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# *De-Sanitising the 'New Normal': The Lived Experiences of 'Digital Research' in context of the COVID-19 India*

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**Abstract**
This paper examines the lived experiences and intricacies of the 'new normal' and digital research among social researchers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic India and its North-East Indian state of Assam. While the pandemic erupted a crisis around the globe, the developing nation of India encountered its bitter effects in the form of the lack of potent infrastructures to contain it. Besides, swift propagation of digital research by educational institutions emerged as a workable alternative for some scholars but posed graver consequences for others belonging to marginalised groups. Reflecting upon this, three themes emerged; the digital monolith, voices and its checkpoints, spacing and (de)spacing. The themes portrayed the complexities in the practises of research, the critical reflexive spaces of research actors and their social categorisation such as gender and class within the reality of digital research. Lastly, the themes paved the concept of 'academic non-membership' as a situation where researchers are often excluded from the nexus of academic communities on one hand and are powerless in conforming to digital research standards and technical institutional orders on the other hand.

***Keywords***: new normal, digital research, pandemic

## Introduction

As a massive force revolutionising space and time, digitalisation today offers major contributions to the contingencies of living life as well as revisioning conventional practises of knowledge, social realities and material consciousness. The genesis of this argument reaches deep with scholarships on digital technology-enabled socio-economic developments, artificial intelligence set-ups and one of the most complex issues in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the socio-material structure of the 'new normal' – 'digital research'.

With a threat to human existentialism, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 surpassed and barrelled approximately 114 countries across the globe. Its contagious origin, the Novel Coronavirus, propelled the weakening of social institutional functions and threatened human sustainability (Abidoye *et al.,* 2021; Blanco *et al.*, 2022); besides de-stabilising comprehensions of conventional social research[1]. Across such ruptures, debates on digital ethnography triggered implications for reorganising disarrayed academic frontiers. Digital ethnography is defined as a methodology for exploring societies and cultures through digital spaces, online flows

[1] While the pandemic generated grave threats to research across all disciplines, social research was the worst-hit relative to its nature and principles of exploring human behaviour.



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and digital fields such as texts, videos, images and coded networks (Burrell, 2009). This has been envisaged as distancing away from armchair anthropology and challenging the social role of anthropologists as mere descriptive translators of cultures (Underberg & Zorn, 2013). The gradual adaptation of digital techniques by anthropologists, specifically those belonging to linguistic and cultural camps, sought digital ethnography as an effective medium to process off experiences and story-telling by inspecting texts and graphics informally anytime (Boellstorff, *et al*., 2013). But, several others also criticised the idea of 'field' and its incoherence in digital research. Rather than weaving 'field' as a network of putting several actors and their versions together, digital research has been deemed as losing enough socialisation, shutting off significant details under the mechanization of technology and fostering ethical dilemmas with hazy research strategies (Airoldi, 2018). But, with a significant historical context of digital research, academicians nodded to it as the alternative amidst the pandemic. Works within the pandemic panorama dictated digital ethnography as sustaining conversations with the interlocutors through virtual chats, tools and video-calling platforms (Ghosh, 2020; Góralska, 2020). Besides, as social research perspectives changes or adapts over time, field engagement also encounters transitions in relation to usage of technologies for inter-communication (Howlett, 2021). This school of thought has been conveyed and reproduced in developed countries such as the U.S and the U.K., as consubstantiation of the 'new normal' structure. However, in unveiling the universalised logic of 'new normal' as normalising the disorder of research practises, the intricate challenges of developing economies like India have been largely neglected. While grappling with challenges of digitalization during the pandemic, scarce scholarships explored digital research in the context of Indian academia. Instead, abrupt transition from physical to online systems in schools and institutes turned into cutting-edge debates for scholarships (Iivari *et al.,* 2020; Suneja & Bagai, 2021), if not digital research.

The intensity of the way in which the pandemic hit 'research' is different from the online education of school students. While teaching and learning partly worked with digital devices such as mobile phones and television set installations (especially in the rural areas) in India, social research with researchers' multi-spaced respondents/ participants shrank. So, the 'new normal' remained a fragmentary development. It emerged within an existing crisis of 'digital divide' in India and its coping struggles, such as the 'Digital India'[2] programme by the Government of India (Government of India, 2021). But, the political economy of digital access through public-internet, e-commerce and e-governance remained largely constricted within urban spaces and metropolis. Comprehending it as techno-politics, Anubha Singh (2021) deconstructs 'Digital India' as reshaping ideas of empowerment as individual responsibility while valorising the status quo of dominant caste, class and gender. The intersections were also overlooked throughout the dissemination of 'new normal' and digital research in India. On the other hand, development theorists referred to 'new normal' as a way of resilience, recovery and re-structuration after a state of social precariousness (Corpuz, 2021). Across such an expansion, several digital and social media platforms facilitated group-oriented interactions, work from home culture and knowledge of containing the Novel Coronavirus. This indicated structural commonalities across developed and developing countries where a

[2] A flagship programme for transforming India into a digitally empowered economy and society.

combination of the 'new normal' and 'digitalization' was validated for promoting health security and sustainability. But, parameters of such commonalities portray some differences with regard to India and its long historical account of digital discrimination against lower-income sections. This has raised concerns like that of 'digital divide' since the 2000s, where millions of people with regard to their marginalisation, caste/class, gender, education and intergenerational poverty are still considered to have no access to the Internet, mobile phones, etc. (Joshi *et al*., 2020). Moreover, as per TRAI (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India) in 2020, it has been estimated that over 70 percent of rural India has no access to Internet or Broadband facilities. Indian states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal, projected the least number of Internet subscribers per 100 persons (Sharma, 2020). In addition, Assam, lying in North-East India, always underwent burdens of regional exclusion and digital divide as compared to other centralised Indian states (Singh, 2012). Such forms of spatial and regionalised inequalities have been further exacerbated by the gravest COVID-19 pandemic. Studies analysed how educators faced several challenges with the structured rules of digital world navigation, such as irregular schedules and eye-straining lecture modes. Inaccessibility to online classes due to lack of 4G smartphones, desktops or laptops among the students belonging to the lower-income families, disrupted their learning experiences, routines and motivations (Varma & Jafri, 2020; Chakraborty *et al.,* 2020). Also, the lack of training across specialised technical interfaces constrained opportunities for researchers and teachers during their coursework. This turned 'new normal' education culture as highly graded and contradictory.

Another pandemic facet draws upon the permanent closure of some schools in India that could not survive its repeated jolts, school drop-outs and lack of fees payment. Drawing across, if 'digital education' triggered scuffle over dismal infrastructures, digital research is a distant dream in a developing country like India and its peripheral North-East region. The National Achievement Survey (NAS) 2021 infer that across North-Eastern states like Assam, Manipur and Meghalaya, 48 percent of the students had no access to digital devices for continuing classes at home during the pandemic (Begum, 2022). While basic applications like WhatsApp and Telegram were used by the teachers to share notes, advanced video-platforms like Webex and Zoom were a complete miss. So, academic interactions were restricted to basic applications in some cases. But, no such scholarships exist on the status of digital research in Assam.

It is important to understand how lockdown and social distancing protocols snatched the aspirations of researchers for accomplishing their fieldwork and invited precarity on the completion of their doctoral and post-doctoral works. The researchers were repatriated back from their places of work to their homes with little or bare minimum access to library resources. Moreover, the researchers from poor backgrounds faced double burdens of relocating back to villages with inconsistent electricity and a lack of work environment. This dragged both primary and secondary data collection for social research to a dead end. While public and private funded institutions in India allowed researchers from material, physical and chemical sciences to be occupying institutional/hostel accommodations after the first wave of the pandemic, researchers from social science backgrounds were pushed to conduct their research within their homes. If 'field' for social researchers is largely assembled through sharing multiple experiences with their informants or shifting across intricate materialities, the social and institutional discourses of the COVID-19


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pandemic pushed the horizon of the 'fields' out of the complex academic debates. Instead, swift legitimization of digital research in academic institutions without proper guidelines or handbooks, halted the careers of researchers. This also subtly de-legitimised social sciences as compared to material sciences and reproduced the methodological, theoretical or conceptual valorisation of raw scientific principles and development. Accordingly, though countries like the U.K. and the U.S. synchronised digital technologies such as Cloud, Internet-of-Things, Artificial Intelligence (AI) for research activities (De *et al.*, 2020), the 'new normal' in India is still begetting ambivalences, inequalities and distress among the research practitioners.

Through these assertions, digital research can be situated as a context rather than merely a methodology. This context not only influenced research activities but also reproduced 'technological order' and flows of power (Pathak, 2021); where control of information served as repositories of class-oriented consumption. The information transferred into the hands of the few possessing digital resources and networks for digital education (Rashid & Yadav, 2020), also overturned digital research into a passive bureaucratic hegemonisation. Besides, 'new normal' aided raw scientism, without comprehending 'research' as an identity beyond professional credit. 'Researching' needs to be framed as an embodied site of being and becoming while operating within a complex social, economic and political system.

A question now emerges is do digital research frameworks rightfully cater to the relationalities and communion of researchers with their participants? Even so, the post-modern anthropologists emphasised digital research's flexibility in preserving relationships and interactions across distances and multiple spaces (Miller, 2018); this remains a distant passage for India, given its social complexities. Foregrounding this, the article puts forth empirical cases for exploring the limits of digital research in the North-East Indian state of Assam and gauges out voices and social meanings of such research amidst the 'new normal'. It also analyses digital research as a stratifying order, entailing 'academic non-membership' for researchers lying on the other side of the 'digital divide'.

## Framework of the Study

The study critically locates digital research and its complex institutional disbursal among the social science researchers in Assam. Drawing across this, the 'academic non-membership', has been proposed as a concept. But it has been achieved without a hypothesis. The concept primarily emerged through a grounded theory approach, where it has the 'trait of being particularly suited for the exploration of not of static phenomena, but of the processes underlying those phenomena and their dynamics, understood in context' (Tarozzi, 2020, p. 8).

The context here is the 'new normal' in India and specifically Assam, the North-Eastern state of India. In relation to this, the concept of 'academic non-membership' has been arrived at through vast set of data, collected through interviews, observations and field notes taken during multiple field visits. This attempt, however, aimed towards the integration of the perspectives of the author (researcher of the study) and the participants of the study while evoking varied meanings of the data and knowledge that emerged subsequently.

## The Study Context: Assam

Assam, one of the eight North-Eastern states of India[3], perennially survived within a zone of peripherality and underdevelopment. Several ethnic revolts and anomalies in the mainstream media attention constructed the state as always lying in the lowest stratum of social, political and economic achievements, without much debate on the underlying issues of governance. Its boundaries are also defined as 'disturbed' areas (Government of Assam, 1955). Within this, while digital research tested time across the centric states of India, its roots in Assam remain in limbo. So, the case of Assam and researchers pursuing their research in few academic institutions here would serve as anti-thesis to the formulaic implementation of digital research.

The present study has been conducted in the Tezpur and Guwahati cities of Assam. Tezpur is a small city in the Sonitpur district and Guwahati stands as a metropolis in the Kamrup (Metropolitan) district of Assam. The latter, Guwahati, is also known as the largest circuit city that houses the capital of Assam known as Dispur, and serves as the seat of the State Legislative Assembly of the Government of Assam. But, the socio-topographical environment of Tezpur and Guwahati stand in contrast to each other in terms of digital distribution, transport, networking, finances and population. The Master Plan for Greater Guwahati 2025, prepared by the Government of Assam, includes developing digital infrastructures as a sub-goal within the larger framework of improving physical and social infrastructures (Government of Assam, 2022). In comparison, digital infrastructures in Tezpur did not rapidly evolve out from a state of underdevelopment. Lack of state attention and no corporate investments pushed this zone to obscurity. However, Tezpur and Guwahati also consist of reputed public-funded universities that admit researchers from diverse socio-economic backgrounds in social science disciplines. But, the pandemic waves hurled massive challenges for research activities through irregular fellowships and abrupt (temporary) shutdown of university hostels.

Digital research invited new and unparallel challenges for researchers in Tezpur and Guwahati. The effects of the pandemic shook digital research projects in Guwahati, bringing it on a similar plane as Tezpur. With the implementation of lockdown, many researchers were forced back to their homes where survival turned into a primary challenge, lest 'research'. While 'digital support' was promised to researchers across several platforms, it did not work as expected. Later, in cases, institutional responses too ceased with no emails or information to support researchers in their academic activities, like participating in seminars/conferences or webinars. On the other hand, the researchers could not manage Broadband costs with the bare minimum stipend they received. So, digital research protocols halted their data collection, literature review process and submission of dissertations. It is against this backdrop that the enigmas related to the membership of researchers in academic communities would be explored.

[3] The North-Eastern region of India comprises the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura and Sikkim.


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## Methodology

### *Study Design*

This study was conducted in January 2021 and again resumed back in May 2021 due to curfew restrictions and social distancing protocols issued by the Government of India. The last phase of the study was conducted in January 2022. Before conducting the primary fieldwork, a pilot survey was conducted from November to December 2020 to assess the response rate for digital research. Later, primary responses were collected from those participants who participated in the pilot survey and some of the others they suggested. The succeeding interactions with the participants during the fieldwork further enabled the excavation of in-depth testimonies. Although the timing for the pilot survey and primary fieldwork was not a planned move, increasing Novel Coronavirus transmission and strict surveillance of police authorities outside residential complexes, influenced the decisions.

Relative to the research objectives of exploring the ways in which early-career social researchers perceive and negotiate with the institutional protocol of digital research in their mundane lives and uncovering the multiple ways in which digital research produced implications on their social identity as 'researchers' during the pandemic; a qualitative approach was followed. This approach proved relevant as it facilitated detailed interventions into the subjective narrations of the participants and their lived experiences (Patton, 2002), within the social formations of the 'new normal'. The study as set in the context of a ruptured time strived more to represent an 'event' than merely politicising the cause and effect of actions. So, a cross-sectional design was implemented to place the study as a specific event and explore the interactive and psycho-social experiences of digital research among the researchers.

### *Data Collection*

Given the qualitative nature of the study, 50 one-to-one interviews were conducted with early-career[4] social researchers or research scholars belonging to the discipline of sociology, social work, anthropology, political science and cultural studies. The interviews took place in settings such as their homes, their rented rooms or their relatives' homes during the first pandemic wave, through a semi-structured interview schedule. As accommodations within university campuses closed, a large chunk of researchers shifted back to their homes. This shift threatened their space of 'research' and turned homes into spaces of ambivalences and contested identities. To enable the participants to communicate perspectives without losing essences of rich details, both open and close-ended questions were used. The open-ended questions invoked responses on the everyday world of digital research and 'new normal', the mundane experiences of sustaining research at home, transitions in the course of their research, possibilities/constraints in academia and adaptation or crisis of academic existence during the pandemic. On the other hand, close-ended questions focussed on gender, age, years of research experience, stage of research careers, class and ethnicity, etc.

[4] Full-time doctoral students with no central government administered scholarships.

With this, the inclusion criteria of the study involved researchers from social science departments of various public (state/central government-aided) universities. Public-aided universities in India stand a better chance of involving research scholars from various socio-economic backgrounds due to reasonable admission fees for Doctoral courses, provisions for free transportation services within campuses, free books in some cases and minimal accommodation charges. Also, the availability of financial schemes for researchers belonging to socio-economically marginalised communities while fulfilling the best possible criteria of pursuing their research from public-aided universities reflects a political economy of 'researching', different from the private universities. Even if private universities possess high-quality digital interfaces to support researchers, the admission fees for Doctoral courses are often set at an exorbitant rate to be afforded by researchers with no potent scholarships or stable familial incomes. This determines the way in which the social composition of the private universities might largely include upper-class researchers. With these considerations, out of the total 50 in-depth interviews, 30 interviews were taken from researchers belonging to lower-income backgrounds and 20 interviews were taken from researchers belonging to upper-income backgrounds (both from public universities[5]). Out of them, 20 were female and 30 were male researchers who belonged to the age group of 26 to 30 years. The participants who were from lower-income backgrounds also belonged to lower-caste groups and tribes such as Jaliya, Mahara, Garos, Rabhas and Adivasis, respectively. They hailed from villages and towns located mostly in the upper Assam region such as Kalbari Gaon, Chayani, Kohar Gaon, Udalguri, etc; while staying in university hostels and rented rooms in Tezpur and Guwahati. Since the pandemic made them shift or go back to their villages, the author interviewed the researchers when they booked rented rooms near their institutions or visited their relatives in Guwahati and Tezpur for work.

Furthermore, in assuring reliability and validity of the study, data were collected through a co-mixture of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The tracing of researchers was challenging during the pandemic, but snowball sampling technique sufficed. Since the author is herself a research scholar, she was acquainted with some researchers pursuing research from public-aided institutes at Tezpur and Guwahati, and asked them to refer to other researchers struggling with similar circumstances. She knew people and even professors from rural backgrounds with years of being in a research institute and forming social networks for academic exchanges. So, five known people of the author were asked to suggest research scholars from different socio-economic backgrounds, who were also later incorporated in the study. Besides, the purposive sampling technique enabled the author (researcher) to focus precisely on early-career social researchers affected by the phenomenon. Lastly, observation was also complemented through field notes taken during field visits such as reactions of participants to several other things and their work or living environment.

### *Data Analysis*

The data were collected in English and Assamese. The pilot survey illuminated that most of the participants were comfortable speaking English and Assamese. Besides English, Assamese is the official language of the state. It also functions as a

[5] From the pilot survey findings, it has been inferred that researchers belonging to upper-income backgrounds might also join public-aided universities for it's social recognition in the Indian context.


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regional identity in itself (Sengupta, 2006). So, the author is well-versed in both English and Assamese, which worked as a viable communication link with the participants. With reference to the qualitative approach of the study, the narratives were collected in detail through intensive conversations on the paradigm of the problem. Accordingly, a thematic analysis was conducted for organising patterns across datasets and 'make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences' (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 2); of the research participants. The responses from the interviews were placed and documented in an MS-Word file (MS-Office 2019 version) for coding and thematic retrieval. The narratives were read and re-read for the generation of primary codes, secondary codes, refined codes and categories. Refined codes were placed in boxes adjacent to the narratives and later themes emerged with groupings of refined codes, relative to resemblances in statements and assertive opinions with reference to the context. In addition, it can be deemed as familiarising oneself with the collected data, generating initial codes, searching themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing or presenting the outcomes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Furthermore, the author resorted to note-taking in the field. The validity of notes has been preserved while reading out emerging narratives to the participants and cross-checking critical points of concentration with them. So, instead of exploring digital research from a policy-based perspective, the study focussed on the ambiguities and negotiations of the researchers with the ideologies and actions of the 'new normal', culminating in processes of digital authority and forces.

## Ethical Considerations

The researcher was well aware of uncovering the complex pain and trauma of the participants involved in the study. In most cases, the researcher faced significant dilemmas of hearing and writing emotions of the participants who were struck within a liminal status. This also posed challenges of being 'reflexive' and engulfed with personal dispositions as a researcher working amidst the pandemic. To address this, the research participants were informed about the aims of the study in great detail. Both verbal and written consent was taken from them to protect their data against manipulation and pseudonyms were used in place of their real names on request. Since the research was carried out during the pandemic spike in India, SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) issued by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare under the aegis of the Government of India, have been followed. While the interviews were conducted in spaces such as the rented homes of the participants or their relatives' homes, N95 masks were used along with washing off hands upon the completion of the interview sessions and using disinfectants in sitting places. The participants responded and offered cooperation to the author, amidst the pandemic crisis. The health conditions of the author and the participants were well enough and no such virus transmission cases have been detected post the interviews.

## Findings

While society serves as the primary laboratory for researchers belonging to social sciences, the pandemic and post-pandemic period disclosed digital paradigms where essences of touch, feel and talk are mediated by technical impulses. In relation to

this, the findings of the study revealed the agential dynamics of such performances in the world of digital research.

*The Digital Monolith*

Digital research emerged as a social consensus for researchers during the pandemic period. But, this consensus transfers compliance for researchers while reinstating the politics of disbursing knowledge across academia. Academia, as known, serves as a structural edifice of equality, social justice and human rights deliberations. Students and researchers from diverse classes have been integrated into the disciplines and routines of academic institutions. As many participants claimed, academic spaces serve as repositories for researchers to establish contact with the wider academic community, beyond national boundaries. But, the pandemic ruptured the essence of such assimilatory spaces, that even virtual interactions could not fruitfully suffice. A researcher hailing from one of the remotest villages of Assam, grimly uttered:

> *I and my colleagues used to participate in group discussions at our institutional library. That was very productive. We used to have tea! Tea somehow provokes more discussions to happen! (laughing!). But, with the pandemic, I lost my scholarship. Even if I possess a second-hand laptop, I lost most of the stuffs that are only possible on campus such as on-point discussions with my supervisor or accessing more projects. (S. Deori, 30 years)*

The pandemic and the repatriation of researchers back to their homes affected access to physical libraries, invested with acclaimed and expensive academic resources (books, journals or software). This generated more visible social asymmetry through the ownership and non-ownership of production in academic industries. Early-career researchers who began reviewing literature for their works and research proposals, stopped at a dead end. While researchers from upper-income families or doing part-time jobs could afford limited editions, others from lower-income families or availing minimal scholarships failed to accomplish this task. Mou, a researcher from Social Work programme of a public-aided university, remorsefully expressed:

> *Institutional affiliation determines access to resources. Being a researcher located in Assam, we already have limited access to databases. I could not access a book by the Duke University Press due to my financial constraints. But, a colleague of mine, belonging to an affluent family, has her father to back her during this tumultuous time. She could secure lot of best-selling books. So, my research is halted! (Mou, 30 years)*

The pandemic and normalisation of digital research (as prescribed by institutions) generated grave threats to the crafts of the researchers. Apart from the transgressions of social systems, the anxieties and precarity comprehended through self-evaluation or by taking into account evaluation of others (local/global academic community); generated ambivalences in social status, irregular research routines and cognitive disarray among researchers within their institutions. Darshana, a researcher, stated:

> *My credibility as a researcher was questioned in my institution. I could not execute digital research methods such as Google Forms usage for data collection or other means for my thesis. Nowadays, I also fail to process information! Lost! As you*


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> *already know, qualitative research requires immersive engagement with the participants while replenishing it over time. Digital surveys are absolutely ineffective as I don't possess a smartphone. Worst, I borrowed my neighbour's phone (chuckling)! (Darshana, 28 years)*

Technology influences the functions of social institutions and adaptations of people in a long run. While the pandemic curved a habitat for 'new normal', its implications for material and metaphysical consciousness of people's lives secreted fracture of mutual negotiations. Such form of digitalisation of social networks in turn generated starkly (in)equalising pedagogic relations.

Dekha, an early-career researcher dwells deep into the problem of digitalization:

> *At my home, I tried my best to contact my supervisor through video-conferencing tools. But it was a failure. The interaction was a loss! Neither I could communicate to him properly what I was saying, nor he could. And my home is in a sub-urban area, which makes things worst. So, my relations with my supervisor strained. I could not help in his works too. (Dekha, 25 years)*

So, the 'new normal' cannot be iterated as a neutral alternative of sustenance. It is also an order determining social participation and depicting a stratifying force of disbursing 'means of knowing'. It (de)stabilises academic essences and multiple voices within it. In the context of Assam, digital research has not merely produced cross-cutting implications on the reflexive identity of the researchers but has de-territorialised processes of pedagogic interlocks.

### *Voices and its checkpoints*

The structuration of the 'new normal' secreted antiphonies of language and silence. This antiphony bestowed unparallel effects on the voices of researchers and their complex interactions with that of the 'researched'. In a way, digital research subjects the 'researched' in a perennial zone of inaudibility. Many researchers specialising in qualitative research spoke about the interpretation and persuasion of speeches or indicators and intensities in the languages of the 'researched'. Moreover, questions on who, where and how can be investigated with sufficient intent of researchers' reflexive interpretation of his/her social location.

Devi, a researcher speaks:

> *I am applying ethnography in my research and institutional fellowships have been very irregular and meagre since the pandemic. In this context, digital ethnography is something beyond my imagination. I don't have access to steady electricity here. Moreover, ethnography is not about collecting narratives, it is also about observing shifts in language, intonation and a deeper understanding of participants, which digital research cannot fulfil. (Devi, 27 years)*

While digital research worked as the only available mechanism during the pandemic phases, it can be rendered comprehensive as a substitutive method in combination with physical field-work design. Placing it as an independent intervention would be a challenge, which might rip off the essence of doing qualitative research. Acting on one's research objectives and the multiple ways of applying methodology (especially in the case of ethnography) involves bundling up

the social, political, economic and cultural valences, which establishes the consistency/validity of qualitative research. Bani, a researcher, describes her position:

> *In digital research, your field, your research participants and your channel of accessing them would be heavily queued. You will only find typical groups of elite participants for your research. If your research is focussing on digital aspects such as exploring the usage of social media, then it is likely to be fine. But, otherwise no! Sitting at home during the pandemic and struggling to find participants possessing smart mobile phones, has certainly placed my identity as a researcher in jeopardy! Moi saage nijok sinibo nuaru6 (I think I cannot identify myself!). Also, due to technical glitches, one of my conferences went horrendous! (Bani, 26 years)*

Digital research disposed the status and role of researchers into a zone of liminality. The 'liminal' re-construction of their identity has shaped the performance of their roles as non-academics (struggling for digital connectivity at home) yet within the virtual space and power relations of the bourgeoisie university administration. Their liminal voices encumbered emotive aspects of their identity, which suffered enough with the 'complex trauma' of the pandemic. The final blow emerged with the rapid shifting of jobs for resisting hunger. Durga, a researcher, stated:

> *In the first wave, I was ruined! I had to rush to my village with no other means of furthering my career. A sense of connection was lost between me and my research participants. Every time I had to report my progress to the Research Committee, I had answers like 'Due to the pandemic … my field-work halted!'. I tried contacting participants by phone, but they were themselves vulnerable. I remained a researcher for administration, but not for myself. Even administration people were asking me to pay fees through online mode. My family was going through a financial crisis and I set up a tea shop for survival. Couldn't find the 'new normal'! (Durga, 30 years)*

As a comparative assertion, researchers from affluent backgrounds could not only access laptops, fax machines and smartphones but could also partly continue their research by travelling in their personal cars and arranging suitable accommodations near the field whenever necessary. This ensured an attempt toward digital research while being hierarchically placed at the upper stratum of academic organisations. Digital research secured a mode of belongingness and achievement for them, within the 'new normal'. The 'new normal' refurnished the recognition of the researchers who could monopolise their social capital to work. Shanti, a researcher from affluent background stated:

> *In a developing country like India, more than half of the people are living below poverty line. Although I faced the problem of non-physical field participation, I would still consider myself in a much better position. I not only possess digital gadgets but also good connectivity with top-notch officials. This facilitated contact with my research participants. I can buy Internet packs regularly and can at least have a spacious room to work. How many people can afford that? (Shanti, 28 years)*

[6] A phrase in Assamese has been used to express complex emotions of self-alienation.


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So, digital research lies within the domain of ambivalence and exploration. While it can be fixed as an alternative methodology for social research, it affects the long-term legitimacy of 'research actors', mostly from marginalised backgrounds. Within the technocratic stimulation of information control and exchanges, digital research also reproduces class barriers and (de)neutralises the spatial paradigm of academic practises. So, the assimilation of digital research and the 'new normal' is no less than a hegemonic construction that dissects the voices of 'research' among a spectrum of researchers, and negates role-relationship of others within the dominant pejorative.

*Spacing and (de)spacing*

As an evolving law-like formulation of social association, the 'new normal' outlined subtle prescriptions of spatial coordinates and who can be legitimately placed within that 'space'. These spaces functioned as a cross-section of power and monopolisation that produced certain implications for 'research' activities and ways of 'doing' it. While digital research emerged as the way out, the academia favouring it could not dwell deep into the purview of gender stratification, division of labour in domestic spaces and baggage of caring or nurturing as a feminine responsibility. Mansi, a researcher, uttered:

> *Since the pandemic shut my university down, I failed to curve a workspace for myself at home. I had to help my mother-in-law in household chores and faced immense difficulty everyday in negotiating my work. It even affected my motivation. Being a woman also places me as a caretaker of the household. Similar things are not expected from my husband. Even if I sit with my work, all look upon me as a person who is not willing to help in running the household! (Manshi, 30 years)*

Researching and performing research within one's own zone of passion requires a space. This space is not merely about material manifestation of organising a process, but also a metaphysical consciousness of finding one's own being within one's work. Several participants uttered about the constraints of 'reflexive' workspace amidst the pandemic. They referred to institutional libraries or reading rooms as workspaces where social interactions with colleagues enabled them to access their subjective and objective dialecticism. Haba, a researcher and a member of an ethnic community named Adivasi, spoke:

> *I still remember my physical interactions with other colleagues. I miss it so much. We used to discuss a wide range of topics and they used to help me with a range of ethical issues pertaining to research. One day, while I was thinking about 'how do I take notes when participants are remorseful about something', one of my friends told, 'See, this is an art. You have to see yourself from your social location'. See, these discussions can never happen on video-conferencing platforms. Moreover, I am an Adivasi. I received this opportunity with my hard work. But expectations for digital research are certainly drifting me apart. (Haba, 28 years)*

In a way, intellectual risk-taking formed the part and parcel of social research during the pandemic. This has been encountered with regard to participants' voices, their complicit spaces and capacities of transferring narratives through digital mediums. In relation to the observations, it can be inferred that digital mediums can be operated or rearranged according to the wishes, crisis, gendered roles and socio-cultural injunctions. Even, the inability to utilise digital mediums for research turned

into a sanction for non-inclusion in academia, such as cracking jokes on digitally 'naïve' researchers. Sulekha, a researcher in her 30s added:

> *Digital mediums are shaped through gendered binaries. It is useful at times. But, it is also difficult for a woman respondent from a remote area to reach the hillock for accessing networks and contact me for providing a long interview. She might have thousands of household chores and her kins would maintain constant surveillance over her phone and perhaps be sceptical about 'who is calling' her. Besides, I am not much experienced when it comes to digital devices. So, I feel left out! (Sulekha, 29 years).*

'Digital divide' and its dissemination between researchers and their participants problematises integration between them. Many participants stated that their space with their participants has been threatened by the starkness of pre-indicative social inequalities. Their use of digital gadgets invited non-responsiveness from their participants. The obscurantism, uncertainty, and cognizance of the digital research paradigm made it difficult for research actors to make a sense of their assertion or what Stanley Cavell (1995) states as conversations of justice. Himen, a researcher, states:

> *I know the relational space with my participants have collapsed. When they saw me with my gadget, they scorned me saying, 'we don't know all these!'. It is really difficult to communicate. I don't know how to make it right! Everything seems bleak. Earlier when I physically went to the field, they were so happy upon seeing me. Now, they feel disturbed by my virtual face! (Himen, 28 years)*

So, digital research in social sciences is more complex than physical-field research. While physical-field research involves varying ontological turns in defining and redefining costs and exchanges for research actors, it also oscillates across dynamic realisations. It too secretes gendered asymmetries. But digital research constrains engagement with a 'vocational' form of research while physical research offers more agentive understanding and reflexive turns of relationality.

## Discussion: Towards 'Academic Non-membership'

A more telling analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic depicted abrupt transcendence of social systems and rupture of prior known modes of social interactions, group-oriented associations and physical connectedness. Against this, the dramatic effect of 'new normal' flourished throughout the globe with the rhetoric of re-development initiatives and positive well-being. As been disbursed, the 'new normal' erupted as a ground-breaking framework for not only rearranging social, economic and political systems but also lived digital realities. It has also been argued that digitalisation blur the frames between the formal and informal learning and offers leisure tools for academic purposes, such as chat rooms, blogs etc. (Nilsberth *et al.*, 2021). While this promised an emergency education, digital research has been certainly different. The structural anomalies of penury and excess in a country like India affected millions of researchers at the junctures of their social, academic and personal lives. This has been explored from the themes deciphered in the study.

Digital research appeared as a transitional force for conventional pedagogy. The face-to-face interactions and negotiations between the supervisors and researchers


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function as an act of communion and exchange of embodiments. These evocations through body language and gestures offered several spaces for producing 'research' as an academic activity and an aspiration. But digital research worked more as a 'digital monolith' (first theme). This de-linked the communion between researchers, their supervisors and the products of their research. As a deemed necessity, although digital research or 'stay at home' research sustained day-to-day management of research activities (Kokkinakos *et al.,* 2016); it also remained distanced. The shared epistemic relevance within such remote modes suffered from several problematic orientations, ambivalences and controlled voices. As narrated by many participants, the lack of stable electricity and broadband connections in their home-villages, their repatriation back from the institutes, the lack of access to digital libraries and their stalled relationships with their supervisors, all resulted in the dissemination of digital research as an authoritative model. Deeper into it, it can also be analysed that the 'new normal' project of digital research is far from the normative and pedagogically rich opportunities for researchers belonging to the socio-economically marginalised groups in the social complex of India. It can be depicted as a politico-economic project of reproducing power relations or class-based stratification and scripts Global North-Global South divide in academia. More stable facilitation of digital research in the Global North or developed nations has subtly led to the blurring of socio-economic and historical specificities of countries in the Global South, specifically India. This can also be argued as how culture, powerlessness and consumption of information are intricately linked to each other (Alexander & Smith, 2020). Some participants stated that their remote existences, their habitat close to nature and their agricultural ways of life kept them priorly away from the practises of technology.

In exploring the reach of digital research in the context of the 'new normal', an imperative move would be to decipher its residues in shaping the world-view of the researchers. Digital research throws into disposal a reality that exists not merely in the immediate but across the interlocking layers of social formations. The second theme of 'voices and its checkpoints' highlights this through the testimonies of social researchers living in Assam. Deconstructing the linear view of research as a rigorous methodological and theoretical endeavour, some participants claimed research as their habitual behaviour. They indicated it as a tool of replenishing their reflexivity as actors of research – going to the field, talking with people, forging ties, photographing them and unravelling the 'unknown'. This has been an empowering and liberating process for them in terms of immersing in an area where their social locations would be affirmed and contested over time. Such constructions of social meanings have been heavily constricted throughout digital research applications in universities. Although digital research has been an alternative amidst the pandemic, university administrators 'announced the "switch-to-online" mode, with the foggiest ideas about curriculum, ways of transactions and pedagogy' (Pathak, 2021, p. 3).

However, the pandemic phases brought a dramatic rhetoric of resilient adaptability and threw into disposal a conflict between one's embodied and extrinsic identity of fieldwork. Where life seemed to be threatened, researching required a manifesto of continuum and digital research came as an appeal or configuration for post-pandemic research in social sciences. While the argument seemed reasonable to an extent, the context-dependency of such an approach has been largely ignored. Institutes and universities in India started off-shooting online transaction systems with abrupt decisions and holding virtual sessions with high-tech devices. In a way, 'new normal' and digital research emerged as something beyond the 'normal' or a

channel of facilitating the stark logic of capitalistic accumulation. Several big-data applications were relaunched in India during the pandemic with state interests. It is also where Telecom and IT (Information Technology) policies made strides after the ventures of neo-liberalism in India around the late 1990s. But such services are still lagging behind in its equalisation. In a recent enumeration by the 5th National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2020, a significant share of the 'digital divide' has been traced; while percentages in urban areas are slightly higher at 56% of women and 73% of men using the Internet, rural scenario has shown worst records at 34% of women and 55% of men (Asia, 2020). So, it can be analysed that digital research within the 'new normal' evoke an expression of social inequality reproduced through the institutional monoliths of academic administration and control of knowledge.

The participants, from sociological backgrounds, rummaged that digital research constricted the choices of their research area. With limited access to 'smart' digital technologies by the researchers belonging to lower economic status, their roles as 'participants' in their research amidst the pandemic, got scrapped. So, research as an act of synergy and passion for the researchers received massive blows with digital research. The lack of control over the products of research led to an alienation from their identity as researchers. This also constricts 'personhood', which works through research and recognition of one's work across national and international borders. Personhood, Miles Little (2011) suggests, 'have physical, cognitive, emotional and moral dimensions … is thus also the sense of agency, the sense of what it is to be this willing, choosing and acting entity, as experienced by the person and by the people with whom she interacts' (p. 38). In a way, digital research reduced this. It reproduced the idiosyncrasy of research as a structured administrative work with strict norms and protocols. For researchers, the dialectical interaction between their creative pedagogies, passions and promises of social mobility for rewards remained short-sighted. In many instances, participants found it enormously difficult to share their research findings through AI (Artificial Intelligence) enabled platforms such as Webex.

Many participants were of the view that digital research can work as a secondary or substitutive methodology, rather than a primary one. Furthermore, the state policy in Assam and its negligible intervention in digital infrastructures elevates such crisis. Until now, no strong plans, data, or reports exist on the status of digital education in Assam, if not digital research. Many participants belonging to the remote villages of Assam stated that the 'new normal' for them had always been physical mobilisation rather than a digital one. Leaving their research work behind, many went to their agricultural fields to collect fruits and vegetables for selling in the nearby '*haat'* (market held regularly or weekly in rural India). On the other hand, many participants from upper-income backgrounds had better access to certain accommodations near their field or the target population. In that case, even if digital research was not directly applied, technology helped them in gathering high-quality secondary data and they in turn helped their participants with some Broadband facilities. So, this perpetuated 'an established system of classifying groups; a complex of social [*state and economic*] institutions that generate observed inequalities which unequally distribute societal resources (such as income and power)' (Oyekola & Eyitayo, 2020, p. 126).

Furthermore, encounters with the participants also illustrated the 'gendered' script of technological practises and the intersectional complexities of gender, class, and ethnicity in accessing digital devices. This has certainly been an overlooked


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point of focus in the realm of digital research. While exploring the third theme on 'spacing and (de)spacing', several participants stated that a man sitting with a laptop might connote contrasting meanings in relation to division of labour within the households than a woman who performs this similar act. This can be placed within the gendered social system, which marks inequalities in realising agencies for men and women. Using laptops and smartphones can be socially decoded as leisure time for women who intend to refrain from care work and domestic chores, which is more culturally valorising. These social expectations or organisation of biological and sexual norms often (de)legitimise and ambivalently regularise the role, identity, positions of work, and prestige of women researchers compared to their male counterparts. In a way, while on one hand, digital research invokes the broadening of lenses to a vast set of national and transnational contexts, it delimits the envisioning of this tangent where gender structures technological use and its essence in the mundane world of one. In relation, a majority of the women participants iterated phrases like performed a lot of unnecessary household work, disruption of workspace, no similar expectations of home chores from husband, etc. This can further extend debates in terms of whether technological intervention is liberating in an absolute fashion or falls within what Judith Butler would analyse as the 'gendered' script of doing digital research, that is the repeated stylised acts within a socially regulated structure (Butler, 1990).

A question pops up on whether digital research can uncover the narratives of the research participants in a sensorial manner. In several instances, women researchers from remote areas found it hard and extremely difficult to communicate with their participants during the pandemic. They often complained about the broken cellular-network towers in their areas, resulting in ruptured or unclear communication. In a way, while social research needs to be conducted with a 'reflective, experiential and critical' lens (Rabinow, 1977, p.5); such lenses have been constrained across digital mediums which (de)stabilised researchers' own location and knowledge.

So, the above three themes suggest the concept of 'academic non-membership' that emerges to the brim. In stretching towards 'academic non-membership'[7], it can be connoted as the manifestation of the macro-authoritarian digitalised processes or fetishisation of the 'digital', 'virtual', or the 'abstract' corporeal world. In other words, 'academic non-membership' can be referred to the material (overt) and non-material (covert) exclusion of pedagogic members[8] from the social, digital and academic structure of activities, conventions, rituals and celebrations. It is a situation where one gets distanced from the larger nexus of the academic community while being powerless to conform to digital research standards and the technical order of institutions. For instance, a researcher might not possess institutionalised access to important academic events due to his or her repeated failures in participating in digital platforms. This might condense to liminal existences, graded assimilation and

[7] The narratives of the participants (specifically from socio-economic marginalised sections) indicated the situation of the concept. But this can be applied across several other developing or under-developed nations. In 'academic non-membership', research experience emerges more from the validations of academic administrations and technocratic orders than that of the researchers themselves. The members are gradually distanced from their membership and agencies.

uncertain participation of researchers and research participants within the standards of digital research. So, the process of becoming an 'academic non-member' can be traced through four dynamic or inter-linking stages – first, irregularity of interaction on digital platforms such as audio/video media due to technical glitches, lack of clear communication and less expertise, second, assertion of online mode of transactions such as payment of fees or submission of documents within a deadline with less or no flexibility, third, low motivation from the research participants of the researchers due to lack of access to smart technologies, broadband or loss of communion through virtual facial interaction and fourth, the inability to share research findings through absolute precision such as the use of pauses, silences, hand movements, etc. while presenting in academic committees (Figure 1).

However, while the online world brought faces seeing each other for serving webs of claims and information, the self-reflections of researchers in digital research work its way towards redefinition – the redefinition of the excluded or those present in constriction. This might be an anti-thesis to 'academic membership', suitably for the ones who have access to resources, space, time and skill to curate digital research or pathways. This garners far greater sanctions from the academic technocrats who 'curate the manifold polar-perspectives on, for example, insider-outsider, we-they, boss-employee, oppressor-oppressed, conservation-progressive, and name it' (Pathak, 2021, p. 5).

Therefore, researches on online platforms expand beyond the platforms. While it is coping in terms of a public health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, the structures of power imbibed within it obscure the agential, economic and psycho-social dynamics of doing social research. So, 'academic non-membership' in a web-based horizon remains trapped within the contestation of choice and necessity, rational and experiential appropriations, identities and prescriptions.

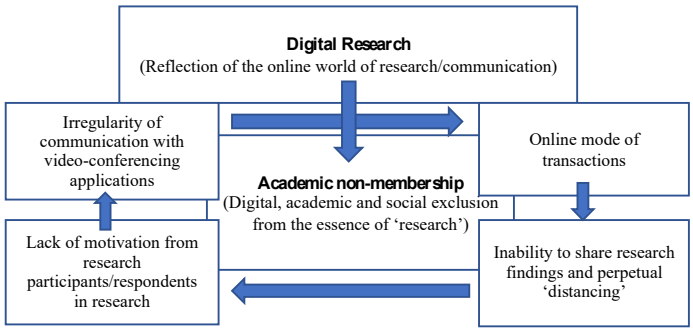


*Figure 1*: *Loop of 'Academic Non-Membership' (Source: Author's own)*

## Conclusion

The propositions and recommendations of digital research within the structure of the 'new normal' lifted its credibility among the larger academic community of social sciences in India. It stretched an intellectually stimulating venture of redesigning research strategies, teaching-learning practises and distanced sociability during the COVID-19 pandemic. But this social reality also sparked off certain contradictions and debates that have been poorly explored in the context of India and its relatively underdeveloped North-Eastern state of Assam. In view of this, this


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paper explores the experiences of digital research among the research community (specifically from marginalised sections) in Assam. It also takes into account the pathos, identity and catharses of researchers working across the proposals of digital research, that made its way into the post-pandemic academic discourses.

Digital research worked as the only viable alternative to restore communion between researchers and participants across varying spaces, places or geospatial locations. But it destabilised the inhibitions of researchers from diverse backgrounds. The reproduction of class asymmetries within the socio-digital purviews of the Indian context and the 'not-so-normal' complexities of the 'new normal' for researchers belonging to the marginalised groups, could never remain a hidden script. The politico-economy of digitalisation made its way into the visual culture of social media, where political figures often marked their existences. But, prospects of digital research, researching phenomena or accessing the participants from varied locations with stable connections remained certainly bleak. Taking into account the approach of ethnography often used in social science disciplines such as sociology and anthropology; it requires a deep intervention into the physical field with attention to specific locales of reflexivity, meanings of speech, attempts of knowledge sharing, and encountering multiple subjectivities. These nuances can be followed through specific research themes or can be halfway followed on the digital platforms. For these elements to work in a holistic manner, not only for the researchers but also for other actors of research such as the research participants, sufficient investments from the state and stable policy frameworks needs to be put into place. The policy frameworks might involve guidelines for digital research approaches, disbursing sufficient funds to the public institutes for making digital research transparent and accountable as well as ensuring stable electricity generation plants or Broadband networks in remote villages. These can be proposed as recuperative approaches in the post-pandemic phase.

Locating across these vantage points, this paper explores digital research not merely as a methodological approach to observe inter or intra-cultural world through digital spaces, but also as a context influenced by the residues of the digital divide. This processes a stream of 'academic non-membership' and situates the dislocation of conventional research practises across researchers' everyday world. Digital devices are not merely automated pieces of machinery, it carnage in multiple manifestations of bodily experiences, anguish, aspirations, power and identities. It also safeguards capitalistic accumulation in processing ease of use but with a subtle standpoint of uneasy or distanced inspiration for many. Therefore, while digital research and the 'new normal' filled the void of non-mobility during the pandemic, it certainly requires an in-depth comparative analysis in terms of socio-economic trends across developed and developing countries. Moreover, futuristic research potentials need to be directed not only on understanding research as a syntax. But a focus should be placed on the agential dissensions of researchers, their locations (class and ethnic orientations) and their membership in an academic community.

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