

December 4th, 2022

Artist Talk with artist and activist Sujatro Ghosh and cultural anthropologist, culinary curator and community organizer Kavita Meelu

Sujatro Ghosh (SG): *What I try to do is to bring people together. And, as you see, the space is not that big, so bringing people together was probably going to be difficult. So, I thought of bringing memories, which have years of preserved ideas, thoughts and belongings, which is something I wish to collect. For example, these are collected foods of that. [Sujatro shows the shrine with the preserved food in his art installation *Annopurno*]. It's like it has days and years of collection and like preservation of these foods. And what is the work in progress is that these are ideas, desires and people's memories, ancestral memories. And anguish and thoughts and beliefs coming together. So that's what I wish to create, in a hypothetical sense.*

Kavita Meelu (KM): *And can you remind me what the question was on the wall [under the "Shamiyana" canopy there is a text written on the wall: Tell us about your most memorable experience of a community / ceremonial dinner"]?*

SG: *On that particular wall I also wish to create a sonic archive where I want people to talk about their memories of a ceremonial dinner or a communal gathering, which they remember. I would try to incorporate those in some way as well, in the final exhibition, which will then become a part of the sonic archive.*

KM: *And why ceremonial dinner?*

SG: *I talk about our winter as a very gloomy season. It is something very difficult, as seen from the place I come from. This is unimaginable for me, where I'm sitting right now (The space is very cold, outside it is freezing). Because winter in Berlin, or winter in the Global North, is something I have never desired.*

So the only way which gives me warmth is to bring people together with the idea of 'celebration'... In other words, or in Berlin language: it could be parties. This is the idea I want to create, to bring in. Because winter comes with a lot of celebrations during the end of the year. But again it becomes very gloomy. So the residency runs slightly longer than the end of the year. So, yes, I wish to bring people together. That's what I wish to accomplish in an ambitious way.

KM: *And do you plan on having any ceremonial dinners or ceremonial gatherings?*

SG: *Yes. Being an artist, my practice revolves around collaborations and bringing people together. So during the time of the residency, I wish to have people coming together during workshops, during drawing circles. Let them write about their desires, draw their desires. And we will be cooking together as well. That's how we wish to activate the space in a manner.*

KM: *And how do you negotiate the fact that the space is cold, with the joy of trying to bring people together here?*

SG: *After moving to Berlin and Germany, my negotiation skills have died out. So my negotiation happened in a way more hypothetical manner, where I try to negotiate with what I have. And what I have comes with this idea of where I belong from and the idea of preservation. The idea of fermentation kind of struck me because I come from a region where we have seen what scarcity of food means and how it feels.*

So if you ask me what I'm going to eat in the next week, I know my plan. I know what I'm going to eat in the next five days. This comes from my ancestral anguish of not having enough food. So this sounded familiar to me. It's something which I'm used to, which I have lived through.

My negotiations happened within my mind. And that kind of reflects in what we see right now if that makes sense.

KM: *When we first came into this space, obviously the entrance was deceptively warm, but this room where we are, is really cold. Actually, going in the left cage and having this tent, which is called Shamyiana, brings warmth to it! Even though it's freezing here, I could actually imagine having a ceremonial dinner there.*

SG: *Cleo Wächter asked me "what is the memory you have from the opening house?" and it reminded me of one of my friends who came to the opening house. They said: "oh, you know, I would bring a sleeping bag and probably sleep here, because the blue light makes me feel like home". It is really interesting, that it kind of evoked that thought of belonging here, which I don't have.*

KM: *Talking maybe a little bit more broadly, I think what both of us have in common is this use of food in our practice. So, I'm just interested to hear more about what food as a tool is for you, how you've been using it in your past work. But also, the importance of it in your work right now.*

Because it seems like in the more recent past, food has a centrality to the kind of messaging that you're talking about in your work. I'd love for you to elaborate on what food has as a meaning for you, in your work.

SG: *While I'm answering this question, I would like to elaborate on the fact that the space where I come from is something which plays a huge part in how I work with food. It does have an ancestral anguish as well as it has the current socio-political scenario, which plays a huge part.*

In 2014, India, just like the rest of most of the world, is facing a threat to democracy. In India it started having the same post-2014. In 2014 there was this particular incident where a far-right government came to power. This made the cow a very political animal.

In one of my previous works, which I call Cow Mask Project, talks about a contemporary archive of women being in India and how they relate to cows. As cows are safer in the country than women are. Because of the heinous crimes (against women) which happen in India. I tried to draw a line between reality and what that augmented reality is actually.

It is interesting that it doesn't only talk about the situation of women in the country, but also about the minorities. India has the third highest concentration of Muslims in the world. And it's not only Muslims, but also Dalits, Christians and people from many other religions who are minorities in the country. A cow is an animal which is extremely important to these minorities because as a form of nutrition, they are extremely accessible. And this was harmed in a way. Because throughout the current regime, the cow became a political animal. Something which is supposed to be worshiped, and not supposed to be eaten.

When such forced impositions started happening, people's food habits and their livelihoods became at stake. My previous work kind of talked about the minority rights and the gastronomical politics of India. And this is where my work primarily comes from. This work is around five years old. But now, coming forward, there have been several other incidents.

For example, there's an incident of the farmers' protest where the privatization of the economy of India played a huge part as well, where the farmers were forced to be on the street and they protested for 90 days, almost, on the street. And I would like to point out that it is something which also gives me extreme happiness. That, yes, this protest was successful, and all these laws were taken away. But simultaneously I see the attack on farmers, for example, being an attack on our food.

Whenever I talk about food, whenever I reflect on something and whenever I talk about something that is happening in the socio-political scenario related to farmers, it's something which I see with food. So

as a form of communal dining, the reason why I kind of followed communal dining was because the word “communal” could also have a connotation of two religions coming together.

And it's something really significant to where I come from, that communal dining doesn't only mean that we commonly sit somewhere. It also has a religious connotation. So, it is through words, through actions of food, through the food we eat, that, for example, my idea of eating beef, becomes a political choice. It is in a country like India, in a space like India.

It becomes a form of revolte, a form of protest, to eat meat. That is how I tried to incorporate it through my work. Also in India, as in the previous project where we talk about the hostility of food, or how food became hostile, there is this idea of purity coming with the idea of vegetarianism and veganism. For example, in a country in the Global North, this could make real sense. Because here, okay, yes, you have the option to be vegetarian or vegan. But where I come from, from the Global South, it is not really an option, if people can't eat. Not many people have the option to choose between meat and no meat. Because at the end of the day, nutrition is what matters. People in that part of the world don't have nutrition. So how can you ask someone to be vegan or vegetarian? These are the things which my work revolves around.

And I talk about the idea of purity. The class struggles, the caste struggle of India which, for me, being from an upper caste, moderately upper caste, and positioning myself to in a very different way. I'm talking about my privilege, as I belong from. I try to incorporate this and talk about my work and where I come from.

KM: *And how about on - maybe - a more personal level, (not that all of that isn't personal). But you know, as you've lived here now for three years. How do you use food as your way to kind of establish or negotiate home here and belonging now in Berlin? And how is that maybe influencing some of your work too?*

SG: *See as it is a personal question, I would try to answer it in a very easy way. Berlin has really bad value food. I think it's always very easy to bring people something which comes from my part of the world, which would bring people together. But jokes apart, food has something that brings people together. We would go to a gathering, and we would expect something. We would eat together. Food is somehow seen as a form of icebreaker, and it starts many conversations. So again, coming from the space where I come from, a conversation, or all different conversations belong to a small bistro like the roadside. Here it happens by the Späti, you know, over taking a beer.*

That's how I try to bring people together through food. And it is something which is very successfully being used as a tool for the time being. And you have yourself run this collective [Smells Like Collective]. You could also tell me about what your experience has been.

KM: *Sure, I think just generally because of my roots, I grew up in Britain, but my roots are Bengali. And for us, food and hospitality is like this [Kavita crossing two fingers], you know? And it was interesting to come, move and live in a country where the dominant culture doesn't necessarily have that relationship.*

So for me and my South Asian aunties and uncles, the first thing that happens when you go into a house is that you offer tea or something to eat. And for me that is something very simple. It is a way of showing that you are open to building relationships. And it is interesting to come to Germany where that is not necessarily, obviously I am bluntly speaking here, but that is not necessarily the entry point into relationship building.

But in my practice, I use that as a tool. It's part of my likely behavior, I do it for people and people respond really well to it. Because the food is great! And as you said, a great icebreaker. I'm wondering how you deal with that in your encounters, maybe institutionally? Are food and the

practice of cooking necessarily given as values that are acknowledged in academia/in the art world? And that's something, speaking mainly from the world of academia and anthropology. There's a lot that's been written about the encounter with food and what happens when you eat food. And that's because most people who are writing these works are coming at it from the perspective of the consumer. And when they write about cooking, they write about it just in terms of labor, and they think that it's got a class connotation to it. Right? But the people who make the food are rarely seen as creative people. As innovators, as people who are adding multiple meanings in cooking when they cook. As opposed to just cooking, because that's what they do. And so, it is interesting, like in the world of academia, now. To see that, there are people trying to fill this voice by passing the microphone to people who are doing the labor of cooking. And I'm wondering how it is in the art world for you, with food being so central to your work, are you getting that institutional recognition? Are people taking it seriously?

SG: *This answer has two parts. It is institutionally accepted. It is something which is a part of the conversation, and which is becoming a part of this whole practice. It is something you would see that many things involve food, many things involve a conversation around food. But in a bureaucratic sense, for example, it shows that when the majority of the fundings you apply for, you can't use the material to buy food, you know.*

It shows that on an institutional level it could be accepted. It's something which is becoming a trend. But in a way more bureaucratic sense it still doesn't exist. It is as if we don't eat, that's how I see it.

KM: *So true. I remember coming up with those issues, even in the residency at Floating University where there has been no calculation of what it means, what the labor is still considered meaningless. And so it's not given its value and it is not given its worth, therefore you can't calculate that in your budget.*

I had lots of questions about fermentation. We had a conversation a few days ago and Sujatro was talking a lot about fermentation being central to this, and I went on some tangents after our conversation. I am interested in hearing: why fermentation?

SG: *It's a broad question.*

KM: *So you have asked people to contribute fermented goods and in this room [central cage] we've got fermented goods on the wall. And you talked about wanting to preserve and using fermentation in that way. And I'm just wondering what other layers does fermentation and using fermented food bring to light, in your work.*

SG: *I would try to kind of combine both the words fermentation and preservation. When I talk about preservation, I see it as something very political. It is also kind of a double-edged sword where one part of politics would talk about preservation, which is very important for indigenous cultures, indigenous spaces, our memories, our spaces where we belong from such an establishment, keeping it together and working around that. Whereas the other parts of politics would talk about preservation as something which has a perverse meaning to it. Where it could be preservation of a nationalistic identity, preservation of a particular religion. Let's call it the devil in the room. It's more like, for example, when Nazis talk about preservation or when Hindutva talks about preservation. It is talking about preservation of these people who come from a certain space of nationalistic purity. And this purity is perverse. So the reason why I talk about preservation in this way is something why we are talking about indigeneity. And we are talking about how this gives power to things, which existed for a while, which are getting underlined because these have somehow become a minority.*

And, you know, in a broader sense, in relation to the residency, which I am a part of. Here, we become minorities. And the climate and winter becomes the majority. This is where winter overtakes us. So, what do we do? We open up preserves and fermented food. This is where we sit and reflect. These are the layers I want to try to bring out through this residency.

KM: I would like to mention that fermentation is like preservation on the one hand, but it's also transformation on the other. It's always changing something in the form of something else. I'm interested in how you're going to discuss this also in your work. In this context, in Berlin and in the food world, fermentation has become super trendy. It is really interesting because it is like fermentation has been a part of this across cultures around the world. It is an indigenous technology that is thousands of years old.

I think in Germany and in Western Europe, there's been this war on bacteria. A company that is a fermentation expert in the States talks about this war on bacteria, and talks about their work, which is called chemical warfare. And this chemical warfare, I think, is very poignant. They do a lot of fermentation workshops, which I think you thought about, maybe doing some like fermentation workshops or doing some fermentation with people that participate in your work.

This company talks about the biggest issue that they have is that people are so scared of bad bacteria and that there is a fear: "I can't ferment certain things because it is going to go bad and I'm going to make everyone sick!". And I thought it was a really interesting perspective that, in Germany where 99.9% of households have a fridge, which is something that stops the fermentation process even in a climate like this. When in India, I think a third of all households have a fridge. In the part of the region where you come from and then in East India, it's much less. So, fermentation and bacteria have a different meaning in that context, than it does here. I'm thinking about how that might also influence your work, or how you see your work and how other people see it when they come here?

Does this war on bacteria resonate with you?

SG: It does resonate to me. But I do have to point out here that capitalism finds its way and will always find its way. And the reason this is why, I wouldn't be surprised if it comes to a plate in a fancy restaurant where we go.

It comes from the experience of, for example, again indigenous culture, things that we believe to eat in a certain caste of people has become, for example, in India, a part of the Michelin star culture today. The reason why I call it "capitalism finding its way", is because it is something which would always have a way to monetize this whole situation.

This trend is something which I'm absolutely not surprised by, but it is also something that this war on bacteria comes from, something which could only come from struggles and like, for example, me coming from this place where I come from. The reason why we have so much fermented food is because we have been through situations in which there was no other way to keep the food. For example, in any Western country like Germany, or if you go down to different smaller parts of Germany, you would find so much fermented food. If you go to Sweden or Iceland there would be situations where - because of the extreme weather there is so much fermentation and preserved food. So yes, that's how I see it. And I don't specifically have a comment on the war on bacteria because it's something very far sighted for me, for the time being, to be very honest.

I do understand that this comes from a certain amount of privilege which probably could only be seen if you're going through it. And the reason why, for example, the war on Ukraine probably made Europe feel what it could be like, what it's like to have only half energy, so this would be the same on food.

This is how I see the whole process developing.

KM: I think we should open up a little bit and maybe get some input or questions or comments or anything from anybody in the group. We're small, so everybody should feel like they can also chit chat.

Cleo Wächter (CW): I have a question that came actually before we went through this talk. For me your work is a lot about defining preservation and conservation and you know how it translates from foods to thoughts.

But before you had this talk, I was thinking about how - and you mentioned now how the art world is really slowly more and more accepting food as a medium or is this there is it becomes more part of people's understanding of art - but originally I've met you as a photographer also.

And I was wondering if there was a defining moment for you to start seeing food as a medium? And the thought that I had before was that photography (through your work) is also a way of conserving or preserving. And if you see a link and if there was a moment where you let the camera go, or if there is still a camera somewhere in your work?

And how do you relate your back front photography to your current work?

SG: *I do understand your question, it's a slightly complex question to answer. I do have a camera by the way. The reason for shifting to this practice kind of happened because of how I moved to Germany. This particular work which I talk about the cows kind of raised the eyebrows, and I kind of became the target of the current establishment which rules India. And the reason why I had to move out of that space, and I came to Germany was because of that. There was a threat to my life there. To draw a line between these two is not necessarily because I wanted to draw one because I was unable to photograph, as I photograph something which I see in front of me. It wasn't relevant for me to photograph in Berlin because this is a space I didn't belong to then. I did the only thing, which I took from that space where I belong, was my memories and my experience of what I had. My practice kind of changed because I kind of had to change it.*

I had to look out for other ways to reinvent myself as an artist. That's the reason why I kind of changed my practice. But yes, I do see having links between both and I do see it as preservation of memories. What I work with is also a form of archives, and again it's more a form of contemporary archives.

KM: Any other thoughts or comments or anything?

Livia Tarsia in Curia: *Food is central at the moment in your projects, how do you address this participatory dimension or how do you implement it in your projects?*

SG: *The reason why it's participatory is probably because it gives me more space to listen to other people. It gives more voices to my work. And that's how I try to incorporate it. And that's how I try to kind of let other voices speak about my work. I believe art is for everyone. And I believe that art kind of I believe in people taking art back home. I believe every person responds to art. That's why I want to work with a certain kind of art. I could have done very different stuff, which could be in very different kinds of spaces. So that's why I incorporated people within my work to incorporate people's voices.*

KM: *And have you had any thoughts about what you want to do with the desires that people leave for the voices to the Sonic Archive?*

SG: *Once somebody puts something there it instantly becomes a part of the archive. I would probably recollect all of those and have a more curated small design, which would be more a booklet. It would be a kind of a more critical understanding of people's desires. That's what I wish to do. I don't know how much I can do but I will try.*

Speaker 6: *First of all, thank you so much, it's a joy to listen to this interview. Have you thought about a strategy to reach people who live here who normally don't go to exhibitions and want to maybe have a closer approach to food as a medium?*

SG: *I have a language disability. I don't speak German that well. But my disability could only be challenged through community organizations which work with people. The only way I could work with them is through collaborations with them. So that's how I wish to reach out to them. And it's interesting enough we met this small organization which is the Berliner Bärenfreunde e.V., they are very indigenous to this space. I'm sure they know this neighborhood and the people of this neighborhood.*

So, I think this being in the center of many things also brings people together somehow. The collaborations could only happen in that way. If this was in India, I would have probably knocked on doors and gone there and asked people, somehow, it's just culturally not accessible. That's how I wish to work with it.

CW: *It is interesting that a lot of people come into this space in the first place not because it is a gallery, but because it is a remarkable space. So there's an opportunity there...*

Well, thank you so much for doing something so impactful and I would like to return your question to both of you as well. What do you desire to eat today?

SG: *Does it have repercussions?*

KM: *You know what I would like to eat today? I would love something Christmas market style. Gingerbread hearts of icing sugar run it. Yeah.*

SG: *This is a very interesting way to end this conversation and how food comes as a form of protest. So, in previous generations I am from a family which is more atheist and my grandmother used to be a believer whenever she needed it, of course. And so, there was this process that she would eat one day of vegetarian food, that day used to be Saturdays. So, in the afternoon she would eat vegetarian because everybody would be out of the house. My mother, my father, me, everybody would be out. And she would have the opportunity to eat vegetarian food in the afternoon.*

In the evening, my father would come back home and would bring something exotic. He would probably bring some mutton, red meat, some prawn, something which you don't usually have all the time, and over the week. And it's interesting that this subtle kind of provocation played a part in my grandmother would just eat whatever is brought from outside and whatever of it is exotic and she would break her fast non-vegetarian.

She would break her vegetarian eating routine in the evening, and she would say, "Oh, it's just today". And it would happen every week that this is how food becomes a part of the protest. And this is how food becomes something which is kind of a rebellious act. But this is something my father would not say "Don't do it", but my father hates vegetarian food like me.

But my father would not say it ever, but my father would probably just do it in a very subtle way "She had the option to eat vegetarian food", but she would just get jealous of us eating that food. So why would a desire to eat something whatever exotic around me.