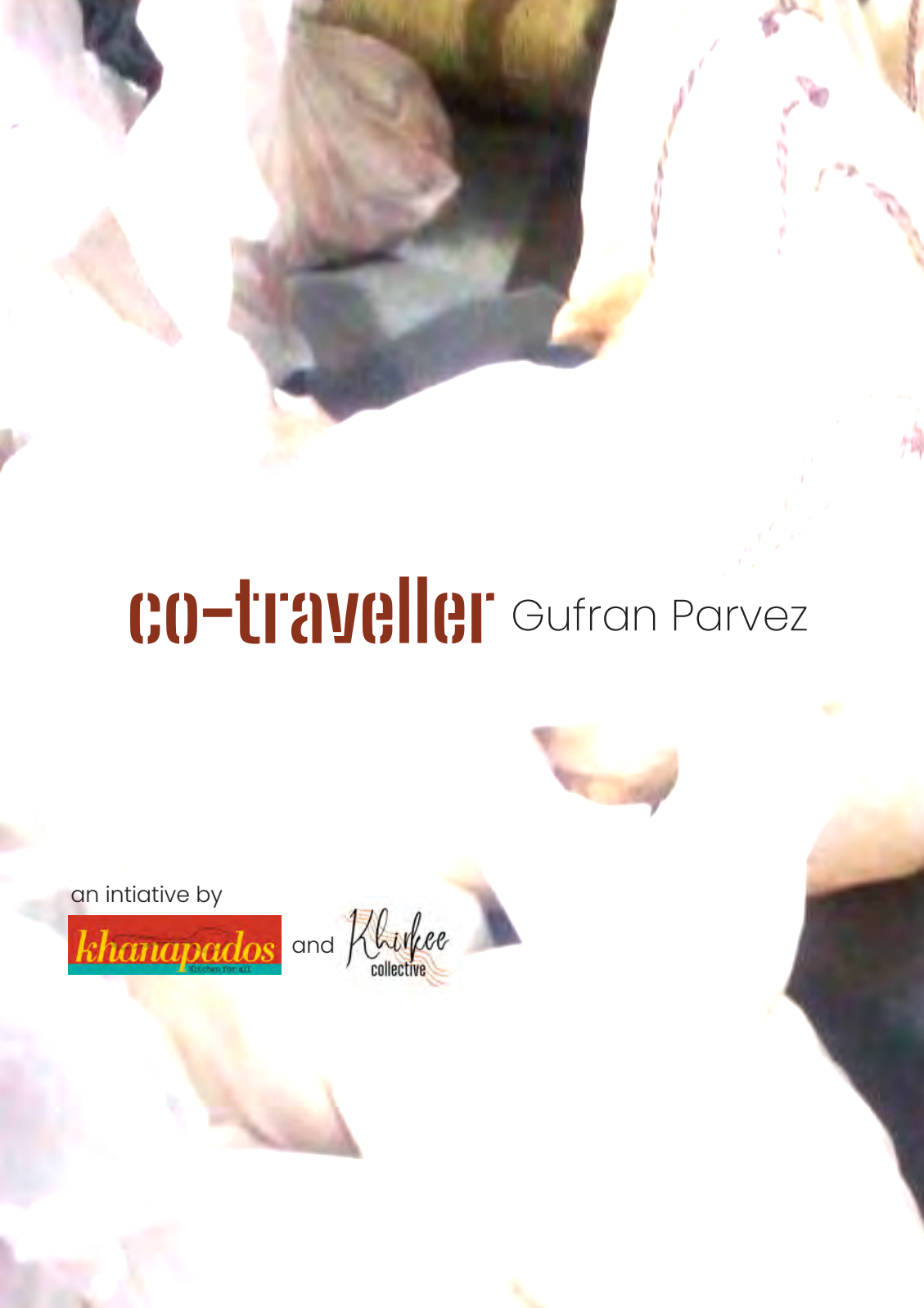

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Gufran Parvez

an intiative by

khanapados kitchen for all and Khirkee collective

co-traveller

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Image: Khirkee Collective & Khanapados

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Khanapados is a community kitchen run by migrant women from different ethnic backgrounds within the densely populated working-class neighbourhoods of Khirki and Hauz Rani in South Delhi, home to a large and diverse demographic that includes rural and small-town migrants from all parts of India and refugee families from Iraq, Afghanistan and several African countries. The kitchen has led to the formation of a dynamic network of social relationships and friendships among its members through the act of collectively cooking a wide range of traditional foods, and sharing recipes, meals and personal stories. It has also enabled the creation of a food archive, food maps and pop-up kitchens in the locality and other areas of the city.

Khirkee Collective is a group of local teenagers/young adults who live in Khirki and Hauz Rani. From diverse social and cultural backgrounds, they are involved in creative research/production in and about these localities through direct community engagement. Using traditional, new and hybrid media, the Collective has built a multifaceted archive of these neighbourhoods, inscribing how people have over time developed particular relationships and upheld a deep sense of connection with the built environment itself. These unique matrices and ecosystems of sociality and pragmatic interdependence that underpin economic and psychological survival thrive here, within the ongoing flux and pressure of urban 'development' and regimes of master planning.

Khanapados and Khirkee Collective are initiatives by the Delhi-based artist-researcher team **Revue** (Sreejata Roy and Mrityunjay Chatterjee). Centrally focused on socially engaged art, through modes of collaborative, dialogic, relational praxis Revue visualizes and renders projects that invite participants from low-income contexts to individually/ collectively narrate their personal experiences of the changing urban milieu through a variety of media and art forms.

The Free Meal venture was made possible by generous responses to an appeal for donations circulated on social media and via personal communication.

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Varsha Nair

&

Prince Claus Fund

Thank You

"Free Meal".

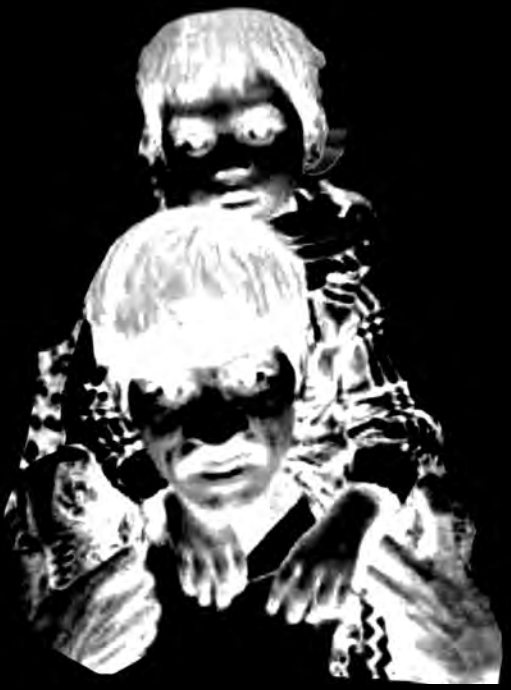
Reading these words, you all must have understood the definition straight away. Normally, such a meal is provided to those most in need, who don't even have money to buy food, and nor are they able to work to make ends meet. But during the coronavirus lockdown it took on a unique meaning.

Let me explain a little how a "free meal" can become a way for human beings to help each other.

When coronavirus first entered India in early 2020 it was generally ignored, but when it began to prove so dangerous our government decided to put the entire country into complete lockdown, without any clear idea about whether this would stop the virus from spreading. First a 24-hour lockdown was imposed; then extended for two days; then for three days...

Initially people got through the lockdowns by using their savings, but the situation became worse and worse as money ran out while the strict lockdown kept being extended. All shops closed, all work suspended, all means of livelihood stopped. But amidst all this, had anyone considered the effect of lockdown on the migrant workers who do daily-wage labour to support themselves and their families? The truth is that these people were most affected, because they have to work every day to survive. All work was stopped during lockdown – what could they earn, how would they eat?

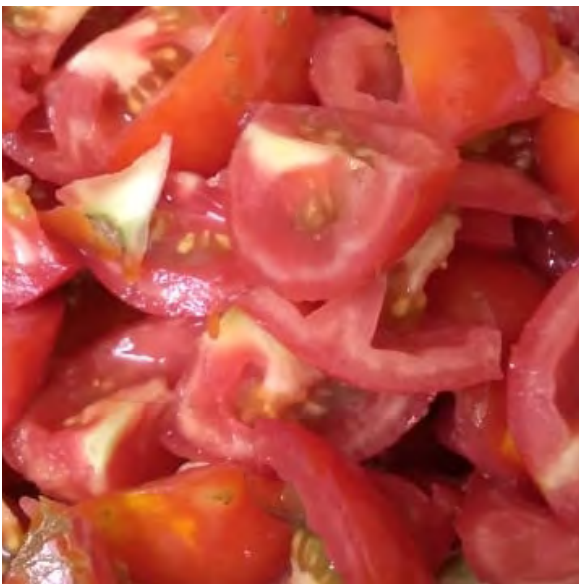
Soon chaos erupted, with the masses of migrant workers starting to return to their villages, thinking, "There is no work in the city, at least at home we can live more easily, we can eat what we grow in the fields." They began to travel towards their homes. Very few trains were running, and the number of travellers was enormous, so people crammed into buses, cars, any other mode of available transport, and even left on foot, walking hundreds of kilometres. This migration kept increasing – and so did the lockdown. To try and stem the mass movement, the government offered to supply rations to the workers so that they would stay in the cities. There were other such government schemes also, but these were complicated – in order to get the free rations it was necessary



to have a ration card; those who didn't have a ration card had to go to an online portal and register themselves. This was very difficult, especially for people who were illiterate.

Many of Delhi's migrant workers who foresaw these problems had already left the city, but there were also those who stayed behind in the hope that perhaps they would find some work. The first lockdown passed in this way, and some of those who had left began returning from their villages in search of work; it seemed as if the situation would return to full normalcy. But who could have known that another tough lockdown was yet to be endured? Everyone thought they would be working as before – and then the second, more deadly, wave of coronavirus swept through India. No one knew whether the situation was going to improve, or get even worse. Once again we had the same restrictions, the shortage of essential goods and, for the migrant workers, the daily struggle to be able to eat. The government knew that if it did not resolve this issue, there would be a repeat of the earlier chaos and another mass migration – things would get out of control, perhaps with even more intensity.

This time the government made some new regulations. For example, shops selling groceries and essential goods and staples could stay open but only within certain hours, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. But other vital household items were also needed, such as cooking gas cylinders, and it was really difficult for people who were not working to obtain these items. Our locality (Khirki and Hauz Rani) is home to not only migrant workers but many different groups, including refugees – Afghanis, Africans, etc. The government schemes were only for Indian nationals, so obviously these other communities



were really struggling, barely managing to survive. Some Afghans had opened small shops selling groceries and essential goods because no other kind of shop was permitted.

Observing these desperate circumstances, we at Khirki Collective and Khanapados got together and worked out how to prepare free meals and distribute them to people in need. We knew we could not do much with our limited resources, but at least we could help people in our own locality. First we made a detailed plan – how to prepare the food, how many people we could reach with the food, what kind of food should be cooked and how much, etc. We also considered the fact that during the lockdown we could not make house-to-house deliveries. So we decided that my grocery shop in Khirki would be the distribution point. Our food would be available for everyone, be they migrant workers, or refugees, or from any community.

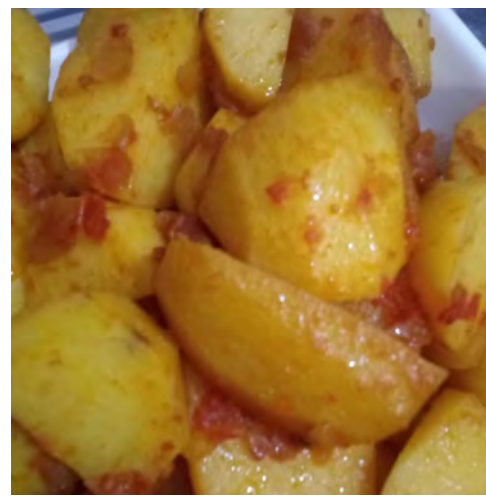
In this way we began our free meal venture, hoping to provide food to a substantial number of people. We are not wealthy, we couldn't just go and buy prepared food and distribute it. And since we had the Khanapados community kitchen, there was no need to look further. We realized that it would be very difficult for a single member of the kitchen to prepare a large amount of food daily; this was too much pressure, added to which was the tension of managing her own household. So it was decided that the Khanapados aunties would prepare the food collectively, overseeing the work by rotation. Each had her own method, so there would be a variety of flavours, and people would not find the taste monotonous.

We decided to distribute the meals in the early afternoon, so that the food could be cooked in the morning

and be fresh when people came to take it. Our first menu was lentils, rice and egg curry. On the first day we were on time, 1 p.m.; everything was ready, and all we needed was for people to arrive so we could start handing out the food. This waiting period was quite a challenge, as we didn't know whether, after all our effort, anyone would come – and we didn't want any food to be wasted. Mari and I sat looking hopefully at the passers-by. I wondered if I should walk around and spread the word, or if we should wait for people to come to us. Should I stop someone and tell them about the meal…? I approached a Congoli uncle, saying "free food is available here". But he refused and kept walking. I returned and sat down, puzzling over what we should do.

Then a worker uncle came to my shop to buy something, and I told him about the meal. He took a packet. Our hopes began to rise, and I sensed that we might in fact meet our objective. That uncle helped us a lot, he told others about the free meal being handed out at my shop. Gradually people came up to us; we distributed the food. Time passed, and people stopped arriving; we still had some packets, so when I was sure no more people were coming I took the remaining packets and walked to the main road, handing them to needy people on the way. So nothing was wasted, and all the meals had reached the right recipients.

We began our second day with the hope that we would be able to distribute all the food, as we had done the first day, and we also hoped that we would not have to wait so long for people to arrive. Yesterday the free meal had been a new event, unknown to most in the locality, but maybe today would be different. Lailaji, the Somali auntie in charge of the food

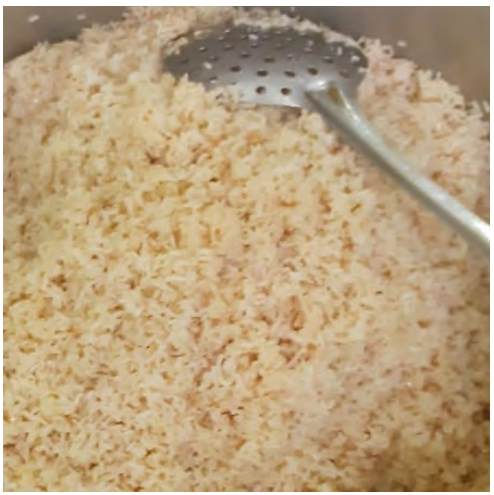


preparation that day, brought the meals to my shop right on time; her cooking is really tasty, and I especially love her pasta and chutney. So no doubt today's food would be delicious, like yesterday's meal. One plate of the free meal comes to me, as I am the taster – I get to eat all kinds of tasty items and am able to give feedback.

Lailaji and I had considered documenting that day's meal distribution. It would involve taking photographs, and I didn't anticipate any problems in relation to this. Through the Khanapados aunties' friend circle many Afghani families had come to know about the free meal; and I hoped that as many people as possible would come to get food, giving me a chance to start my photo-documentation.

The migrant workers came up one by one, and we began giving out the food. But when I started documenting they reacted weirdly, glaring at me as if I was doing something wrong – maybe they were suspicious about why I was taking photos and what I would do with those photos. Still, none of them asked me anything; nor did I say anything. Then an Afghani woman approached, asking, "Can you tell me where the food is being given out?" I replied, "Nowhere else, it is being given out right here." She said, "I have been searching for your shop for a long time, I couldn't find it." She took a packet, saying, "I will tell others where your shop is, so that families who need food can find it easily." She went away, and amidst all this I forgot to take her photograph.

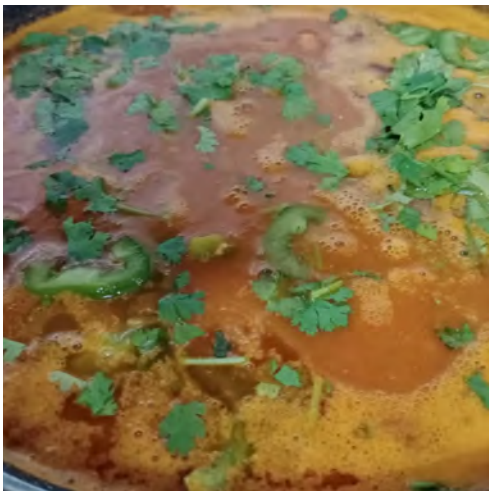
I sat down to rest a bit. After a while a Somali auntie approached and asked from a distance, "Is food being given out here?" "Yes," I answered. Her next question was, "Does the food contain mutton or chicken?" "No," I replied. She

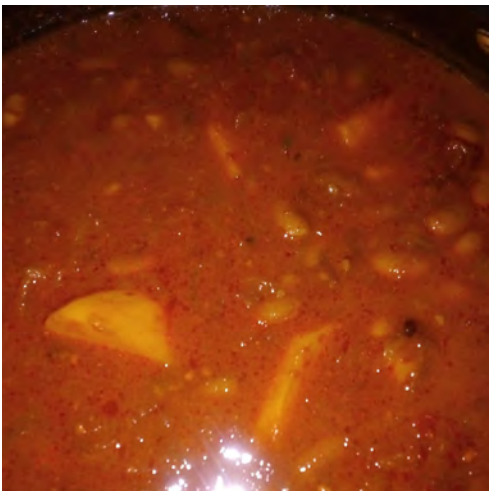


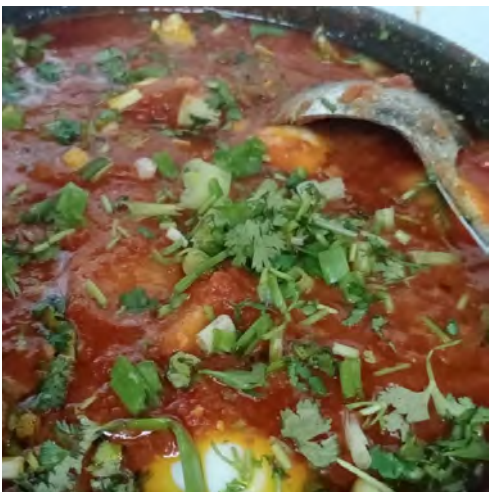
said, "Then you tell me what kind of food it is." I said, "We have rice, lentils and egg curry." She seemed to find this very funny, and with amusement said, "We [Somalis] don't like eggs, if there is meat or biryani, let us know!" And she went away without taking any food. More people came and the food distribution carried on. What the auntie had said was not true of all Somalis – some of them happily accepted the free meal, but I did realize that day that most Somalis prefer non-vegetarian food.

Our third day passed; by then I had only photographed a few people, mostly migrant workers. We moved into our fourth day. We had decided that today Mari, the auntie who sat with me, would hand out the food, and I would focus on documentation. The food arrived at 1 p.m. and people began arriving at the same time. The Afghani auntie who had found my shop after much searching had kept her word – she had told others about the free meal, and today a lot of her community had come. But as I began documenting, one Afghani auntie told me to stop: "Why are you taking photos, I don't want my photo taken, I don't like it, and we are not permitted to be photographed like this." Mari said, "They are objecting, so if you must document them don't photograph their faces, only their hands." I took her advice, thinking, "Everyone has their own issues..." After this, whenever an Afghani family or an Afghani auntie came to us I took photos only of their hands.

Over the next several days the food arrived and was distributed, and in the process we began to form relationships with strangers. I remember a little girl coming to us, the sweetest little girl; she used to come with her grandfather to







pick up the free meal. One day she came by herself. As I gave her a packet I said, "Is there no adult with you?" She asked me to give her food for her grandfather. "He is not well, he is not able to come; please give me one more packet," she said, so sweetly that I laughed aloud, gave her another packet with pleasure, and she went away happily. Similarly there were others with whom I formed a special relationship, to the point that when they were around we understood each other in silence, without the need to say anything. These relationships became deeper as the days passed. In many cases it was taken as fixed that so-and-so will come daily for the free meal. Sometimes an auntie would tell us, "I will be a bit late tomorrow, keep some food for me."

We continued this way for about two weeks, with the weather gradually becoming warmer. At that point we asked ourselves how long we could keep offering the same menu, and decided it was time to change it a bit. Also, in summer most people don't like to eat eggs. So instead of egg curry we offered rajma with the rice, because this combination is very enjoyable, popular and tasty. Each time the rajma tasted different, depending on which auntie was in charge of the menu that day. Sometimes it was less spicy, sometimes more spicy.

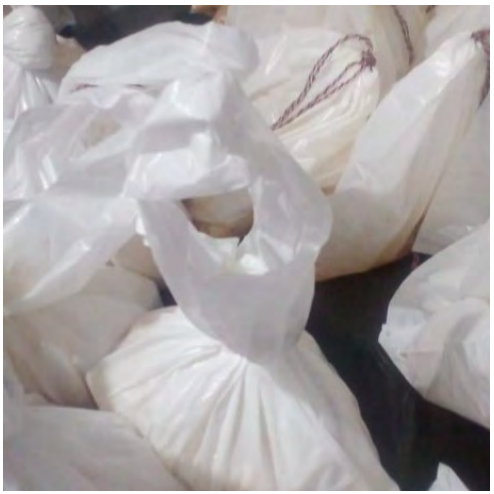
Due to high demand on some days the food even fell short and people had to go away empty-handed. We started cooking bigger amounts of food so that we could feed everyone who came. Children, aunties, elders, workers – by now everyone in the locality knew about the free meal, and the food was distributed very quickly.

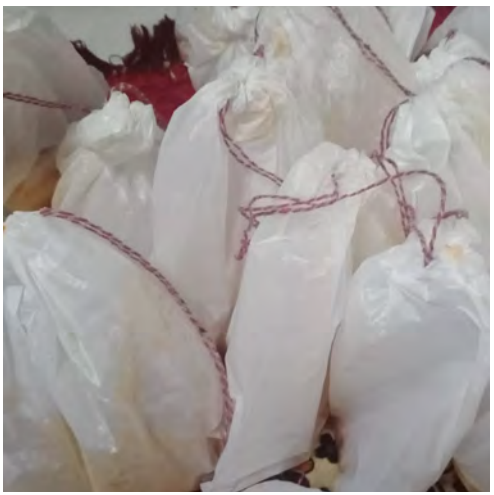
I thought a lot about how the Khanapados aunties cooked so much food daily for the free meal, while at the same

time taking care of their own households – this takes great strength and determination. I really wanted to know how they finished such a workload, and always on time so that no one is inconvenienced. For instance: At what time did they start cooking? When did they go to buy supplies? How did they make time to pack the food? How did they manage the time needed for all these tasks?

The aunties told me that it was in fact more difficult than they had first anticipated because the work takes a lot of time and there are many problems at every stage. Purchasing supplies was stressful because prices kept going up. The eggs for the curry couldn't be stored for too long in the hot weather, and had to be used up; sometimes they turned out to be rotten. When the menu was changed from egg curry to rajma, the problem was in the quality of the rajma – there are different kinds of rajma and they soften at different temperatures, and this caused disruptions in the cooking schedule as the gravy can only be prepared with completely soft rajma. As full summer set in there were problems in relation to packing the food – there was tension that if packed too soon it might go bad; if packed too late, it would not reach the distribution point on time. If there was too much delay people who had come earlier would have gone away unfed, and food might be left over, at risk of spoiling in the heat.

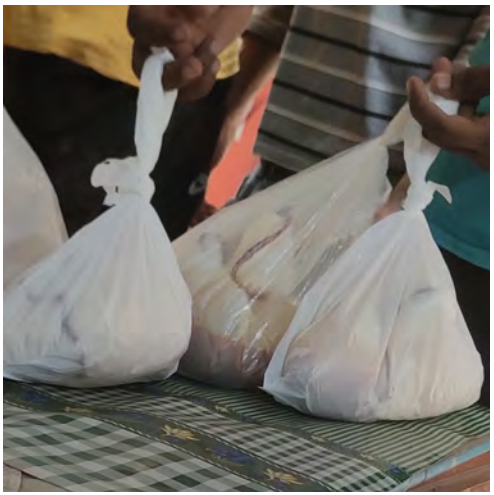
The aunties said that when they first began cooking the free meals they had no idea that they would have to keep so much in mind, paying attention to the tiniest details. They had not imagined it would take one to two hours just to pack the food. At that phase of the lockdown vegetables were very expensive, and the aunties had to bargain hard with the

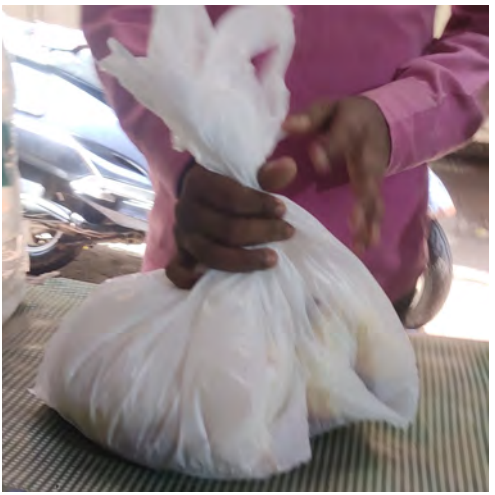


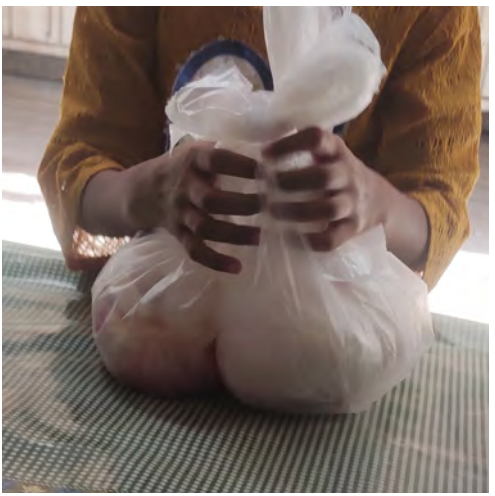


shopkeepers in order to get maximum supplies at the lowest cost. They did not go to the mandi to buy at wholesale prices because it was so crowded that going there meant a high risk of infection. So instead they bought vegetables from handcarts in the locality, bargaining hard with the vendors, and with these limited supplies they prepared the free meals. The cooking began at 5 a.m. with supplies bought the previous day, and was completed between 10 and 10.30 a.m.; at 11 a.m. they began packing the food; and it reached the distribution point by 1 p.m. so that everyone who came by in the afternoon could be fed.

Our free meal venture was particularly successful with regard to the daily-wage migrant workers who instead of returning to their villages during lockdown had stayed on in the city in the hope that work would soon begin again. If they could not find steady work, they tried their hand at something or the other in order to be able to eat. We started the free meal with the aim of getting food to these needy people. Initially we had doubts – how will we do this, what will happen – but when word spread in the locality people came to us of their own accord. Our distribution time was also the migrant workers' lunch time and they came straight from wherever they were working to get the free meal. When I began documenting them I thought it might be difficult – maybe like the Afghanis they would object to being photographed – but this was not the case. Rather, many workers were in such a hurry that they did not notice me taking their photos; some of them ignored me and others were indifferent because the food was their only concern. Sometimes the youngsters among them would strike poses and say, "Take a good photo… I'm looking good,

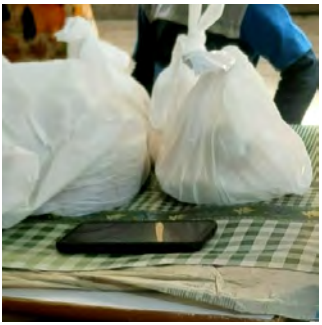






aren't I?" Some workers were always in a good mood and would hang around my shop, laughing and joking; others arrived in a big hurry, took their packets and left immediately. Some workers gave feedback about menu changes and the different flavours; and there were also those who praised the food.

In terms of our achieving everything we had set out to do, the worker uncle who came to my shop to buy something on the first day of the free meal helped us a lot – without our asking him to do so, he had told people that free food was being distributed at my shop, and gradually people began to arrive. Now our venture is carrying on well, and there is no need to explain anything to anyone in the locality – people come, take the food and go their own way, there are no problems. Along with them I too have benefited from the free meal because those who come to get the food may buy a bottle of water or a paper plate from my shop, and in this way I am able to earn a little. As the days passed, the number of people coming for the free meal increased, and at times we even ran short of food packets. Despite this, through ongoing appreciation and support of our free meal effort, many local people have helped us to realize our intention.



khanapados
Kitchen for all

Khirkee collective

REVUE

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