

THE STORY RETOLD: Singleness and the Sanghathan

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Narrating stories, not just of pain and suffering but also of collective struggle and learning, joy and companionship—stories that have been ‘created’ and are still in the making—as the single women in Rayagada work to transform the future...looking back at a five-year journey of (gendered) relationships, collective actioning and co-learning.

AFTER A LONG DAY OF HARD toil, on a hot summer evening in 2013, a group of Kondha *adivasi* women gathered in a dark and isolated corner of a village named Emaliguda. A disturbing silence prevailed in the gathering. It was a ‘silence’ that hinted at a loss of words/language. This silence was the result of what an old woman, Tulsi Pulaka, had just shared; an instance from her

life that she believed she could never forget and, yet, did not want to recall. It had occurred a few years earlier when she was accused of theft in a neighbour’s house, where she had been invited to perform a religious ceremony. She had been harassed and humiliated in front of the whole village. While narrating the incident, she suddenly got up, threw open the end of her saree, revealing her bare fallen breasts as she cried in pain,

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“I stood before them like this and said, look for your money. Where is it? Find it. Later, I went inside that house and forcefully took a handful of rice as my remuneration for performing the pooja. I know I should not have taken rice from the household where I had been insulted. I should have refused any offerings from that house. I would have slept on an empty stomach that night, however. I was forced that night to place my helplessness above my humiliation.”

Her frail, thin and ‘pained’ body was trembling with anger in front of the women listening to her. And there was silence all around. The women of Emaliguda village had gathered that evening to share with each other their experience of living (in) singleness, holding each other in silence. This was the first time they had gathered for such a meeting.

Deep into the night, as the women shared stories of their lives with each other, I was told, “The night will end, our stories will not.” Many nights have passed since then (from the beginning of 2013 to the end of 2017) and many stories continue to unfold—stories of loss, pain, suffering, abandonment, rejection, violence, as also stories

of defiance, struggle and everyday resistance—stories of singleness that were buried deep inside.

This paper recounts the stories, not just of pain and suffering but also stories of collective struggle, collective learning, creative joy and companionship—stories that have been ‘created’ and are still in the making as ‘we’ (the single women in Rayagada and I) work together, towards transforming our future. In other words, this paper is a kind of reflective/reflexive ‘looking back’ at a five-year journey of working through (gendered) relationships (including relationships among women), collective actioning and co-learning.

Beginning (in) Singleness

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This work began with the collective articulation and analysis of the condition of singleness among the Kondha *adivasi* women in Emaliguda village of Kolnara block in Rayagada district of Odisha. An initial survey in 2013 revealed that 35–40 per cent of the women in the village had either never married, were widowed, or were separated from their husbands. The group discussions, over time, helped us (the single women and myself) arrive at a two-fold

understanding of singleness: (a) singleness as a condition depicting loneliness and aloneness, including economic, political and cultural othering and exclusion, perpetual states of financial and emotional insecurity, life largely devoid of relationships and care, a huge work burden resting entirely on the woman’s shoulders, and the everyday life of a woman subjected to varied forms of socio-political discrimination and violence, and (b) as also a condition that has enabled women to lead, at least, a negotiated gendered existence in comparison to women under the direct and strict control of the hetero-patriarchal institution of marriage and the patriarch figure, the husband. In other words, singleness for us is as much about negotiating and coping with, as also resisting patriarchal structures, as it is about everyday pain and suffering.

Mami Pedenti, a never-married single woman, asserts, “Our happiness is ours and our sadness is also only ours. We do not have to worry about keeping a husband satisfied and happy. We can earn our own money and, at times, even spend it upon ourselves, which is very difficult for a married woman (in our context) to do.” Most of the never-married

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women in Emaliguda think they are comparatively more liberated than married women and can plan their own lives, even if there are structural restrictions and a control of a different nature.

What also emerged in our group discussions was that even the separated single women, given an option, would not want to remarry. They did not want to suffer again and experience the same kind of violence, isolation, alienation, negligence, stress, and crises they had had to face when they were living with their husbands. Some said, "Husbands increase a woman's burden of work, create unnecessary troubles and disturbances at home; husbands also dominate." Demystifying the common and popular assumption that marriage leads to happiness, Jaga Pedenti asks, "... it is not as if I am very happy at the moment, but what is the guarantee that I would have been happy, had I been married?"

This understanding also takes us beyond the rather simple formulations of victimhood and the equally simple notions of agency that come to haunt us in present times. In this regard, Tulsi's experience is an experience of singleness. What was revealed and relived in her sharing was

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Here, one does not intend to belittle the importance of working on the economic questions related to poverty, hunger, deprivation, etc. Rather, the point is to highlight what gets obscured (questions related to experience of gender, well-being, desire, dignity, life beyond material interests, etc.) in the excessive focusing on 'developmental issues'. Analyzed further, Tulsi's experience was not limited to an experience of helplessness and humiliation (which interprets Tulsi's subject position only as a victim), but also of Tulsi's protest when she decides to take her rightful share of rice. This complex layering of varied 'subject positions', of loneliness and self-dependence, of suffering and resisting at the same time speak of singleness for us.

Arnalu Miniaka (Aiya) is a 45-year old woman, who lives alone in a small, self-constructed house. She

was 10 years old when she began working outside her home. Due to the need to share responsibility of work, both at home and outside, her parents never allowed her to go to school. She was 15 years old when she was forcibly married to a much older man. Her husband was an alcoholic and used to abuse her verbally, physically and sexually. Every time her husband forced himself upon her, she would be in pain for a long time. Even before she could recover from the physical pain, she would again be sexually abused by her husband. At times when she tried to stop him, she would be beaten badly. Even after about 30 years of separation from her husband, the psychological scars of the violent marriage continue to haunt her.

One year into her marriage, she had become pregnant with her first child. The child died soon after its birth and within six months she had become pregnant again. "One night, when I was sleeping, my husband came home all drunk. I was scared. I did not get up. My husband got a big knife from the kitchen and tried to slice my neck. The next day, I left my husband's home. I came back to my parents' house." Her second son was a few months old at that time. But her husband did not let her keep the child. He

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took the child away and, after a couple of months, he re-married. Her parents did not take the separation very well. She was forced time and again to go back, make peace with her husband and live with him. However, Aiya was determined not to go back ('not to go back' is an important political position in a largely patriarchal tribal culture), and began working as a wage labourer in a factory.

Seven years later, she fell in love with a man at her workplace and decided to re-marry. The second marriage lasted only nine months. With time, her new husband also became violent and began to ask her to leave the house. One night, he locked Aiya outside the house. She wept all night waiting for the door to be opened, but no one heard her cry and no one opened the door for her. In the morning, she decided to go back to her parents' house. This time when she came back to Emaliguda, her brother who lived with his parents, refused to support her; after her father's death, he abandoned not just her, but their mother and their unmarried elder sister.

Aiya began a 'new life' with her mother and sister. Her mother and her sister worked as wage labourers on other people's farms

and she worked in a factory. Even after her mother died, Aiya and her sister were not supported by her brother. A few years later, Aiya's elder sister also passed away. Since then, Aiya has been living alone in Emaliguda. Some time later, Aiya left the factory job and began cultivating a small piece of 'encroached' government land. These never-ending struggles have not crushed her; instead, paradoxically, these circumstances have made Aiya quite independent. Yet, this does not take away the loneliness and insecurity she experiences about the future.

The two-fold understanding of singleness is also tied to a shift we made from singlehood (as a state of being single or a particular social positionality due to the absence of a male sexual partner—singlehood more as a marker of a woman's identity; such as the identity of a widowed, separated, abandoned, deserted, divorced, never-married woman) to singleness (as a condition, a way of being single; as an experience of living and feeling singleness in the absence or even in the presence of a male sexual partner—more as a 'contingent emergent subject position').

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helped us understand the condition of Kondha *adivasi* women in a broader way. It led to the surfacing of the conditions of singleness that are lived within marriages and necessary coupledness. This involved women, who were married and had husbands, and yet faced conditions that were similar to those faced by the women, who did not have or lived without a male sexual partner. Women (the older ones) whose husbands are (physically or mentally) unwell, women with alcoholic husbands, women with husbands who do not contribute to the household in any way whatsoever, women whose husbands are abusive and violent, women whose husbands have migrated and have not returned, to women living with men who do not care and are often indifferent to the presence of these women in their lives. We had, thus, moved from woman as an individual biological entity/identity to singleness as a lived experience and a socio-political condition—an experience or condition not limited to the widow or the poor or the *adivasi*—but which could be shared across age, marital status, ethnicity, class and caste positions.

Aunla Kadraka's husband works in the railways, has a salaried

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job and earns a monthly income, but he brings nothing home. He spends all the money on alcohol. Aunla is old and lives alone in a small dilapidated hut in the corner of the village, in spite of having a husband, four sons, two daughters-in-law and grandchildren. When telling us about her husband, she said, "He does not come home for months. When his money is spent, he comes back to me. I have to, then, take care of him and feed him. I am old and have to work all day in other people's fields to be able to manage even one meal a day. But my husband does not understand any of this. He keeps complaining that I don't give him proper food to eat. From where am I supposed to get money for expensive food? He spends everything he earns and when he is left with nothing, he comes back to trouble me....When I was pregnant with my first child, he left home and returned after four years. I raised my son with so much difficulty. Now all my sons refuse to look after me. Two of them are married. They live in the same village with their wives and children, but they refuse to keep me with them. My daughters-in-law and my husband accuse me of having sexual relations with my sons."

A man, who works, brings money home and does not beat his wife is understood to be a 'good' husband. "Is that enough?" is something Basanti (who is not more than 20–22 years of age) asks us. Basanti lives with her husband, who is a mason, and brings home substantial money. She tells me with a sad smile on her face, "He is a good husband. He does not beat me like other men beat their wives. But there is no happiness between us. He goes for work in the morning and comes back late at night. There is no problem as such, but we never spend time together. He does not even talk to me." Basanti helps us understand that the experience of singleness is indeterminate of the presence or absence of a male sexual partner. Despite the physical 'presence' of a 'good' husband, there can be an experience of singleness.

The articulation and analysis of oppression and the resistance within singleness connected us women into a kind of collective, which we named the Eka Nari Sanghathan, ENA (Single Women's Collective). The Sanghathan developed into a space of friendship, belongingness and togetherness for the women who had been,

either abandoned by their families or were treated as a burden and a liability. The Sanghathan became a space that hosted companionship and a sense of care and security for the women, who experienced 'singleness' as a result of social/familial othering.

Ruayi Pudenti, who is a member of the Sanghathan, once said, "No one believed my story and no one ever understood my pain. I had no choice but to keep my sadness to myself. I could not explain it, so I never shared it with anyone... But now I share my feelings with my *Sanghas* (friends) in the Sanghathan because they believe what I say and they understand my pain..."

The coming together of women in the Sanghathan is not a means to attain some common/shared goals (such as increasing the numbers in order to attain rights and entitlements), but as an end in itself (where women come together to share their life with each other). This space is co-created every moment with the members of the collective, in the wake of a need for a collective for single women. However, it functions not only as a support group but also as

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a transformative space that can move beyond the standard model of addressing (single) women as victims to making sense of singleness as a living process—as also a response and challenge to hetero-patriarchy. Women in this collective journey engage and (re)think questions related to development, well-being, solidarity, rights, feminist consciousness and politics, and these processes have played a significant part in building and strengthening more and more voices of resistance. Thus, the Sanghathan is, for us, both a politics of friendship and a form of a collective struggle and action (*sanghathit sangharsha*).

Because the Sanghathan belongs to the *adivasi* single women, the questions concerning women, gender, and hetero-patriarchy as well as the other collective endeavours that the Sanghathan undertakes are all placed well within the particularity of the *adivasi* context. Moreover, building heavily upon the cultural ethos and value system that tie them together, single women in the Sanghathan have been re-creating new relationalities (ethico-political companionships) and redrawing old ones (those engrained in hetero-patriarchal systems). ‘Care for the other’

is held in the highest regard and continuous efforts are undertaken to maintain trust among each other. This work does not intend to romanticize the *adivasi* culture, ethos and values as one remains aware of the inherent antagonisms, conflicts, discriminations and marginalization that are a part of the Kondha *adivasi* life world. It builds upon the disaggregated nature of *adivasi* society that has a lot to offer us in terms of rethinking and co-creating ethic-political values and transformative praxis.

Moreover, the collective repeatedly undertakes several processes in order to analyse and reflect upon group behaviour, group functioning, communication patterns, power dynamics, external/internal influences, etc. Importantly, this work revisits the familiar idiom of ‘representation’ and ‘leadership’ and resists the formation of ‘woman leaders’ because it sees the very idea of ‘leadership’ (privileging and placing power in the hands of a few) as patriarchal. The Sanghathan has no elected/selected ‘leaders’. Whoever wants to join in is welcome and whoever wants to share speaks! All the members of the collective form the core of decision-

making and facilitation among themselves. Different roles and responsibilities are fulfilled by taking turns, which is decided through consensus. The members labour together and work towards mitigating power relations within the Sanghathan in order to arrive at a common and a non-hierarchical space.

There has been a significant change in the overall personality of the women in the Sanghathan. In the initial meetings, the women were not very comfortable speaking to each other, especially in front of many people and in the presence of men. Most women would share their hesitation to speak and voice their opinion. Arnalu Miniaka (whose lived experience has been mentioned earlier) often said that because she is not educated, she thinks she does not know much about the world and, hence, prefers silence. She believed that she lacked the ‘sophistication’ required to interact with people. However, slowly, her involvement and engagement in the Sanghathan deepened and she has gained more and more confidence. She slowly overcame her hesitation. She is no more the hesitant, shy, petite woman sitting in the corner, arms wrapped around herself, only

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listening to all that was being said; rather, now even with the officials (mostly men), she is a strong, fearless and an articulate woman, who knows well what she argues for. She takes initiatives, has direct conversations, encourages participation in and even facilitates the group many times.

Arnalu's mobilization and strategizing skills have played an important role in bringing the Sanghathan members together to form the collective and to help raise the consciousness of the members. She ensures that each and every member of the collective is involved and makes an effort to keep the collective in place. She deals with individuals in the collective with immense empathy and patience, and works efficiently towards resolving conflicts of interests, whenever necessary. She has been making efforts to mobilize women and raise consciousness around the need for coming together and pursuing an ethical engagement.

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under her supervision. Unlike most women activists, she does not have a fiery voice. She is very soft and polite. However, she always brings direction to the discussions and ensures that every member's opinion and voice is accounted for. It is also interesting to see how she often builds on what she learns from the space of the collective and what she gives back to the space. There are many other women like Arnalu Miniaka, who have experienced a change in themselves over time and have become exemplars for the others in the collective.

For the last two years, women from the Sanghathan have been working as my co-action researchers. We have been visiting six villages in the Sikarpai *panchayat* in Kalyansinghpur block in order to explore and understand the experiences of women in different villages, the condition of singleness, their everyday lived reality and the nature of gender(ed) relationships. Many women from other villages have come together to be a part of the Sanghathan (about 130 women); despite the contextual differences, the women have been engaging with each other on several issues and instances.

The next section explores this journey of expanding the Sanghathan.

From the Women on the Scooty

The 'main road' turned upside down with narrow and temporary 'side-lanes' offering way to ever-speeding trucks, overloaded TATA magics (something really magical about these mini-vans fitting no less than 20 people in, above and outside them), and rashly driven bikes (honking masculinity) takes us (the Sanghathan members from Emaliguda and myself) to the villages in Sikarpai *panchayat* (about 30 km away from J.K. Pur where I reside and 15 km from Emaliguda village). Leaving the main 'developmental' road, we take the difficult, temporary, risky and less travelled road of/ to transformation (more on the difference between development practice and transformative praxis later).

We make our way through the uncertain maze of side lanes and muddy paths on my unsteady scooty—the speedometer needle oscillating between 30 and 40—my shoulders held tightly by the woman sitting behind me and the woman behind her clutching the back of the scooty cautiously. Our

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journey together is characterized by caution, this inter-dependence and holding on to each other, which helps us move ahead (slowly, yet steadily) on the side lanes of transformation.

As we began visiting the villages in Sikarpai, we received a variety of responses ranging from curiosity, hospitality and acceptance to suspicion, disinterestedness and rejection. In the initial days, we would go from house to house requesting the women to sit with us. There were days when a few women would gather and some discussions would take place about the 'problems' in the village and the lack of resources. There were also days when we would return disheartened after waiting for hours and finding not more than a couple of women interested in talking to us. We were often told that, "There is no sense of oneness in the village and the women do not value sitting together for meetings." At other times, we were asked politely to not waste our time visiting these villages because people either had no time or they were simply not interested. Bringing women together to engage in a dialogue was very challenging.

We observed that, in some villages, the women would often sit together in one place and talk to each other till late in the evening after finishing their day's work. We decided to join them and slowly become a part of their everyday discussions. Our repeated purposeless evening visits to these villages gave us an opening and helped us build some friendships and familiarity. The women slowly began opening up to us and there was immense curiosity among them around why we, three women on a scooty, roam around the area, from village to village. They would ask us who we were, where we were from and what was the purpose of our visits.

As we answered their questions and addressed their curiosity, there was a shift in their perception about us. From being viewed as an educated middle-class professional/expert, bringing *adivasi* women to help her work in the villages, we were now regarded as '*ma-mane*' (women) from Bepliguda (original name for Emaliguda), who had forged a Sanghathan in their own village and were working on women's issues with a '*didi* from Dilli'. This process helped us communicate to them that

this work was not mine alone, and that it had been initiated and was being taken forward by the women in Emaliguda. The initial discussions on why and how the Sanghathan had been formed, what our experiences were, the philosophy behind our praxis, and what kind of work we had done so far, provided us with an opportunity to generate interest among women of the Sikarpai area.

However, time and again, we were still faced with the most popular question 'rural' spaces have learned to ask as victims and beneficiaries of development: "What can we get from you?" and "How will we benefit from coming and sitting for these meetings?" To be heard amidst the loudness of these questions and repeated assertions of, "Rural *adivasi* spaces are poor and lacking," was a struggle.

Moreover, the issue at hand was also the manner in which these concerns were being communicated and the ways in which we were being approached; these mostly came in the form of a 'cry' of a victim, poor, third-world woman, lacking resources, knowledge, cognizance and capability to change her

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condition, making constant demands for all that she was supposed to demand for, and all that we were supposed to provide. It is not that the concerns around poverty and problems regarding access to resources are not important or are of any less value; our efforts, however, through the workings of the Sanghathan have been to move beyond mainstream developmental imagination and practice that perceives the ‘village’ and its inhabitants only through the framework of poverty and ‘lack’.

This work, since its inception, has been arguing for critical engagement with the existing (somewhat under-theorized) practices that are hegemonic in mainstream development—and is continuously trying to arrive at a re-formed understanding of the transformative praxis. It maintains that mainstream development, that claims to speak of transformation, mostly falls short of distinguishing transformation from (somewhat instrumental and self-interested practices of) state-sponsored or funded developmental deliverables.

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to find much purchase in the current developmental practices hegemonized by the women’s Self-Help Group models that are centered around ideas of material benefit and self-interest. This kind of theoretically informed gender work aims at exploring and addressing concerns that continue to remain hidden (in the obsessive focusing of developmental issues) and those that resonate with *adivasi* history, knowledge and way of life, thereby relying on *adivasi* women as ‘capable’ subjects creating possibilities for a collective (transformed) future rather than remaining mere beneficiaries of state-led development.

It took us long to explain the difference between the workings of the Sanghathan and that of the developmental organizations. A graphic representation and explanation of what we call ‘The Circle-Triangle Distinction: From Resources to Relationships’ helped us communicate it better. The circle stands for the resource-related issues in the women’s lives, for example, shortage of drinking water, inaccessible roads, lack of electrification, absence or malfunctioning of governmental institutions, provisions and policies, etc. The triangle, on the other hand, stands for (inter-personal) relations-related

issues in women’s lives, thereby, representing issues such as singleness, violence, gender discrimination, a woman’s relation to her own body-being, health, sexuality, etc.

This separation between the circle and the triangle highlights that the issues tied to the circle, at one level, require a negotiation with the state and government officials, largely as ‘rightful’ beneficiaries of developmental policies and programmes, whereas, the issues tied to the triangle require a rethinking of gender(ed) relationships, ethico-communitarian ways of being and transforming ourselves and our socio-economic-cultural context and conditions. Women are burdened by issues tied to both the circle and the triangle. But how to address these issues and what we become in the process is an important question that opens up through marking this distinction between the circle and the triangle. This also takes us to other questions such as:

a) Do we remain beneficiaries relying solely upon the developmental state and other organizations (something the ‘circle’ insists we do) or do we take charge of transforming our present and future through

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transforming ourselves, our social relations and context (something the ‘triangle’ becomes symbolic of)?

- b) Where do we begin: from the circle or the triangle? Can working through the triangle strengthen our position to negotiate better with (non) governmental organizations? Can rethinking social (gender) relations and strengthening ‘local’ collective bonds take us towards transforming the self, the social, the economic and the political, thereby lessening our reliance on outside agencies such as the state?

This exercise, through marking a sharp distinction between the work of development and that of the Sanghathan and, therefore, opening up these questions, has helped us destabilize the dominance of practice and the discourse of mainstream development in the villages in which we were working. It has allowed us to prepare fresh ground of our own.

The Sanghathan at Work

The ENS, in the last four years, has managed to lobby with the state to procure some of its rights and entitlements. All the widows,

separated, and old single women, now have access to pension. They have also been slowly receiving financial assistance for building houses under the Indira Awas Yojana. However, in these engagements with the state, there has been an ongoing reflection on the state-citizen relationship and the hierarchy therein. There also has been a marking of the difference between procuring of rights and entitlements, simply as beneficiaries, to working hand-in-hand with state functionaries.

The women have come together to secure themselves financially by opening bank accounts in their own name, in which they deposit a part of their pension and the money they receive from their respective families as part of their remuneration for farm and house work; this was one among the many other significant decisions the Sanghathan took—the decision of negotiating with their respective families and ensuring a remuneration for the work they performed for their families. This has led to a small yet significant change in the way single women are perceived in the family and the larger social.

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singleness among married women have been discussed and debated and the voices of more and more women are being included in the Sanghathan. Issues related to alcoholism, abuse, marital/sexual violence, masculinity, body, sexuality, gender discrimination, division of labour, preventive health-care mechanisms and access to government schemes and provisions have been taken up and the women have been sensitized to think and reflect around these concerns. Besides, our regular visits to the villages in Sikarpai, the women from all the villages that we are working in come together once in six months to meet each other, discuss and reflect upon the issues of concern and plan the future course of action.

Additionally, the collective has also been involved in creating models of self-sustenance, in creating processes of working together and generating surplus in order to take care of the financial needs of single women. For instance, for the last two years, the women in the Sanghathan have been collectively preparing *ambo-soda* (a traditional mango pickle) from the mangoes gathered from the forest. Some of this pickle is kept for self-consumption by the women and the rest is sold to generate

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surplus, which is appropriated collectively. The idea of making pickle is not to make a business venture but to come together as labouring-creating subjects. It is also to generate support for the members of the Sanghathan, who are now too old and are not in a condition to sustain themselves.

This year, 35 women from the Sanghathan have come together to collectively cultivate paddy by leasing three acres of land for the next three years. With the help of my colleague Ashutosh (who has joined us this year) and in collaboration with Dr. Debal Deb and Dulalda (from Basudha: cintdis.org/basudha/), we cultivated indigenous seed varieties using ecologically sensitive and traditional methods and techniques. This year’s two-fold initiative of (a) bringing women together to do collective farming, and (b) moving beyond chemical farming to alternative ways of farming has proved worthwhile. Today, when the farmers are being encouraged to produce and appropriate on an individual basis, keeping self-interest in mind and are being lured into relying heavily on capitalist, market-based inorganic and chemical farming that emphasizes the use of fertilizers, pesticides and hybrid/high yielding seeds, this experiment

of alternative farming with indigenous seed variety and ecologically sensitive methods was a big challenge in itself.

We faced many other challenges from the unpredictable and often delayed monsoon (that led to lack of irrigation in the initial days and, therefore, delayed sowing), to washing off of the bridge (in the flash flood) that connects Emaliguda to Pujarida village where the land is, and performing all the farm work, including tasks that usually/traditionally men in the families do (such as preparing and cutting the boundaries of the field, spraying medicines, thrashing of the paddy, etc.), to staying up till late in the night in the fields, in order to regulate the amount of water on the land. However, the collective spirit of the Sanghathan kept us going and we managed to work through all kinds of constraints, ranging from the financial to the physical, psychological and environmental.

The women walk a long distance (a couple of hours) to reach the land, lift heavy weights, perform back-breaking work all day, stand without shade, whether it rains or in the scorching sun. Yet, they sing in harmony as they work, laugh their heart out during the small *pika* (traditional beedi/cigarette) breaks, eat together

under the mangrove and walk back home in joy after completing the work, day after day. Their bond strengthens as they travel, work, sing, smoke and eat together. Their happiness is beyond measure on the days that all 35 of them come and finish the work in a couple of hours. They would, at times, say, “When we work together, the work feels so easy. It becomes much more difficult when we have no one to share it with.”

The work was mostly distributed according to age...with the younger women taking up the more laborious tasks. However, everyone, irrespective of their age, participated and contributed to the labouring process, except Daima Pedenti, who unfortunately met with an accident a few days before the sowing and could not be part of any work. Not only the performance of labour, even the appropriation and distribution of the produce was a collective endeavour and everyone including Daima (who could not participate this year) was given an equal share of the produce. The Sanghathan teaches as it learns—this collective journey of producing, appropriating and distributing paddy equally has left us all (the women, Ashutosh and I) with new learnings, reflections,

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and, most important, it has strengthened relationships.

Every year, we plan to engage extensively with five to six villages in different *panchayats* so that we have an expanded reach in the area and the Sanghathan can be built across different contexts. Five to six villages a year may seem very little; but the engagement of our work is more qualitative than quantitative. We believe that by simply expanding to a large number of villages, we may not be able to build strong bonds among the women; moreover, the learnings and reflections from our work might get hampered.

The work focusses on in-depth engagement with women, with the aim of building transformed futures. Along with my co-researchers (we will go on adding co-researchers as we move to more villages in different *panchayats* over the years), the plan is to understand and explore the nature of hetero-patriarchy and socio-cultural controls and taboos in the Kondha *adivasi* culture that oppress and exploit women. The work also focusses on spaces and structures that are gender-just and operate differently from the mainstream understandings of feminism; the focus is also on exploring

traditional ethics and values that hold and assist the functioning of the 'communities'.

These explorations and reflections coming from the *adivasi* life-world would help us in building on our work while rethinking and redrawing gendered experiences, practices and relationships and in transforming lives through collective living and caring. Thus, the work is largely to understand, rework and (re)build gendered relationships, processes and ethics of care that draw heavily from the *adivasi* culture and context that these women are a part of, rather than build upon foreign understandings of feminism that have continued to guide us so far.

Although the plan is to work largely on building *adivasi* gendered collectives, specifically we also plan to engage deeper with related issues of sexuality, violence, gendered division of labour, preventive health-care, eco-sensitive and collective agricultural practices, models of self/social sustenance, learning spaces that will focus heavily on *adivasi* knowledge systems and practices (rethinking learning beyond formal western education systems), and building collective processes that are democratic and non-hierarchical in nature.

The question before us is how to move forward with this vision in non-violent yet affirmative ways. The work shall remain deep-rooted in the context and yet may offer insights and knowledge that may be helpful for rethinking transformative work in general. We, at Eka Nari Sanghathan, will keep working towards this aim of newer learnings, common becomings, and deeper bondings.

Co-learning

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My role in this journey (both assigned to me and taken up by myself) from the beginning has not remained a fixed one; it has kept shifting from that of being a friend, facilitator, co-ordinator, mobilizer, trainer, learner and researcher. At times, I am a guiding source and at others the one who was guided, a source of information, a link between the Sanghathan and other institutions and organizations, an insider who was entrusted with the property of the Sanghathan (personal sharings, plans, discussions, etc.) and an outsider with the potential of taking this initiative and struggle beyond its limits of remaining 'local'.

In this way, this work cracks the binary of the researcher as the 'expert' because the aim of this

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work is to generate knowledge that gets co-created (Sanghathan members and I). This work has taught me how outside 'expertise' cannot be deployed or accepted uncritically; rather, this work builds towards generating a collective 'expertise', thereby, bridging the knowledge gap between what comes from the 'outside' and that which already exists. This, for me, was an experience of a process of mutual exchange, learning and co-production of knowledge.

The forging of the Eka Nari Sanghathan has been a very challenging process, yet it has taught me so many things about women's experience, gender work and women's friendships. It has encouraged me to think of the alternatives to development. It is from these women of the Sanghathan that I have learned 'gender'; I have learned how to 'live' relationships (even when in singleness); I have learned what it is to collectivize/mobilize and work towards common/shared

futures. In another sense, this work has not only taught me 'gender', but how to live life; live life ethically. Like the Sanghathan members, my confidence and courage has also been building slowly with time. With every successive initiative, I learn something new (an unknown language, about relationships, collectives, gender, agriculture, health, etc.), face challenges, overcome problems, and find a way out.

These processes seem to have a life in themselves; they are the driving force. This is not just any other job for me. This is like living life in its everydayness. Looking back, I realize that my involvement and keen interest in this work has not only been to be able to do something with/for the single women in Rayagada, it has also been a journey into my own self, towards making sense of my own condition of singleness and fighting my own feminist battle of 'making space' for a woman who chooses to reject the

hetero-patriarchal institution of marriage and wishes to lead a life of singleness without being questioned, without being challenged, without being mocked at, and without being harassed (both mentally and sexually).

Travelling along with the Sanghathan members has been a significant experience, shaping my be-ing and bringing about a transformation within me. I am a friend, a researcher, a facilitator and much more; all these relationships that I shared with the women teach me something or the other. Be it learning to live in the rural, learning to share, from learning their language, to learning the significant lessons of life, death and politics, these women to me are great mentors.

Bhavya Chitranshi is a Rohini Ghadiok Fellow in Action Research at the Centre for Development Practice (CDP), Ambedkar University Delhi. She has co-founded the Eka Nari Sanghathan in the Rayagada district of South Odisha. She has been working on the question of 'singleness' and gender among Kondha adivasi women for the last 5 years. Visit us at: ekanarisanghathan.blogspot.in