and make a new application, and that, instead of coming to this office again, we could simply send him a photo of the new receipt over WhatsApp. Thereon, he would process the application swiftly.

Sukanya and I were very grateful for this idea, and his generosity, and waited outside for the autorickshaw to arrive, after I had booked it on Rapido. While we waited, Sukanya said, "*It is very good you came along. Tomorrow, I have another task in the office of the electricity company.*"

As we waited for the autorickshaw, amid a stream of traffic of cars and motorbikes that wouldn't stop honking, Sukanya got impatient when the autorickshaw was taking longer to arrive. I had my eye on the app of my phone, so I could see the real-time location of the autorickshaw. Suddenly, I noticed that he had taken another turn into another street, such that he would be coming towards us from the road across us. I muttered this and Sukanya was ready to cross the street, insisting that we should be noticeable to him. I knew better than that: the autorickshaw driver would be looking out for us, and it did not make sense to move away from where we were standing, since he was the one navigating traffic and traffic lights.

I began to lose my patience but stayed put, as she tried to cross the street, when I shouted out to her that he was here, and pointed at the autorickshaw coming towards us. But it did not have a numberplate! I asked the autorickshaw driver why did not have one, and that it is tough to identify the vehicle that way. He gave a sheepish smile and said that the vehicle belonged to his brother, and mumbled some other excuse. Sukanya and I were too exhausted listening to such excuses that are common in Guwahati; we asked him to start driving already. "*It's so convenient in our* Bombay*! I would just hop on a bus*," he said.

Even through the continuous ghut-ghut-ghut-ghut-ghut from excavation machines at various construction sites across Guwahati, Sukanya couldn't stop talking. She told me about: a Chinese restaurant that she had found to serve good food, a meeting with her literary group in the home of one of our common acquaintances, how she went to watch an Assamese movie alone recently when she had no company, how governments are hoodwinking the middle-class by constructing more temples, how the water bill is three times higher in Guwahati than in Bombay, how people in Guwahati tend to waste water, how people in Guwahati are busy showing-off their new clothes all the time, how corruption has seeped into every aspect of life in Assam, how she had seen a video of the poor in one small village not receiving rice as part of free ration because their documents mentioned their names erroneously.

I was not a passive listener. There was never a dull moment with her; she was well-versed with recent news and analysed them critically. So it was not merely a litany of topics as the autorickshaw rumbled through the bad roads; it was a conversation that flowed through a city she was forced to make her home.

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Diasporic ties make way for a possibility of kinship as a process over time, which manifests across various spaces and incidents, and embedding itself into existing infrastructures (Norman, 2022; p. 93), allowing for a calibration of place-making while attempting to sustain the ideas of home and rootedness. Sukanya's feeling of "bejaar" is not a case of loneliness in a house that she owns in theory, but never inhabited. This bejaar is reflective of a complex affective map of nostalgia of what is lost

and what could have been, under a sky that turns dark suddenly (Dey, 2015); reflecting the limits of social networks that exist only in name or proximity. Migrant studies show that belonging is often distributed across multiple sites and cannot be fully reclaimed by returning to a place of origin (Gilmartin, 2008; Albert & Barros, 2021).

It is in this affective landscape of nostalgia, loss, grief, and anticipation that the weight of waiting for paperwork to be complete embodies a symbolic violence (Hull, 2012; Horton & Heyman, 2020). The missing receipt, the changing process, the app adaptation, the missing numberplate: together, they constitute a galaxy of slow systemic violence of bureaucratic delay where endurance becomes the only moral armour. This is where the arrival of the ethnographer — as an acquaintance from a life and a city that is more real than the current one in limbo — becomes a prosthetic for care through the years of diasporic assurance.

Sukanya's tireless work of assembling documents, seeking signatures and returning repeatedly to administrative offices reveals how eldercare is inseparable from interactions with the state. The meticulous management of her documents harkens to the precarity of living as an economic migrant, where pieces of paper hold more weight than personhood (Hull, 2012; Horton & Heyman, 2020). Years later, when she has to wage a long battle to secure her pension, she is upholding the moral grammar when institutions overlook human labour. Her intended short stay that turns into several months of anticipation reveals an infrastructural leakage where personhood is negated, and waiting becomes a moral practice (Janeja & Bandak, 2018).

The presence of an ethnographer in these scenes does not resolve the bureaucratic frictions. Instead it shows how care often takes the form of walking alongside someone through systems that disregard individual suffering. The winding conversations as the autorickshaw wound its way through battered roads is symbolic of the endurance in spite of the treacherous path through and towards bureaucracy. Sukanya's information about a restaurant or water wastage are not merely small-talk, but are moments of smoothening the frictions that are imposed beyond one's choosing. Her choice to inhabit her time and the city by watching a movie by herself in a city (Tripathi & Samanta, 2023; Phadke et al., 2010) that has not been her true home defies the logic of an older woman waiting at the mercy of institutional hand-wringing. She does not let the long wait gnaw at her days; it is a subtle assertion of a situated agency when none of the papers or their processing are in her control. The conversations throughout the loud journey are a subtle act of resistance: the excavators would not silence all that has excited, enthralled, shocked, or disturbed her. In sharing the stories with the ethnographer — whose presence is an affective crutch — she exercises an embodied agency in choosing stories that are worth sharing, and worth the journey.

My own multiple migration experiences have been exercises in bureaucratic endurance; the wait for processes that are untranslated and unclear have to be held alongside celebrating the explorations of new worlds. In those moments of my own waiting, when a translation app on the phone does not deliver clarity about bureaucratic processes, the companionship of another person

would have eased the frictions of migration. In heading to Uzan Bazaar together, my presence was not about providing any material or affective assistance, but the simple unspoken request of bearing witness to processorial debris.

Finally, I am deeply implicated as the ethnographer offering to ease out the bureaucratic edges by speaking on her behalf in an office where pieces of paper are more powerful than a person's word. The privilege afforded because of our socio-economic class — visible in the way we dress (Crane, 2000) — could have been the reason why we were not turned away. Sukanya's repeated query about an alternative for the lost receipt is met with patience and kindness, and not with rebuke and ridicule, as is the experience for those who are of a lower socio-economic class (Gupta, 2012; Bhoi & Gorringe, 2023).

Accompanying Sukanya through her bureaucratic labouring became an act of caregiving which involved such hierarchies and asymmetries, even when driven by solidarity (Tronto & Fisher, 1990; Raghuram, 2019). Such care is shaped by vulnerability, relational dependence and uneven distributions of responsibility (Tronto, 1993; De La Bellacasa, 2017).

These moments reveal both the privilege and the responsibility of the ethnographer in scenes where bureaucratic access is unevenly distributed. They also make visible the emotional stakes of research when the wellbeing of one's interlocutors feels intimately tied to one's own. My ability to claim temporary daughterhood was not an ethical stance rooted in malice, but was a deliberate utterance to alleviate Sukanya's exhaustion that stems from repeating the bureaucratic entanglements. It was not a premeditated utterance, but an attempt to defy the quick dismissal of processes that bear the invisible stamp of laboured waiting. It was not a transgression; instead, it allowed Sukanya to insist that the task be completed while I was with her. I was behaving as her daughter would; I was behaving as I would with my own mother. It reflects a reorientation toward relationships that could feel emotionally safe for older women who navigate exhaustion, loss and limited institutional support.

Within the broader argument of this dissertation, Sukanya's story highlights how older women's lives are shaped by entanglements of care, bureaucracy and diaspora. Care here is not an act that takes place within the home alone. It extends into offices, transport systems and digital platforms, and it circulates through the moral labour of accompaniment. The relational practices that bind Sukanya and the ethnographer together demonstrate how kinship is continually reconfigured in later life. It is a living practice that supports older women as they navigate grief, change and structural vulnerability through the edges of memory and materiality.

Nursing new bonds

My mother joined a Facebook group called Anusilon [*practice*] some years ago. That's how she encountered Kajal, one of the administrators of the group, who had become a friend to her. Kajal is in her late-forties; my mother is in her mid-seventies. They first got to know each other by commenting on the other's written texts. Slowly, the comments moved to the territory of texts, then phone calls, and slowly, a friendship based on mutual admiration blossomed.

My mother would tell me how Kajal's husband had miraculously survived cancer and a near-lethal COVID infection; their friendship deepened when Kajal and her husband would visit Bombay twice a year for his health checkup at the country's premiere cancer treatment hospital; the couple would always visit our Bombay home, and my mother would do what she is wont of when guests visit: cook elaborate meals.

Even today, Kajal's profile photo on WhatsApp is of herself and her husband on a beige couch and red cushions, and a light orange wall. It is a photo that was shot by my mother, when they visited her in June 2024.

I had never met Kajal. But when she learnt about my research, she did not hesitate to post my call for survey participants on Anusilon; she posted an introduction by stating "*One of our daughters*..." I was not sure if this was her being simply nice because of my mother's generosity. In any case, there was a sudden rise in the number of responses to my survey in Assamese.

As I made plans to travel to different cities and towns in Assam to conduct my fieldwork, I needed to travel to Duliajan. My mother reminded me that Kajal lives in Duliajan and that I should speak to her, to ask for recommendations on an economical hotel or a homestay.

"*Why will you stay anywhere else? You will stay with us*," she said over the phone. It was not a question, but a decision that was made for me; care and an ownership of addressing my needs. for my comfort and ease. This transcends the idea of access to a community that tends to dominate halls of anthropological inquiry: the access to a community was not one that I would have to break into, but one where I was consciously — with hepaah [*desire / eagerness*] and warmth — welcomed into.

That surely eased my own logistical issues with getting to Duliajan, in the northeast of Assam. Kajal sent her driver to fetch me from Dibrugarh railway station, where I arrived at six in the morning after an overnight train ride from Guwahati. The young man, with sleepy eyes and yet awake enough to drive again, drove for ninety minutes through a cold February morning past houses with bamboo fences; through a landscape where the smoke arising from distant rural kitchen danced with the morning mist. I was brought into a home where two stray dogs in their courtyard ran up to the car and sniffed me. As they rubbed their heads against my legs, Kajal opened the doors wide with her wide smile. The family had a breakfast spread ready for me: with the finest of Assamese ingredients, with items made of various types of rice, jaggery and thick yogurt. Kajal had prepared this with her sister-in-law, even as she was also getting ready to head out to her job as a teacher.

It was as if we had always known each other. She knew what my research was, but I did not want to burden them by staying the night in her home. More importantly, I wanted to spend the night in the home of Madhuri, my research participant, and head to Dibrugarh thereafter, to not delay my research any further than it had already been. "*Oh, is that so*," Kajal said when I explained my plan. She seemed upset, but also said that I could do whatever was most convenient for me.

But I realised that not staying in her home with her family would actually be the wrong thing to do. Taking her help by way of the car travel from Dibrugarh railway station to Duliajan would be akin to rendering the relationship as solely transactional. My inclination to avoid being a burden to her family was a mistaken one; a better way to thank her for her immense help would mean spending time with her family. Right after breakfast and after I had been introduced to everyone in the family, and had learnt the stories about how the five stray dogs became part of their family, I changed my plans and told her that I will stay there for a night, since I was enjoying the conversations with her immensely. They learnt that I love to eat pork in spite of being a Brahmin by caste; Kajal's husband then spent two hours cooking it, since he was the one who cooked it best in their home.

I went out to meet Madhuri and stayed the night in her home. It was after I had spent 36 hours with Madhuri — which included a dusty two-hour bus ride to Dibrugarh — that I had returned to stay the night with Kajal, with the plans of leaving the next day. But it all changed when I woke up shivering and sweating. I went to the kitchen, where both Kajal and her husband were making breakfast. I told them that I had a high fever and that if it was okay, I would sleep a few hours and leave in the afternoon. This time, it was her husband who made the decision for me: "*You are not going anywhere today. You are staying here and resting*."

A part of me was relieved that I fell sick in Kajal's home. My worldviews matched with hers: they were not pompous in their lifestyle, we both shared the angst about the religious-nationalist direction that the country was heading in[35], and most importantly, I knew I would be safe in her home. Not merely physically, but emotionally. I knew I was headed to an aunty's home next — where I have ancestral ties — but they were getting the house painted at the same time as her granddaughter's matriculation exams were approaching. I knew that the dynamics of hospitality had changed over the years, and I did not want to be an unwell guest in that space, even though it was as much my home as theirs. Kajal's home allowed me to be vulnerable with being unwell, and in taking the time to recuperate. It gave me the confidence to tell her, "*Baidew,[36] I know I was supposed to stay here just a night, but I am so grateful that I am able to stay here longer.*"

I hadn't intended to stay in Kajal's home a single night, lest I would burden them. I had decided to stay for just a night to express my gratitude by actively receiving their generosity. But I stayed in Kajal's home three nights in total, as she had her family nursed me to better health, with

[35] The religious-nationalist progression in India is in reference to the Hindutva, or the right-wing Hindu nationalism, which is beyond the scope of this research.
[36] In Assamese language, an older sister is addressed as Baidew. I addressed Kajal as Baidew because she is older than me by a few years.

several cups of hot ginger-pepper tea. And more pork curry. The nights after dinner were spent chatting with Kajal and her husband by a small fire they would light in their backyard, to keep their beloved stray dog Chikoo warm, as he lay on a tiny bed made of scrap cloth. A back-scratcher was kept in a corner: her husband used it to gently rub it over Chikoo's head, who would be lulled to sleep. For three nights, I watched how Chikoo rubbed his head against her husband's ankle, hinting that it was time for the sleep ritual, as we rubbed our hands together by the fire and talked about everything and nothing, and yet feeling like they were my chosen family too. I now had a home in this part of Assam; a home not forged by blood.

As soon as I left Duliajan — once again, in Kajal's car, even though I could have jumped on any of the buses plying every ten minutes — I called my mother to tell her that when Kajal and her husband would be visiting Bombay later in the year for his biannual checkup, she should insist that they stay in our home at least one night, even though they have access to her brother's company guest house at subsidised cost.

Of course, Kajal's home was massive, and there were at least three other rooms still empty even when I stayed there. Her husband's business was thriving, they had a small tea estate that provided them with good earnings. I knew I was not being inconvenient to their resources. Even so, compared to the hesitancy of being at my aunty's place — where it was evident how the middle-class in India today has become more individualistic and hence less generous — my mother's chosen new friendship offered me more emotional comfort than the traditional blood ties where generosity and service are the expected norm; that which also tends to burden the women of the house.

My WhatsApp conversations with Kajal continued; she was always checking on my well-being. With Bhindew[37] — her husband — the WhatsApp conversations are limited. After he described the recipe for pork curry over the phone, a scroll of our chats thereafter reveals only time-stamped photos: pork curry being cooked in Dublin, pork curry being cooked in Duliajan.

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The time I spent with Kajal and her family cannot simply be reduced to a digital relationality. It is a relationality that is alive, and holds space for the fragile, the unexpected, and the tangible. It is a relationality that does not need simplistic typologies of friendships.

My mother's hospitality towards Kajal and her husband was following an old pattern that is prevalent among diaspora communities, of creating a sense of belonging when we are uprooted — by our own volition or otherwise — and find ourselves with another that might peak our tone and understand the vocabulary of longing for home (Norman, 2022). It is an act of reconnecting with the roots when visitors from the faraway home visit; care extended towards those who might find

[37] The husband of a Baidew is called Bhindew.

themselves stranded in unfamiliar terrain. Such an entanglement is upheld by the moral act of feeding and hosting. It is an act of building community when institutional infrastructures of safety can only render walls and a roof.

My mother's bond with Kajal was the forging of a non-familial one; it accounts for the ways in which social life is ensured in the absence of certainty. It is a social life that is not held together by need, but expressed through uneven and undemanded gestures of mutual affection, eagerness, desire, intent and care. The intent is not premeditated but flows with time, as connectivity and connection thickens.

Social media that each accessed on the smartphone enabled them to get acquainted with each other. The smartphone cannot be simplistically romanticised as a digital tool of a new kind of revolution. It is a threshold that opens the door to care that is unasked for, to hospitality that is not provisional, to a politics of noticing and staying-with that refuses the cold economies of transaction. What this traces is the architecture of what remains after obligation has become diluted, after the extended family has receded as an affective infrastructure. The women in these stories are not making alternative kinship systems.

It shows that the forms of care that sustain women in later life are created through ongoing work across digital and domestic terrains. Feminist scholars of care note that care is not a private or sentimental act. It is a distributed labour shaped by vulnerability, reciprocity and a moral orientation toward others (Tronto, 1993; De la Bellacasa, 2017). The relationship between my mother and Kajal reflects this understanding. Their bond emerges from everyday gestures such as comments on poems, shared accounts of illness, and the willingness to open a home to someone first known online. These acts accumulate over time and create an ethical field in which hospitality becomes a practice of wanting to care rather than having an obligation to care.

Following Howell (2003, 2006), kinning involves bringing someone into a circle of belonging through recognisable acts of responsibility and recognition. De-kinning involves the loosening or redirecting of these responsibilities. Both processes are evident in this vignette: I am addressed as a daughter and treated as one through patterned acts of feeding, hosting, checking on my wellbeing and expressing concern. The category of daughter expands to include me, while traditional kin-based obligations are partially redirected.

That Kajal deemed a photo that was shot by my mother in Bombay as something that was worthy enough to be her profile photo says more about where she views herself as looking her best. Elaborate meals cooked for visiting guests becomes a moral language of hospitality, and later, care towards the sick anthropologist on the field. The hospitality offered is not merely one based on obligation, but of "hepaah" — a deeper sense of eagerness that transcends any notion of expected reciprocity. It is this hepaah that had receded within the ancestral home and the extended family, but was offered and found as a different moral grammar within a different micro-social.

That the first impulsive reaction to the ethnographer's illness is made by the man of the house reflects not only the generosity of the family, but also the ways in which his kindness emerges as a central operator of this moral economy. He takes on their potential burden of care-giving towards a guest through his gesture — and labour — of cooking pork curry. In cooking something repeatedly, he tends to the affective infrastructure of care, extending it to become a collaborative idea of care with the women in the house (Biswas, 2024), disrupting the typologies of what constitutes care-giving and who is the care-giver. That care-giving extends to the stray dog that had made itself home within the family. The back-scratcher becomes an artifact of care for those more-than-human, for those beings for whom the grammar of reciprocity of care is just rubbing on the ankle of their favourite human.

The safety of the anthropologist, and the return to health, thus stemmed from an unexpected friendship that had been mediated through the internet. Accepting care created a form of relational accountability that feminist theorists of care describe as central to ethical life. To receive care is to be positioned and implicated within a moral world (Gilligan, 1982; Raghuram, 2019). Even so, I am ambivalent in determining such relational terrains based solely on digital adaptation and digital connectivity. The smartphone is not the agent here, the people are, as implicated in their various roles in relation to each other. The smartphone is only a relay station through which other, older grammars of attention, care, and accountability move; offering a sense of community when an obvious one might be difficult to find or might have withered away.

This vignette renders a speculative idea of agency, when uncertainty becomes the air we breathe; belonging becomes possible through slow acts that reveal the conditions and responsibilities of being human. Kajal's photo of herself and her husband on the couch while visiting Bombay shows us what we can see, but the act of immortalising the memory as a part of how she is identified on WhatsApp forms the larger tapestry of belonging; not all of which can and will be photographed.

In many ways, there is no grand narrative here, and no typology to be built. It does not answer any specific research question; yet it lies in the heart of this ethnography. What holds together is not policy, ideology, or blood. What holds together are fragments of enduring practice: the phone calls, the meals, the message sent to the Facebook group "*one of our daughters*." It is in these utterances that we glimpse how life persists in the debris of institutional form. Care becomes a method of world-making. Within this lies a view of what remains when we no longer believe in systems, but still believe in each other. The phone thus is only a small enabler of something that has long endured.

Within the palm

The three vignettes in this chapter demonstrate that care and kinship in later life are not residues of earlier social arrangements. They are dynamic, inventive and analytically central to understanding how older women sustain themselves in environments marked by institutional withdrawal, fractured family networks and uneven social support. These stories refuse a nostalgic reading of kinship as something that once was and is now lost. Instead, they reveal kinship as a social and ethical project that is continually remade through acts of attention, accompaniment and generosity.

Feminist theorists of care remind us that care is not a private moral virtue. It is an infrastructure that sustains life while also exposing the vulnerabilities that states, families and institutions often fail to recognise (Tronto, 1993; Tronto & Fisher, Tronto 1990; De la Bellacasa, 2017). Gargi, Kajal and Sukanya each show how older women create this infrastructure through small and sustained acts. These include sharing food, monitoring each other's wellbeing, renewing long dormant friendships, tending to neighbours, and navigating bureaucratic systems that demand tenacity rather than offer support. Care in these vignettes is not supplementary. It is the organising principle around which sociality is rebuilt in later life.

Kinship theory has long emphasised the fluidity of relational forms and the power of everyday practices in making relatedness (Carsten, 2004; Howell, 2006). The stories in this chapter take this insight further. They show that older women engage in continuous processes of kinning and de-kinning in order to create relational spaces that feel safe, reciprocal and emotionally sustaining. Biological ties do not vanish, but they no longer dominate the architecture of support. Instead, neighbours, friends, digital contacts and the ethnographer become key participants in the labour of keeping life going. This remaking of kinship is similar to "digital kinning" (Baldassar & Wilding, 2020) which is neither accidental nor marginal. It is a deliberate response to lived conditions in which traditional forms of family care are strained or absent.

What emerges across these narratives is that ageing is not simply a biological process. It is a moral and relational project in which people continually reorganise who matters and who is allowed to matter. Seen in this light, kinship and care is not limited to normative familial roles, but is defined by practice. They show how social life endures not because institutions function well, but because people continually recreate the relational conditions that make life liveable. In the wider scope of this dissertation, the chapter makes a central claim: kinship in later life must be understood as a generative and ongoing form of social creativity, one that becomes particularly visible at the edges of care, bureaucracy and ageing.

These vignettes also challenge anthropology to reckon with its own dependencies. Fieldwork is not sustained by methodological skill alone. It is made possible by the care labour of women who host, feed, transport, console and accompany the researcher through illness, uncertainty and emotional

difficulty. This relational labour produces knowledge that is inseparable from the ethical responsibilities that accompany it. The ethnographer is not an observer at the edge of these care worlds. She is drawn into them, shaped by them and accountable to them.

This complicates the long-standing assumption that ethnography requires distance. Instead, it reveals that knowledge emerges from being embedded in relational terrains where care is uneven, improvised, and morally charged. The academic structures that frame research often fail to recognise this labour, even though it is central to what ethnography makes visible.

Housewife Literature

God's compassion

When Usha took me to meet her mother Rekha, an older couple were just taking leave; they were visiting to invite her for their son's wedding. Rekha adjusted her saador and began to stammer about how she did not have the chance to comb her hair all day; that there were people waiting on her to write something and send it soon. I excitedly told her how I wanted to meet her as soon as her daughter told me that she is a saahityik [*a literary person*]. Rekha replied that she had written a poem that day, and had posted it on Facebook.

"*Oh, but for Maa, her writing is more than on* Facebook*! So many of her books have been published*!" Usha interjected, as if to remind her mother of her own work that has been immortalised in books. Usha told me to stay and talk to her mother, while she stepped out for groceries. I looked around the flat, located in central Jorhat: a display case was filled with trophies and plaques. The photos of two men — one very young, the other much older — hung on the pink wall. Along the length of the room was a low bookshelf that held at least a hundred books. I looked closer, and they included the classics of Assamese literature. Some of them had her name on the spines. I asked her how many books she has written so far. "*I have written many books, but if you ask me how many, I will not know. All I can say is that I have written nineteen novels. Some are smaller because publishers specify how many pages. There is also a book which is a collection of all the short stories I have written over the years*," said the seventy-year-old, while walking slowly towards the kitchen to make me tea. Usha had told me that her mother had suffered a fall a few months ago, and was still recovering.

Rekha explained how book publishing is no easy or cheap feat: they cost 1.6 lakh rupees[38], with a print run of 200 copies. But many of the books are accompanied by launch events. In recent months, her fall, the recovery with the help of a physiotherapist, and her existing arthritis had added to her expenses. But even through it all, she said, people wanted her to write. A poetry here, a commentary there. She has had to turn down invitations to events outside Assam where she would be honoured, because of her health concerns.

She served me tea and biscuits on her dining table, located in a corner area next to her kitchen. "*In the evenings, I like to sit and write here. I think God has given me one* gunn *[skill / blessing], that if someone has told me to write something, I am able to write it. The story comes out of me. It is a bit different with writing poetry; I have to take a word and do* aamoni *[knead] with it*," she explained her process.

When Rekha was eight, she had written a poem, and the teachers were surprised by her play with words. When she was in grade seven (approximately at age twelve), one of her stories appeared

[38] Lakh is a unit in the Indian numbering system, and one lakh = one hundred thousand.

in a magazine read by adults. "*When we were little, there were not so many people writing. Some people would stand outside my* school *and say, 'That is the child who wrote that story!' But it's not like that anymore. Now everyone is writing! Poetry is not something that everyone can write. If you read the poetry of some poets, you feel so good. But you do not get the same feeling with all poetry*."

I requested Rekha to read me one of her poems, to which she agreed happily. She walked to one of her rooms and turned on the light, and was suddenly overwhelmed with embarrassment. "*This is all a mess*," she said. I replied that it was exactly like a writer's room: each of the walls were lined by tall metallic bookshelves that could be locked; a small bed was covered with piles of papers and folders; a desk was covered with notebooks and an assortment of pens. She looked through one of the cupboards and showed me a thin book whose yellowed cover page bears the sketch of an older man: it was a novel she had written, based on her father's life, who was a freedom fighter[39], and had organised an event for his centenary birthday. She offered me two of her books, each hardbound, but I apologised that I could carry only one since I had limited space in my bag. My refusal did not disturb her; she understood the predicament and told me that she could give it to my mother, whenever she might visit Assam.

Rekha had donated two cupboards full of books to a local library when they were honouring her. She pointed to the desk in her room; she wrote there, as well as on the dining table, as well as on her bed, in another room. "*I don't know how to use a* computer*, so I write on paper. A boy comes to fetch the paper and make them into* DTP[40] *copies*."

"*But it is such a big thing to have a writing space of your own*!" I remarked, with some envy but with a great deal of awe, in noticing how she had allocated the spaces in her home, where she lived alone, following the death of her husband several years ago.

"*But I have kept them so dirty and messy!* Usha *gets very angry: I keep the poetry and novels all together in a folder. A* publisher *from* Guwahati *has said he will publish the recent poetry together. But all of this compilation takes a lot of work. I got the* DTP *done for all of them. Here... let me read these poems for you*," she said, drawing out a stack of printed sheets and bringing them to the dining table. She read them aloud; her words carrying the grief of losing her youngest son in his prime.

She had also posted the poem on Facebook, and pulled her phone to show it to me. But instead of texts, she had photographed those printed pages and uploaded them as images, such that some of those were hazy and the print was not clear. I asked her if I could add her as a 'Friend' on Facebook; she was not clued into the details of how that is done, and told me to do it instead. I sent her a Friend request from my phone, and then accepted that request from her phone. Her interests lay in writing poems more than figuring out new technology.

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[39] Freedom fighters are recognised by the Government of India for having participated in India's freedom movement, and receive pension and other social benefits.

[40] DTP is desktop publishing. Most local printing shops in India are called Xerox shops, eponymous to the photocopier brand. In the past, these shops also did DTP work to convert handwritten text to printed material, and since Rekha does not use a computer, she continues to follow the old process.

I wondered aloud how a lot of women were able to pursue something of their own — even writing — only after they became aajori [*free*]. I said how society tends to not expect older women to do anything beyond the narrow scope of their home and their family; that society expects an older woman — especially after her husband has died — to simply get older and become less relevant. But here, Rekha was writing actively, regularly, and productively. What did she think of this?

"*I don't know about other women but I can only tell you about myself: if I did not have the pen, I would feel so lonely! People ask whether I feel bad about living alone, and I say, not at all. My father never prohibited me from doing anything. If I sat and chatted with him, he would say, 'Why don't you go and write instead of talking? Later you will complain that you have no time to write!' And here, my husband never prohibited me from going out, and let me write. I would write and leave my papers around, before rushing to any literary meeting. And you know what he would do? I feel so sad when I remember it now... he would keep them all* saapi-saapi *[tidy them up neatly]. He would later say, 'I have filed the papers now, and won't file them again in future! You were writing a story; why did you leave it like that, with the papers scattered?' I wouldn't say anything, and I would leave them scattered again. But he would always file them and keep them neatly,*" Rekha said, leafing through her papers.

I remarked that this was massive support she had received and that it was rare. She agreed, and then tired her eyes lit up: "*You know, in* Jorhat*, I am the first woman* sahityik [*literature person*] pensioner[41]! *I used to never say this aloud, but now that I am old, I can say it openly*." Seeing my eyes become wide upon hearing this, she detailed the process: "*There was a form to apply. I had to list my published books. By then — it was 2004 — I had 10 books published. So I told my husband about it; I also got the encouragement of a professor from Gauhati University. I had to also gather the clippings of wherever my writings had appeared, and my biodata; my husband edited the documents, got the DTP done, helped me with the form, and sent it by post. And then I forgot about it. During my morning walk with my husband, we walked by a shop with newspapers, and there was news about it: Rekha Baruah and Ratul Bora[42] were the two recipients of the pension from Jorhat*!" She slapped the table with the last statement, with her jubilant voice suddenly loud, as she shared the day she had read that news. It was almost as if her body remembered that joy.

"*My husband left home just before nine in the morning, to be the first customer when the sweetmeat shop would open."* The whole day was full of guests, and sweets for them.

Rekha will thus continue to receive a pension, until her death, for her work of writing; or more accurately, in the Assamese parlance, her work of "doing literature". Above her dining table is a framed black and white photo. While we were talking, Rekha's eyes suddenly caught a glimpse of that frame. The photo is that of Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, considered one of the pioneers of modern

[41] The Education department of the government of Assam awards a pension to writers: https://dheliterarypension.assam.gov.in/
[42] Name changed

Assamese literature. "*I bow down to his photo every day; he was such a* guni maanuh *[man of skills and virtue].... If we had received all the* xubidha *[convenience / opportunities], we could have been writers like Rupali Raisom*[43]*. She could write so much and go so far. But we were married off so early... I had just turned eighteen, and enrolled in college after I got married. I was studying while I was pregnant. He [her husband] took a month's leave from work. I went to college until the time Usha was born. I have a friend who remembers this and says that while my husband took leave from work for the child's birth, I kept going to college! At that time, there was no concept of a Caesarean section; so within three days of giving birth, I went home.* Usha *was such a cute baby and people would come to see her, but I would tell them that I have to study for my exam! She was just a month old when I had my exams. Somehow I passed!*"

Rekha's second child was born soon after, and after several years, her son was born (who died from drowning when he was 15). She did not take up a job, but was always busy: her writings were being published. "*When they were babies, once they were washed and fed, they would sleep for several hours. So I could write then. Once they started* school*, it became tough*," she reminisced. She would fetch her daughters from school and head to the residence of another renowned writer, seeking his feedback on some of her writings. "*Somehow I found the time to write even when they were little. I don't know how; it was God's* koruna *[compassion]*."

And what about now: Did she follow a schedule? Will her schedule be something that wannabe writers will want to emulate someday, similar to the daily routines of other famous writers[44]?

"*I don't know what God is doing to me, but I like to write in the mornings. But I don't get much time with all the chores. I wake up, drink water, have a pill for* thyroid *[sic], then have tea, then have the pill for my* blood pressure*, then read the newspaper, and then if I get some time, I write a bit...*"

I couldn't help but share with Rekha my own challenges with writing; with procrastinating and imposter syndrome. Even though I had just met her, I felt myself being vulnerable before her: of feeling stuck, of feeling burdened by innumerable worries, of unable to write. Did she ever feel stuck?

"*Yes, that happens. Those times, I don't write. I just read other books. But it is important to develop a habit of being able to write wherever you sit. This is God's* koruna *[compassion] towards me. If I travel, I never go without my pens, pencils, books and notebooks. Never! It does not matter if I don't end up writing there, but I must carry them along*," she said.

Months after the encounter, I called her for Diwali. She told me that her arthritis was worsening, and that the only physiotherapist was in Dergaon, an hour's drive away. The fees were also very high. Her younger brother kept inviting her to Guwahati, and she had been wanting to go there since a long time: there are more publishers there. But she was worried about the long journey of

[43] Indira Goswami — better known as Mamoni Raisom — was the first Assamese woman writer to win the Jnanpith Award, in 2001. The Jnanpith Award is India's highest national literary award.
[44] The Daily Routines of Great Writers: https://www.themarginalian.org/2012/11/20/daily-routines-writers/

seven hours on the road, owing to her health. A train would be impossible, in the absence of an elevator or escalator in Jorhat railway station. "*Besides, I am not able to sit and write in someone else's space. My brother has arranged everything for me to be comfortable there, but there is no comfort like one's own home, where one can sit and write*."

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Set within gendered norms of the expectations of a woman as a wife and mother, Rekha's story of persisting to write against all odds disrupts the narrative of women's constraints as being all encompassing. It reveals the terrain of the resistance that is possible when a woman takes charge of her desires. For Rekha, the pen is the lever that enables such desires to be fulfilled. Her story is one of defiance and refusal braided together, as she carves an identity for herself beyond being just a housewife. Her defiance is exercised through many moments of refusal across her lifetime.

That she did not have a chance to tidy up her hair or clothes before the arrival of unexpected guests is not callous; it is emblematic of a woman who is so engrossed in her writing that the supposedly-womanly task of tending to her looks is secondary. The trophies lining her wall are not rusty objects from a time gone by, but are alive in their sheen: she is still avidly writing, and still receiving accolades for her work as a writer, and that takes centre-stage in her life.

But writing is a talent that she does not take for granted: it is a skill that she has honed over the years. Her attribution to God is her humility; her "doing aamoni" or kneading with an idea until the words flow is testimony to her defiance of a culture where a woman is only expected to knead flour for roti and be a housewife.

The organisation of her flat shows how creativity is embedded in domestic arrangements. Bookshelves, locked cupboards, the dining table and the bed form a dispersed writing infrastructure. The same rooms that anchor the gendered labour of cooking, hosting and caring also support reading, drafting and revision. Rekha is embarrassed that her writing room is messy. But that embarrassment is only a polite gesture: it is half apology, half refusal. The paper folders on the bed work fine for her. The so-called mess is a visible trace of a life in which literary work has not been relegated to the margins of household time, but has quietly taken priority over expected standards of feminine tidiness. The objects create the subject (Miller, 2008), and these objects have been curated to meet her desires.

Her success as a writer is not merely a triumph of free will, but is a result of the encouragement of the men in her life: her father, her husband, the professor. Within a patriarchal society where gendered norms continue to have a stronghold on women's lives, their gestures of admonition are moments where they express encouragement. Her husband compiled her scattered writing pages, admonishing her by saying that he wouldn't tidy them again. But she continued to leave her pages astray, he continued to tidy them. It was an act of care that is typical of women supporting their intellectual husbands (Pavalko & Elder, 1993; Dhania et al., 2022), but here, the

gendered script is flipped. Her husband keeping her papers “saapi-saapi” was a gesture not only of spousal care; but of domestic labour and symbolic recognition. His support did not undo broader gendered inequalities. But it is within such asymmetries that her authorship becomes sustainable. This is not a story of a woman who succeeded despite men, but of a woman whose agency emerged through a particular configuration of care, obligation and encouragement in a patriarchal society, such that it can almost be viewed as a form of resistance that is quiet and has the potential for a long-term tectonic shift in fossilised gendered scripts (Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2008).

Rekha’s refrain that writing is God’s compassion is not only a devotional statement. It is a way to speak about her own ability without appearing presumptuous in a setting where older women are rarely authorised to claim intellectual achievement outright. The divine here condenses many other forces: a supportive father, a husband who quietly archived her scattered pages, publishers who recognised her work, and a State that eventually granted her a pension.

She leaned on her husband — and the professor — for support. It was perhaps luck that she received the support. Her ability to express her agency through her desire to be a writer is hence not one exercised in isolation, but a “co-agency” (Glăveanu, 2023, p. 5): what was possible depended on her relationships with her environments. The co-agency is visible when her husband helps her with the application to secure a writer’s pension. Being granted a lifelong pension sits within the feminist gerontological framework of public policies, especially those pertaining to how older people are cared for (Calasanti, 2004).

The writer’s pension situates Rekha at the intersection of intimate relationships and state recognition. To receive money from the government for “doing literature” in old age is to be reclassified from housewife to professional, at least in bureaucratic terms. Yet this institutional honour arrives after a lifetime in which writing had to be squeezed between pregnancies, childcare, the death of a son, and chronic pain. Her narrative invites us to think of ageing not simply as decline, but as a shifting moral status in which the value of a woman’s intellectual labour becomes visible only belatedly, when most of the work is already behind her.

Together, these strands reveal that ageing is not just a biological fate but a moral and political relation, structured by gendered labour regimes, caste and class hierarchies. Such a life course perspective helps us understand how Rekha’s life is “affected by the circumstances and actions of others” (Dannefer & Settersten, 2010, p. 4).

The many decisions to pursue writing, day after day, is her willful act in the face of what is expected of women in a patriarchal world (Ahmed, 2014). It was not something that she had decided later in life, once she was free from the burdens of raising children. She wrote her college exams while bearing a child in her body; she wrote when the toddlers were fed and asleep; she now writes through the aches that attempt to limit her ageing body. That she prefers the comfort of her own home to continue her writing, over the comfort of her brother’s watchful eye, is her willful act against what is expected of older women. She does not simply lean on God’s compassion towards her, but she also

seizes it with all her might. In doing so, there is a sense of empowerment, visible through the series of processes that have enabled Rekha the ability to make choices. She continues to tend to the laboured roles and obligations of being a wife and mother, but sees that another life is possible for her: the life as a writer. For Rekha, alternatives exist in the abstract, but more importantly, they have been also visible (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14).

In learning about her journey as a writer and sharing my own vulnerabilities as a wannabe writer, I was no longer an objective observer. I unabashedly sought out her wisdom, as an elder of the community. This quest for her tips on how to navigate my own challenges is not a gesture of extractive anthropology. Instead, it is a gesture — albeit impulsive — where culture meets the moment of hunger for answers. It is an act of reverence, of not only noticing and respecting the wins of elders, but a sense of kinship that becomes visible in the non-specific terrain of intergenerational passage of knowledge. It becomes an affective moment of care that is asked for without inhibition; and it becomes a moment of care in the form of passing wisdom, which is the perhaps highest form of intergenerational care, by tending to the needs of a community's children.

Birthing books

At school, Kaveri had won story writing competitions. The prizes she had won were books. The prizes had been kept safely, until she got married and had moved away from her maternal home in Teok, just an hour north of Jorhat. She still remembers the name of one of the books she had won: "Aami Ubhoti Saau" ["*We Look Back in Retrospect*"]. When her parents passed away, and the house was turned upside-down by her brothers to accommodate their families, the books were lost.

Kaveri's husband worked in one of the three public sector oil companies. That meant that he was transferred for his job every few years, across India. Her two children were thus raised all across India, until they moved to different cities to pursue their careers. In 2002, her husband was posted in Nazira and they were living in a housing estate meant for the company's employees and their families. There, during Bihu and Durga Puja, a souvenir was published, and Kaveri began to write a few articles for them. She also sent an article to the acclaimed Assamese magazine "Nandini". Even though its readership is largely women, it is a general interest magazine. Her first article for the magazine was about the many uses of the different parts of the versatile banana tree. A year later, she wrote an article titled "Bowari Jibon" [*the life of a daughter-in-law*] for another popular magazine, "Priyo Sakhi" [*Beloved Girlfriend*[45]].

In 2011, Kaveri's daughter — who was working and living in Bangalore — announced that she had met a boy. "*Now somehow she must have told him that her mother does some writing. Because soon, he was trying to teach me how to write more frequently, and for other publications*," Kaveri told me in her Guwahati flat, as her three-year-old grandson kept bringing his various toys to show me. This was her son's child; her son and daughter-in-law are doctors working at different private hospitals. The daughter-in-law is a radiologist, and said that she was able to work fewer hours in the hospital because her work was less intense. This allowed her to spend more time with her son, even as Kaveri and her husband were doting grandparents to the little boy.

That day in her home, the daughter-in-law was already back from work and chasing her son around the house, with a spoon and bowl of mashed vegetables. Kaveri was oblivious to that chase; she was more keen to tell me about her literary adventures. Unlike the other women I had met, who were typically wearing a saree or a mekhela saador, Kaveri was wearing salwar kameez, with a fleece vest to ward off the receding winter winds. Her daughter-in-law was at home wearing a T-shirt and shorts: a rare sight among daughters-in-law in Guwahati especially when they are still living with their in-laws.

Ignoring the running child, Kaveri gave me exact details: the prabandho [*essays*] and golpo [*stories*] she had authored with their specific titles, which newspapers and magazines they were published in, and the approximate date of their publication. "*Earlier, I used to write in notebooks. Now I have terrible* spondylolysis *and hence I do all my writing on the* mobile phone," she said. The

[45] "Sakhi" translates to girl-friend or female friend, in the platonic sense. An equivalent is the Spanish word "Amiga".

household had already made tea to be served to me, but Kaveri kept telling her to wait: "*Let me talk to the guest first*."

But the process of writing in a notebook, then copying it all onto better paper, and posting them to the magazine would take a long time. Besides, these written texts would sometimes be published after many months. "*In 2018, I was visiting my daughter in* Bangalore*, and she was now married. My son-in-law introduced me to* Facebook *on my* phone*. Initially, I could only see other people's posts; whatever they may have written or their photos. In 2021, during my father's death anniversary, I wrote a short* prabandho*. My sister living in Teok saw this, and told me to write in a* Facebook *group called* Gadya Charcha *[Prose Discussion]. She said that it was a literary group from* Nagaon*, but active on* Facebook*. I slowly began posting there. They organised a competition for* anugolpo *[tiny stories]: we had to write 16 of them through the month of* September*. I told my* mister[46] *[husband]; will I be able to do that many? He said, 'Just start; there's nothing wrong in trying.' I kept writing and ended up with 21 of them! I was surprised that my name was among the winners;* Gadya Charcha'*s administrators then compiled my writings and printed it as a book. They gave me 10 copies; I paid for an extra 30 copies. So I have been writing since then..."* Kaveri narrated her journey, her eyes glistening with the details of how she became an avid writer.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, Kaveri would lie in bed and write on her phone. Often, she would sit on the sofa and write on the phone, with the TV turned on for background noise. She wrote another book, and sought the help of the same group's administrator to print it. She told her husband that she would like to compile all her writings since 2002 into a single book, and he helped her with it financially. This time, she published the book herself.

She got 30 copies printed of this compilation which cost her 60,000 rupees. "*I gave a copy to everyone, in the excitement of my first book! Now I have just one copy left. I did not sell; some people would give some money. And I feel bad to tell people [about money], but it would be good if they understood themselves that it is so tough to publish a book on one's own. The price was written by the publisher here in* Guwahati*. I gave them all my writings, they printed and delivered it all home. But for the books that I wrote in* Gadya Charcha*? I did not have to move one bit! I had only met them online but they managed it all. But for this book, I had to go to the publisher a few times*."

I asked her if she calls herself a writer. She paused just for a moment before saying yes. During the pandemic, the group announced a new project: to write a novel, in 50 parts or sections, with exactly 300 words in each. "*Doing that calculation was no easy feat! I would write, then count, there would be some words extra, then delete them, then write again... that went on and somehow I wrote 40 parts. I began to read it and I quite liked what I had written, and could see the story shaping differently, to reach the goal of 50 parts. But I began to post each section one by one in the group. And that's how the small novel was published,* Jibonor Eka-Beka Baatere [*On Life's Twisted Paths*]."

[46] Mister is the colloquial way of referring to a husband in India.

In April 2024, she wrote a travelogue, covering 29 states in India, and Singapore. She was already in touch with her previous publisher, and they were very excited when she shared this idea with them. She sent them the book over WhatsApp, in parts. But it had to be done secretly. "*It was our fortieth wedding anniversary, and I wanted to gift this book to my* mister*, since I got to travel and see so much because of his job transfers. The book arrived in a big box two days before the* anniversary*, and we had the book* release *function in our building's compound, with our neighbours and relatives*," she said, while lining up all her six books on the sofa for me to photograph, in the chronology of their publication from 2021 onwards. Each of them had a colourful, hardbound cover. But the book could not be a complete surprise to her husband: she had to inform him before paying the big sum to the printer. "*It was my money, he wouldn't have said no, but this was not a small expense, so it made sense to inform him. He would not have stopped me*," she said.

After tea, and realising that the family had other engagements for the rest of the day, I slowly made my way out of the house. The grandson was no longer feeling friendly; he stuck sleepily to his mother's leg. Kaveri was now contemplating getting an iPad, to make the writing process somewhat easier, given its size compared to the phone. But it's still about the phone for her: "*Without the* phone*, I wouldn't have been able to come this far. What's on one's mind, has to somehow come out. And not everyone can express that. Sometimes my husband asks me, 'What will you get from writing?' He does help me sometimes with checking my spellings. But now my husband has no time to help me. He is busy with the grandson!*"

Kaveri's next project was a novel, and she was writing it on the phone's Colour Note app. This is her fifth book written entirely on the phone. The previously published books were sent to the publisher from the app, a few sections at a time: copying the text from the app, and into WhatsApp, and sending them.

"*But it's not like I am only stuck to the phone all day! I have always had cultural interests since school. Since class six, I would stitch my own clothes and other small things on the sewing machine. When we lived in the housing estate, I made soft toys, taught a few women how to make them, and even sold some. Then oil painting, wall hangings, and cushion covers too.... In between all of this, I was also writing. But when the lockdown began, the writing increased*."

Three local newspapers had reviewed her novel, and had praised it; apart from the many comments she received on Facebook. I asked her if she was introducing herself to people as a lekhika[47] [*female writer*]. She said that she does not, but that those who are on Facebook know that she writes and they enjoy her writing. I asked her again: "*But the work you are doing... isn't that the work of a writer*?"

"*Yes it is the work of a writer, but to call myself that...* imaan poinot hoise ne, naajanu... *[Have I become as skilled or efficient, I don't know]. But people have liked what I have written so far,*

[47] In Assamese language, the male word for a writer is "lekhok", and the word for a female writer is "lekhika". It is derived from the word "lekha" or "likha" which means "to write".

including the novel that was part of the competition. The novel was about a middle-class family with two children; the woman gets a job immediately after she gets married, but she also gets pregnant, and she faces a dilemma. Her parents-in-law advise her to take up the job, and she works until the eighth month of her pregnancy and delivers twins. She manages her life with mothering and her job, but after a few years, her husband is transferred for his job. He meets with an accident and he cannot recognise anyone thereafter. So now she manages life with raising her children, her job and caring for a husband, who becomes incapacitated after a fall in the bathroom.... I had to end the story there because that was the length I had to write... I am thinking of continuing the story further...."

Kaveri walked me out of the apartment, all the while talking about her books. I remarked that the phone had enabled her to write, and had perhaps catapulted her to the status of a writer. In the elevator downward, the lights had suddenly gone off, but it was still in motion. In that slow motion of gravity, through the darkness, she said, "*The* phone *has given me my books. They are like my own children. It's like... when a woman is* pregnant*, she has to care for her diet, mental state, and more... and then birthing the child too. And that takes a lot of effort. So writing a book is like that: thinking about what to write, what should be the sequence, what should be its end... It's also a mental and physical pain, just like giving birth to a child.*"

"*But in* pregnancy *and childbirth, the last push is the toughest... What is the version of that in the book writing journey*?" I asked her, as we continued to descend.

"*When I have to review the whole book again, after the* DTP *is done... looking at it, line by line... that is the most arduous. But when the book is published and it comes into my hand, seeing my own words now printed... it's very emotional... and at that moment I have tears in my eyes...*" she said, as we stepped out of the elevator and into the light. Her eyes welled up and sparkled behind her eyeglasses.

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Kaveri's journey of birthing books, while seated on her sofa, is not frivolous or casual. It is labour, sometimes painful, but also joyful, expressive, and deeply embodied.

Her efforts are once again a relational exercise. The attempt by her daughter's boyfriend to woo Kaveri is not frivolous either: he pays heed to what is her vital life-force, and aims to assist her with her literary desires. It is an act of collaborative care (Biswas, 2024), and goes beyond the cold economies of transaction, even though his intention is clear. In doing so, he is indirectly trying to prove himself as a worthwhile son-in-law; as someone whose acts of care is an embodied exercise.

Kaveri extends that sense of care towards her daughter-in-law, who, after her hours at the clinic, is comfortable at home wearing a T-shirt and shorts. Kaveri herself is not dressed in the typical Assamese attire of mekhela saador or a saree; her salwar kameez, however, is more commonly visible across cities and towns in India, as the most comfortable clothing of choice for women (Kumar &

Walia, 2016). Kaveri breaks away from the normative expectations of how an older woman should be dressed. In allowing herself that freedom of choice in her clothing (Bahl, 2005; Amirtham, 2011; Lynch & Medvedev, 2018), she indirectly extends that to her daughter-in-law, and this marks a vital shift in the relational terrain. Clothing thus becomes a gesture of freedom, and by proxy, one of care.

Kaveri is appropriately engrossed in the story of how she came about writing stories. The conversation takes precedence over tea that might go cold. Sharing the details of every story written and its publication date are the milestones that are relevant in how she remembers her literary journey. The monetary details of publishing the books are the price of the moral expectation of fulfilling her heart's desire.

When she takes to writing on the phone, while seated on the sofa and the TV turned on, she is not being casual. Writing on the phone is not frivolous puttering. It is a willful act of crafting fiction; of attending to the excitement from an online challenge. The triumph derived from a pen whose ink flows beyond the expected number of stories is heightened when the book is published. She is now a writer who finds the confidence and audacity to compile all of her writings into another book. That she undertakes this arduous exercise herself — by dealing with the publisher and spending her own money — not only teaches her the ins and outs of book publishing, but also becomes a moral calculus of doing literary art.

Her connivance with the publisher to create a travelogue as a gift to her husband becomes a moral grammar of spousal relationship, and an act of reciprocity for being able to travel because of his job. One can well imagine that moving homes every few years with children may not have been an easy feat for her. Instead of focusing on the gendered labour of repeated migration, her gratitude for the experiences of travel reveals a complex fidelity to her fate as a woman married to a man with a job that expects him to migrate regularly. She takes this experience and repackages it into a memory box in the form of her travelogue. The travelogue becomes a prosthetic for gratitude, expressed through her literary efforts. But the final product still needs her husband’s green signal because of the investment involved in printing a book: instead of her husband being the arbiter of the family’s finances, she views the consultation on big expenses as a moral grammar within the infrastructure of marriage (Sharma & Kota, 2019; Velankar et al., 2014; Lancaster et al., 2008).

Her novel feels deeply autobiographical, even though she does not say it. The narrative reveals the laboured endurance of women who are expected to balance motherhood, career and duties towards an ailing husband. That her books have had a wide traction — even though those were not sales — reveal the many silent cries of women caught in such moral crossfires, such that Kaveri's words resonate with her audience.

Despite six books published, Kaveri’s hesitancy to call herself a writer exemplifies the gendered script held by women in their view of themselves. There would be no opposition if she confidently introduced herself as a writer. But her hesitancy is not only a facet of imposter syndrome, but also stems from the sexist and ageist notions where nothing great is expected of women.

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood suggests agency should not only be viewed "as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood, 2001, p. 203). She thus cautions us against jumping into conclusions about any form of expression of agency as being a form of resistance, but to analyse such actions as something possible only because existing power relations have disempowered some. Kaveri's pursuit of writing her books is not the textbook resistance to domination. It is, instead, an example of the ways in which an expression of agency has been possible because of the relatively weaker entanglements of patriarchal restraint, as well as the privileges afforded by her socio-economic class.

Finally, Kaveri's metaphor of writing as childbirth is breathtaking in its clarity, and it captures exactly what this ethnography reveals: that writing — especially from the space of the home, the bed, the sofa — is not frivolous or casual. It is labour, sometimes painful, but also joyful, expressive, and deeply embodied. The smartphone facilitates this to quite an extent. Yet, more than from a celebratory and technosolutionist perspective (Sætra, 2023), the smartphone provides a practical, emotional, and social infrastructure. Her books are her laboured creations: testing endurance and deeply emotional. Her confidence, her voice, and the material traces of her books lined up on the sofa — all of it adds up to a vision of aging not defined by withdrawal, but by continued, self-directed creation.

Deep seeking

"*You will sleep with me; you will be more comfortable there*," Madhuri told me after dinner, as I helped her tidy the dining table. Her words did not shock me; it was not an unusual practice in India to share the bed with someone of the same gender, even if we may have just met. There is no hesitation in making the offer; there is none in receiving it.

I changed into my pajamas for the night, and it was time to erect the mosquito net for the night. Its nightly reconstruction meant a meticulous manner of fixing its four corners to different parts of the room, with whatever might hold it up. A longer string stretched up to a metallic railing on the window; a shorter green one was attached to a nail on which the wall calendar hung. It was a specific process, adhering to which would promise a night without our blood being sucked at.

Settled under the mosquito net, and with the phones turned on, we both sat up. In the dark, with the sound of crickets in the distance, and staring into the blue light of her phone, Madhuri showed me the literary group on Facebook called Korxon ["*to create*"]. There were 153 members. She showed me the messages about the plan for the next day: a few of the authors' books will be released and different literary styles would be discussed, 11am onwards.

Bedtimes for her are when she reads, even when her husband would be fast asleep next to her. "*Sometimes, I wouldn't even realise the time and it would be one in the morning before I would fall asleep... And then I would have to wake up at five anyway. My eyes open at that hour even after* retirement," Madhuri said, scrolling through the group on her phone, looking for some of the texts she had posted. She did not remember when she joined Facebook, but was excited about all that has become possible through it. "*Look, I had written this story two days ago called* 'Hepaahor Rong Bisaari' [*'In Search of a Colour of Desire'*].... *I got the idea for this story from Dipsik. I took another idea from Dipsik, and then wrote the story. I had written the prompt:* saakori kina aaru bika *[the sale and purchase of jobs]. Only the ones who buy a job can sell a job. But Dipsik could not give me what I wanted, so I had to develop the story on my own. It is based on my older son's life: he interviewed twice for the same job at the oil company, but did not get it even though he felt that he had done very well in both of them. Here, it's all a money game with the second interview*," Madhuri explained.

After spending the night in her home in Duliajan, Madhuri and I woke up early that Sunday morning. She woke up earlier than me, tending to the chores of the house, and then draping a stunning blue mekhela saador. As I helped her with the safetypin to secure the pleats to her blouse, she asked me if I would like to borrow one of her mekhela saador sets; I was both surprised and delighted that she offered me. But I had not carried an appropriate blouse, so I turned down the offer. After breakfast, we headed to the goal of the day, for which she had dressed meticulously: travel to the bigger town of Diburgarh 50kms south, to attend a meeting with the new literary group we had talked about the previous night: Korxon.

Madhuri has always had an active social life, even when she worked as a Hindi language teacher at a secondary school. On the rickety crowded bus, which stopped every five minutes to fetch

passengers until every seat was taken, she listed out the different groups she has been a part of, and the positions she held in them. Most recently, she was the Secretary of the Duliajan Lekhika Samaroh [Duliajan *Female Writers Society*], and during her tenure, she had organised a writing workshop with Rahul Bora as the facilitator. He is also the brain behind Korxon.

That initial workshop was held at a building, whose construction was possible with donations from different literary organisations. This enabled these groups to use the space for any event. After that first day-long workshop — which took place in late 2021 — the group continued to meet regularly on Google Meet. "*Tunujyoti lectures for 20 minutes and then we ask questions. He gives us writing prompts, and we have to submit our work within a short deadline. He checks our work, and gives us feedback. Our group has 24 members. It is definitely very convenient that we can meet online, and continue writing together,*" she said, while preparing breakfast that morning. A range of Assamese snacks — different types of pitha [*sweets made with rice flour*] — that she had made were ready to be served.

During the week I was visiting Madhuri, the writing deadlines were within a span of three days, and she had written three short articles that week, and was working on her fourth. "*He gives us a topic each time, and this time, it is based on the poem "*Momotar Sithii*" ["Letter of Maternal Love"] by [renowned poet] Hem Barua. We have to read that poem first, and take it as a cue/prompt to write our own texts*."

Madhuri "picks the pen" when she is *aajori* [free]. Was she picking up an actual pen? She said she used to, in the past. But then something shifted: "*I noticed that if I write something on paper with a pen, and then copy that onto the phone to send it, I end up thinking differently about the topic, with sometimes different and even new ideas. So now I write directly on the phone. Even so, I write the main ideas in a notebook, so that I have a frame and expand on it later."*

Bora — the groups' facilitator — posts a link on the Facebook group, and that's where the group members submit their written works. But Madhuri was already leading an extremely active life, even before the advent of ways of connecting through the Internet. So has the palm-size gadget added anything in her life? Has there been any kind of laabh [*benefit / gain*]?

"Srishti hoise *[Creations are possible]. I am able to do things now; I am able to get ideas online... For example, I can attend the online workshop on Google Meet. Sir has taught us to write based on any ideas that we might have. In the Anusilon [Facebook] group, I can write anything. People do 'like' it, even though I may not know if what I have written is good or bad. Nobody says that the writing is bad, but I can write* nirbhik bhaabe *[fearlessly]*."

Madhuri learnt to use Google Meet at her school, during the COVID-19 pandemic, to be able to reach students online. "*That was one good thing that happened because of* COVID."

On the dusty bus ride to Dibrugarh, Madhuri kept talking about a new tool that her teacher Bora had explained to them about: "Dipsik". She told me that the tool helped anyone find answers online, if they knew how to ask the questions well.

I was still puzzled. She browsed through the screens on her phone, with the apps laid out and finally clicked on the one she needed to show me: It was the app for DeepSeek, the AI tool that had disrupted ChatGPT (Robison & Lopatto, 2025). Madhuri's teacher Bora had told them that they could type a sentence into it — in Assamese — and receive the app's response to those prompts. "*But it's not very useful; it can only give us pointers but we still have to do the writing*," she said, while showing me how the app functioned on the phone.

When we arrived in Dibrugarh, and as soon as we took our seats in that small room, we were served tea and a coconut laddoo, while listening to a series of speeches by various people. There was a fairly even number of men and women attending, even though there were more women among the audience. Three women read excerpts from books, but it was not clear to me if those excerpts were from books they had authored themselves.

It was nearly two in the afternoon and the speeches still continued. Madhuri stood up. She did not wait for the microphone to reach her. She said that she was not sure if the meeting was meant to discuss new ways of writing, or to simply applaud a few people's works. Others nodded gingerly, and soon, the meeting ended and lunch was served. In the bathroom, Madhuri asked me if she had made a mistake by speaking up. I said that she had not; I told her that I was also expecting a forum with more discussion. But I was also delightfully surprised that this 65-year-old woman from a small town spoke up when she was uncomfortable with the way the meeting had been conducted. Outside, an older man told her she did the right thing, and her face relaxed after his approval.

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Madhuri's writing workshops demonstrate how peer-to-peer digital literary practice among older adults flourishes in small towns and kitchens, and not only in metropolitan centres (Pizzul & Caliandro, 2025; Eisenhauer, 2024). It is not merely a glimpse into the ways in which women are "benefitting" from smartphones. Instead, it is a deeply relational ethnography of how older women are seeking out digital literacy practices on their own terms, and are inhabiting the digital with their own rhythms, constraints, desires, and aesthetics (Sandhu, 2022).

While her husband snores away, the retired teacher charts new avenues for herself under the blue light of her phone. Within the frame of her everyday life being anchored in the familiar obligations, she adds yet another role: that of a writer who joins online workshops, responds to prompts on Facebook, and experiments with an artificial intelligence tool. Women like her are not merely "catching up" with technology, but crafting new routines of creativity, making use of WhatsApp, Facebook groups, and digital workshops in ways that collapse the boundaries between the formal and informal, the domestic and the public. She is wide-eyed and curious; defying the narratives where there is very little expected of older women.

These explorations require time, effort, and risk-taking. But these do not come in the way of her everyday duties of tending to the long list of chores, and her own kitchen creations of a wide variety of snacks. Her creative pursuits do not abolish the gendered structure of her days. Retirement is only a function of age, and not of limitation. Her active lifestyle embodies the narratives of active ageing (Kiuru &Valokivi, 2022; Husain & Husain, 2020; Samanta, 2018; Tripathi & Samanta, 2023).

Even so, it is not without the gendered scripts that she continues to follow in tending to the house. It is only when she is "aajori" — free from chores, free from obligations — that she can tend to the gestures which would fit within the descriptions of active ageing. She navigates the moral compass of being a woman with many interests, which she has to balance in her own time: a form of "serious leisure" that urban middle-class older Indians have been engaging with (Tripathi & Samanta, 2023). She builds networks of reading, writing and critique that are both local and virtual. Her clarity on when she writes by hand and when she moves to phone-based composition gives us important insights into how cognition, body, and device interact.

Madhuri's story shows how older women in small towns are not passive recipients of digital literacy initiatives, but active participants in the construction of new literary publics. Even as middle-class women in urban India are turning to AI to lighten the mental load at home (Sanyal, 2025), Madhuri's experiments with writing prompts have already shown her the limits to AI. Her suspicion of DeepSeek opens the door for the possibility of a co-created digital literacy tool where the identities, lived experiences, and inherent intelligence and wisdom of older populations are an integral part of epistemic intervention.

She does not want it to replace her as a writer; she only seeks a tiny thread that she could pull and develop as a narrative of her own, grounded in lived experience, such as her son's failed job interview in a corrupt system. This does not represent a naive defence of human authorship. It is an evaluation based on her understanding of writing as a practice that is both moral and situated. The story must carry a truth, however fictional its form, and that truth cannot be delegated to a machine that is indifferent to the local politics of employment and disappointment.

Madhuri's participation in online literary workshops is also shaped by the hierarchies of knowledge that structure such spaces. She accepts the authority of "Sir" who sets tasks and deadlines, but she is not submissive. Even though she finds herself among local literary giants, she leans into the confidence of her age in challenging a space that could have satiated her literary quests, but failed to do so. Her intervention reveals the tension between symbolic recognition and substantive engagement. Her voice registers a claim to be treated as a serious participant rather than simply an appreciative elder. Even though she is later unsure if her voice was helpful or disruptive, her act of speaking out is her way of tending to the cost of her own labour in traveling the distance to attend the meeting; her act of speaking up thus becomes a willful one in the face of what is expected of women in a patriarchal world (Ahmed, 2014).

Writing against erasure: A triptych

In our Bombay home, my deceased father's briefcase — where he kept his important papers — continues to hold together all our important documents. Birth certificates, bank documents, passports, and old letters that were sent to my father by my maternal grandfather. Almost every home that I visited has such a briefcase, and it is implied that it is an important casing, bearing important documents. It means serious stuff.

But in Maya's home, the old briefcase that once belonged to her husband, is full of newspaper clippings. The yellowed pages are mementos of the times she aspired to be a writer, just like her mother has aspired. "*My mother was a prolific writer; I have done nothing in my life*," she said, as she showed me her work.

The briefcase also holds her old notebooks: long ones, that are usually meant for students to practice their maths in. When Facebook came into her life a few years ago, she began to reclaim that writerly spirit. She was part of my MA research, she had chosen a pseudonym for herself, which was her mother's name. "*She will be remembered each time you write something about me*" (Borpujari, 2021, p. 42).

Until her hours and days were occupied by caring for her husband whose cancer was in remission and yet needed much care, Maya was actively participating in one "Facebook challenge" after another: she posted photos of book covers, explaining why she enjoyed reading them, and "nominated" others in her 'Friends' list to do the same. She posted photos of books in English and Assamese, to denote that she was an avid reader of books in both languages. The photographs of the covers were not randomly taken: she placed both books on a murha[48], with a potted plant in the background.

Maya's short essays, in 2021, spanned a wide range: book reviews, reflections on the writings of other prominent Assamese writers, recollections from her two decades of living in Bombay, socio-political commentary on life and living in Guwahati. She has a long 'Friends list' on Facebook, and attributed this to being a "*very* social *person*". But her writings — and more significantly, the comments to them — were keeping her awake at night. Not in a manner that was unhealthy, she clarified, but with a sense of curiosity and excitement. She had said:

> "*We women never get any* recognition *anywhere, for anything we do. But now, when people* comment *on my writing, that is massive* encouragement*. I don't think they would say it lightly... My mother was a prolific writer, but never had such opportunities as me. We are not writing high-end* literature*, but we are* housewives*, so this is 'housewife literature'. Even so, that this is getting* published*, feels good."* (Borpujari, 2021, p. 64)

[48] Murha is a type of short stool made of bamboo that is found in northeast India.

However, three years later, when I spent time with Maya, I met a woman who had the light sucked out of her. The exhaustion from care-giving, combined with the symbolic violence at the hands of her husband, and her duty to care for him even through the grueling days of blending his meals into a puree and his violent outbursts at nights, had left her uninspired, and even defeated. Before me was no longer the woman who was optimistic about finding a new platform for writing and an audience for it; she was no longer the woman who believed in the potential of "housewife literature". Her spirit was broken. "*I am very* depressed," she kept telling me, even as she was forced to be physically active.

She wrote only sometimes: about contemporary times, specifically in relation to the changing contours of familial relationships and friendships, and people's busyness as the excuse for not tending to each other. "*It is easy for people to simply* click 'like'*, but they don't want to* comment*. So there is some distance*," she said, during one of the quiet afternoons when her husband was asleep.

After my ethnography, I would sporadically text her on WhatsApp. In April 2025, her husband was not able to eat regularly. Her children in the US had arranged for a 24-hour paid care service. Her husband was also in a state of delirium: not speaking coherently, his memory waning, and physically so weak that he was glued to the bed. "*He has no energy to say horrible things to me now*," he once said on the phone, adding that she was able to go to the market in the evenings, without worrying about being yelled at for reaching home a few minutes later than usual. In May 2025, her husband passed away, in the middle of the night. It was still evening for me in Ireland, so I called her up: she was stoic, and was sharing details about the practical steps to be undertaken for his cremation, after her children would arrive from the US. Once the rituals of death were tended to, her son took her along to the US, where she stayed with him for three months.

"*It is a* mixed feeling*... we were together for so long, and I am sad that he suffered so much for that last month. But now, for the first time, I have no worries*," she told me over the phone, while she was still in the US.

I began to notice in a tangible manner what this was: Maya was writing again on Facebook. It started slow, and the momentum picked up over the months. She was writing short stories based on what she was seeing around her; commentaries from her travels in the US. "*Don't stop writing now*," I told her over the phone, when she was back in her home in Guwahati.

"*Yes, my days are* mukoli *now*," she said, referring to that feeling of openness: within her home, and in her life.

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When I was little, my mother would translate news articles appearing in the Sunday edition of English newspapers, translating them in Assamese in her scrap book, copying them onto better paper, and sending them by registered post to magazines in Assam.

After joining Facebook in 2017, she found herself within several Assamese literary groups, and discovered new avenues for her writing. While these groups were populated by people in Assam, it was also a conduit for the Assamese diaspora — people like herself — to stay connected to their roots and their literature. But these days, she said, she writes more often in Grantha Xubaah [*Fragrance of Books*], than in Anusilon [*Practice*]. But on what basis was she choosing and deciding what to write for which group?

"*I know what they like and don't like. Suppose I write a translated article about* transgender people... *people in* Anusilon *don't like it. Many of them live in villages. Nobody says anything* negative*, but they don't* comment*. But* Grantha Xubaah *has highly educated people, and such an article would be well-received there. Now this is only an example*," she explained, as we lay languidly on the bed in our Bombay home after lunch: the same bed where both my brother and I fell asleep as toddlers, and later as teens; the same bed where my father fell dead. This was a typical afternoon scene: the fan above whirling as it had been for over forty years, and my mother resting after lunch, mobile phone in hand, reading messages on WhatsApp, sending emojis and gifs (Borpujari, 2025).



A painting by ethnographer Priyanka Borpujari from her study on aging and cell phone use in India, based on a photo taken in her fieldsite, showing her Maa in her bedroom trying to nap after lunch, but also enjoying using her cell phone.
Ethnography: The Basics (1st ed., pp. 81) by S. Wardell, 2025, Routledge.

Choosing to post in one group and not in another was not merely about comments. Being an active part of these groups had given her something beyond an easier platform to publish her writings. "*I feel* anando [*happiness / joy*]... *I get* recognition *as a writer. I always loved to write.... When I came to* Bombay*, I would send my writings and they would appear only in* Priyo Sakhi *magazine. But other*

editors would not even respond. But Facebook *has given rise to so many* saahityik [*literary person*]. *I am absolutely* xaamanyo [*ordinary*]. *I am nothing compared to others. Now look at this group* Ardha Aakash [*Half A Sky*].... *Such beautiful writing*!"

I asked her if they were beautiful because of the chosen topics, or the quality of writing. She said it was both; many of the group members had also authored memoirs and travelogues, and won awards too. Reading people's literary posts is what my mother enjoyed most from that group, as well as from others. "*Remember how we got eggs in paper bags made from* magazine *pages; I would tear them open and read them! I can pick a book at any time,*" she explained.

Meanwhile, fiction, translated essays, detailed travel reports: these accounted for my mother's writings. Many within these groups had been telling her to publish a travelogue. She had been mulling over the idea for a long time; I had suggested some ideas too. Both of her children living in different countries meant that she could visit us both, and these travels constituted a large proportion of her travel reports.

In the summer of 2025, we met in Istanbul, in my brother's home: a relatively economical midway place for a rendezvous with each of us travelling from different parts of the world. Our conversations continued in my brother's kitchen. "*Just before I came here, I reached out to a* publisher *in Assam, and he seemed very keen to publish the book. But I might have to visit Assam when all this is final. The editor said it was too early to talk about money, but he told me to think of a name for the book... But I cannot think of a good one...*"

I was surprised by the progress she had made. I thought I would have to collate all her writings together, format them neatly, add a watermark to make it copyright-proof, then connect her to editors. But my mother had done all of this on her own, and did not need me! I was very curious about all of this: How many pages were in her manuscript? Did she print her writings? Did she send them by post? Who showed her how to copy-paste the texts from Facebook onto a Word document? Was it a Word document from which she printed her manuscript? I was buzzing with questions, after having realised my own redundancy.

On a bus towards Hagia Sofia amid the evening traffic, my mother explained: "*I* copy-pasted *the writings into* WhatsApp *and sent it to the xerox shop.*" On my insistence, she paused taking photos of the cityscape from her phone and pulled up the xerox shop among her WhatsApp chats. She had previously sent them her income tax return documents, for them to print. After that, a series of long messages in Assamese: these were her travelogues.

I was impressed how my mother had managed it all; I was glad that I had introduced her to Facebook (Borpujari, 2024a) after my father had passed away in 2016. I asked her if she saw this as a form of kranti [*revolution*] that she was writing a book at this age. She took great offense to that: "*Don't say 'in this age'! I was always writing*!" She was now being recognised for her work; people always knew she had an interest in writing. But didn't she have a wider audience now, thanks to Facebook? "*Of course! After all it is social media*!"

When we got off the bus, we walked on a broad street, parts of which reminded us both of Bombay. We turned to a quieter back alley; she paused to photograph every cat. "*It's so lovely to walk here. Back home, I don't know if I should keep an eye on vehicles, or the potholes*," my mother remarked. "Such niribili *here...*"

Niribili translates to the sense of peace that comes from freedom; what she felt from walking on a clear quiet street after years of navigating India's crowded, chaotic, noisy, unsafe streets.

"Maybe niribili *could be the name of your book*?" I suggested.

"Maybe," she said.

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Punya and I were on the same bed, under the mosquito net. Neither of us were able to fall asleep. We talked about everything and nothing. I pulled out my phone from under my pillow, as I tend to do when I am unable to sleep. This reminded her of something: "*You have to show me something....* Facebook *has made me an unknown person*!"

I was not sure what she meant. She said that, in three Assamese literary groups that she was a member of, her recent posts were marked as "anonymous", and there was no mention of her name.

"*Someone invited me to join the Paramartham group, and I wrote saying that I am not a new member. But I have been a member since a long time, and have written short stories and poems there several times. In my recent posts, I had to write my name at the bottom because it showed that I was an* anonymous member. *Because they asked me this, I don't feel like writing in that group again*," she explained, hinting at feeling disrespected when she was not recognised as an existing member.

I suggested that it might have been a mistake; that she may have mistakenly clicked on the option of posting anonymously. In June 2022, Facebook had introduced the feature to post anonymously within groups anyone might be a member of, "to make it easier for users to participate in a discussion without giving their name and profile photo because they're new to the group, and don't feel comfortable sharing their views and opinions with members" (Facebook, 2022). So within her group, she might have mistakenly clicked on the option to post anonymously.

Punya nodded in the dark, that yes, possibly, she may have made a mistake. I reiterated, "*I don't think the group or Facebook itself has made you anonymous. Because what you post is in your control*." I suggested that in the morning, I would look at her posts, and see if the anonymity could be edited; such that her name was back again, as the author of the original post. Alternatively, I could copy-paste those posts and repost them again, and add a note at the end about how she had previously wrongly posted as an "Anonymous member".

Punya had been writing short poems in this and other groups since a few years. When she was posting her recent poems, the group's admin had not known that this was someone who was already a

member of the group. Hence, the admin had been messaging her — the supposed "Anonymous" person — suggesting that she join the group, based on her literary interests.

"*I am not anonymous*," Punya asserted.

****

Viewed together, these three vignettes show us the ways in which each woman is attempting to reclaim this newfound space that has given them a space for their self-expression. But I wouldn't say they are reclaiming the Internet, because it was never their space anyway. There is no techno-feminist triumphalism (Wajcman, 2013; Gill, 2006; Blair, 2018) when older women are trying to navigate the many unwritten rules of the Internet and digital spaces.

Maya's story, especially in contrast to her earlier optimism, adds a profound emotional depth. When she stumbled upon the Internet a few years ago, her optimism that led her to check comments to her writing is understandable. She is not merely humble when she declares her writing as "housewife literature", but it reveals a self-awareness of the political contours that define literature, as well the architects of such works. The aesthetics of the photographs she posts tell us more about how she wants to be perceived online; expression is her primary media dependency goal (Kim & Jung, 2016).

In contrast, her broken spirit and self-declared depression do not negate her earlier writing life; they sit alongside it. There is no redemption arc here. Instead, the complexity of a life marked by violence and care, creativity and fatigue surface to the fore. Her briefcase — filled not with official documents, but with dreams deferred and then revived through Facebook — is a metaphor for women's intellectual and emotional legacies surviving in fragile containers.

Her husband's worsening health saddens her, even as it gives her an iota of free air that allows her into the market for a few minutes longer. His death, the inevitable complex grief (Boelen, 2016) and the slow months towards reconfiguring her life after the arduous strain of care-giving give way to revisiting what she had thought was lost. Her dimmed energy was slowly returning; her husband's death marked the end of her digital absence.

My mother's own discretion in what she posts is an organic epistemology in audience engagement (Broersma, 2019). There is a hunger for intellectual depth with the writing, and she navigates the online space with this knowledge. This act of discretion is not mere strategy towards generating more comments and a fan base, but is an act of managing the labour of writing and the exhaustion that comes with audience tracking (MacGregor, 2007). In viewing herself as "xaamanyo" — *ordinary* — she minimises the illusions of grandeur and manages her own expectations of how far she can exercise her agency with her literary acumen and capacity.

The ethnographer's surprise at her mother's ability to navigate a perceived challenging journey towards publishing a book reveals the moral expectations inherent in mother-daughter relationships (Waterston & Rylko-Bauer, 2006, p. 406). The mother's competence in doing the

necessary steps towards publishing a book reveals the ethnographer's feeling of being made redundant in her role as a responsible daughter, even as this means one less task to be tended to from across continents. It reveals how the moral dependency of older parents on adult children is unquestioned. The closer digital interaction with a photocopier shop is a disruption to this moral order; it leaves the ethnographer questioning the complex fidelity with care.

Punya's refusal to establish her identity within a group that she has been a part of since a long time reveals the ways in which older women no longer want to undertake the burden of asserting their selfhood. When the group's admin were telling Punya to join the group, based on the assumption that she was not a member because they only saw her posting her poems as "anonymous", they were tending to privacy management practices, to make the group safe for all. Privacy management practices in Facebook groups are enacted at individual, intragroup, and group levels (Mansour & Francke, 2021; Dorazahi et al., 2025). From a design justice perspective (Costanza-Chock, 2020), tools that are useful for some, may not be easier understood by others, especially when app updates are rolled out without explanation. Punya's insistence on not wanting to write, after she was asked to prove herself, is an example of the tool trying to be inclusive for others (by providing a safety mechanism) but excluding her (when she does not know how to use it, and assumes human agency). So, the tool has more agency in keeping her out of the group, by her not wanting to participate. But her insistence with me on determining the disappearance of her name is her determination against erasure.

Facebook groups did not have such privacy mechanisms; she now views this as gatekeeping. She refuses the bureaucratic paternalism of proving herself anew to bypass this gatekeeping. She sits with this conundrum at the edge of exhaustion and possibility. She refuses what women writers have been relegated to for too long: anonymous and erased.

Who gets to write?

The ethnographies in this chapter expose the many ways in which older women are negotiating the new space they have stumbled upon. Each woman is writing against erasure: an erasure not of their texts, but of their selfhood. These aren't simply vignettes about the accomplishments with digital literacy. These stories together reveal a refusal of invisibility. This refusal comes in different forms: sometimes irreverently, seldom loudly, always creatively.

These older women are thus, inadvertently, pushing back the narrative of ageing, when their mothers and grandmothers led different lives. They are defying what has been expected of them; they are doing so by claiming their space in the Internet. I wouldn't say they are "reclaiming", because it was never their space anyway, and it was not lost. They are finding that there is ample space here, in this room called the Internet. They are simply having fun, without making it an intentional political act.

These women are not entering a space of entitlement; they are carving out informal, affective publics in corners that were never meant for them. And they are doing it with humour, poetry, selfies, and saree groups. You show us that digital presence isn't always a demand for power; sometimes it's a whisper, a breeze, a way of being seen.

While there has been a culture of literature and the arts, the convenience provided by the smartphone has enabled people to be an active part of that literary culture. Writing was once a performative act, one that was tied to a certain luxury: of having the space for a desk, and the time allocated for it, to sit down and put words to paper, and then slog through the process of seeing those words in print. But the smartphone has erased those intermediary steps; women that I met now write while lying on the bed, while someone is watching TV in the background, while traveling on a bus. And Facebook groups have erased the gatekeeping. This is the affordance of the object — the smartphone.

These women are following a long line of women writers in Assam, who have questioned the hierarchies within Assamese society that burden women's lives and erase their selfhood. Most notable among them was Indira Goswami, who became the first Assamese woman writer to win the Jnanpith Award — India's highest national literary award — in 2001. In her writing spanning novels and articles and various commentaries, she questioned "the bounds of sanctity in gendered truths by underlining female agency" (Pathak & Sarma, 2022, p. 3). She did not write only about Assam, but brought to Assamese readers the brutalities from various world's corners, from her wide travels. Losing her husband to an accident at the age of 25, just three years after her marriage, she found writing to be the site of her recovery. She wrote in agonising detail her struggle with depression, her suicide attempts, the embodied experience of lingering grief, and unbridled expressions of bodily desires. This woke up Assam to a new style of bold writing, which prompted writer Aruni Kashyap to declare that, "She is what Toni Morrison is to America: when she speaks, Assam listens" (Kashyap, 2022, p. 5).

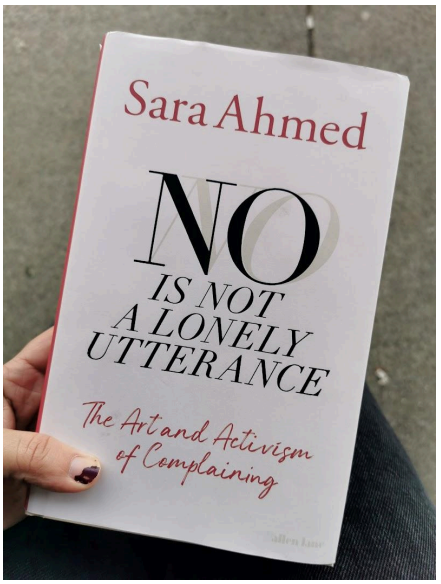
The women in this ethnography are walking the path paved by women like Goswami. They are doing it through an online space, through the affordances of the smartphone. With this, there is a shift — perhaps only as gentle as a breeze — in their own sense of self. Do they feel empowered? It is tough to tell, because there are hardly any words in Assamese that mean exactly that; the women have told me — in their words and their own metaphors — what writing and having an audience has meant for them. When I reflect on the word "powerful", it does not sit alongside the beautiful, elegant women I met. "Powerful" seems too masculine; too aggressive. But this — housewife literature — is resistance.

In her most recent powerful words, Sara Ahmed (2025) writes "Power works by making it hard to challenge how power works" (p. 116). Here, I am thinking about the power of the institution in overpowering the desire and the right of the women in my research to be named. Kaveri had laid down her six books for me to photograph: she is a published author and takes pride in this new chapter in her life. Rekha made history when she became the first woman in Jorhat to be awarded a lifelong literary pension. Yet, I am forced to erase her from this history because of the power of my institution.

I had not specifically sought out high achievers in my research. I stumbled upon them, even as they would nonchalantly mention that they write. Older women were deemed "vulnerable" (Borpujari, 2024b) by my institution's ethics committee who decided that they needed to stay anonymous.

In tending to the ethical responsibility towards my institution, I was forced to fail in discharging my ethical responsibility towards these women who were claiming their space on the Internet, writing books, and making a name for themselves. Punya told me "*I am not anonymous*"; here, I was anonymising her.

Punya fights anonymity online, and yet, I erase her in *my* dissertation, which bears *my* name and is written towards a degree that *I* will obtain. The subaltern here wants to speak (Spivak, 1988), but is forced to be anonymous. *All the women* in this dissertation — including my mother — have been pseudonymised.



I write this with feminist rage against erasure. "When those who try to stop a culture from being reproduced are stopped, a culture is reproduced" (Ahmed, 2025, p. 129). While I understand that tending to the possibly vulnerable in research is immensely necessary to prevent research from being an extractive exercise, my entanglement with the ethics committee reproduced a form of extractivism in research by being forced to anonymise women against their will. While this research is infused with stories of willful acts by older women, I failed in my own wilful act in the face of the power of the institution.

Because the names of the women are redacted (by way of using pseudonyms) I am registering a feminist complaint (Ahmed, 2025, p. 131) by only including a photograph of a book that I have held as talisman in registering my "no" towards this moral politics of erasure. The women in my research have been, through everyday acts of defiance, saying "yes" to alternate ways of ageing. Writing is almost a willful act by the women in my ethnography, even as this has to be preserved against losing the fire that they have kindled within themselves. I register my "no" in a slight manner, with a similar feminist hope it is not a lonely utterance against enforced erasures by institutional power.

The political consequence of institutional erasure cannot ignore the reality of women writing, claiming audiences, and negotiating respectability. This is not a secondary issue. It is one of the thesis's key arguments about how institutions define vulnerability and agency. My feminist complaint notwithstanding, the vignettes of women writing against erasure is an intervention in literature and technology studies — placing "housewife literature" at the centre, not the periphery, of cultural production. In doing so, this ethnography is one of care: a record not only of what women wrote, but how they have held onto themselves in the act of writing — through grief, through routines of caregiving, through brief flashes of joy (Roy, 2022) when a like or comment lands late at night.

As I witnessed older women going online — writing, posting photos, using apps that make their lives easier — this is possibly the beginning of an unorganised movement, whereby they are reclaiming their time, by claiming their space and writing new narratives about and for themselves; a movement that has been mediated by social media and its affordances.

Cast Off

When my mother posts her own photos, she is not merely pursuing a vanity project. When Madhuri has her head stuck into the phone in the middle of the night, she is not merely losing her sleep scrolling aimlessly. When Sukanya follows the news of a corrupt minister's son, she is not merely chasing gossip in between the bureaucratic carousel that she is dragged into.

All three women are exercising political acts ever so without explicit intent. My mother's photos are a way of older women claiming space on the Internet. Madhuri's writings on the Facebook literary group pierces the fossilised notions of who can be called a writer. Sukanya's online pursuit of corruption mirrors her own attempts at navigating digitised bureaucracy. The online space was never meant for older women like them; it was never designed keeping them in mind.

As I cast off this dissertation to its finality, I can now draw in the last row of yarns together to see what I managed to accomplish. My research field encompassed the traditional ethnographic field; but patchwork ethnography and intimate ethnography, while lurking in online spaces, enriched my research field. An extensive online survey, whose design process became an intrinsic part of imagining how older women might navigate digital systems, revealed how women's digital agency is not a monolith; the diversity of digital experiences is based on intergenerational nodes of learning and teaching that are made possible through delicate care practices. Older women are curious about the digital, and yet, are ambivalent about declaring it as the absolute tool of empowerment.

Through the ethnography conducted among and with nine women, this dissertation shows how middle-class older women in India are nudging — sometimes elbowing — their way into the Internet. The Internet never assumed their precarities or priorities, and hence, when older women take to the Internet, they are doing so with the aid of others, negotiating platform limitations and bypassing infrastructural failures. In inhabiting the digital, older women thus become willful subjects, whose agency often takes the form of co-agency as kinships of everyday forms of care — and relations not defined by lineage or duty — are woven into their later life narratives.

In "Women, Men, Machines", we see how machines can alleviate women's labour, but only up to a point. They have to still tend to the gendered scripts of labour, and machines become part of the moral economy of how they conduct their lives and in relation to others. Their apprehension of household machines is a product of long histories of gendered socialisation in which women learn to doubt their own capacity. This connects with "Learning New Tools" when engaging with the smartphone: similar apprehensions surface, marking an accumulation of symbolic violence when women's beliefs about what they can and cannot do. Such beliefs become sedimented when digital infrastructures are designed in a manner that is obtuse and obscure for non-digital natives.

But women are still staying curious, still learning new tools. Older women navigate their later years through unexpected unplanned forms of kinning and dekinning. Intergenerational practices of bearing witness and quiet support form the rubric of a care infrastructure that enables them to step into

the digital world, one that was not designed for them. This is visible in the unexpected unplanned forms of kinning and dekinning, as we see in “Kinning Through Time.” Such an intergenerational practice of care is not merely observed in the field, but becomes a core part of the research practice: “Teaching New Tools”, opens the door for a way of imagining fieldwork that is not only somewhat reciprocal, but one where the care practice of showing older women how to use different tools on the phone, become part of the epistemology of feminist ethnography. In sketching the processes of teaching, the visual narratives offer a somewhat tactile experience of how care is transmitted: through pauses, through frustrations, through phone tinkering, through repeated questions.

The machines become threads for a larger intricate loom, where the tensions and knots are not only functional, but profoundly political. Within all the constraints – some gendered, some ageist, some infrastructural — agency persists. This connects to “Housewife Literature”, where we see older women taking to the Internet to write new scripts for themselves; not in secret but for others to read. They are defining an audience for themselves, and defying the assumptions of what is expected of them. These quiet forms of resistance are not gestures of empowerment in the conventional sense, but are situated responses to the moral demands of their environments, shaped by loss, obligation and the desire for a life lived with a measure of control.

Akin to the different patches of fabric that are sewn together to become a rich patchwork, my research weaves together different methods and practices, some planned and systematic, others improvised. As such, this dissertation contributes to an epistemology of ethnographic research that responds to the circumstances at hand. Sifting through, this ethnography is cast off as a complete knit, making four broad contributions:

From the lens of digital ageing studies, I argue that older women’s relations with digital tools is neither celebratory nor fearful. What matters is not whether technology is used or avoided, but the conditions of possibility that determine one’s capacity and desire to participate or refuse.

From the lens of design justice and STS (science-technology-society), this dissertation argues that older women navigate the Internet as an obscure field without a map, and yet through persistent practice of calculated negotiations with a space that was not designed for them.

From the feminist ethics in anthropology, I demonstrate how institutional demand for anonymity not only contradicts research participants’ own desires for recognition, but goes so far as to be the technology of erasure.

This dissertation also makes a methodological claim: that teaching is not a supplement to ethnography, but one of its most revealing forms. Teaching is where power becomes palpable, where authority hesitates, where dependency is negotiated, where patience thins and thickens, where care is tested in real time. It is in the act of showing — how to swipe, how to save a number, how to order a taxi — that hierarchies surface and soften, that expertise becomes unstable, that roles blur. Teaching is not a neutral exchange of knowledge. It is an affective encounter, shaped by histories of gender, age,

intimacy, obligation, and doubt. It is where vulnerability circulates, not as a fixed attribute, but as something situational, reversible, shared.

To teach in the field is to enter into a relationship of exposure. It is to be accountable not only for what one observes, but for what one alters. When I show a woman how to use a tool that had previously intimidated her, I am not merely documenting her world, I am intervening in it. These moments of instruction are moments of risk and of possibility. They can humiliate, they can empower, they can exhaust, they can embolden. They carry within them the moral weight of care. And it is precisely because they are messy, ambivalent, and unfinished that they are ethnographically vital.

In this context, sketching is one of my core ways of inhabiting the field. It is not just illustration. It is method. It is a way of slowing down the encounter, of staying with it, of noticing what transcriptions cannot hold: the pause before a question, the curl of a hand around a phone, the shared laugh after a mistake, the repetition of a gesture that refuses to settle into muscle memory. These drawings do not record care: they enact it. They render care visible not as an abstract value, but as a series of gestures, hesitations, interruptions, and small victories.

Through sketching, care becomes tactile. It acquires weight, shape, rhythm. It can be seen accumulating across pages, across sessions, across relationships. The visual form allows for a kind of attention that is not extractive. It does not rush toward meaning. It lingers. It stays with the ordinary. It registers exhaustion, confusion, and persistence without translating them immediately into theory. In doing so, it offers a different epistemology: one that values duration, friction, and relational density.

These practices — teaching and sketching — are not ancillary to anthropology. They do not decorate its findings. They are not methodological flourishes. They are where anthropology happens. They are sites where knowledge is co-produced, where authority is unsettled, where care becomes analytic, and where ethics is not a protocol but a lived negotiation.

To take these practices seriously is to refuse the fantasy of the detached observer. It is to insist that ethnography is not only about what we witness, but about how we stay, how we respond, how we teach, how we learn, and how we remain accountable to the worlds that allow us to write about them.

This research thus has broader implications for how we study ageing, and how we might make sense of older women's use of digital technology, irrespective of location and other markers of identity. In focusing on the lives of women who have received an education and have some degree of financial mobility, this dissertation shows that such privilege does not guarantee agency. Agency is not absolute, but relational; it is speculative, constrained, calculated, and carefully negotiated. The practice of noticing, of bearing witness, and a persistent trickling of unsolicited and yet greatly appreciated forms of support and companionship during ethnographic fieldwork paves the way for how we might imagine knowledge production.

Finally, this dissertation invites us to approach the digital without fastening it too tightly to the promise of empowerment. Not every gesture needs to culminate in liberation for it to matter. Not every act must announce itself as resistance to be political. What these women show us is that

significance often resides elsewhere: in continuity, in curiosity, in small, stubborn practices of staying present. This is not a story of vulnerability. It is, rather, a story of refusal: of refusing the narrow grammars through which institutions decide who is capable, who is fragile, who must be protected, and who must be hidden.

When women ask to be named and are denied that request, it is not care that is being exercised, but a form of ethical thinning. It is a quiet erasure disguised as protection. Casting off the names of women who want to be named is not a neutral act. It rules out futures of recognition. It interrupts the circulation of voices. And so, casting off here becomes something else: an opening, a loosening. A way of imagining ethnography not with those we have learned to call "vulnerable," but with those who are already shaping worlds, already making sense, already teaching us how to live otherwise.

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How did the women learn how to use the smartphone and social media?

H-43 wrote "कुछ तो खुद ही कोशिश की, और कभी-कभी अपनो से मदद ली"
[*Some I managed with my own efforts; and sometimes took the help of my people*].

A-35 wrote, পাছলৈ ফোনটো পিটিকি পিটিকি সকলো কথা জনা হ'লো ।"
[*Playing with the phone,* pitiki-pitiki*, I learnt everything*].

There is a philosophy here, if we pause long enough to hear it. Learning is not linear. It is tactile. It is playful. It is collective. It happens through pressing, through mistakes, through laughter, through repetition, through reaching sideways rather than forward. These women are not waiting for permission. They are not waiting to be taken seriously. They are not waiting to be taught how to belong. They are learning by trying, by asking, by refusing, by persisting—by staying curious even when the world has suggested that curiosity should have expired.

And when A-40 wrote that it was "মোৰ কৌতূহলী মন"— *my curious mind* — she was not speaking only for herself. She was naming a current that runs through this entire ethnography: a quiet, insistent, flickering curiosity that does not announce itself, but does not extinguish either. It glows. It returns. It keeps moving.

It is not easily dimmed.

Appendix A

Ethics approval

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

DCU

Priyanka Borpujari
SALIS

29th February 2024

REC Reference: **DCUREC/2024/021 (Full Committee Review)**

Proposal Title: 2024/021: "Grandma is on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok!" Smartphone and Shifting Identities of Older Women in India

Applicant(s): Dr Agnès Maillot, Dr Fiona Murphy, Priyanka Borpujari

Dear Colleague(s),

Thank you for your application to DCU Research Ethics Committee (REC). Further to its review by the committee and resting on the assumption of information accuracy and completeness, DCU REC is pleased to issue ethical approval for this research project. Please include reference to this approval in all materials used to recruit research participants.

Researchers are responsible for ensuring that the research project to which this ethical approval refers is carried out as specifically described in the application form. Should modifications to the research project be required at a later stage, researchers must submit a research amendment application form to REC for approval, prior to the implementation of modifications.

Please note that it is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that any other DCU compliance requirements relevant to the research project, such as those related to data protection, insurance, health and safety, or legal issues, are fully met in advance of initiating the project.

As part of DCU REC's ongoing monitoring process, a research progress report may be required. DCU REC will request this report from the PI as appropriate.

DCU REC wishes you every success in your research.

Yours sincerely,

DCU
Research & Innovation
Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath,
Baile Átha Cliath, Éire

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Dr. Melrona Kirrane
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

Note: Please retain this approval letter for future publication purposes. Research students should include this letter as a thesis appendix.

Appendix B

Plain Language Statement (PLS) and Consent Form

My name is Priyanka Borpujari. I am an Indian national and currently enrolled within a PhD programme in the School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies (SALIS) at Dublin City University (DCU) in Ireland, under the supervision of Dr. Fiona Murphy. I am researching the experiences of older women in using smartphones and social media. You had completed the online survey, and you had provided your contact details so that I could reach out to you for my research, to interview you.

This is how I will proceed:

(i) I will send you a 'Friend' request on Facebook, and would like you to accept it. You may remove this access at any time.

(ii) I will then parse through your social media account to see what you have posted in the previous six months (text, photos, videos)

(iii) I will then conduct an in-depth interview with you in your home or any other location of your convenience.

A few points to take note of:

(i) You will not be forced to reveal your identity.

(ii) I will use only selected sentences from your interview, and selected posts from what you post on your social media account for the purpose of my research.

(iii) Data from interviews and whatever you post will be used only for this research and will be stored safely through encryption.

(iv) At any time of the research, and until I analyse the data, you may withdraw from participation. And if you choose to withdraw, any information that you have shared will be deleted and not be used in my research.

(v) The research results will be used towards completing my thesis. I might also publish this as a monograph later. I will also submit the findings to academic journals and at conferences.

Please let me know if you have any questions. I will provide a consent form which I would like you to sign, to confirm that you have understood my research and the nature of your participation.

Sincerely,

Priyanka Borpujari
Email: priyanka.borpujari2@mail.dcu.ie
Phone (WhatsApp): +91-9820741992

Appendix C

Online survey questions

My name is Priyanka Borpujari. I am a PhD researcher at Dublin City University (DCU) in Ireland. I am conducting research to understand the experiences of older women in India in their use of smartphones and social media. My research supervisor is Dr Fiona Murphy [fiona.b.murphy@dcu.ie].
For this purpose, I am reaching out to you, with the hope that you will complete this survey.
This survey has 20 questions. Completing it should not take you more than 30 minutes.
The main criteria for participating are as follows:
Gender: Women
Age: Above 60 years
Local residence: India
Other necessary factors:
- You have a smartphone
- You are active on social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, etc.)

Your responses will be anonymous and will be stored safely.
If you prefer to complete this survey over the phone, please message me on WhatsApp: +91-9820741992

* Indicates required question

☐ I understand everything in this document. I understand that all information I provide will be confidential and that my identity will not be revealed.*

This research has been approved by the ethics committee at DCU. The Data Protection Officer at DCU is Martin Ward and he can be reached at martin.ward@dcu.ie.

Your age*

- 🔘 61-65
- 🔘66-70
- 🔘71-75
- 🔘76-80
- 🔘81-85
- 🔘86-90
- 🔘91-95
- 🔘96-110

Where do you reside? *

Village / Town / City / District * _____

State * _____

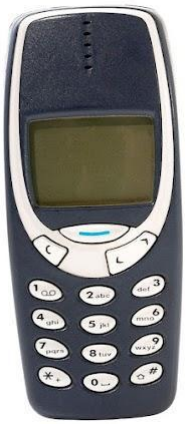
Do you live alone? *

- 🔘Yes
- 🔘No

What is your marital status? *

- 🔘Married
- 🔘Widowed
- 🔘Divorced
- 🔘Not married
- 🔘In a relationship
- 🔘Other:_____

When did you first use a mobile phone?*



- 🔘 It was a gift
- 🔘 It was a phone that was previously used by someone in the family
- 🔘 It was a second-hand phone that I purchased / was purchased for me
- 🔘 I was sharing the phone with someone else in the family
- 🔘 Someone helped me buy to it
- 🔘 I bought it with my own money and my own choice
- 🔘 Other: _____

When did you first use a smartphone?*



- 🔘 It was a gift
- 🔘 It was a phone that was previously used by someone in the family
- 🔘 It was a second-hand phone that I purchased / was purchased for me
- 🔘 I was sharing the phone with someone else in the family
- 🔘 Someone helped me buy to it
- 🔘 I bought it with my own money and my own choice
- 🔘 Other:_____

What was your first feeling and experience with the first smartphone?*

- ☐ Excited
- ☐ Nervous
- ☐ Challenging
- ☐ Difficult
- ☐ Easy to use
- ☐ Sceptical
- ☐ Happy
- ☐ Curious
- ☐ Overwhelming
- ☐ Other:_____

What apps do you access from your smartphone?*

- ☐ WhatsApp
- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ Google Search
- ☐ Email
- ☐ Alarm clock
- ☐ Calculator
- ☐ Camera
- ☐ YouTube
- ☐ Maps
- ☐ TikTok
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Any language translation app
- ☐ Gpay or Paytm
- ☐ Zomato or Swiggy
- ☐ Zoom or Google Meet
- ☐ Tinder or Bumble or any other dating app
- ☐ Uber and/or Ola
- ☐ Any app for writing notes
- ☐ Gaming apps
- ☐ Other: _____

Which year did you create your first social media account?* _____

What was the first social media account that you created?*

☐ Facebook

☐ Instagram

☐ TikTok

☐ Twitter

☐ WhatsApp

☐ Other: _____

What was your motivation to create your social media account?*

Who do you interact with on your social media account?*

☐ My children

☐ My grandchildren

☐ My extended family

☐ Friends I know from before

☐ People I have met online who are now acquaintances or friends

☐ Other: _____

Please explain how did you first learn to use the smartphone and social media. Please write in detail if someone helped you with different items.*

What do you usually post on social media?*

☐ Photos that I have taken

☐ Selfies

☐ Short text that I have written

☐ Videos that I have taken

☐ Re-sharing posts that I have seen on social media

☐ Other: _____

Are you part of any groups on social media?*

🔘Yes

🔘No

If you are part of any groups on social media, please write their names or describe them.*

What do you enjoy most about social media? Please explain with some examples.*

What do you enjoy most about posting on social media? Please explain with some examples.*

Do you interact face-to-face (in social settings) with people you have met online?*

🔘Yes

🔘No

Do you feel that social media has changed your interactions with people, as compared to when you were younger? Please write in detail.*

Older women in previous generations did not have social media. But today you have social media. So how different is your life now, as compared to older women in your family in previous generations?*

We have come to the end of this survey. How did you complete this survey?*

🔘By myself

🔘With the help of someone else

On which device are you completing this survey?*

🔘Smartphone

🔘Tablet or iPad

🔘Laptop

🔘Computer

Would you be willing to share more about your experiences of using social media over a phone call? Your name or identity will not be revealed if you say "Yes"*

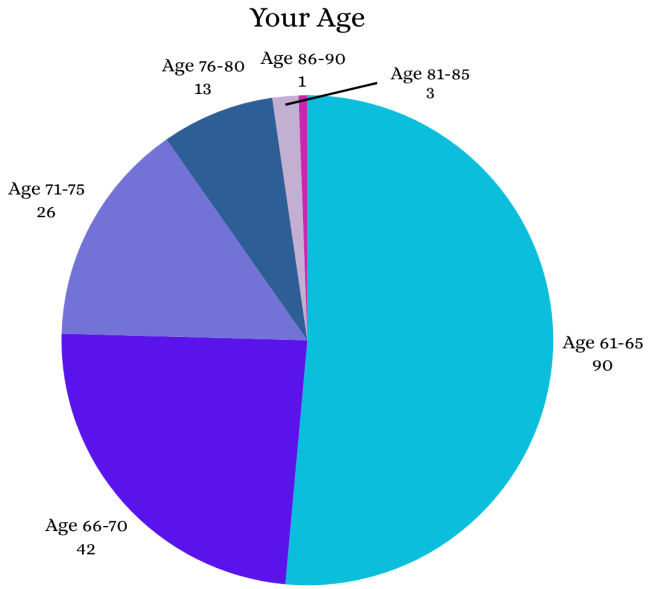
🔘Yes

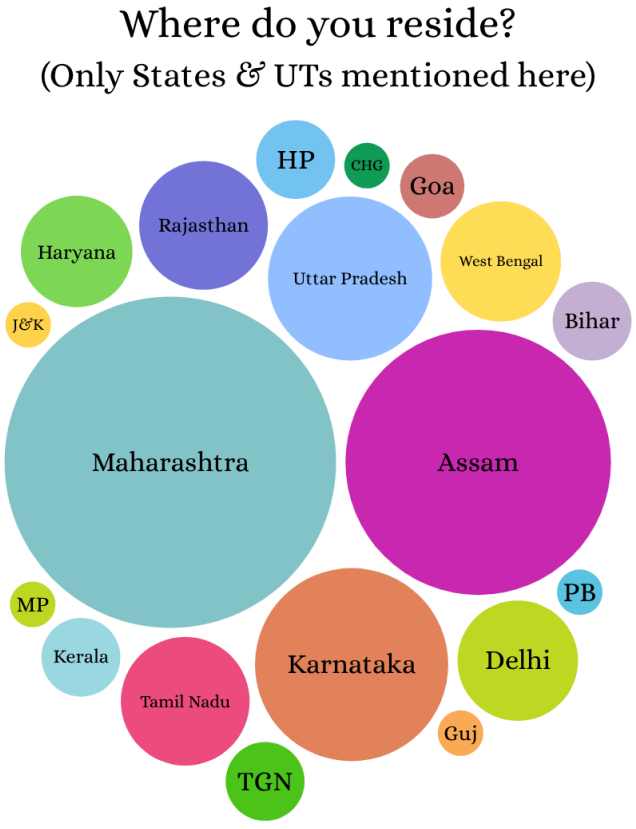
🔘No

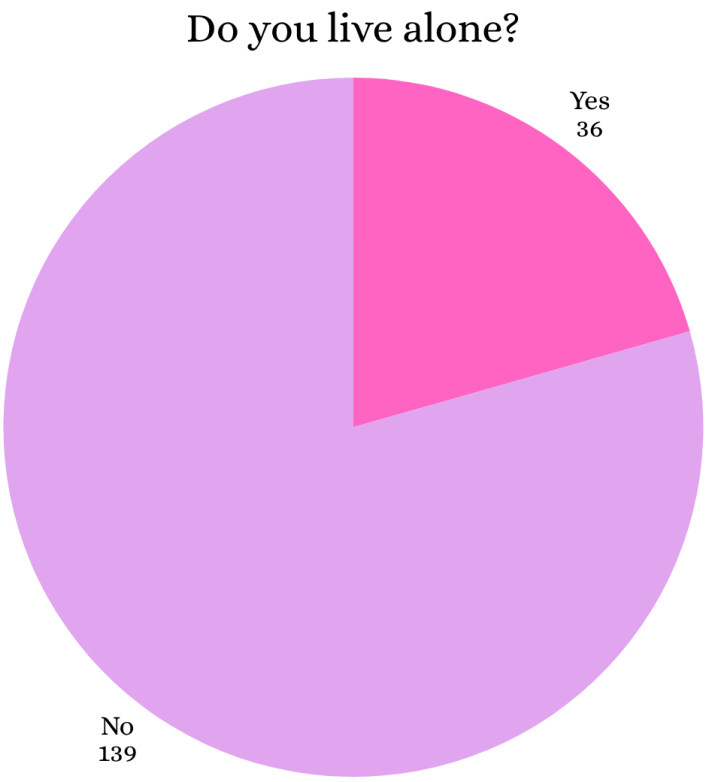
If you responded "yes", please provide your name and phone number so that I can contact you. You can also contact me on WhatsApp +91-9820741992 _____

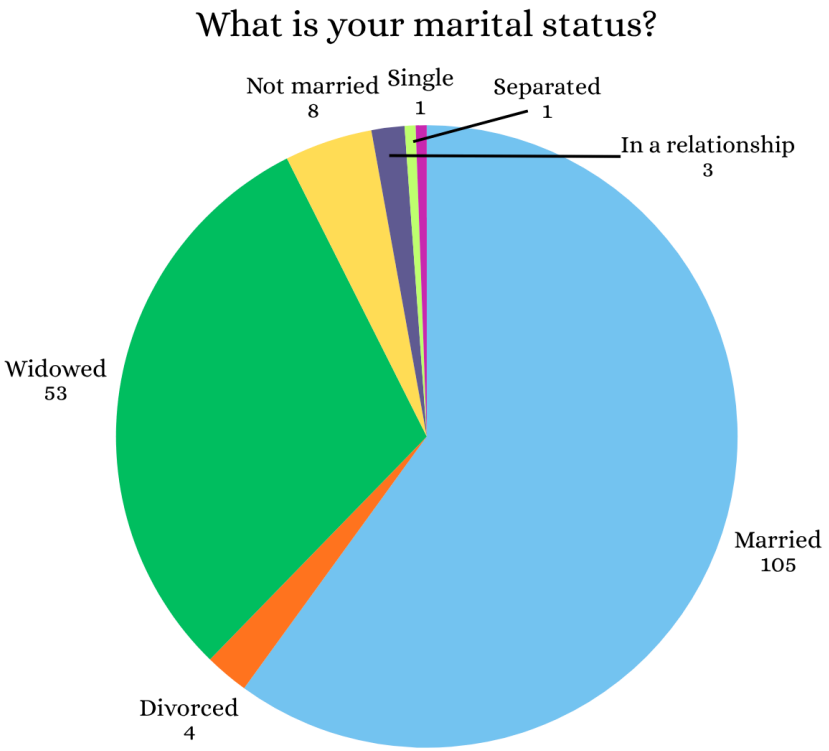
Appendix D

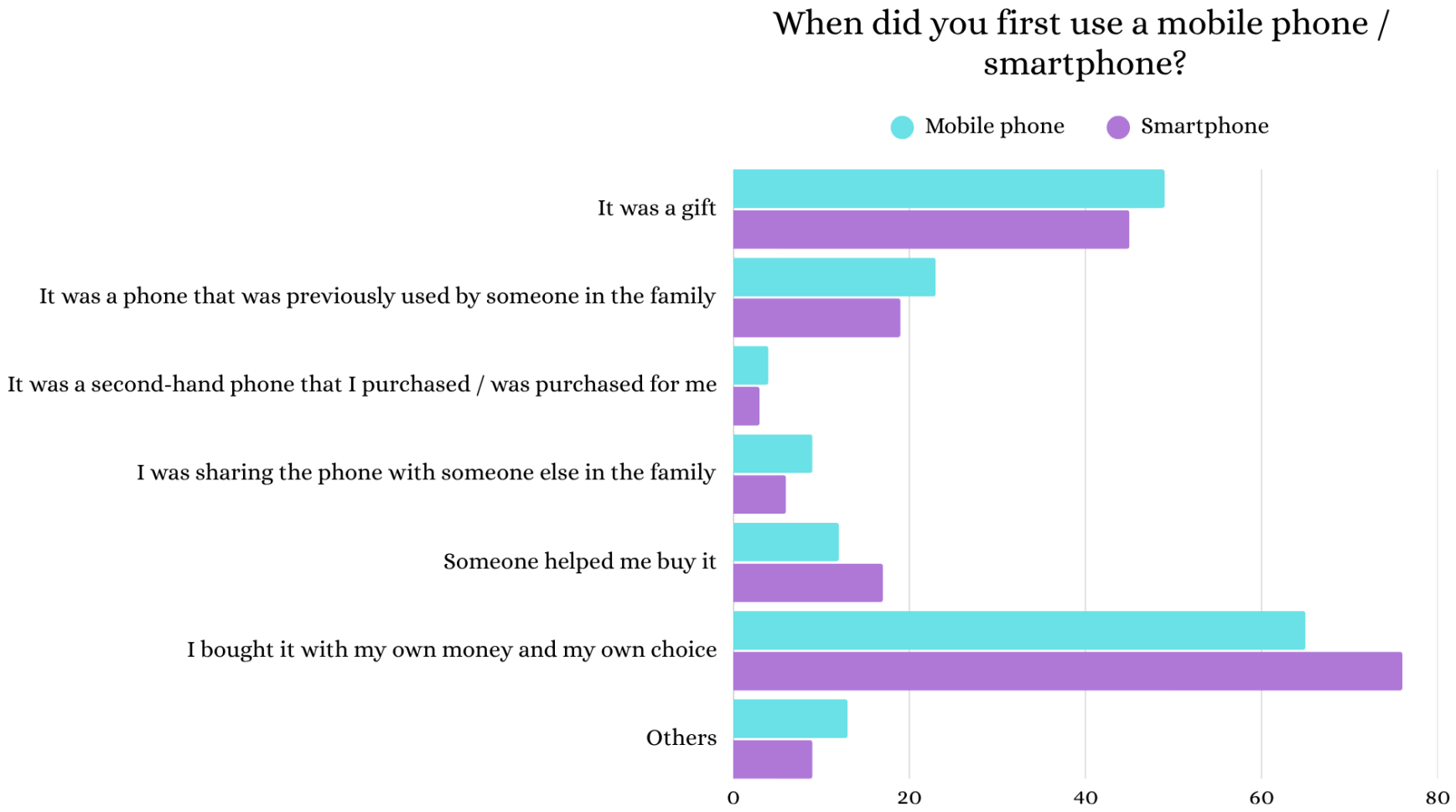
Results of survey questions in graphs



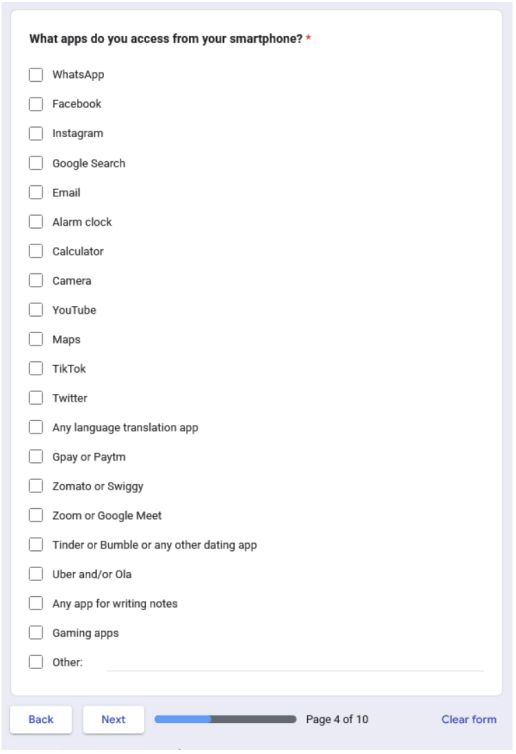


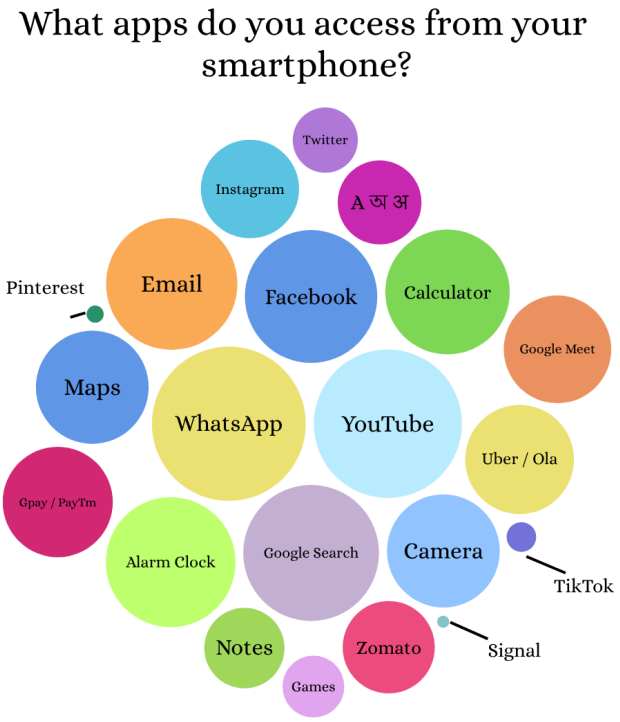

Do you live alone?
Yes
36
No
139

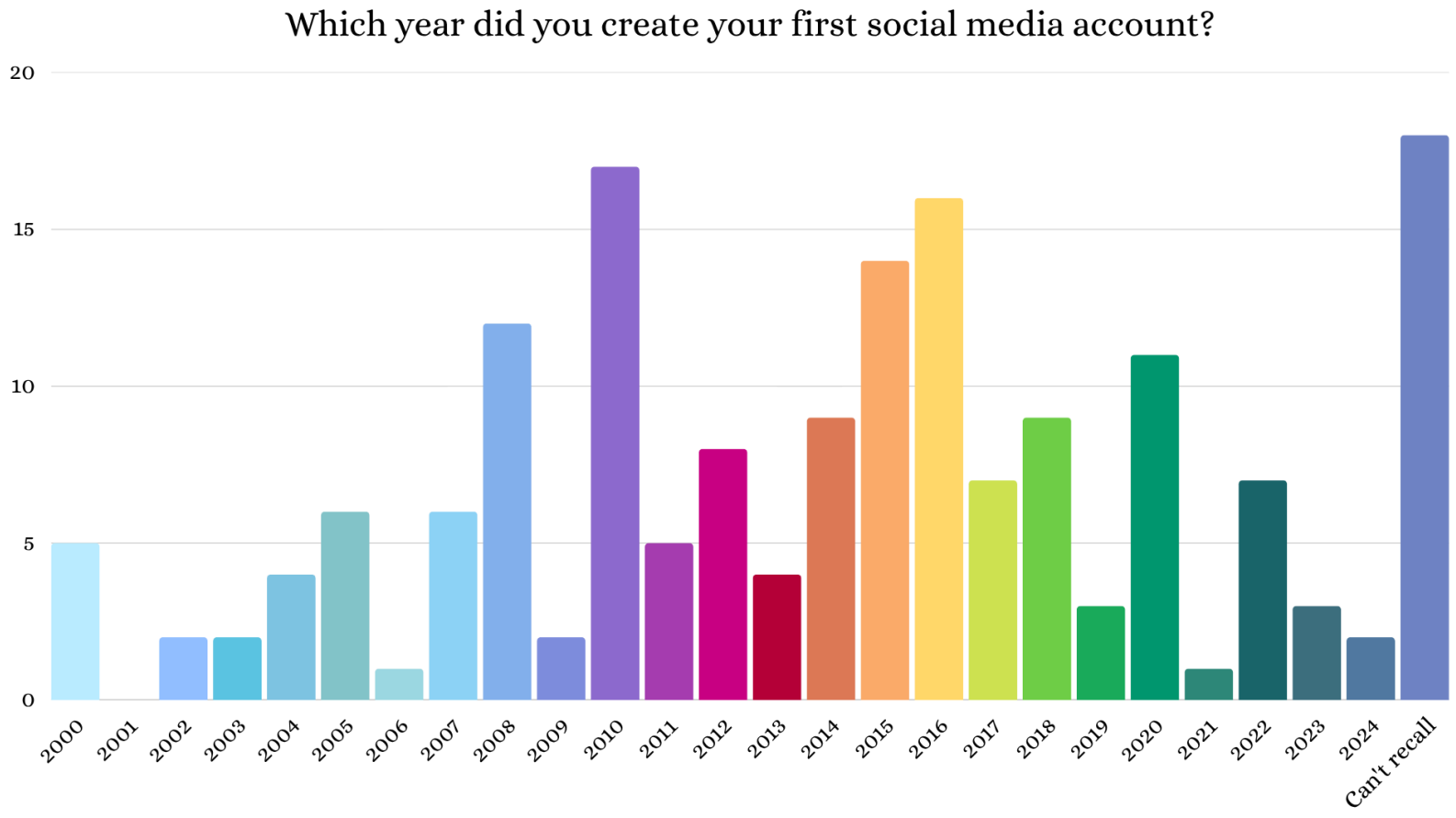

What is your marital status?
Not married
8
Single
1
Separated
1
In a relationship
3
Widowed
53
Married
105
Divorced
4

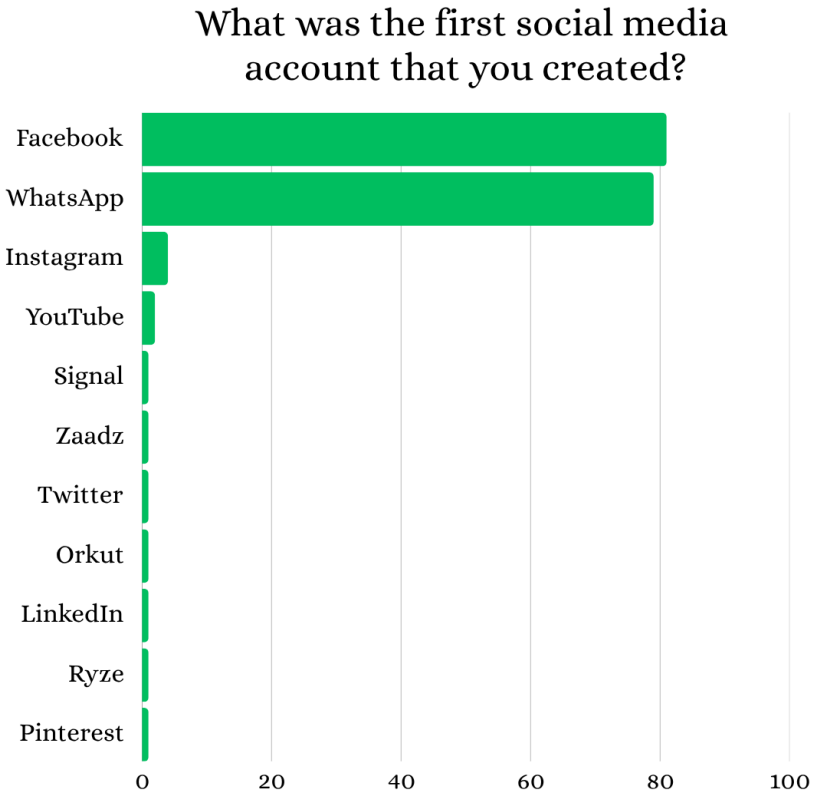

When did you first use a mobile phone / smartphone?
Mobile phone
Smartphone
It was a gift
It was a phone that was previously used by someone in the family
It was a second-hand phone that I purchased / was purchased for me
I was sharing the phone with someone else in the family
Someone helped me buy it
I bought it with my own money and my own choice
Others
0
20
40
60
80

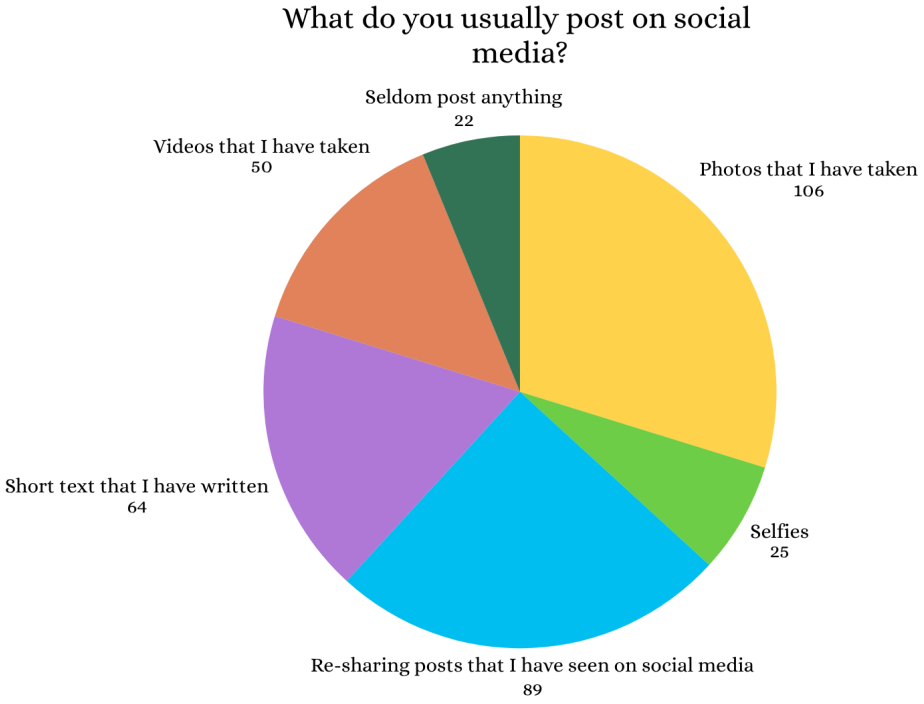

What was your first feeling and experience with the first smartphone?
Nervous
Challenging
Sceptical
Overw...
Excited
Happy
Easy to use
Curious
Difficult

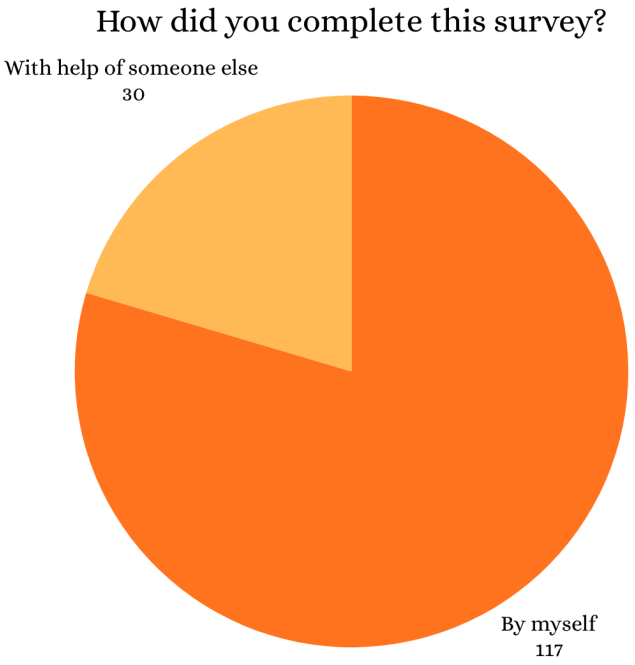

What apps do you access from your smartphone? *
WhatsApp
Facebook
Instagram
Google Search
Email
Alarm clock
Calculator
Camera
YouTube
Maps
TikTok
Twitter
Any language translation app
Gpay or Paytm
Zomato or Swiggy
Zoom or Google Meet
Tinder or Bumble or any other dating app
Uber and/or Ola
Any app for writing notes
Gaming apps
Other:
Back
Next
Page 4 of 10
Clear form

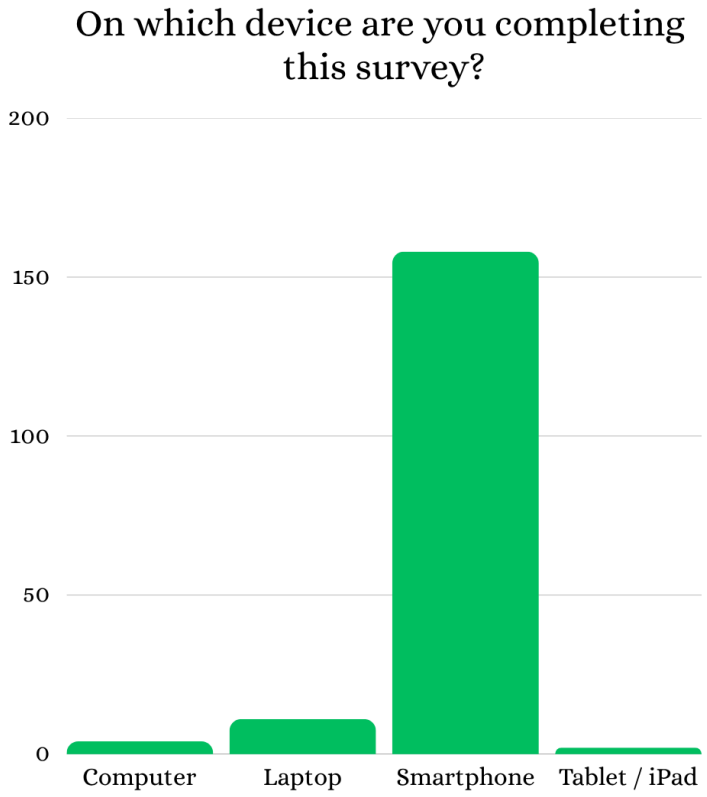

What apps do you access from your smartphone?
Twitter
Instagram
A অ অ
Pinterest
Email
Facebook
Calculator
Google Meet
Maps
WhatsApp
YouTube
Uber / Ola
Gpay / PayTm
Alarm Clock
Google Search
Camera
TikTok
Notes
Zomato
Signal
Games


Which year did you create your first social media account?
20
15
10
5
0
2000
2001
2002
2003
2004
2005
2006
2007
2008
2009
2010
2011
2012
2013
2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019
2020
2021
2022
2023
2024
Can't recall

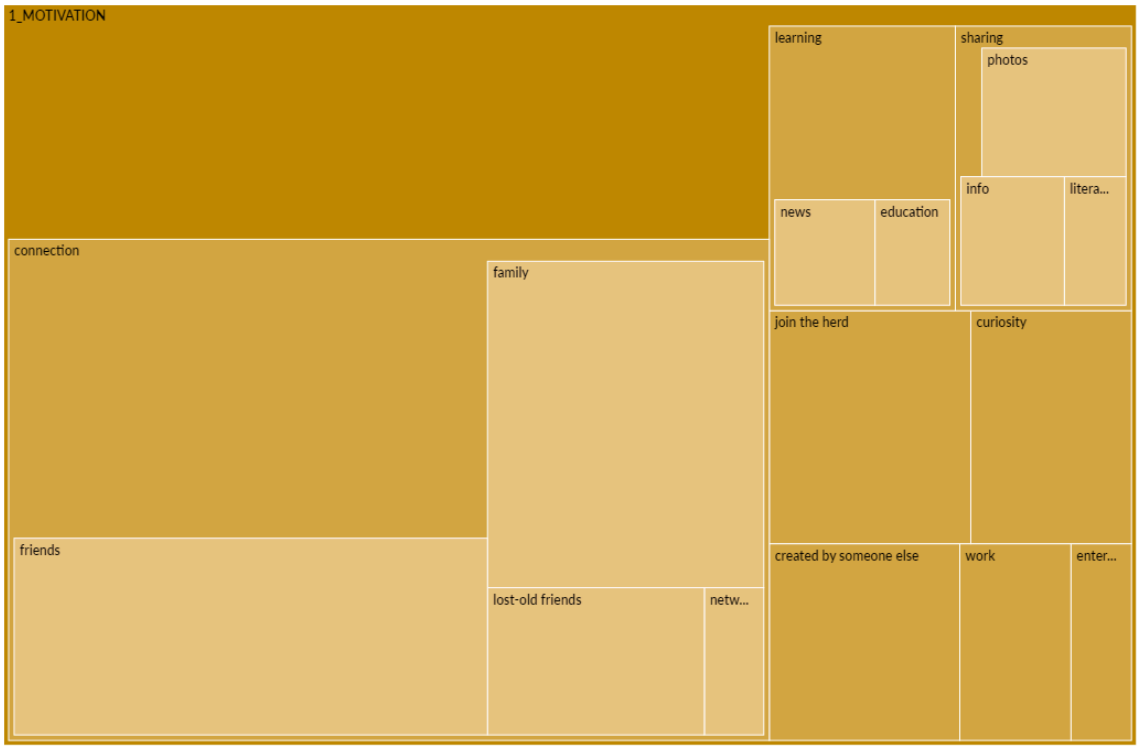

What was the first social media account that you created?
Facebook
WhatsApp
Instagram
YouTube
Signal
Zaadz
Twitter
Orkut
LinkedIn
Ryze
Pinterest
0
20
40
60
80
100


What do you usually post on social media?
Seldom post anything
22
Videos that I have taken
50
Photos that I have taken
106
Short text that I have written
64
Selfies
25
Re-sharing posts that I have seen on social media
89

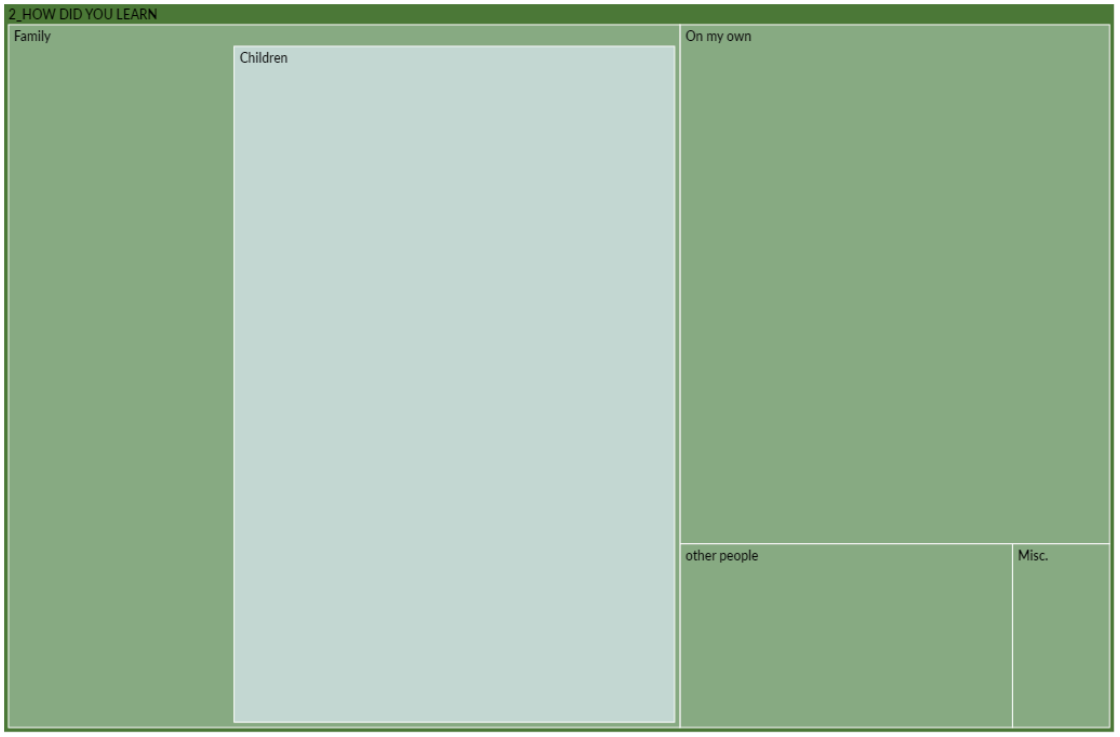

How did you complete this survey?
With help of someone else
30
By myself
117


On which device are you completing this survey?
200
150
100
50
0
Computer
Laptop
Smartphone
Tablet / iPad

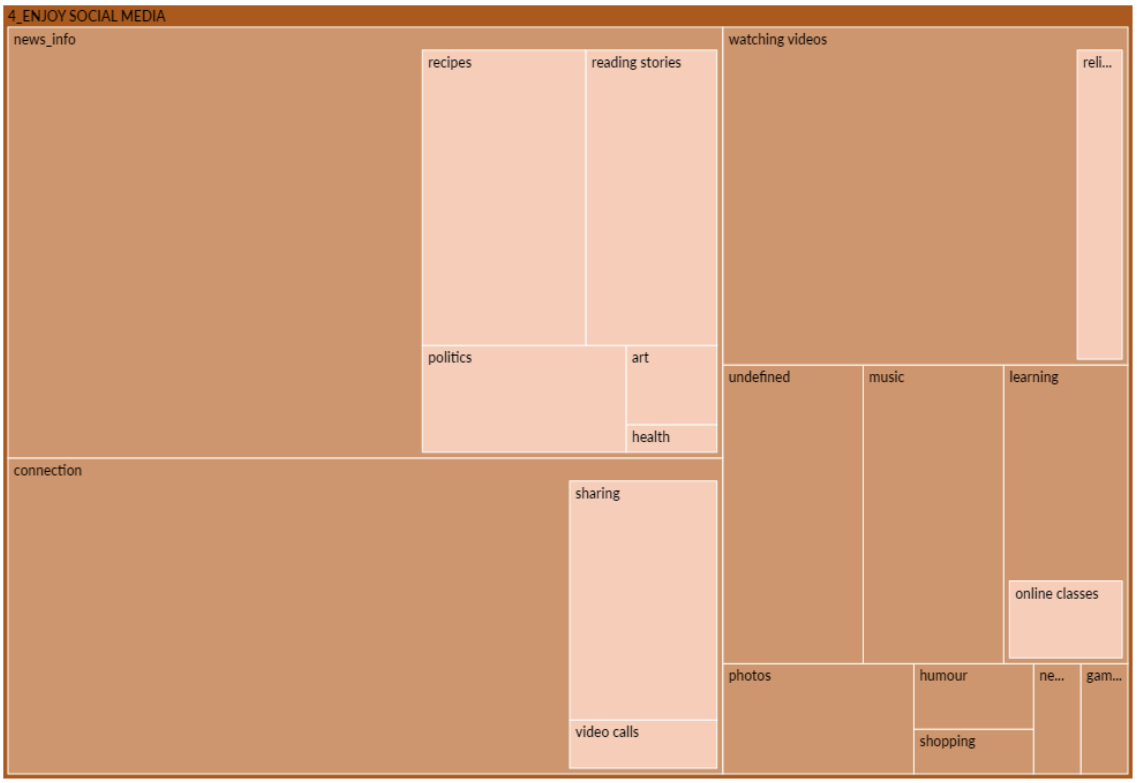
What was your motivation to create your social media account?



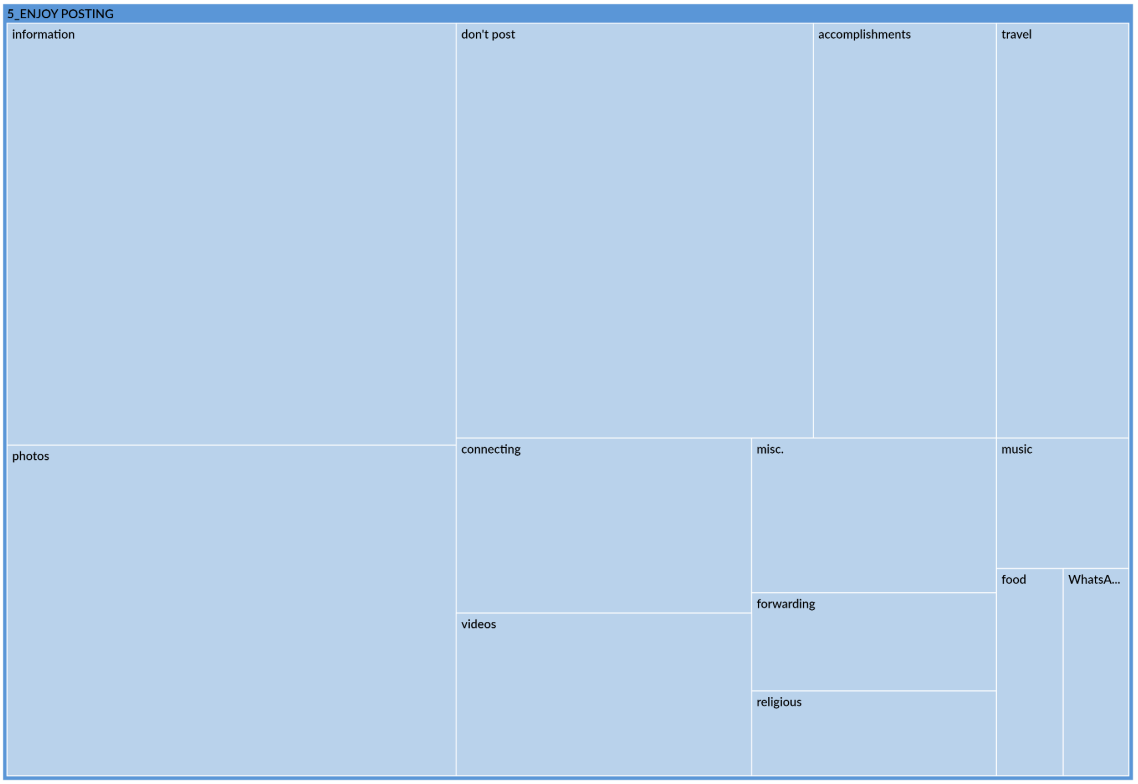
Please explain how did you first learn to use the smartphone and social media. Please write in detail if someone helped you with different items.



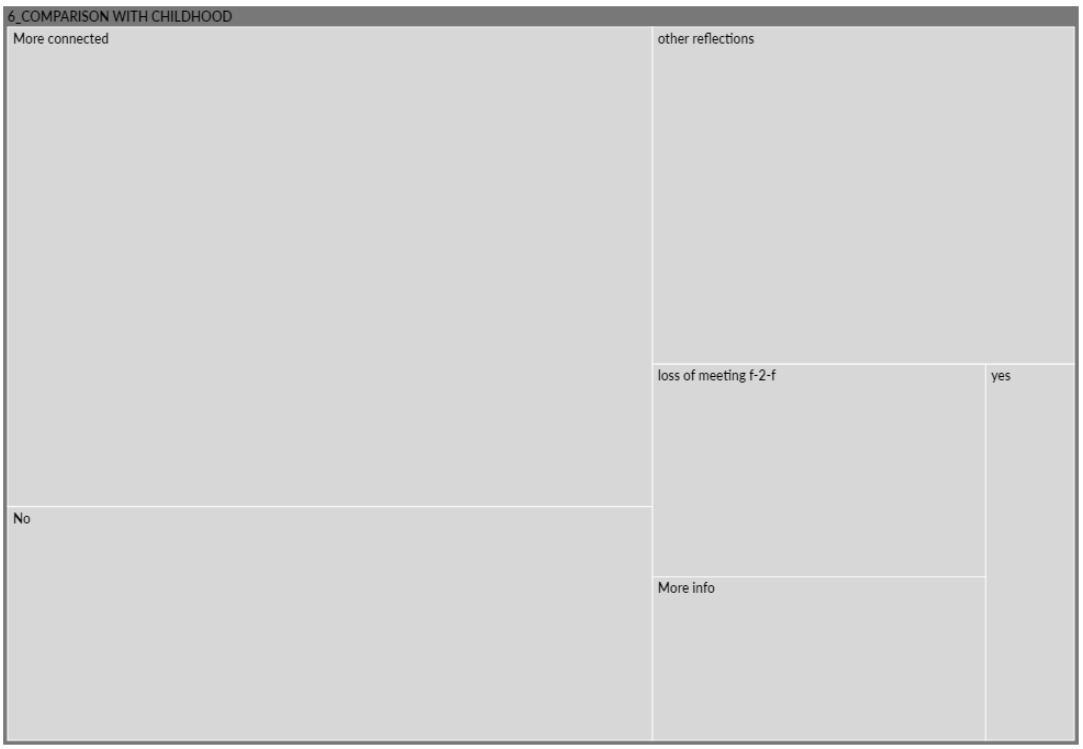
What do you enjoy most about social media? Please explain with some examples.



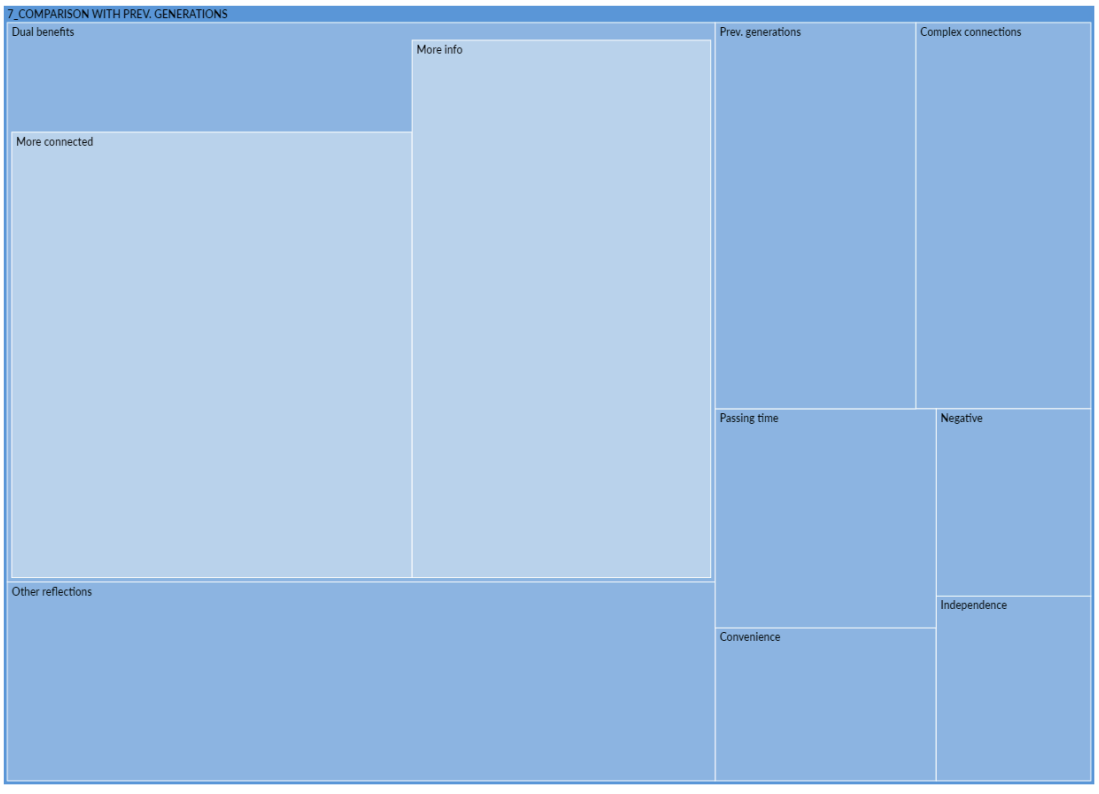
What do you enjoy most about posting on social media? Please explain with some examples.



Do you feel that social media has changed your interactions with people, as compared to when you were younger? Please write in detail.



Older women in previous generations did not have social media. But today you have social media. So how different is your life now, as compared to older women in your family in previous generations?



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