

CHAPTER II

Prison as a field site: Locating the field

2.1 Introduction

Throughout my research journey, I encountered numerous inquiries, including questions like "Are you confident in your decision to research women prisoners?" "How would you handle interactions with them?", and "Were you subjected to any harm during your fieldwork?" From a comprehensive perspective, this chapter might be seen as a means of addressing all the issues that emerged during the entire duration of my fieldwork. This chapter demonstrates the prison's role as a field site in an academic context and my position as a prison researcher focussing on the question of reflexivity¹. Wacquant (2002) argues that in the absence of extensive research on prison as a field site, it is imperative for prison researchers to directly investigate prisons by meticulously documenting the prison settings. This is necessary to fill the gaps in existing literature regarding fieldwork in prisons.

2.2 A Brief Development of the Prison System: India and Assam

Enduring influence of Colonial hegemony on our nation is exemplified by the current jail system, which functions similarly. Conversely, it is widely acknowledged that India has maintained a highly structured penitentiary system since ancient times. Initially, the primary function of the prisons in India was to function as detention facilities, where an offender would be confined until their trial, judgment, and subsequent punishment. Bhusan (1970,p. 2) asserts that the societal structure in ancient India was founded upon the principles stated by *Manu*² and further explained by *Kautilya*, *Yagnavalkya* and other persons. *Kautilya* in his *Arthashastra* has stated that rulers in ancient India made frequent use of fortresses to lodge their prisoners. In ancient India greater emphasis was laid on the spiritual aspect of human life and therefore the prisons were so modelled as to provide sufficient opportunity for penance and remonstrance. It was a common practice to keep

¹ Reflexivity is cultivating an awareness of one's own self during the research process, and it is a common and nearly inevitable occurrence for ethnographers. Reflection is an essential part of the process since the researcher serves as the primary research instrument. They have access to the field, create field relations, and conduct and structure observations. (Claes et al., 2013,59)

² *Manu*, *Yagnavalkya* and *Kautilya* were ancient India's law makers

the prisoners in solitary confinement to afford them an opportunity of self-introspection. During ancient times in the Indian system of punishment, confinement was the prevailing method of physical punishment

To move on, the Mughal system of justice dealt with crime, as it was understood then, the emperor and his nobles punished enemies or *baghis* (rebels) by consigning them to the dungeon under the charge of an officer within the confines of forts and palaces, or had them sent away to far off land. The conditions of imprisonment during the Mughal Empire in India were exceedingly severe and repressive. The prisoners endured egregious abuse, such as torture and deplorable living circumstances. The recognized methods of punishment comprised capital penalty, hanging, mutilation, corporal punishment via lashing or flogging, branding, or death by famine. Until the mid-nineteenth century, India's prisons suffered from a lack of certainty in terms of punishment, as well as inadequate security measures and a weak institutional identity. In the early colonial period, jails were typically constructed as buildings. Nevertheless, specialized penitentiaries started to be created from the 1850s onwards. By the 1870s, a significant number of these institutions had undergone deterioration and were facing issues of overpopulation. In the mid-century, Bentham's views of jail management and building gained widespread acceptance among colonial administrators. In 1855, Rhode, the Inspector of Prisons in Madras, proposed a plan for several new prisons, which he called a "panopticon". Bentham's idea promotes the constant monitoring of each prisoner from a centralized position (Rhode, 1874, p. 27). In colonial times, prisons were administered by employing gangs (Arnold, 1986). The prisoners acted as convict warders and night watchmen, enabling the enforcement of strict control over the hostages mostly through physical methods. Officials and other staff personnel abstained from directly engaging in the inmates' duties that were deemed unpleasant or morally dubious. The incorporation of functions enabled the subversion of prison norms, with the power to authorize or forbid actions frequently residing with influential convicts. The convict warders were responsible for reporting any violations, while they carried out their duties of supervising and monitoring the everyday activities of the prisoners (ibid; p.145-9). Multiple covert acts of subversion went unnoticed and undocumented, amplifying the scope of opposition to prison laws specifically, and colonial administrative protocols in general. The introduction of function fusion led to the occurrence of two sorts of interruptions. At first, it challenged the conventional and Goffmanian framework of prison management, which highlighted the distinct separation

between those in authority and those under supervision. Moreover, it eroded the idea of the jail as a scrupulously structured and controlled establishment. The colonial prison utilised strategies to instill discipline by encouraging obedience and cultivating obedience via employment. It is in line with the firm and legal refusal of traditional forms of punishment, such as imposing harsh penalties, mutilation, and torture on prisoners. Moreover, it eroded the idea of a meticulously structured and controlled jail facility. The daily routine in prison was shaped by various aspects including unpredictability, human relationships, closeness, and situational demands. McNair (1899) characterized the prison system in Singapore and Southeast Asia as one in which offenders are entrusted with self-supervision. During a period of insufficient available warders caused by vacancies and dismissals, an initiative was undertaken to hire disciplined convicts to oversee their fellow offenders. However, this approach faced criticism since it presented difficulties for men to exercise authority over those with whom they shared intimate connections (ibid, 1988). The convict warder system can be compared to a kind of motivation that combines rewards and punishments. By efficiently overseeing convicts, convict warders would gain greater independence (Sherman, 2009, p.5). Disciplining entails molding individuals who are both obedient and industrious, in exchange for a range of advantages. The bodies of convicts were distinguished by their disciplined and obedient disposition, rendering them exceedingly valuable. The tactics employed in colonial jails were intended to foster discipline via obedience and promote compliance through effort. This instance aligns with the resolute and legal rejection of conventional methods of disciplining and penalising individuals, such as inflicting severe punishments, amputation, and torture on wrongdoers.

The colonial prison served as a means to comprehend the fundamental importance of the supremacy and indestructibility of imperial power. The administration often used social differences to justify the reason to oppose contemporary and progressive approaches to regulate deviant and incarcerated populations, to assert colonial power and dominance (Kolsky, 2010). The implementation of modifications in the jail administration and infrastructure was hindered by the practicality and associated expenses. In India, the existence of caste sensitivity, considered to be a socio-cultural attribute, caused adverse effects on the rational method to organizational practises in jails (Arnold 1994; Yang 1987,p.33). During the colonial era, a specific group of Criminal tribes was established to systematically and consistently document the identities of criminals, essentially segregating them from the rest of society. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1911, as specified in

the legislation, permitted the gathering of individuals from these tribes in designated settlements. Within these communities, individuals would be closely monitored and provided with support to help them secure a means of supporting themselves. It had a resemblance to a modern iteration of an open penitentiary. According to Sen (2007,p.14), The Criminal Tribes Act of 1911, as outlined in the legislation, permitted the gathering of individuals from these tribes in designated settlements. Within these communities, individuals would be closely monitored and provided with support to secure a means of earning a living. It had a resemblance to a modern iteration of an open penitentiary. In the mid-1920s, there existed a population of 4,000,000 individuals who were perceived as both troublesome and unattractive. According to Ronaldshay's (1924) findings, the entirety of their social structure revolved around engaging in illegal activities, specifically burglary and theft, which were deeply ingrained in their ancient way of life .

Colonisation resulted in the adoption of modernity in institutions, which entailed the establishment of a Western-style administration. In essence, the practice of imprisonment was established according to the structured prison system. The transition led to a fundamental change in the essence of deterrence. In 1870, legislation was passed in India to ban the practice of using bodily mutilation as a form of punishment. Instead, it was replaced with the imposition of demanding manual labor. Moreover, the Reformatory Schools of Art in 1897, which mandated the transfer of juvenile delinquents to reformatory schools instead of prisons, serves as another illustrative instance. During the Ahom era in Assam, it was customary to administer punishments that entailed the amputation of body parts. The prison system in Assam, like the rest of India, may be attributed to its origin and structure established by the British Colonisers (Majumder, 2022). The problem of prison administration in Assam can be traced back to the establishment of the British East India Company in 1826. By 1833, the East India Company had already built jails in important administrative areas like Guwahati and Goalpara (Cosh, 1837). The foundation of Dibrugarh jail occurred between 1859-60, coinciding with the aftermath of the sepoy insurrection. The consequences of the rebellion were also felt in Assam. According to Guha (1977, p.54), the significant upheaval of 1857 also affected Assam. Widespread speculations about the impending end of British control in India spread throughout the area. The Hindustani sepoys were deployed in Dibrugarh and Guwahati. In late July 1857, some members of the overthrown local aristocracy began to grow restless (ibid, p. 4). Since there is no recorded history about its establishment, these occurrences may be connected

to the establishment of many prisons in Assam. During the colonial period in Assam, convicts were classified into three categories, namely A, B, or C, depending on their physical condition, level of education, and occupation before being arrested. However, beginning in the 1920s, a novel method was introduced whereby offenders were categorized into categories according to the nature of their offense (Das, 2016, p.26 as cited in Majumder, 2022). It is crucial to acknowledge that the liberation movement exerted a direct impact on the prison conditions in Assam, as well as in other areas of India. The national movement's prominence in the early 20th century brought attention to the prisons in Assam, including the Jorhat Jail³. After Prisons were included as State Subjects under the Government of India Act 1935, the responsibility for related operations has been dispersed, with each State taking independent action. In 1951, Dr. W.C. Reckless, a participant of the United Nations Information Technical Assistance Programme, delivered crucial suggestions in his report upon his arrival in India. Following that, the All India Jail Manual Committee, between 1957 and 1959, formulated the Model Prison Manual to be enforced in different states. In 1956, the Jail Reform Committee was established in Assam under the leadership of Rev. JM Nichols Roy. Furthermore, further legislations were passed, such as the Assam Prison "Leave and Emergency Release Rules, 1968," the "Probation of Offenders Act, 1958," the "Assam Borstal Institution Act 1968," and the "Assam Children Act, 1970." Following that, further commissions, committees, and working groups were formed with the explicit aim of executing Jail Reforms and ensuring the fulfilment of fundamental requirements for inmates in correctional facilities. Prior to 1986, the management of prisons adhered to the regulations specified in the All India Jail Manual of 1934. Nevertheless, since the publication of the Assam Jail Manual in 1987, the management of prisons has been conducted in accordance with the guidelines specified in this manual.

2.2.1 Important Prison Reforms: An Overview

The British started the process of improving the Indian Prisons. Acknowledged as the father of modern-day Indian penitentiaries, Lord Macaulay brought the poor state of Indian prisons to the attention of the Parliamentary Council of India in 1835. He proposed the

³ Assam Chief Minister in his Independence day speech of 2021, announced that the State Government of Assam will preserve the Jorhat Central Jail as a heritage site, after shifting the present prison to another place in the district, as a mark of tribute to the great freedom fighters who were lodged in this jail during the celebration of 75th year of Independence “Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav” Source: The Assam Tribune.

establishment of a commission to improve the conditions of Indian Prisons. The publication of the committee's report in 1838 was a noteworthy achievement in the advancement of prison administration in India. In 1846, a Central Prison was constructed in Agra, in accordance with the recommendations of the committee. The first Central Prison in India was erected, followed by the construction of central prisons in Bareilly and Allahabad in 1848, Lahore in 1852, Madras in 1857, Bombay in 1864, Alipore in 1864, Banaras and Fatehgarh in 1864, and Lucknow in 1867 (Report of the Indian Jail Committee, 1919). This project had a positive influence on the field of prison reforms in the country, while also advocating for the philosophy of retribution in jail administration. In 1844, the North Western Province designated its inaugural Inspector General of Prisons on a provisional basis for a duration of two years, which was subsequently prolonged. Following Macaulay's prison discipline committee, three subsequent committees were formed in 1846, 1877, and 1888, all with the same goals. The recommendations suggested that the colonial government viewed the practise of penology and imprisonment as essential instruments of governance. The Jail Act of 1894, a momentous piece of legislation, remained the principal basis for jail administration even after the country gained independence. The Indian Jails Committee (1919-1920) undertook a comprehensive and insightful investigation into prison administration. The group played a major role in laying the foundation for prison-related policy in the subcontinent. Their recommendations on several facets of prison management had a substantial influence. The recommendation clearly underlined the need to segregate women in separate facilities or specific areas inside the same facility, in order to "prevent their visual contact, communication, or any interaction with male prisoners" (Singh, 1979). The inaugural Jail Reforms committee in Assam was formed in 1956, under the leadership of Rev. JM Nicholas Roy. Subsequently, other laws were enacted, including the Assam Prisons "Leave and Emergency Release" Rules of 1968, the Probation of Offences Act of 1958, the Assam Borstal Institution Act of 1968, and the Assam Children Act of 1970. In 1987, the Indian government implemented reforms aimed at addressing the needs of women convicts. To carry out a thorough evaluation of the conditions faced by women prisoners in the country, the Justice Krishna Iyer Committee was appointed. The committee proposed several noteworthy recommendations, which include: (a) Ensuring that women prisoners are adequately informed about their legal entitlements, (b) Exclusively assigning women constables to conduct searches on women prisoners, (c) Mandating women prisoners or undertrials to undergo immediate medical examinations by women physicians upon

admission to a prison, and (d) Granting women prisoners the privilege to contact their families and communicate with their legal representatives, women social workers, and voluntary organisations. (e) The establishment of distinct detention facilities for women prisoners is imperative. (f) It is crucial to have prosecutors with expertise in handling judicial proceedings specifically for women inmates (Mohanty and Hazary, 1990, p.24). Nevertheless, many components of the reform in Assam's prisons, such as the establishment of a separate women's prison in the region, have not been fully implemented. Pursuant to the Supreme Court's ruling in the 1996 case of Ramamurthy versus State of Karnataka, a committee was formed within the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPR&D) to ensure uniformity in prison regulations and develop an initial prototype of a prison handbook. A Model Jail Manual was established in 2003 to specifically tackle jail reforms in India. The document was produced on the basis of a nationwide consensus and thereafter disseminated to all State Governments for consultation. In 2014, a committee of experts was established with the objective of revamping the Model Prison Manual, which was initially written in 2003. In 2016, the expert panel did a comprehensive assessment of the Model Prison Manual and subsequently developed a preliminary edition of the Model Prison Manual. The Home Ministry officially sanctioned and disseminated the Model Prison Manual 2016 to all States and Union Territories, seeking their counsel. The primary aim of the new manual is to provide uniformity in the legislation, policies, and guidelines governing jail management and administration across the entire country. The implementation⁴ of this prison handbook is still pending in the jails of Assam.

2.3 Prison Administration and Organization in Assam

Prison falls within the jurisdiction of the State government, as specified in List II of the Seventh Schedule in the Constitution. The State Government has sole jurisdiction over the management and administration of Prisons. The administration of prisons in Assam follows the guidelines outlined in the Assam Jail Manual of 1987 and the Assam Prison Act of 2013. According to the Assam Prison Act, 2013, a prison is an institution that is established and declared under section 3. It is used for the detention and correctional

⁴ The 31 jails in Assam are administered according to the Assam Jail Manual, 1987, which is more or less a replica of the Prison Manual of 1984. However in 2013 the Assam Prison Act was enacted, which is just a mini extension of the Manual of 1987

treatment of offenders, as well as for the detention of other individuals who are committed to custody under the law. The term 'Prison'⁵ is synonymous with "jail"

The Inspector General of Prisons possesses absolute jurisdiction and supervision over all correctional facilities within the State of Assam. The prison headquarters, located in Guwahati, Assam, functions as the operational hub for the head of the prisons. The relevant clause of the Assam Prison Act, 2013 delineates the responsibilities of the Inspector General of Prison, which include

- (a) Overseeing and administering all prisons within the State.
- (b) Administer, organise, supervise, coordinate, and govern the various programmes and activities related to prisons within the State.
- (c) Execute additional abilities and duties as stated.

The Inspector General is assisted by two Deputy Inspector Generals (DIGs) who support him in fulfilling his duties. The State government has partitioned the entire geographical area of the State into an appropriate number of prison ranges, clearly defining their territorial jurisdiction. The Deputy Inspector General (DIG) is responsible for supervising a certain prison region and is entrusted with the management of the jail's activities within their assigned jurisdiction. They must report directly to the Inspector General (IG). The appointment of the Superintendent of each jail is carried out by the State Government, in accordance with Assam Jail Manual, 1987 (Clause 8, p. 1368). Given that research was conducted exclusively in two central jails, my analysis solely focus on the organisational and administrative structures of the central jails. The Superintendent is supported by one or more deputy jailors, one jailor, two Assistant jailors, a welfare officer, two or more head warders and several warders. The State Government appoints a board of visitors to supervise each prison. The composition of this board consists of the District Magistrate serving as the Chairman, the Chief Judicial Magistrate, and four non-official members. Furthermore, a review board functions within the prison system to evaluate the circumstances of imprisoned individuals and recommend their premature release in compliance with sections 67 and 68 of the Assam Jail Manual, 1987.

⁵ As in the Assam the word Jail and prison is used synonymously (Assam Jail Manual, 1987, Chapter 1, Clause5, p.1359)

The power and authority distribution in this prison follows a hierarchical structure, where upper levels delegate responsibilities to lower levels. Consequently, the top-ranking officials, namely the Inspector General (IG) and Deputy Inspector Generals (DIGs), who possess the greatest power, lack direct knowledge or firsthand comprehension of the operational dynamics of each and every jail individually. This is because they possess authority over all jails inside the State. Their comprehension of the jails under their oversight is obtained from the Superintendents, who uphold direct and uninterrupted communication with these facilities. The Superintendent relies on his subordinates, including jailers and other officers, who in turn depend on the warders and the convict overseers. The power distribution in question is designed to create a hierarchical structure that is ideal for the functioning of a 'complete institution', where external influences exert limited direct control or intervention in the daily operations of the jail (Bandyopadhyay, 2010, p. 64). The jail administration rigorously follows a preset protocol established by the State and the necessary bureaucratic authorities. The jail administration in this sense adheres to Weber's classical theory of bureaucracy, which is typified by a hierarchical organisation that resembles a pyramid. This framework fosters depersonalised relationships and upholds social boundaries between several tiers of authority. The organisation is established via the implementation of an officially established framework of rules and regulations, a precisely defined scope of authority, a planned plan for supervisors and subordinates, and consequently, a notable degree of specialism.

ADMINISTRATION HIERARCHY

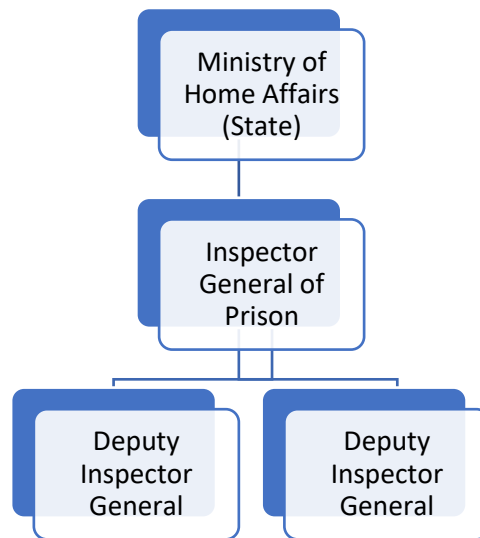


Figure 2.1: Administrative Hierarchy within the State.

HIERARCHY WITHIN THE PRISON

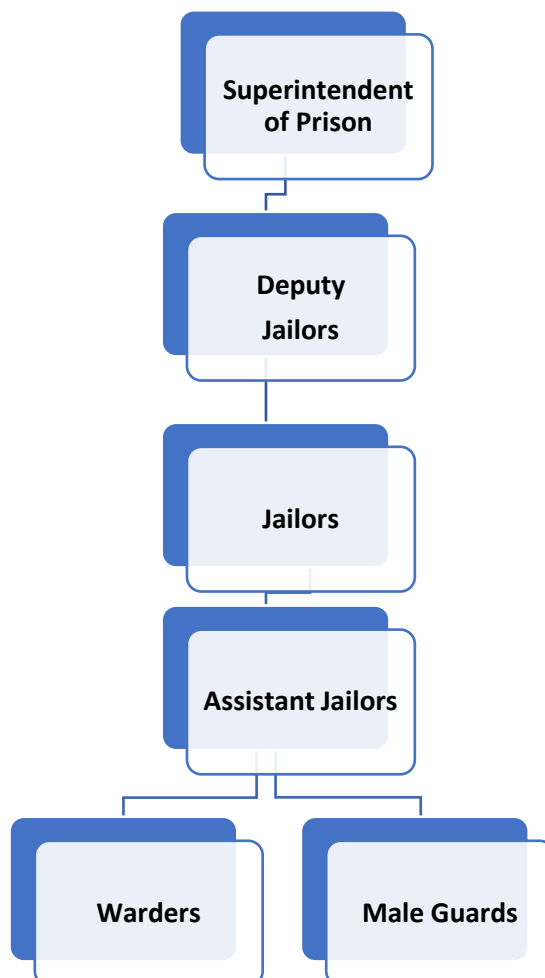


Figure 2.2: Hierarchy Within the Prison

2.4 The Field Sites.

Aashray Sthal referred to as Jail AA and Kamala Griha referred to as Jail KG are the two field sites. Jail AA, is positioned in the centre vicinity of a town in Assam. Established in 1859, perched by the NH 37 highway, it occupies an area of 47 *bighas*, is surrounded by a massive wall with jagged glass edge. A red iron gate, supported by tall pillars decked with block tiles and white layers on top, serves as the entry point. On the right side is the security post with stationed guards, with an entry book, where any outsider entering the campus, has to establish identity and do the entry and in front of which hangs the board bearing the name and year of the institution. Stretching between the gate and the main building, there is a lengthy entrance passage. Flanking the entrance are two small enclosed gardens adorned with neatly trimmed grass and blooming flora. The well-maintained lodgings of the authorities are located on the left side of the entryway. The primary edifice is constructed in the Assam Type architectural style, featuring a generous application of white paint and adorned with a weathered tin roof in a reddish hue. Adjacent to the building stands a brick-hued wall embellished with vegetation and featuring the elevated Indian flag, swaying gracefully in the atmosphere. On either side of the main building, there are sheds designated for vehicle parking. The name and establishment year are displayed bilingually, in English and the local tongue, using white lettering against a blue background. The signage is positioned at the top center of the building and also in the upper right corner. Prior to entering the jail, there is a security checkpoint where visitors undergo inspection. Beyond this point, there is a big iron gate with a small opening in the corner, allowing only one person to pass through at a time, which in jail terminology is known as challenge gate. The entrance of the prison leads to a spacious gateway. The superintendent's office is located on the left side, while the other offices of the authority are situated towards the right. Located in front of the doorway lies an additional gate, which leads to the residential section of the prisoners. A guard, armed with a gun, stands in front of the gate holding a substantial and extensive collection of keys. He is responsible for the keys to both gates. Upon passing through the final gate that separates the jail's main office from the prison compound, one enters a vast expanse characterised by abundant vegetation and meticulously tended flower gardens. The male barracks are situated in the centre of the courtyard, with the temple located next to it, and the hospital positioned towards the far-left side. Upon entering the compound, the women ward is not immediately visible, as it is situated in the remote end of the campus. The primary entrance of the ward

leads to a central courtyard, surrounded by various wards. In close proximity to the gate, the women warder is stationed on duty. Located on the right side is a well, the designated space for washing, and three bathrooms. The ward is a compact Assam-style building, including an elongated courtyard. To mention in this instance, Jail AS is the oldest prison in Upper Assam.

To talk about Kamala Griha, Jail KG is in the prime location of another town of Assam. Constructed in 1908 and opened in 1911, it covers an area of 76 *bighas*. Structure wise it resembles Jail AS, both are Assam-type structures built during the colonial era. The territory of Jail KG, is marked by a yellow half wall on the front area and then the border is marked by cane fence or “jeura”. Two coconut trees in the entrance with an open gate offer the only bit of greenery available to the eyes. In the entrance, in a red cement wall, the name and year of establishment are embedded with white stones in mosaic. A board with the time for visits is added on the front wall. The sturdy Assam-type house is painted a light yellow with white pillars and black wooden frames of windows and doors. Right from standing on the road facing the complex, one can see the Indian flag fluttering in the front yard. Here also along with the main gate, there is a security post, where anyone entering has to do the formal entry after this one immediately reaches the large iron grill gate, exactly similar to the one of Jail AS, but here the checking takes after crossing this gate, which opens into a large portal with offices on both sides like Jail AS with a little difference in the location of the offices, the women ward here is also located deep within the jail, is an Assam type structure, with flower beds, for the women there are four large rooms, a courtyard, a washing area, and two bathrooms. Compared to Jail AS, the area of the ward is a bit bigger. The establishment of Jail KG in 1908 and its subsequent inauguration in 1911 was a result of the freedom struggle.

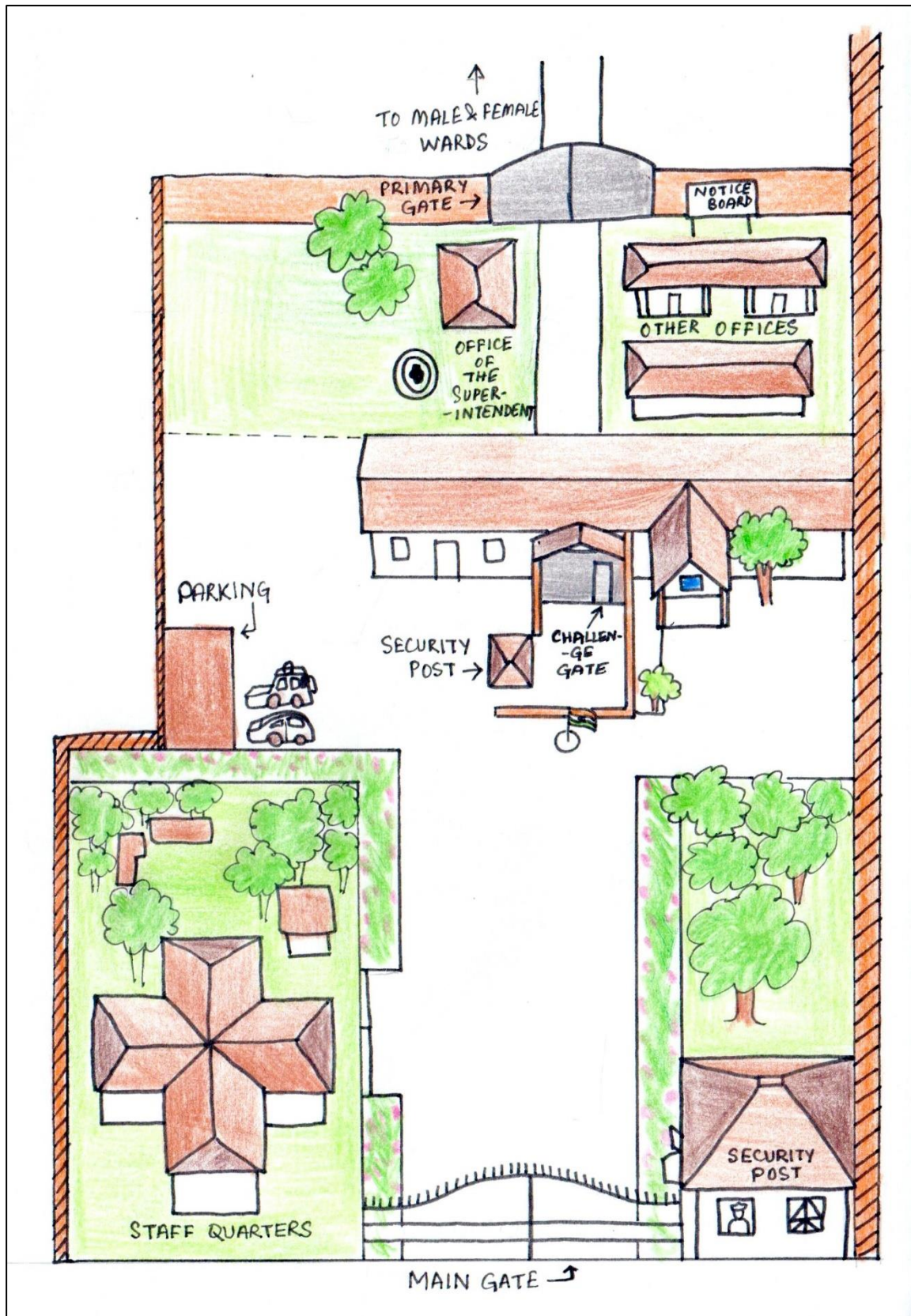


Figure 2.3: Memory Drawing of the passage to Jail AS from the Main Gate

Source: Field work

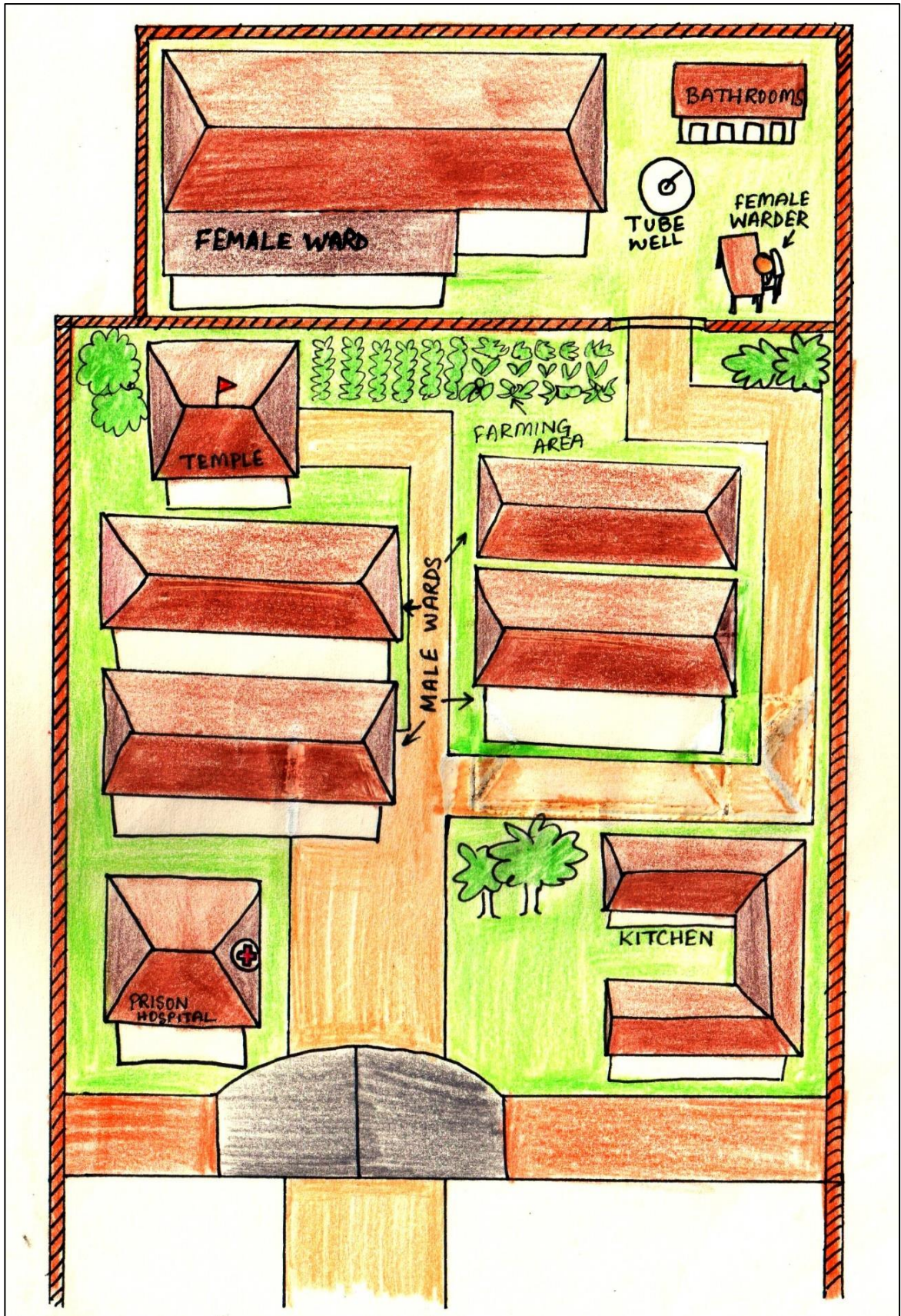


Figure 2.4: Memory Drawing of the main campus of Jail AS.

Source: Field work



Figure 2.5: Memory Drawing of the front view of Jail AS

Source: Field work

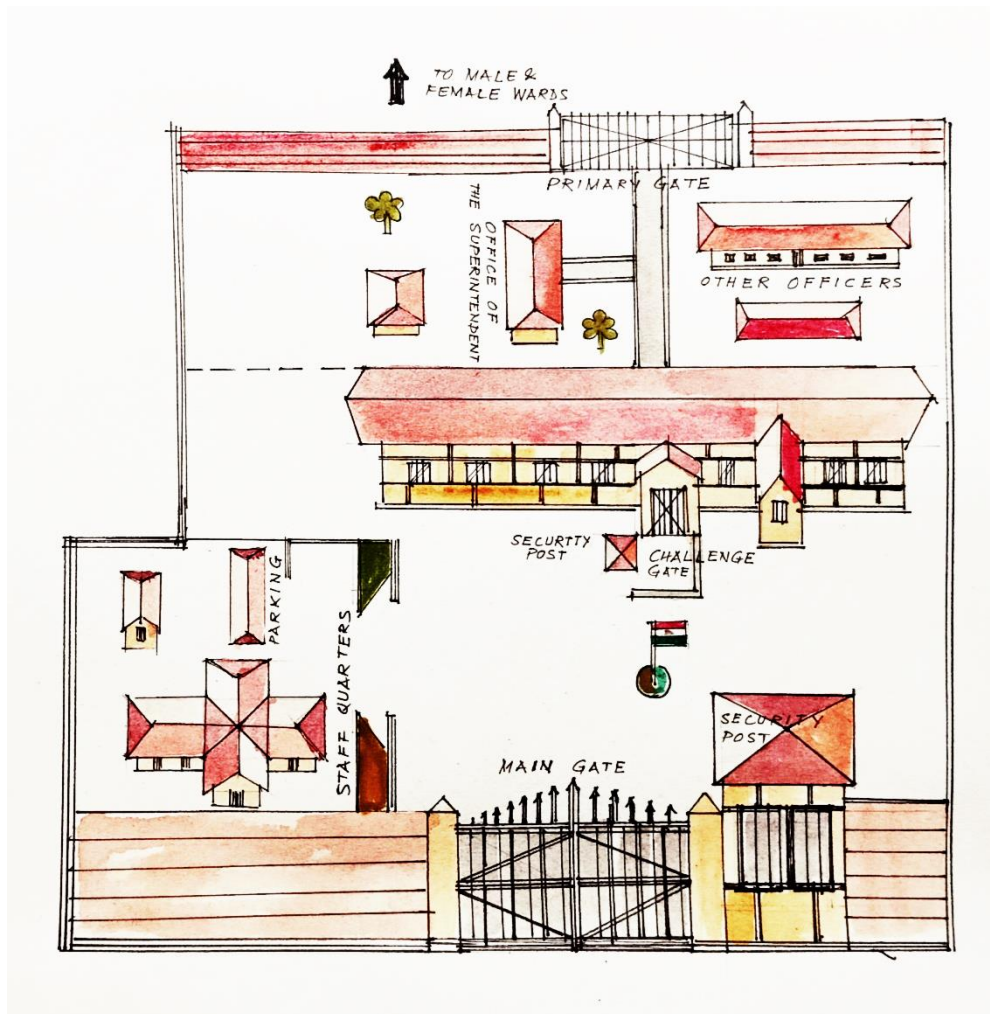


Figure 2.6: Memory drawing of the passage to jail KG from the main gate

Source: Field work



Figure 2.7: Memory Drawing of the front view of Jail KG.

Source: Field work

2.5 Engaging in the field: A Self-Reflective Narrative

Gaining authorization is a recurring process in numerous qualitative research studies. In the tightly controlled and closely observed environment of a prison, this phenomenon is much evident (Drake and Harvey, 2014 cited in Rowe, 2015). Prisons being enclosed facilities impose significant restrictions on academic pursuits (Waldrum, 2009, p. 4). There are many accounts of researchers where on numerous occasions they have been denied entry or faced obstacles while trying to get admission. I had to wait almost a year to get permission to enter the prisons and start the fieldwork. In September 2019, I initially sent a letter to the Inspector General of Prison, Assam, seeking formal authorization to conduct fieldwork in four Central Jails. The primary rationale for deciding to conduct fieldwork in four jails was to obtain a larger size of sample, as the existing data indicates that the number of women prisoners is relatively small compared to males. However, there was no response until January 2020. In February 2020, I personally went to the Inspector General Office in Guwahati to request authorization. To mention in this regard, while initiating the

application process, in the Inspector General's office, few officials inquired about the purpose of my visit and when they came to know the reason, they said, "What is there to study about these criminals?", "Will your research be any purpose?", "How a women like you will deal with them", "You might face many challenges", but I remained composed gently nodding my head and attentively listened to their words as sole intention was to obtain permission. Upon submitting my application, the office personnels assured me that they would initiate the processing. One of the office personnel who deals with these matters, provided me with his contact information and instructed me to reach out to him in a month's time and assured me that I would be granted permission, which provided me considerable relief. However, much to my disappointment, in March 2020, the lockdown was announced owing to Covid 19⁶, which also resulted in the suspension of my permit. However, in between I used to do gentle inquires about my field visit permission to the official who shared his contact number with me, and every time he used to say that once the COVID-19 situation is improved, I would be given access. Finally, in March 2021, one day, I received a phone call from him and intimidated me about my granted permission to conduct fieldwork for six months, but it was limited to two Jails only due to the report of many Covid-19 cases in the other jails and along with the intimidation he also shared with the contact numbers of the Superintendent of both the permitted jails, who would initiate the formalities of my visitation, and told me to contact them, as they were already intimidated about me. I refrained from making any additional requests for permission grant in the rest two jails, out of concern for jeopardising the granted authorization, and accordingly I made the necessary preparations for my awaited field visits.

It was my choice to visit whichever field site I wished first, so I decided first to visit Jail AS, as it was located in my hometown, though I have never went inside it, but I was quite familiar with its exterior, as most often I happened to pass by that way. Prior to my visit, I experienced anxiety and nervousness how the fieldwork will go. By reading sufficient literature on how to approach the field in an institutional setting I prepared myself. However, the actuality starkly contrasted with the knowledge I had absorbed and mentally prepared. Before my visit, I engaged in a telephone conversation with the Superintendent of Jail AS. He briefed me about the timings and the COVID-19 protocols which I needed to follow. Due to the need to adhere to COVID-19 procedures, I was required to undergo

⁶ An acute respiratory illness in humans caused by a coronavirus and the World Health Organization(WHO) declared it a pandemic on March 11th, 2020.

the RAT⁷. I was required to provide negative test results in order to gain access to and I was asked to reach the Jail premise at 11.30 am. On the first week of April 2021, I started my fieldwork in Jail AS. While I was preparing for my visit, the morning, my parents became anxious of my going inside the jail and spending time with prisoners, and proceeded to give me a multitude of suggestions, such as refraining from asking any questions and avoiding actions that may provoke their anger, as prisoners are considered to be dangerous according to them. I gleefully listened and assured them that such situations wouldn't arise. These suggestions align with the common thought that people hold about prisoners. Wearing a simple pale green salwar suit⁸, with a *dupatta*, properly pinned, putting on an N-95 mask⁹, a diary, three pens, and a water bottle, I sat out for my first day of fieldwork. Upon arrival, I proceeded to the first gate where I completed the necessary entry procedures. After walking a short distance of three or four metres, I reached the second check post, as previously mentioned. At this post, two male guards¹⁰ dressed in khaki uniform were stationed. I presented them my University Identity card, and in response, they instructed me to deposit my mobile. They proceeded to conduct a thorough search of my bag, while they also constantly gazed me with suspicion from top to bottom, I felt unease at time, again I gave myself the reminder I am in the jail premises... Subsequently, I proceeded through the expansive iron gate and entered the office arena of the jail. The Superintendent's office was situated on the left side, where I was instructed to take a seat. Following a formal introduction, he informed me that I am permitted to visit the jail on weekdays from 11.30 am to 3 pm. He also said, sometimes if any official functions happened to be in the jail, that particular day my field work would be halted and said that I am permitted to interview only the women prisoners, as I have mentioned only about them, and in no point I can interview the male prisoners, and also I cannot loiter the prison compound alone, if I wish to visit any area other than the female ward, I have to seek his prior approval. Everyday day a woman warder would accompany me inside the women ward, and he strictly asked not to use any recorders or cameras by any means. Also with a gentle smile yet in an imposing tone he said to me if at any point of time, if the authority feels my presence is posing any external threat in terms of security, he has every

⁷ Rapid Antigen Test

⁸ A two piece Indian wear consisting of a upper wear of knee length or below it and a trouser shaped bottom wear.

⁹ During those days wearing a N95 mask was compulsory protocol for Covid 19.

¹⁰ See. Section 2.4. In the check post 24*7 a male guard was stationed, and no was given entry inside, unless one establishes one's identity.

right to cancel my visitation. After this briefing, he summoned a female warder¹¹, who was attired in a khaki saree, to take me inside the female ward. Accompanied by her, I crossed the last gate and finally I was inside the prison compound. While walking towards the women ward, which was approximately a minute away, she advised me,

“Madam, refrain from looking at the men nearby as they might stare or make inappropriate remarks. It is quite uncommon for them to encounter women, so it is natural for them to become excited upon seeing one...” Additionally, she exercised caution regarding the women prisoners, and advised not to believe whatever they utter.. “*Muthor uproot tu aporadhi tahati ...ghorial soku pani ulia bohut...nije gom pabo apuni, kedinman pisot...*(After all they are criminals...so they shed crocodile tears, you will yourself know after some days...). They will also now and then engage in slanderous remarks about both us the authority, about the facilities and all...all this they will say to gain sympathy from you, so don't believe everything...”

I nodded in agreement, wearing a subtle smile, attempting to convey the appearance of a compliant pupil, as I was aware that she had put on the protective coat earlier. Upon arriving to the ward, I was made to sit on a chair just in middle of the open space of the ward. I saw the women, some were sitting leisurely in the courtyard in groups talking among themselves, few were sitting alone silently, some were busy making hairs for each other, some were washing clothes, some were bathing. But I noticed, when they saw me entering the ward, all their eyes were on me with curious faces... In the meantime, the women warder on duty, shouted in a stern voice, “*oi efale ah sob, tohotor log koribole ey Madam ahise* (Come here, this Madam has come to meet you all)”

In no time everyone flocked around me and the warder acquainted me with the women and uttered, in a firm manner, “She has come to talk with you all ...*bhalke kotha patibi, misa misi natok eku nokoribi...*(talk properly and don't create any unnecessary drama)” But I did not at all like the approach of the warder, as in no way I am going to force any women to sit for the interviews...and this would not serve the purpose of my methodological ethics. After the warder said I could start with the interviews. she went to her stationed position near the gate...I started, “*Namskar dei!! Mur nam...aru moi Ph.D kori asu...aru bikhoy tu hoise apunaluk, hekarone apuna lukor usorole ahisu...*(Greetings!! My name is...and I am pursuing Ph.D...and my topic is to study about you all...that's why I have come here)” Upon hearing my

¹¹ See. Section 2.4. In Jail AS there were six women warders in total, and one among them was head warder and Jail KG, there were five women warders headed by a head warder

statement, I was uncertain how far the women understood the purpose...though everyone nodded their head, but with blank expressions in most of their faces..I heard the talking among themselves in whispered tones.. *ki nu mane! Ki Ph...*(What ...What is Ph..and similar sorts). I understood it was quite unnatural for to them to comprehend and understand what research is ... Then I tried to make them understand, I simplified saying that my intention was to write a book about them. Additionally, I mentioned that those who desired could engage in conversation with me, although it was not obligatory. This was my very first interaction with the women. Furthermore, it is worth noting that my previous research experience in Jail AS greatly facilitated my subsequent fieldwork in Jail KG.

2.5.1 Positioning Oneself as a Prison Researcher

Participating in activities within this field can be a demanding undertaking. Conducting research in correctional facilities provides a distinctive and challenging opportunity due to the fundamental character of prisons as a "site of irreconcilable conflict" (Sparks, 2002, p.556). Protocols are implemented to ensure the authorization for participant involvement and one needs to instill trust in a disorderly and unexpected environment, and carry out research to the best of one's ability inside a tightly regulated framework of guidelines, regulations, authority, and influence (Jewkes, 2012,p. 68). My innate tendency to be an introvert and shy woman which I previously considered as disadvantageous, unexpectedly proved beneficial during my fieldwork. The restrained and modest attitude I displayed was evident not only in my contacts with women but also in my whole behavior. Every now and then, whether the male warders and the male guards in both the jails approached me on my arrivals or departures, asking about how my research was going on, with comments such as, Madam... with a mocking smile... are they causing you any distress... are they opening up? "*Kiba dikdar dile kobo, ami asu...*(If any trouble let us know, we are there) I diplomatically replied always... 'Yes they are cooperating...' as I knew they won't help me in any way...their only motive was to initiate talk with me... On the advice of the woman warder, on the very first day, I avoided making direct eye contact with the male prisoners, I encountered while walking towards the women's ward, but would carefully notice the activities of the male prisoners, to grasp a difference between their lives from their women peers. Every day, as I walked past, I encountered a constant stream of remarks from them... "*Amar logot, kotha nepate... Ami tu aru bhalke interview dibo parim ...*"¹²(Would you not partake

¹² This behaviour from the male prisoners I encountered in both the jails.

conversation with us...we can give more better interviews)". Whereas some sang Bollywood numbers and Bihu Songs on seeing me.

Amidst this structured and doubtful atmosphere, clear attempts were made to establish the researcher's visibility on my part. Given my unique circumstances, I had to make deliberate decisions in how I presented myself, communicated the value of my work, and adjusted to the requirements of both staff members and prisoners. Exhibiting a courteous and polished attitude, I judiciously selected the personal information to provide and took into account my attire to convey reliability and confidence, making certain that I did not conspicuously differ from the women I interviewed.

I realised that I was exposed to the same controlled system and authority as the prisoners, which necessitated the careful observation of my behaviour as a crucial part of my research. An implicit cautionary message was present regarding the potential deprivation of physical entry¹³, an essential prerequisite that could not be subject to negotiation. The degree to which physical accessibility influenced the impressions I aimed to create had a direct impact on my actions and decisions in the field. Authorities frequently warned against approaching the women closely, underlining their position as criminals. During interviews, people closely studied me because I was seen as an "outsider." To mention in this instance, upon commencing fieldwork at Jail KG, I was granted authorization to conduct interviews within the confines of the Superintendent's office. Although the Superintendent originally left the room to honor my privacy, various situations required him to frequently return. The women, exhibiting hesitancy and unease, found it challenging to express their thoughts, frequently replying with brief, one-syllable statements. The Superintendent's office constructed a physical barrier to segregate me from the women, and the immediate vicinity of the room was abnormally loud. During my initial interview with the ward's mate, I was instructed to take a seat in front of the Superintendent's desk. Upon noticing the surplus of seats in the room, I chose not to ask for an additional one for her, instead deciding to position my chair facing the wall. During a period of more than two weeks, I experienced an increasing feeling of unease as the chair and floor symbolically separated me from the women. Space has a crucial role in shaping research direction, however it is frequently disregarded in discussions about the relationship between researchers and participants in the field (Mehta, 2014). Space serves

¹³ By this I meant cancelling the fieldwork by the prison authority.

as a neutral framework where cultural variations, historical memory, and societal organisation are recorded (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997, p.34-36). My fieldwork was not going the way I expected as I was hesitant to seek authorization from the Superintendent to access inside the women ward like in Jail AS and conduct the interviews. After the interviews, the Superintendent most often would offer me of a cup of tea, in his office along with a brief and formal talk. I thought of taking this as an opportunity to hint that I was not achieving my purpose of interviews in the way it was conducted. So one fine evening after the interview, I decided to take a risk. With great fear, and apprehension in my mind I told him that I am thinking to halt my fieldwork for some days, with a little description of my field work in jail AS inside the women ward how it went, I told him that the fieldwork is not going properly, as the respondents are hesitant to speak and I very politely asked him he has any suggestion regarding it. As he had already shared his long experience of working with prisoners in the different jails of Assam. Following the next three days interviews continued in a similar fashion, and my facial expression clearly exhibited the apprehension and anxiety connected with the entire process. On the third day, while I was about to start the interviews, in office, he said to me that I had permission to conduct interviews in their ward, since it would make them feel more comfortable and I was asked to follow similar protocols as advised by the Superintendent of Jail AS. I was super elated at this. Following a period of two weeks, I was ultimately given permission to access the female ward. Women warders within both jails occasionally presented challenges. Inside the ward the women warders, now and then used to create few hurdles, but one of my respondents in jail AS, told me that all that they want from you is little bit of care, then they will not create any trouble. So, one day after conducting the interviews, while the warder came to leave me till the main office, I asked her if we can sit for a cup of tea someday, she said, whenever she gets time she will let me know. After few days, one day she said, we can go for a cup of tea in the evening. Accordingly after my fieldwork, she accompanied with me for tea, in a nearby tea joint outside the jail. My intention was to build a good rapport with her. At first, I faced difficulty in identifying conversation topics, but she proactively asked about my family members. This initiated a significant dialogue between us, and in a similar way I made rapport with other women warders also. In the same way I built rapport with the women warders of jail KG also.

2.5.2 Engaging with the respondents

In both the Jails it took some time to make the women understand my work. Initially in both the jails, one by one the women used to come and sit for the interviews, and whatever I asked they said, it was a one way flow... Additionally, I saw that as soon as I entered the ward, the women realized my presence, stopped what they were doing, and sat down like compliant students in a classroom. But slowly as the fieldwork progressed, the women came to stay in their selves and didn't bother my presence, to create a tailored self. Gaining the trust and establishing a connection with the women necessitated a substantial investment of time and effort on my behalf. My keen observation on the trivial daily activities helped me to initiate talks with the women and break the barriers accordingly. To mention again, often some women repeatedly told stories in an effort to gain my sympathy, hoping that I could find a solution to free them. This was widespread among the *undertrials*, as they held hopes of earning a lower sentence. The convict women on the other hand willingly accepted their fate, as they were aware of the exact time of their confinement. According to Goffman, a primary role for a fieldworker is that of witness: You are deliberately immersing yourself in a situation, assuming the role of a passive observer rather than an active participant or interviewer, in order to see and document how individuals respond to their surroundings and the actions taken towards them (Goffman, 1989,p. 126) Besides interviewing the women, witnessing of instances happening in the ward also helped me to grasp a lot about their everyday within the ward. During some hours of my fieldwork, I just refrained from any interviews, and sat and witnessed, everything that happened around the ward and tried my best to jot down everything in my field diary. As a researcher, I had to assess the level of information that participants would be comfortable revealing, as well as determine how I would effectively utilise this data for my research. As never to any women, I asked about their crime, it was some women who themselves told in some context. During the entire course of fieldwork I tried my best not to make them feel as prisoners during my interactions, as it would jeopardize the aim of conducting feminist research. The practise of actively engaging in listening, as opposed to just auditory perception, was essential for comprehending and examining the intricate power dynamics that impacted both the persons in the prison and the research itself (Rhodes,2009). While attending to the women's narratives, I also paid attention to their bodily movements and other non-verbal forms of communication. Just as the body was subjected to monitoring, the narratives were also subjected to surveillance. Frequently, when the warder was present

nearby during the interviews, they became aware and thereby altered the substance of their statements. It was crucial for me to also be attentive to the surroundings throughout the interviews.

Liebling (2014) utilised reciprocity as a means of initiating dialogue with respondents about their own experiences. They would often ask about my life. I found it fair to have a conversation with them about my life, similar to how they were sharing their own lives with me. The inquiries related to subjects that were of personal interest to them. They found parallels between their own encounters with emotional distress and my past personal experiences. I detected a palpable feeling of relief and empathy emanating from them. I can recall certain occurrences from their life that bear a resemblance to my own experiences. At times, when I heard them, I felt a powerful emotional reaction, but I was able to keep my calm. Jewkes (2012) compellingly argues for the methodological significance of taking into account the emotional dimensions of prison fieldwork. Achieving a deeper and more complex understanding of the consequences of imprisonment can be accomplished by recognising the emotions experienced by prison fieldworkers and their subjective encounters in the field. As per Liebling (1999, p. 164), there is no obligation to synchronise our emotions with the data at hand. They serve as a representation of data. Occasionally, I discovered that emotional engagement was a powerful means to gain a deeper understanding of my field of expertise. Rhodes (2012) asserts that thinking, speaking, observing, and writing are interrelated, and researchers can effectively represent the truth of a situation by fully engaging with the subject matter. Finally, I decided, on the day before the final day of my fieldwork I would talk with the Superintendents about this, that as a token of thanks for participating in the interview process, I want to give them something and accordingly I did, and the Superintendents of both the jails agreed in it and fulfilled their requests, which also gave an utter satisfaction.

2.5.3 When recorders and cameras are not applicable

The use of audio recordings is a widely accepted and well-established form of communication (Martin, 2002). Except for the field diary, any other form of communication were strictly prohibited in my circumstances. My field diary was the only form of expression in this specific instance. In order to produce a meticulously created jail field journal, it is imperative to meticulously record a diverse array of subjects with thoroughness and precision (Sanjek, 1990). At the beginning of my fieldwork, I had the

difficulty of keeping a steady rhythm of note-taking that matched the progression of the narratives. I noticed a decrease in my writing speed as a result of frequent utilisation of the keyboard. Nevertheless, with the passage of time, I managed to surmount this impediment. Aside from narratives, my field notes comprehensively covered the entire prison premises, as I lacked the means to employ a camera for recording. Regrettably, I was unable to document everything due to the constraints of time and space. Hence, after leaving the prison each evening, I developed a routine of documenting my observations to avoid any possible memory lapse. Field diaries provide a way for researchers to reflect on their interactions with people, places, and things during the study process. In addition to my field diary, I kept a personal research journal to record my thoughts and feelings. During my fieldwork, I found my diary to be a helpful tool for emotional release, since it allowed me to understand and process each day by recording my experiences and feelings. The information was solely designed for my private consumption and provided a safe space for me to openly express my concerns, complaints, and frustrations. It was a culmination of several ideas, contemplations, and feelings. During my fieldwork, I saw that the most significant instances of comprehension occur when there are disruptions. During such periods, it is necessary to dedicate ample time to writing and deep thinking in order to comprehend the fundamental nature of the experience. This approach relies on having trust in and being sensitive to one's intuition.

2.6 Conclusion

Undoubtedly, carrying out research within a jail setting presents a formidable undertaking. However, it shares many similarities with other community settings. Just as it requires time for a researcher to become acquainted with and integrated into a community, the same holds true for the jail environment. By immersing oneself in the jail environment and using rigorous analytical and reflexive approaches, one can get significant experiential insights, acquire information, and provide detailed accounts of the hidden realities within prisons. While conducting field work in the two central jails, I encountered specific challenges that required me to engage in introspection. Engaging in reflection is essential not just for upholding scientific integrity but also as a way to deal with the profound and sombre characteristics of the jail environment. There were instances when I witnessed women crying, which presented challenges to my capacity to remain emotionally detached. However, I made a concerted effort to maintain emotional detachment throughout the

whole research process. Lee (1993) asserts that undertaking field research is a demanding undertaking that necessitates the researcher to possess resolute determination and intellectual prowess to surmount the challenges posed by the subjects under investigation. Lastly, a number of women also conveyed their joy, appreciation, and favourable encounters with me throughout the fieldwork process. However, it is crucial to recognise that these interactions did not yield any concrete resolutions other than my personal progress in attaining a PhD degree.

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