

The Art of Uneventful Everyday: On Socially Engaged Art Project in Delhi

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1. Introduction

Like any other south Asian city, Delhi had grown organically through migrants of different communities and classes. Many working-class people develop their site of work and residence through a network of social relationships. Most of the time, these sites are illegal or quasi-legal. They often suffer the blow of violence of demolition due to the beautification of the city or through the logic of hygiene. These migrant working-class people are seen as trace-passers in the city. One such site is Meena Bazar. It is a makeshift market outside the main gate of Jama Masjid, a Mughal time famous mosque in old Delhi. This mosque stands just opposite the side of another spectacular Mughal site, Red Fort. Every year these two Mughal monuments attract millions of tourists.

Meena Bazar is a location for the working class to buy and sell their products. This is a site for very cheap commodities and food items. Next to Jama Masjid on one side is Chawri bazaar which connects the primary wholesale market of Delhi, commonly known as Chandni Chawk, but it has several lanes and bylanes of different names and is dedicated to markets for different commodities. This market employs thousands of workers doing all kinds of work, from pulling karts or rickshaws, loading-unloading deliveries and many more activities. Meena Bazar also feeds these people with their daily essentials. Another site is the urban village located in the heart of the city. At one time, on the edges of Delhi, many sprawling and congested working-class colonies inhabited by generations of rural migrants have now been subsumed into the core of a rapidly mutating metropolitan landscape.

The local communities in the neighbourhood of Khirki Village, along with nearby Hauz Rani, are part of the sprawling, congested unauthorised colony of Khirki Extension in South Delhi. The world of informal labour practices here is essentially kept very private, dependent on particular regional and community affiliations, operating within its pragmatic norms, and somewhat sequestered. Like millions of similar tiny and inconsequential sites all over the third world, in terms of economic struggle and subsistence Khirki Village is continually manipulated by global market forces as well as the unyielding pressures of 'urban' development'. The efforts of migrant workers in such sites are appropriated, recycled and reshaped repeatedly to satisfy the veracity of the profit motive and the long chain of its evident and hidden beneficiaries. While the city thus incorporates and assimilates its margins and redefines its notions of what constitutes the 'urban', it also re-configures provincial attitudes. It offers a range of new affiliations and new possibilities of personal freedom to the large population of young working women from these communities.

2. Axial Margins||Urdu Park

The project Axial Margins||Urdu Park (2015-present) is situated within a night shelter for homeless women, occupying a section of Urdu Park, a large field next to the archaeological heritage site of the Jama Masjid in Old Delhi. It engages in an aesthetic and conceptual exploration of the collaborators' experience of public and private spaces with the resident single mothers who are beggars, victims of domestic violence, abduction, and other kinds of abuse.



Figure 1. Night Shelter of single women at Urdu Park, 2015. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

In the project Axial Margin, with some in-depth experience of collaborative work for a couple of years through various engagements like diaper making, pillow making, painting on the interior of the shelter wall, collaborators then undertook a more elaborate exploration of the idea of map-making as a way to narrate their experience of their environment. Their interest in this modality became more urgent when agencies in charge of the shelter proposed moving it from its present site in the heart of Old Delhi to a place outside the city. This caused much anxiety among shelter residents, many of whom have a deep, reliable, and in some cases lifelong, relationship with Jama Masjid and Meena Bazaar. These particular contexts are embedded in the

women's personal histories and continue to be the pulse of their daily lives. The women collaboratively created a map of the locality with acrylic paints on a single 16 ft x 4 ft canvas – a unique form of existential cartography. The women's prolonged experience of this area is so intimately fused with their material and psychological survival. Each participant also painted personal impressions of Meena Bazaar on individual canvases, depicting the shops, lanes and objects sold there, such as slippers and bags. While painting, they orally reflected on their complex, intricate relationship with the surrounding environment, acknowledging its presence as a redemptive stable feature within their frequently chaotic, fluctuating and highly stressed circumstances.



Figure 2. Collaborative work through various engagements like diaper making, 2015. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.



Figure 3. Collaborative work through various engagements pillow making, 2015 Photograph by Revue Ensemble.



Figure 4. The women collaboratively created a map of the locality with acrylic paints on a single 16 ft x 4 ft canvas, 2016. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.



Figure 5. The women collaboratively created a map of the locality with acrylic paints on a single 16 ft x 4 ft canvas, 2016. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

2.1 Daily survival

From the inception of the project, while building a relationship with these single mothers, we have been continuously observing a crucial lack of adequate food supplies and medical care arrangements for the shelter's residents. There were several government-run social services and programs providing shelter residents with three meals a day. This was discontinued for some reason for some time. The women then began cooking for themselves in the open, in the courtyard of the shelter. They made a rudimentary stove by placing two bricks in parallel, between which sticks or other wood and waste paper could be burnt as fuel. The residents buy ingredients from the vegetable market, fish and meat market, and a particular grocery shop that gives them items on credit. They also obtain leftover food from various local

dhabas (roadside eateries). Despite these daily efforts, they do not have enough for a proper meal and can only feed their children biscuits or bread with tea for lunch and dinner.

While working on the large collaborative map of the locality, women delineated the shops where they regularly get food, tea and ingredients. This visual narrative enabled a parallel map of their social networks in the neighborhood. The women's day is not complete without broader interaction in the community – going out of Urdu Park into the market on their morning mission to procure ingredients and food for the day's meals and chatting to each other and the people around Lala's grocery shop and Kalim's dhaba, Bihari dhaba and Bangali dhaba. Sometimes they start the day with a



Figure 6. The women created individual maps of their neighbourhood with acrylic paints on canvases, 2017. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

breakfast of tea and fan-shaped biscuits from Ustad's shop or Number 18 Tea Stall.

The collaborators developed personal narratives in more depth through exploring the relationship of their food, cooking practices and their environment. The sessions resulted in creating recipe books based on the discussion of food traditions of the communities in which the participants were raised. They also narrated where and how they have learnt to cook and how they have adapted their cooking techniques and philosophies of food to the available ingredients, available money and exigencies of life in the shelter. Each collaborator created her recipe book with paints and collages made from coloured paper and sequins.

2.2 Personal Memories

While creating the recipe books, women talked about their favorite foods that, in some cases, they had not eaten for a long time after migrating to the city from rural areas. For instance, Sabrun recalled the dish she most loved: *makai-chawal* (corn-rice), that she last ate in her village as a child. Corn was a significant crop in her region, so corn-rice and corn were our staples in the local diet. Sabrun spoke of becoming an orphan when she was very young and being raised by a strict and demanding aunt. One day, instead of tending to the pot of *makai-chawal* on the stove, Sabrun left the kitchen to play in the courtyard. The food got burnt, and her aunt punished her by making her eat all of it. At present Sabrun has the support of a man who ensures two daily meals for her, but he is reluctant to feed her children even while he wants her to be with him and cook for him. She does cook *makai-chawal* today but uses a different method from the one she learnt from her aunt.

Each woman painted small (1 ft x 2 ft) canvases with brightly colored images of the particular spices they use in their cooking and of the vegetables they cook daily. Reshma commented that dire poverty limits food choices, and while destitute people know they should not reject any food, it is still crucial that whatever they eat should have *swaad* (good taste). They don't like to eat food which is not tasty, even if it is free or very cheap. For example, the meals sent to the shelter, first by Anganwadi and later by the Delhi govern-

ment, were completely bland, with no *swaad* whatsoever. Those nutrition schemes have been discontinued, but in any case the women prefer cooking their own food in the courtyard of the shelter, even if it is a struggle to get money for ingredients. Moreover, they make sure their food always has *swaad*. Reshma's favorite curries are made from magur (black catfish), shikhara (silver catfish) or rohu fish, cooked in mustard oil with onions, tomatoes, garlic, red mustard seeds, coriander seeds, cumin seeds, black pepper, green chillies and salt.

The collaborators also talked about their excellent relationships with shopkeepers at the particular stalls in Meena Bazaar where they buy their ingredients and the Dhaba owners who support them by giving them food on trust, accepting payment later. The women rely on this generosity. For example, Binu explained that when they buy a ten-rupee plate of dal-chawal (lentils and rice) from Kalim and ask for extra helping in the form of meat gravy, he adds a *boti* (small piece of meat) to the gravy. Bihari, another Dhaba owner who has known the shelter's residents for a long time, does the same when they buy dal-chawal (lentil-rice) from him.

As mentioned earlier, the shelter residents used to cook on a makeshift stove made of bricks, using wood and waste paper as fuel. Now they cook on gas, getting their cylinder refilled at Kala Mahal as the owner takes Rs 80 per rell, while Lalaji near the market charges an extra Rs 10 for his effort. The women used to buy their utensils from Kala Mahal, but now they buy them from the Sunday Market. They prefer to use heavy utensils such as *kadhai* as they are durable and food cooked in them does not quickly burn.

The collaborative creation of the map of Meena Bazaar had inspired the idea of a shared kitchen. For some time, the collaborators had been discussing how to pool their limited resources, acquired with great difficulty, towards cooking meals in the courtyard of the shelter—then selling this food as a source of income – an option to their normative practice of earning through begging, and a form of work that would enable them to maintain their dignity. Their work – objects, canvases, maps, texts and food – is displayed and experienced within the shelter during the project's open



Figure 7. Paintings of spices, 2017.
Photograph by Revue Ensemble.



Figure 8. Paintings of spices, 2017
Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

days, that living space itself undergoes a dynamic metamorphosis into a genuinely alternative exhibition venue, far beyond the conventional boundaries of canonized institutions such as galleries and museums. This corroborates Revue's aesthetic philosophy and organic mode of research over the past decade, part of our effort to embed a strongly democratic, inclusive template within the generally closed, elitist ethos of contemporary Indian art.

With the destruction of Meena Bazaar, the women of the Urdu Park shelter have lost the bustling environment that was in itself a nurturing refuge for them in so many ways.

They are still coming to terms with the stark, disorienting, haunting absence they encounter each time they leave the shelter compound. Their social connections within the now-empty grid of the demolished market still exist but are ruptured, enfeebled and elusive. Nobody knows when the shelter may itself be targeted for demolition within uncompromising myopic municipal agendas of 'beautification', 'urban development' and the profit-driven mandates of a 'global' city. The once-thriving matrix of Meena Bazaar now exists as a site in the collaborators' histories, memories and hearts; it is being celebrated and commemorated through their texts and paintings.



Figure 9. Paintings of vegetables, 2017. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.



Figure 10. Meena Bazar. It is a makeshift market outside the main gate of Jama Masjid, 2015. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

Especially during the pandemic lockdown, when the migrant workers who found Meena Bazaar and the wholesale market as their permanent home are being forced to live on starvation for days and are destined for an uncertain future. However, the women's creative work and personal commentary in effect now constitute an invaluable archive that memorializes and honors what once was a thriving material and social space, its many micro-ecologies supporting many thousands of people and interwoven into a dynamic way of life. Perhaps such inscription is also the most appropriate, immediate and meaningful way to mourn, negotiate the shock and grief at the death of a context that was so precious, such an intense, reliable and significant variable in the daily push to survive.

3. Museum of Food: A Living Heritage

During our community art project – *Mobile Mohalla (2015-present)*, we collaborated with young women¹ from dif-

1 - The project Mobile Mohalla engages residents of the adjacent localities of Khirki and Hauz Rani, two urban villages in south Delhi. The long-term goal was to examine how art interventions can mobilize women from different backgrounds to create their own public spaces within the male-dominated space of the neighbourhood. It was a challenge to find project participants within a patriarchal culture where gender segregation is the informal norm and women, in general, have little public visibility/are restricted to their own private spheres. <https://www.mobilemohalla.net>.



Figure 11. Sharing food in the kitchen, 2018. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

ferent ethnic backgrounds and between women and men from the community. In the course of the discussions, food emerged as one of the contours. The focus was to explore the histories of cuisines, ingredients and tools that people carry with them. The informal and formal dialogues with food as a site of interaction among the groups unraveled the complexities of social life, displacement, memory, leisure, and gendered experiences that can move beyond nostalgia.

Food has always been a vital aspect of a place, a city or a neighborhood. Besides fulfilling one's daily needs of hunger, food has always occupied a social, political and economic significance in a region. Its importance in a person's everyday life, embedded in the social relations of a community, cannot be overlooked. Khirki and Hauzrani, two adjacent

neighborhoods in the heart of South Delhi, has been the hotbed of migrants coming from across the country and even international borders. On the one hand, there are local migrants from Bihar, UP, Rajasthan, Bengal, Kerala, North-east India sustaining on the opportunities the city provides them with and on the other hand, there are international migrants, asylum seekers and refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Congo, Nigeria and many others. Khirki and Hauzrani have also seen a transformation in its culinary spaces over the last few years with the opening up of new joints offering food prepared by the migrants: internal and international. A girl from Manipur can be seen enjoying an Afghani burger on the streets, or an Afghan teenage girl could be seen relishing the 'Golgappas' from a vendor. The interaction between multiple food consumption practices

has made the neighborhoods an exciting display of mutating food habits. The process of food preparation is not a process in isolation, but one which is mired in multiple processes ranging from the selection of ingredients, the style of cutting the meat which is specific to each culture, the assortment of vegetables, the proportion of salt and sugar, the right amount of heat and the process of stirring which offers different possibilities based on one's social identity. The local migrants and especially the ones rooted in their native places, carry 'food practices' as one of their defining identities to the new place. This explains the growth of places serving different cuisines in the cities worldwide, which have seen streams of local and international migrants. In this context, the idea of exchanges through food forms an essential component of our social bonds.

The project Museum of Food: A Living Heritage (2017-present) was launched in December 2017 to bring these multi-

ple food practices into a shared space through simple yet layered cooking. The agents of exchange in this are women who have been socially and culturally bounded in the kitchen owing to the more extensive patriarchal setup. The relation is not restricted to the act of cooking but also consists of the stories hidden in the selection of ingredients, the role of their mothers in sharing the age-old recipe, the range of utensils, etc.

3.1 Everyday Engagements

The daily activity of the kitchen starts from buying ingredients like vegetables, meat, spices etc and then cooking, eating collectively and also maintaining the kitchen. The method at the kitchen is to rotate the tasks of food preparation, i.e., to have one dish from each cuisine cooked daily, often focusing on a common ingredient or a theme. Monday is Afghan day, Tuesday is Congo, Wednesday is Iraqi, Thursday is Somalia and Friday is from the different migrant commu-



Figure 12. Daily activity of the kitchen, 2018. Photograph by Pallavi. All rights reserved by the authors.

nities of Bihar and North East India. The weeks are planned, aiming at unique dishes based on selected grains, like wheat, rice, semolina, maize, etc. Initially, the women used to cook food in the kitchen, sharing the meal within themselves. Later after a few months, they started inviting their friends to have meals together and share recipes among other everyday experiences and concerns through a casual conversation. Further, they present these dishes collectively at a monthly Pop-up Kitchen at different sites, where others are invited to share the meal and encouraged to interact with the project. This mode of engagement cohesively brings the different food traditions together both within the tight, intimate space of the kitchen and the broader context of the general public.

3.2 Words and Gestures

This project's fascinating and complex dimension is that not all the women in the group speak each other's language yet can actively communicate vis-à-vis essential cooking information and transmit their emotional experiences associated with their traditional foods. As speakers of Arabic, Dari, French and various native dialects from their places of origin, they rely on an intuitive, flexible, amalgamated vocabulary of words, gestures, facial expressions, similar regional socio-linguistic codes, and idiomatic translations by those among them who do have some broader knowledge of the various languages in use within the group. They also frequently draw from a lexical cache common to the different languages, enabling fragmentary utterances to be layered and honed into comprehensible meaning. For



Figure 13. Sharing food collectively, 2018. Photograph by Revue Ensemble.

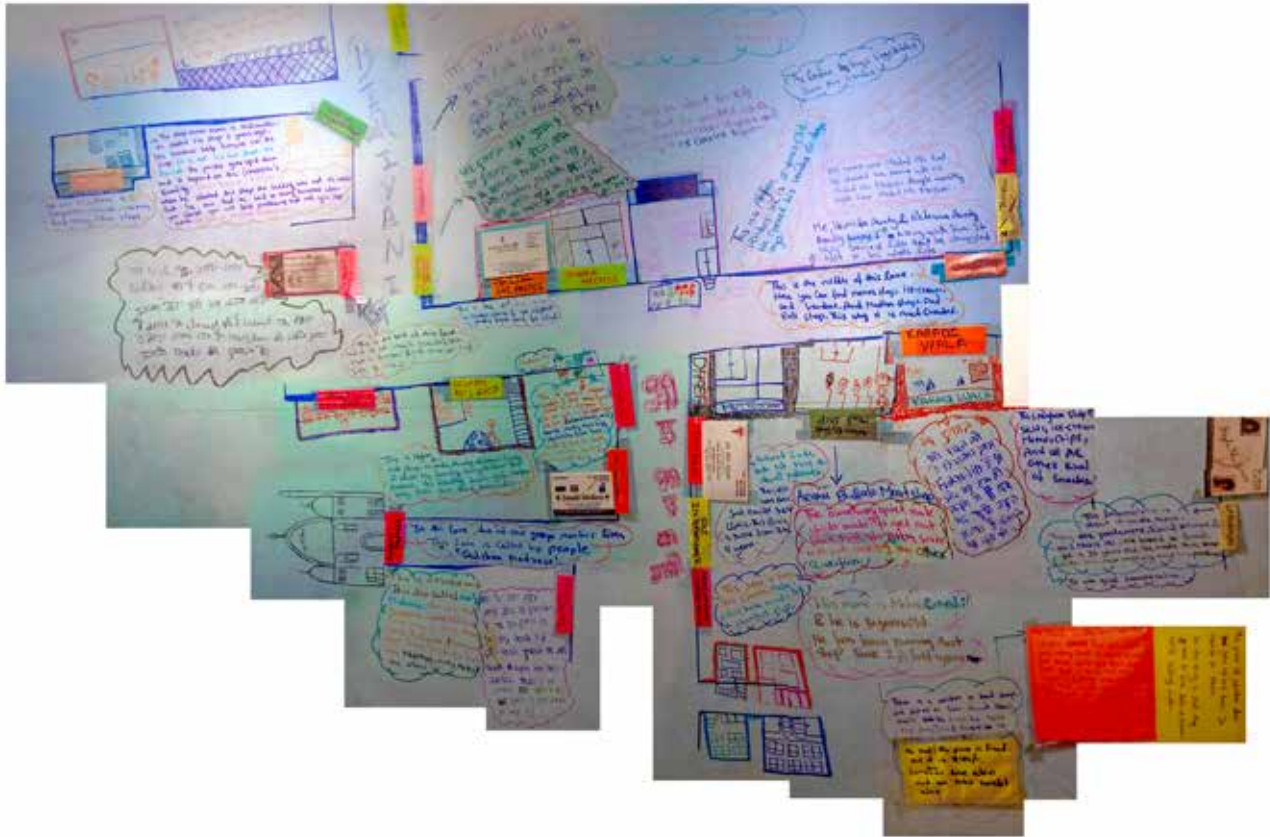


Figure 14. Maps created by Khirkee Collective based on discussions, 2018. Photograph by Anubhab(KNMA).All rights reserved by the author.

instance, Arabic and Farsi share many words, and Dari is very similar to Farsi. Hence the speakers can interpret each other's statements with a bit of effort. Those speakers with a full or partial grasp of Hindi or English also quite skillfully use these languages to engage with one another. Several of their children who attend school and regular tuition classes in the locality speak fluent unaccented Hindi and English, very often help in the lab by translating for their mothers.

Immediate direct communication is also skillfully facilitated through digital media. Participants research their queries online and share information and images of particular ingredients, staples, or spices via mobile phone. However, in symbolic terms, it might well be asserted that within this unique ethos of empowered polyglot sociality and community, it is a traditional food culture that serves as the strong,

singular, definitive mother tongue of all those participating in the Khirki Living Lab and Pop-up Kitchen.

3.3 Social Networking

Through a discursive engagement of the food maps in collaboration with women in the kitchen, we propose to show how innovation contributes to rebuilding new idioms of food and nutrition among the community. The food maps provide a valid entry point to understand how gendered migration experiences problematizes the idea of 'authentic' vis-à-vis 'fake' in the everyday life of the communities. Thus, food maps are about everyday realities of searching for new ingredients, tools and within budget and local dietary constraints that have to be understood at the cusp of violence that intersects these lives.

Further, the concept of aesthetics in the project has emerged from the mundane objects, the utensils, that women use in their everyday life. The color, quality, materials and shapes of the vessels and pots they carry to the kitchen or pop-up site determine the form of aesthetics that some have carried with them from their home country and some obtained from the neighborhood market. In this project, we have a deliberate attempt to avoid the artificial construction of planted aesthetics of market dynamics or try not to create a fake “authenticity” about Afghan, or Somali or Congolese; instead, we have emphasized what has emerged organically through everyday necessity.

4. Conclusion

“Here, the term space refers to a complex construction and production of environment - both real and imagined; influenced by socio-political processes, cultural norms and institutional arrangements which provoked different ways of being, belonging and inhabiting. This space simultaneously also impacts and shapes the social relations that contribute to its creations” (Phadke, 2012, 53).

The everydayness of sharing space, collectively buying the cooking ingredients, cooking, then eating together and chatting creates the possibility of interpersonal relationships. A sustained collective interaction facilitates comradeship that helps to share personal and social crises. A collective member’s death, health, or financial crisis brings everyone closer and lends a hand for support. The daily interaction renders the community kitchen’s collective space a necessity for everyone in the group. On the other hand, through the project Axial Margin, we observed that sustained and systematic creative engagement had catalyzed profound and positive shifts in collaborators’ sense of self and identity. They no longer see themselves as struggling destitute individuals primarily concerned with their own/their children’s daily survival in challenging conditions. While their material hardship continues, their psychological horizons seem to have radically expanded, and they now affirm themselves as emerging artists with good voices, good perspectives, valid subjectivities, valid symbolic languages, good skills and, above all, a proper place within a social system of unconscionable inequality.

The paper questioned the everyday in which dialogue has a central place and is utilized as a central instrument, uses different media forms to creatively express the dynamic of “everyday life” and its “uneventfulness” (Lefebvre 1947) in the urban public space. This philosophical framework pushes back against convenient canonical schemas of what constitutes appropriate subject matter for ‘art’. In human terms, the ‘everyday’ is the ground of our material awareness, holding us and flowing through us; it is what we know and where we live. Flexible, non-purposive, intangible, insignificant, ignored, overlooked, neglected, obscure, the many-faceted ‘everyday’ is so customary that it is experienced as a reflex and escapes further scrutiny. However, in fact, mundane reality manifests through an oscillating dialectic of the familiar and the strange. It also is evident in the habitual and the exceptional, the banal and the special, the dull and the vibrant, the numbing and the stimulating, the iconoclastic and the traditional. These are not oppositional energies but complementary ones – intersecting coordinates on the axes of time and space within our daily experience.

Art conceived in, nourished by and organically emerging from the everyday, the existential matrices of the community as both creator and the visitor, and using the physical substrate of that everyday reality as a medium of expression, is one mode that can disrupt and transfigure our experience of what is unremarkable. Democratic in scope and intent, embracing and celebrating the ‘ordinary’, such art has the potential to recalibrate our perceptions and enable us to re-immers in the every day – all the internal and external phenomena we reflexively take for granted and may no longer even notice – as ‘extraordinary’, i.e., experienced as uplifting, fascinating, astonishing, expansive, and even emancipatory.

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