

## Singleness and *Sanghathan*

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This paper is on what Spivak calls, “necessary absurdity”; a necessary absurdity that deconstruction brings to the praxis of transformation<sup>1</sup> (namely transformation along the axis of what would provisionally be called the ‘subject’, the ‘social’ and the ‘political’); “deconstruction can make founded political programs more useful by making their in-built problems more visible ... Deconstruction does not aim at *praxis* or theoretical practice but lives in the persistent crisis or unease of the moment of *techne* or crafting (Spivak 2012: 134). In the light or perhaps shadow of the deconstructive, this paper poses a problem; a problem that the work on/of transformation is faced with in the specific context of singleness among rural *adivasi* women in Rayagada district of South Odisha. This work is a part of an ongoing action research which is an attempt towards foregrounding the 'lived experience' (Guru and Sarukkai 2012) of *being single* and *being woman* by attending to the condition of 'singleness' among rural *adivasi* women and exploring alongside questions and collaborative collective processes of transformative praxis. This work began in 2013 in one village named Emaliguda in the district and is currently in the process of further expansion to other villages in and around the area. The work so far has generated some insights and understandings around the condition of singleness among *adivasi* women and in the process, has helped mobilize a single women’s collective called *Eka Nari Sanghathan* (Single Women’s Collective)<sup>2</sup>.

The problem that has opened up with this action research work, which is an

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<sup>1</sup> Dhar (2015), Chakrabarti and Dhar (2015) and Dhar and Chakrabarti (2015) marks the question of transformation along three mutually constitutive axes: a) the axis of the subject (i.e., the axis of the psychoanalytical) (b) the axis of the political (while remaining critical of an understanding of the political reduced to the liberal State and the vote, they invoke transformations in the realm of subtle relationships of power, including self-transformations in the micro-processes of the Party and the State as also non-party political formations) and (c) the axis of the larger social including collective and communitarian formations.

<sup>2</sup> This work with women’s experience of *singleness* in Rayagada, Odisha has been made possible by a generous three-year grant from the Rohini Ghadiok Foundation (RGF).

attempt to work on the question of subject, social and political transformation (the three axes of transformation that stand in mutual constitutivity), is how to bring these three axes in dialogue with each other. In other words, if these three axes of transformation are mutually constitutive, then how does this mutuality and constitutivity translate into praxis? What does it *do* to the question of praxis? How does one account for their simultaneity (transformations in subject, social and political taking place in tandem with each other)? And how does it respond to the question of the (im)possibility of transformed futures? What is it to work and think deconstructively; what is it to engage with the problem(s) at hand is what seems to me as of now “my heightened sense of necessary absurdity”; and this paper is an attempt at exploring deconstructively, the above mentioned questions. The exploration however, takes me to psychoanalysis.

### **Singleness in *Adivasi* Women**

As the process of the collective articulation and analysis of *being single* and *being woman* unfolded along with the *adivasi* single women, it led to a shift from initially only identifying *singlehood* (as a state of being single or a social positionality due to absence of a male sexual partner - more as a marker of a woman's identity; identity such as widow, separated, abandoned, deserted, divorced, never-married) to foregrounding *singleness* (as a condition, as a way of *be-ing* single; as an experience of *living* and *feeling* singleness - more as a ‘contingent emergent subject position’ of a woman). Thus, singleness becomes an experiential truth not only in the absence, but also in the presence (which is a kind of absence presence) of a husband, partner or companion. Singleness in this sense, has not only been an exploration of the question of the *Who* (who is a single woman?) but also of the *What* (what is a single woman?; in other words what is ‘singleness’, or what is to *be* single, when we move from one kind of understanding of singlehood as a noun or an identity to singleness as a gendered process or a subject position in a largely hetero-patriarchal world).

The living *conditions* of singleness and the conditions of *living* singleness involves living in a perpetual state of loneliness and exclusion (including socio-political, economic and cultural exclusion), facing numerous kinds of restrictions, controls and taboos, being largely devoid of any kind of familial support and care, be

it emotional or financial, being over-worked in order to ensure survival or earn a 'space' in the family and being subjected to varied forms of discriminations, marginalization and violence in the larger society. Hence, singleness as a condition was realized as an issue among women since the 'absence' or the absence- presence of a male legitimate sexual partner in a woman's life seems to be shaping the nature of her other relationships. As a result of which she is single(d), thereby marking singleness as a nodal attribute (somewhat like the *point de capiton* in Lacan [2006] and Laclau-Mouffe [1985]) dictating and determining her existence.

Along with this ongoing and overt social violence and oppression, the lives of *adivasi* single women are also marked by covert yet coercive violence of the State-Capital nexus (for example the violence of primitive accumulation) as also violence of mainstream capitalist development (hence, involving the violence of the 'historical inevitability thesis' on *adivasi* worlds and that of foreclosure of a world that the *adivasi* single woman inhabits). Interestingly, the violence of patriarchy is rendered overt when it comes to *adivasi* space (all the more by frequent flying gender trainers circulating in the global South); while the violence of development is rendered covert. What it is to be a (single) woman in the midst of such cultural crisis and devastation looming large, and from which there appears to be no apparent escape, is a question worth asking. The single woman question needs to be placed firmly within the history of the *adivasi* question<sup>3</sup> in India as, *being adivasi* emerges as context for women's oppression in this work. This is to mark the question around the overdetermination of gender (singleness as non-primordial subject position), *being adivasi* (which could be called a primordial identity, but which needs to be rethought in this work; rethought in the sense of being historicized; as also in the sense of being *de-aboriginalized*), and class, global capital and world of the third (see Chakrabarti, Dhar and Cullenberg 2012 for the overlap of what I call *adivasi* life worlds and what

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<sup>3</sup> The role tribal communities have played "in defining India's cultural identity, creativity and dignity has [paradoxically] been rewritten as a history of underdevelopment" (Nandy, 2013: xi). *Adivasi* worlds have been branded *victim others* – victims of structural poverty, victims of their own backwardness, non-scientificity, superstition, even anti-modernness – by contemporary cultures of *third worldisation* of parts of Southern societies (see Chakrabarti, Dhar and Cullenberg [2012] for a critique of third worldisation). However, in this work the attempt has been to critically revisit the hegemonic understanding of development that renders the *adivasi* (single woman's) world as 'underdeveloped' third world. It engages with the history of development and developmental work in a way that interrogates the Capitalocentric and Orientalist nature of mainstream development, including a re-imagination and re-formulation of developmental philosophies (see Chakrabarti and Dhar, 2009). It is in terms of this critical reflection that we look into the question of *adivasi* life history.

they designate ‘the *lived world* of the *third*’). This is important because non-primordial collectives “exist alongside, in tension or even in a struggle with primordial community claims” (Sangari 1995: 2).

The problem that one encounters here is that this history of the *adivasi* question is always already marked by the stamp of colonial anthropological assumptions and the assumptions of the developmental state etc. The general idioms and assumptions related to *adivasi* societies that come to mind instantly are (a) tribal societies are primarily backward, they lack in development, modernity, even civilization at times (b) tribal societies are gender just/equal/sensitive etc. In this work however, the valence of these two somewhat opposed generalities, is revisited and verified. We perhaps need to move beyond simple celebratory notations and equally simple derogatory denouncements of *adivasi* contexts.

Interestingly, this overdetermined space of gender-*adivasi* is already occupied by the development sector that comes with somewhat non-contextualized and under-theorized theories of oppression. Based on its (rather limited) understanding of oppression, this sector has a theory of *righting* women’s oppression. The developmental statist imagination at most recognizes widowhood as victimhood but has no space whatsoever for women who are unmarried, separated, married yet single<sup>4</sup> (these states of singleness that also in a way throw challenges at the dominant institutions of marriage and family). When understood as a socio-legal, as a constructed identity (widow-hood) ‘suffering’ in the absence of a male ‘protector’ and ‘provider’, the single woman is perceived as a passive, helpless ‘victim’ in need of support from various institutions. She is rendered a mere beneficiary (of a widow pension of Rs. 300 per month) and/or recipient of developmental interventions that claim to enhance her well-being without taking into consideration her condition and way of *being* single. Women are collected into groups to promote micro-finance, livelihoods, health, education etc. (“developmental agendas”) but the ‘reality’ of their lived and nodal experience such as singleness is largely kept outside of these interventions.

“Within the developmental discourse, single women are positioned as subjects

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<sup>4</sup> Singleness is also about older women whose husbands are critically (physically and mentally) unwell, women with alcoholic husbands, women with husbands who contribute to the household in no way whatsoever, women whose husbands are abusive and violent, women whose husbands have migrated and have not returned, and so on.

in need of governmental support; issues of land, wages and health assume primary importance. Significantly, absent from the discussions about single women's rights are issues of their self-fulfilment or desire. *The objective conditions of their existence seem to overwhelm their subjective being*" (Pappu 2011: 379; italics mine). The foreclosure of the subjective being – of the axis of subject-power-desire – of the multifaceted and fractured subject positions and lived experiences of women in *adivasi* spaces and (manufactured) foregrounding of 'victim (widow) faces' of the poor and suffering third world women is a reflection of the epistemic violence of mainstream gender and development work that assimilates an appropriate(d) 'other' (i.e., widowhood) on the one hand and on the other the one that chisels out and silences the screams and pain of an inassimilable inappropriate(d), at times resisting Other (i.e., singleness). This assimilation of the appropriate(d) victim 'other' in gender and developmental imagination is, as if, "a certain organization of places designed to *lead astray*" (xxxvi); Derrida calls such a displacing organization of space/place *crypts*; for Derrida "the crypt hides as it holds"; the grounds are so disposed as to "disguise and to hide ... but also to disguise the act of hiding and to hide the disguise ... what is at stake here is what takes place secretly, or takes a secret place, in order to keep itself *safe* somewhere" (Derrida in Abraham and Torok, 1986: xiv). In the context of Derrida's invocation of the crypt and of cryptonymy, a lingering kind of self-doubt then begins to take shape: is 'development' itself a cryptonym – a word that hides? Is widowhood a cryptonym, that hides singleness?

Moreover, the development sector's obsessive gynocentrism (i.e., the focus on women) forecloses deeper questions of gender; this in turn leads to foreclosure of feminism, the feminist political and any kind of transformational imagination and praxis tied to gender-ing. It often appears as a cloud, a lid or at worst a substitute signifier over the patient work of feminist theorization of the political (see Achuthan 2001). In this process, what mostly happens in the name of women's 'empowerment' or gender consciousness is a certain kind of mobilizing and instrumentalizing of poor

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5 Derrida makes sense of the crypt, however, in three senses. Crypt is at one and the same time, (i) 'a certain organization of places [*lieux*] designed to *lead astray*', (ii) 'a topographical arrangement made to keep (conserve-hidden) the *living dead*', and (iii) a 'cipher, a code' (Derrida in Abraham and Torok, 1986: xiv-xxxvi). The three senses of the crypt form for us the knot of (i) third worldisation of the *adivasi* single woman's lived experience, narrative, language, logic and ethos, (ii) which in turn renders dead the living, or that which is living in the *adivasi* single woman, and (iii) the need, hence, for a de-ciphering of that which is living in the deadness of being.

tribal women for fulfilling the set agendas of mainstream development. There is hardly any gender work/feminism taking place in this rhetoric. John (1996) has shown how women in India have always been rendered subservient to the larger concerns of the community, nation, culture. To take it further, perhaps the foregrounding of women in development in turn has rendered woman subservient to the interests of the *adivasi* community and in the process foreclosed feminist questions; i.e., the apparent woman-centrism in development has in turn foreclosed feminist politics.

However, this foreclosure of singleness and feminist politics is not a specific characteristic of the development sector alone. The foregrounding of widow as victim has been as much a focus of the Indian women's movement as it has been that of the development sector. While development sector finds solution to her problems by ensuring widow pensions, the women's movement has taken a more political route by opening up debates around Sati and widow remarriage as solution to a bitter pill. In addition to this, *The Towards Equality Report* which recognizes the existence of unmarried women, however, while generating its critique of the institutions of family and marriage never attempted to directly address the unmarried and the separated single woman. At most, the developmental feminist agenda has moved towards inclusion of women who are heads of households however, the larger focus still remains on addressing only the economic aspects of these women's lives. Apart from this politics of tokenism, the question of singleness of women as such has never received serious feminist attention. Thus, the foregrounding of 'woman' as an undifferentiated, homogeneous whole (indifferent to both their primordial *adivasi* identity and non-primordial subjectivity of singleness), in developmental work and in the women's movement, has in turn foreclosed the question of singleness and feminist politics.

In response to this, the action research in *Rayagada* suggests that women do not form a coherent whole in the (*Kondha*) *adivasi* space. In other words, women are not a generic or homogeneous constituency. There are matrices of fragments/fractures within the category 'woman'. There are women within the category 'woman' and the conditions and the contexts in which they lead their lives inform the question of their *being(s)*. There is oppression at different levels and the nature of oppression among women varies. There are various kinds of 'subject-power-desire' dynamics at play between women (for example, the power relationship

between a married sister-in-law and an unmarried/separated/widowed single woman in the family and between the two wives in case of polygamous marriage), which reflect how oppression emerges in complex and contradictory forms (defying simple perpetrator-victim models so rampant in under-theorized gender training modules) within the category 'woman'.

These experiences and processes in turn take us a little away from the elite or urban understanding of single women (as modern, independent, empowered, liberated, even the 'new woman') connected to circuits of capital logic and power flows. In other words, it takes us towards exploring whether there exist a difference between elite or urban understandings (of singleness) and the subaltern rural *adivasi* understandings (of the same). This appears important in order to foreground the question of difference in Indian feminism wherein, singleness in the elite imagination is associated with a sense of liberation (it is often sought as a matter of individual, personal, 'informed' choice, and is seen as part of a larger feminist consciousness etc.); whereas, singleness faced by subaltern rural single women are marked by the existence of structural oppression. The important question then is, how does the subjective and the structural bleed into each other in the subaltern rural? Moreover, Basu and many others argue,

at least in South Asia, women's movements are located precisely among the westernized urban middle classes. Within this context, the struggles of Indian tribal women against class and gender inequality acquire particular significance ... tribal women's resistance has generally occurred quite autonomously from urban feminist movements. (Basu 1990: 193)

What new openings, questions and understandings can feminism in *adivasi* spaces with *adivasi* women (which has largely been kept distanced and foreclosed from mainstream feminist politics) could bring to the 'political', is a question worth exploring. It looks like the relationship between feminism which has its own time-space-causality curvature, largely within contexts of modernity is in a tense relationship with *adivasi* contexts of time-space-causality curvatures<sup>6</sup>.

While arguing for this, I remain aware of the many critiques that have been posed to post- structuralism claiming that the difference that it posits only weakens

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6 See Banerjee 2005.

feminist solidarity and divides the question of the political. As pointed out by Wood,

... a commitment to feminist politics demands that the limited political and analytical use of this category of 'difference' be underlined ... This has meant, a focus on language, culture and discourse to the exclusion of political economy, a rejection of universalism in favor of difference, an insistence on fluid and fragmented human subject rather than collectivities, a celebration of the marginal and denial of all causal analysis. (Wood 1996 as cited in Rege 1998: 39-40)

However, what I intend to ask is, whether difference necessarily means segregation and division? And does the feminist political require a new theory of difference, including 'sexual difference' – which comes to feminist thought from largely two routes, one, psychoanalysis and the other, French feminism; as also perhaps a new theory of the political marked by questions of antagonism? (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 2005). Further, does political choice or choice of the political reside either on the side of universality or on the side of particularity? Or is there a third way between the two, what Mouffe calls “*particularizing the universal*”?

I highlight the question of universality/particularity since the category 'single woman' is always already a heterogeneous category. Where, on the one hand, the experiences of single women are quite distinct and specific, on the other, there are convergences and similarities in the condition(s) of their singleness. The question that one seeks to explore is that while retaining the complexity and inevitability of heterogeneity, antagonism and contradiction (among single women in particular and women in general), is re-imagining solidarity, revisiting ethics and rethinking political praxis, a possibility? A clue Rege offers,

... a shift of focus from 'naming difference' or 'different voice' to social relations that convert difference into oppression is imperative for feminist politics ... what we need - instead is a shift of focus from 'difference' and multiple voices to the social relations which convert difference into oppression. This requires the working out of the cultural and material dimensions of the interactions and interphases between the different hierarchies of class, gender, race and so on. In other words, this means *transforming 'difference' into a standpoint*. (Rege 1998: 40-41; italics mine)

Keeping Dalit feminism as an important interlocutor, I would like to ask, while Dalit feminism inaugurated interesting questions with respect to the feminist political in the post colony, what are the kinds of questions, mobilizations of single women in *adivasi* spaces inaugurate for the feminist political? The distinction from Dalit feminism that I however intend to mark is that whereas, Dalit feminism takes 'Dalit' as entry point and as an identity within which women's oppression has been theorized, this work on the other hand takes singleness as the entry point (not as an *identity* but as a *condition* hence, it stands somewhat different from philosophies guiding Black feminism or Dalit feminism; in this sense as a question of 'condition of singleness' this work resonates with the question of working class condition) and *being adivasi* is the context within which singleness is to be theorized (hence, it marks its difference also from the metaphysical or universal nature of working class oppression and politics – as located in the particularity of *being adivasi*<sup>7</sup>). What can be the nature of feminism(s) emerging from this reconstitution of the particular-universal relation; something which is not universal as the working class condition and not particular as dalit identity but remains a common condition of singleness in the particularity of *adivasi* identity? Is this then an (im)possible third?; is this *another* way of approaching the existing debate between difference/diversity and sameness/commonness within the feminist political?

Lastly, I wish to examine these questions not just as theoretical questions but as historico-practical philosophical questions as women collectivize themselves. In that sense my examination is not only archival or textual but a reflection on the ongoing documentation of feminist praxis and transformation in which I am not just an observer-participant or otherwise but a co-traveller. In that sense, this action research work is an examination of the *lived experience of the feminist political in adivasi life-worlds*. Guru and Sarukkai (2012) talk about lived experience of caste. One can also have lived experience of caste politics. I will look at the lived experience of feminist politics and singleness since hitherto although we have looked at the lived experience of women, we have not really moved towards looking at the lived

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7 It is to ask (how) can we also learn from *adivasi* worlds theories and praxis of feminism (rather than trying to always teach 'them' our theories and practices of 'feminism')? (How) can we learn to be political and what is it learn to transform from a subaltern life world(view)? These questions require us to think further as to what is it to *listen* to a subaltern voice? Can we begin to see, for instance, what patriarchy, gender, power, violence, oppression, resistance, or the 'political' entails in the subaltern wor(l)d?

experience of the feminist political, as a kind of transformative praxis. Thus, this work on/of transformation, given its theoretical framework and imagination, requires us to rely on what was mentioned earlier as the three axes of transformation; the axes of subject, social and the political. Why these three and how these three take form, are two questions that frame the next two sections of the paper.

### **The Cusp?**

The above section enables us to understand singleness among *adivasi* women as an overdetermined reality marked around, (a) the psychoanalytic subject (with affective states like states of fear, loneliness, unwantedness, pain etc.), (b) the social (marked by the violence and oppression of larger hetero-patriarchal structures) and (c) the political (which is symptomatic of the epistemic violence of the capital-state nexus and foreclosure of singleness in developmental work and the women's movement). It also opens up questions related to transformative (feminist) praxis that we are now faced with in the *adivasi* rural with single women. It is against this background that the paper goes back to the problematic that was raised in the beginning; the question of *how*<sup>8</sup> the axes of subject, social and political overdetermine each other and why praxis geared towards transformation needs to bring to dialogue these three mutually constitutive axes. Few reflections (Laclau 1987; Parker 2011; Dhar 2013; Páramo-Ortega 2014; Dhar and Chakrabarti 2014) become important handles to understand and explore these questions in detail. These studies, to begin with, urge us to engage in what Heidegger refers to as “de-struction”.

For Heidegger, “de-struction” did not signify the purely negative operation of rejecting a tradition, but exactly the opposite: it is by means of a radical questioning which is situated beyond this tradition- but which is only possible in relation to it – that the originary meaning of the categories of this tradition (which have long since become stale and trivialized) may be recovered. In this sense, effecting a “de-struction” (of the history of Marxism) implies going beyond

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8 This 'how' is not just a question of method, or even methodology (in the sense that methodology can help us bring the three axes to dialogue). It is rather a philosophical question; asking what can be a (contingent) philosophy of transformative praxis.

the deceptive evidence of concepts (such as “class”, “capital” and so on) and re-creating the meaning of the originary synthesis that such concepts aspired to establish, the total system of theoretical alternatives in regard to which they represented only limited options, and the ambiguities inherent in their constitution itself. (Laclau 1987: 330-331)

This work on transformation engages in “de-struction” of questions around psychoanalysis and the subject, around the 'social' and the 'political'. This critical engagement in relation to the 'originary' and the process of re-creating 'meanings' challenges dichotomized ways of thinking that have hitherto informed ideas and concepts surrounding these 'discourses'. Hence, our questioning begins with “which psychoanalysis, which subject?”, “which social?”, and “which political?”; and the attempt is to arrive at answers in relation to each other. In that sense, the answer is already hidden in the question. The attempt is to foreground (a) that the psychoanalytic and the subjective is always already *socialized* and can hence be politicized, (b) that the understanding of the social is open to re-signification and is embedded in pastness, experience, desire, as also in conflict, antagonism and hegemony, and (c) that the (contingent) praxis of the political could turn to psychoanalysis and the question of the subject in psychoanalysis, including questions of sociality and relationality.

Freud pointed out the impossibility of finding a sign of reality in the apparatus of the psyche that guarantees any kind of absolute truth. Similarly, according to Marx, consciousness is a social product. Society conveniently restricts the potential expansion of consciousness. It is restricted and enclosed by social factors that unconsciously lead to its configuration. On the other hand, the social, as a phenomenon, is not at all the sum of the badly so-denominated “individual” specificities. Anything individual is one hub in the social weave and contributes to the construction of historic dimension where there is reciprocal action between spirit and matter. The spirit is the utmost point of expression, the apogee achieved through the organization of matter. (Páramo-Ortega 2014: 203).

Further, “if the condition of the psychic is traceable to the “factory of [unconscious] thoughts” (Freud, 1965, p. 317), and if unconscious thoughts are an inalienable

thread of the overdetermined social, affecting the social and, in turn, being affected by it”, how can this dialogue between the subject, the social and the political be avoided in contexts of transformative praxis? How is the “psychic”, which is usually understood as a kind of interiority, always already “social”? How is the social, which is usually understood as a kind of exteriority, paradoxically “psychic”? What is the connection then between the psychic and the social?” (see Chakrabarti and Dhar 2014: 221).

Moreover, the “conflictual social” which is always already marked by what Laclau refers to as negativity (“struggle and antagonism in the structure of any collective identity”) and opaqueness (“the ideological nature of collective representations which establishes a permanent gap between the real and the manifest senses of individual and social group action”) and post Laclau, which Chakrabarti, Dhar and Cullenberg (2012) refer to as 'foreclosed' (where the hegemonic, as it foregrounds a certain reality, also at the same time, obscures or conceals), renders the 'social' highly political and politicize-able. It also brings to dialogue the social and the political with the psychoanalytic<sup>9</sup>. Given the interconnections determining social and political 'spaces', is the teleological explanation that political transformation necessarily precedes social transformation, valid? Similarly, how long can attempts at social transformation (like that of Tagore's *Sriniketan*) remain skeptical of the political?

Finally, as Parker (2011) and Dhar and Chakrabarti (2014) explain, the space of the psychoanalytic is not a space of self-transformation alone, it is also a space that through the “(im)possible experience of the limits of love and knowledge or of the inassimilable (Lacanian) Real” (Dhar and Chakrabarti 2014: 227) makes this space a “crucible of revolutionary subjectivity” (Parker 2011: 197). This latter perspective opens up the possibility of encounters between “impossibility of the social” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) and “the impossibility of the telos of a self-maximising, self-satisfied, whole called the “Subject” (Parker, 2011: 228). Thus, the question of the subject is not bereft of the question of the subtle and somewhat secret structure of

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9 “The second point (on opaqueness) may be linked to the action of the unconscious and to the plurality of “systems” established in the various Freudian topographies. The first, by establishing the non-immanent and ever-threatened character of any collective identity (resulting from the negativity inherent to antagonism), allows the consideration of (class) struggle as a dialectic of identifications composed around a real/impossible kernel.” (Laclau 1987: 331). The concept of foreclosure, on the other hand, is a psychoanalytic concept that foregrounds what the 'social' repudiates in order to become and remain the hegemonic (see Chakrabarti, Dhar and Cullenberg 2012).

hegemony and vice-versa. And in the possible production of what Parker calls “revolutions in subjectivity”, the space of the psychoanalytic renders itself both social and political. The question that then arises: is any ethico-political praxis of transformation possible without psychoanalytical interventions geared towards non-violent and non-coercive reorganization of human relations and desires?

It has been argued that “every miscarried revolution, though only partially and temporarily so, has usually failed for not taking into account the unconscious subjective factor (Parin, 2006) or the so-called objective conditions. Any psychoanalysis that supposes to be “individual” goes substantially wrong, too. [We] psychoanalysts must be able to read the sedimentations of history in what we mistakenly call individuals. ... [Thus], any revolution must include the revolution of the subject, too; that is, the interior revolution based on the conquest of the unconscious individual and cultural aspects: “The real socialist revolutions have an ever stronger need of a qualitative change towards a greater consciousness” (Goldschmidt, Barker, & Wolfram, 2008, p. 842). In the words of Marx (1845/1975f): “the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice” (p. 13).” (Páramo-Ortega 2014: 201). Can the question of the political, which hitherto has been thought around conscious resistance and futurity, dirty its hands in the messiness of the human (un)conscious, in phantasy and in the past roots of the present? And can questions around oppression-exploitation, conflict-antagonism, suffering-healing as also those of an (im)possible revolution, (non)relation and resistance be brought to dialogue?

The action research work in Rayagada is an attempt at reflecting on and exploring the questions/doubts raised above. The work aims at attending to lives rendered silent by deep and long-drawn experiences of pain, violence and Otherness; of being-woman, being a sexuated object, being-a-single-woman in the world of a largely polygamous patriarchal culture. The condition of singleness hosts and raises a range of issues and concerns related to the forms of violence and oppression of single women in particular and women in general in *adivasi* society. Moreover, it leads to the foregrounding of the everyday negotiations and battles of single women, the varied forms of struggles they experience(d), their disparate ways of coping, the inner strength that has sustained them through this condition and the possibility of resistance therein.

These processes of collective articulation, discussion and analysis that have been deeply psychoanalytic, social and political, led to the *becoming* of a collective where women who have been abandoned by their families, or have been widowed, have been left unmarried, or women whose husbands' are critically unwell have come together to forge a *Sanghathan* called *Eka Nari Sanghathan*<sup>10</sup>. In other words, the collective analysis of singleness has not only been a psychic journey into an (un)known (social/historical) past but has also generated hope for a new and transformed future. It is as if, what Dhar and Chakrabarti refer to as a “dialogue between the pastness and the futurity of dreams.” This dialogue holds relevance because “pastless futures become violent presents; and futureless pasts become claustrophobic” (see Dhar and Chakrabarti 2014: 221). The birth of a new (or perhaps a shift in) subject position of the single women in the *Sanghathan* (who seemed to become aware – even if minimally – of their political potential) marked the beginning of what Parker calls ‘revolutions in subjectivity’ and what I would like to call re-constitution of “ethico-communitarian” subjectivities, (im)possible social relationships and a contingent-emergent *being-in-common*<sup>11</sup>.

### ***Sanghathan: Working through non-relation?***

The philosophy of transformative praxis that we (members of the *Sanghathan* and I; albeit with unease and ambivalence) envision through the *Sanghathan* and its inner workings is premised on a rethinking of questions centred around subject, solidarity, and relationality. It is in this sense that the question of psychoanalysis, social and the political remain in a constitutive dialogue. It is through a dialogue between what

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10 *Sanghathan* – derives its meaning from the term '*Sanghathan*' itself. When we break down the term '*Sanghathan*' as *San(gha)than*, it is seen as a coming together of friends; wherein *Ghathan* in Hindi implies coming together in order to build, construct and organize and *Sanghas* means friends in Oriya. Thus *San(gha)than* for the members is building up a 'space' where friends would come together, to be with one another and to be there for one another. *Sanghathan* in this sense means a way of relating with each other. Another way in which the *Sanghathan*, is understood (and this is primarily drawing upon how *Sanghathan* has been conceptualized by *Eka Nari Shakti Sangathan* (ENSS), Rajasthan- is that that a *Sanghathan* entails a form of a Collective Struggle, (*Sangha*)*thit* (*Sangha*)*rsha*; wherein along-with generating an understanding of peoples' oppressions, Constructive Collective Action (*Ghathan*) is undertaken towards challenging power structures and working together towards enhancing well-being.

11 See Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) *The Inoperative Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Parker calls “revolutions in subjectivity” and “subjectivity in revolutions” that we intend to explore questions of transformations in the subject, the larger social and the political. In this respect, the question of the (psychoanalytic) subject<sup>12</sup> becomes a relevant question to the praxis of transformation. According to poststructuralist feminists, the potential of feminist politics lies in the questioning and destabilizing of the category “woman” that is produced and regulated by social norms and it is this opening up and re-articulation of the category “woman” that will determine the nature of the feminist subject within feminist politics. Mouffe also argues for deconstruction of essential identities as a necessary condition for understanding various forms of social relations in which lives of political subjects are embedded, which in turn, opens up the multiplicity of various forms of subordinations as also standpoints *a la* Rege in which the subjectivity is *situated*. The nature of political subjectivity hence is ever emerging and located in its multiplicity and contradiction; it remains contingent and is not fixed, unified and homogeneous. Thought in this way, the work in the *Sanghathan* engages with the question of the subject at the uneasy cusp of the subject of ‘single-ness’, the ‘woman’ as subject and the ‘*adivasi*’ as subject; all of which are seen in a Derridean vein as decentred and disaggregated.

Moreover, this rethinking of the subject goes beyond the usual understanding of subject as individualized and self-interested and in turn argues for production of subjectivities that are aware/conscious, even if partially, even if fleetingly, of the inevitability of their existence in relationship to the other/Other (Tagore 1963); the other<sup>13</sup> who is similar (not the *same*, however sharing the condition of singleness) but may also be different (different as ‘women’). It is in this relationship with the other/Other, that the question of self-transformation is imagined. In Volume 2 of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault distinguishes the two elements of every(day) morality. The first element is the code, or the principles. But the second and often more important element is the cultivation of the ethical person/self. According to Foucault, the “relationship with the self ... is not simply ‘self-awareness’ but self-formation as an ‘ethical subject’ ...” (1985: 28) and there is “no forming of the ethical subject without ‘modes of subjectivation’ and...‘practices of the self’ that support them”

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12 See Chakrabarti, Dhar and Cullenberg 2016.

13 Irigaray splits the question of the ‘other’ into two: the *other of the same*; and the *other of the other*; the first is complementary femininity; the second is the feminine as radical alterity, as the register of sexual difference; and in no way it is or could be masculine. (see Irigaray, L. (1985). (C. Porter & C. Burke, Trans.) *This Sex Which is Not One*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.)

(Gibson-Graham 2003: 4). Foucault calls it *askesis* or 'care of the self' – as against the Christian 'ascetic' - (in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* [2005]) and argues that the praxis of self-(trans)formation is itself a condition of truth:

... truth is never given to the subject by right. ... truth is not given to the subject by the simple act of knowledge (*connaissance*), ... for the subject to have right of access to the truth he [or she] must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point other than himself [or herself]. The truth is only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject's being into play. ... there can be no truth without a conversion or a transformation of the subject, without a long labor of ascesis (*askesis*). (Foucault 2005: 15–16; as cited in Dhar and Chakrabarti 2014: 227).

Turning now to the question of solidarity in relation to the question of self-transformation, the *Sanghathan* departs from the usual politics installed in the language of demanding citizen rights and entitlements from the liberal/welfare State producing individualized self-interested subjects collectivizing to amplify 'numbers' in order to gain visibility. The philosophy and praxis of this work focused equally on the question of self and social transformation (rather than remaining a mere beneficiary of the so called benevolent State); it re-imagines solidarity in a way that it ceases to be a bond of unity or agreement between individuals united for a common political cause; rather, it begins to find relevance in the emergence and sustenance of the contingent and emergent *being-in-common* itself. Michael Oakeshott highlights two different modes of human association; *Universitas* and *Societas*.

*Universitas* indicates an engagement in an enterprise to pursue a common substantive purpose or to promote a common interest... contrary to that... the idea *societas* is that of agents who, by choice or circumstance, are related to one another so as to compose an identifiable association of certain sort. The tie which joins them, and in respect of which each recognizes himself to be *socius*, is not that of an engagement in an enterprise to pursue a common substantive purpose or to promote a common interest, but that of *loyalty to one another* ... Oakeshott insists that the participants in a *societas* or *cives* are not associated for a common enterprise nor with a view to facilitating the attainment of each person's individual prosperity; what links them is the recognition of the authority of the

conditions specifying their common or 'public' concern<sup>14</sup>, a 'practice of civility'... This modern form of political community is held together not by a substantive idea of the common good but by a *common bond*, a public concern. It is therefore a community without a definite shape or a definite identity and [is] in continuous re-enactment. (as cited in Mouffe 2005: 66-67).

Hence, *solidarity* within this praxis of transformation, *remains not just a means to attain a common goal but becomes an end in itself*; and this is one sharp break in *Eka Nari Sanghathan* with traditional politics. Our work in *Rayagada* stands testimony to such an unfinished effort; wherein relationship between individuals in the collective earns a place higher than the common 'cause' that gets promoted. This is so because the subject in this political formation is not assumed/expected to be devoid of her embeddedness in her (psychoanalytic) past, including subject-effects of memories, nostalgia and (irrational) belongings, her social relations and living conditions (whether situated, constituted or constructed); in fact, it is this very embeddedness of the subject with which she enters the *common in the making* and makes/builds the "common". In addition to this (un)conscious embeddedness, this work on/of solidarity is also premised on difficult yet unavoidable – unavoidable in the realm of the political – questions of human Eros. Freud argues,

Eros is [at] the core of solidarity and [is] also [an] expression of the basic need to *belong* to any kind of community. [He] (1929/1961b) admitted that "(wo)men are to be *libidinally bound to one another* [and that] necessity alone, the advantages of work in common, will not hold them together (p. 122). ... [He goes on to say] that a civilization which leaves so large a number of its participants unsatisfied and drives them into revolt neither has nor deserves the prospect of a lasting existence (Freud, 1927/1961c, p. 12). ... [He] (1929/1961b) considered that the ideal any civilization should pursue consists of "a re-ordering of human relations". (as cited in Páramo-Ortega 2014: 200-203)

Thus, the question of solidarity for us in the *Sanghathan* is not limited to re-claiming of spaces (usual developmental and political rhetoric) from where women are said to have been kept away (the so called public spaces, which also is an assumption given the fuzzy lines between the public and the private in the *adivasi* woman's world) but

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14 Oakeshott calls this *republica* (Mouffe 2005: 67).

about co-creating a (personal-political collective) space of their own in order to come together to forge relationships, create bonds of trust and friendship and open up their lives to each other. This space then becomes a critical space for discussions, articulations, analysis and theorizing of women's fractured oppressions, struggles and forms of resistance(s) in hetero-patriarchal structures. These processes hence, involve countering and confronting not only the larger world out there (social relations cut across class/caste/gender, citizen-state divide etc.), but also a world that they build together - the '*Sanghathan*' - the hierarchies and power dynamics in intimate personal relationships, differences of age, background, exposure, social contradictions, subjectivities etc. even among women in the collective, and finally also of the world with-*in* (our internal dilemmas, pain, biases, envy, desire, eros).

The question of relationality in this work (between the *Sanghathan* members and with the larger socio-political world out there), is rethought through 'antagonism' (in Laclau-Mouffe) and 'non-relation' (in Lacan). Based on a critique of liberal democracy, while engaging with Carl Schmitt, Mouffe inaugurates an informed enquiry into the nature of modern democracy by highlighting the constitutive role of antagonism in social life, which determines in turn the nature of the 'politics of pluralism'. She critiques traditional political thought for its inability to capture or perhaps silence the extant and all pervasive antagonism in the social while constructing a universal language of politics as a politics of the so called 'masses'. This disavowal of antagonism, is responsible for the failure of traditional forms of politics in remaining democratic and participatory. Mouffe argues,

... when we accept that every identity is relational and that the condition of existence of every identity is the affirmation of a difference, the determination of an 'other' that is going to play the role of a 'constitutive outside', it is possible to understand how antagonisms arise. In the domain of collective identifications, where what is in question is the creation of a 'we' by a delimitation of a 'them', the possibility always exists that this we/them relation will turn into a relation of the friend/enemy type; in other words, it can always become political in Schmitt's understanding of the term<sup>15</sup>. This can happen when the other, who was until then considered only under the mode of difference, begins to be perceived

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15 "Schmitt has pointed out, that antagonisms can take many forms, and it is illusory to believe they could ever be eliminated. In those circumstances, it is preferable to give them a political outlet within a pluralistic democratic system." (Mouffe 2005: 5).

as negating our identity, as putting in question our very existence. From that moment onwards, any type of we/them relation, be it religious, ethnic, national, economic or other, becomes the site of a political antagonism. (Mouffe 2005: 3)

Mouffe goes on to say that once it is established that the world exists in antagonisms and politics has its underlying potential amidst these antagonisms, there is a need to rethink the sustenance of the 'political' in its pluralism; this is a kind of radical pluralist democratic politics that is based on the notion of radical democratic citizenship, which stands in opposition to the neutral and neutered conception of citizenship thereby establishing a common political identity amidst the diversity of democratic struggles. She proposes radical democracy as a new political philosophy; one of the many strategies geared towards pursuing and deepening the democratic project of modernity; an articulation that needs to construct a new language of subject positions, a new form of plural and democratic individuality, and a new concept of democratic rights of the individual that can only be exercised collectively.

Thus, this rethinking of the 'political' in light of pluralism involves breaking away from notions of entrenched rationalism, individualism, and universalism, if the political agenda is to make space for various democratic struggles that include the multiplicity of the existing forms of subordination and standpoint *a la* Rege. However, this break from rationality, individuality and universality does not mean that these ideas are to be abandoned rather, to point out that they are,

... necessarily plural, discursively constructed and entangled with power relations. It means acknowledging the existence of the political in its complexity: the dimension of the 'we', the construction of the friend's side, as well as the dimension of the 'them', the constitutive aspect of antagonism. (Mouffe 2005: 7)

While establishing relationality between 'we' and 'them', Mouffe points out that a distinction needs to be marked between 'enemy' and 'adversary' in order to create or maintain a pluralistic democratic order.

It requires that, within the context of the political community, the opponent should be considered not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated. We will fight against his ideas but we will not question his right to defend them. The category of the 'enemy' does

not disappear but is displaced; it remains pertinent with respect to those who do not accept the democratic 'rules of the game' and who thereby exclude themselves from the political community. ... This 'agonistic pluralism' is constitutive of modern democracy and, rather than seeing it as a threat, we should realize that it represents the very condition of existence of such democracy" (Mouffe 2005: 4).

Thus, only when the adversary in its 'Othering' is not only accepted but rendered indispensable for the existence of a politics of the 'we', the politics of pluralism emerges as being democratic. Mouffe emphasizes that there can be convergence between various democratic struggles only when a new 'common sense' is generated based on the principle of democratic equivalence. This new 'common sense' is required so that the convergence between the groups is not only limited to just an allegiance of the varied interests, but rather, a true convergence, based on democratic equivalence, of varied demands made by various groups. She distinguishes this *relational pluralism* from the postmodern conception of the fragmentation of the social, and of identity, wherein there is no acknowledgment of the existence of the relational matrix of contingent identities between those fragments. Hence, Mouffe's formulation of the politics of radical pluralism problematizes essentialism: "either of the totality or of the elements - and affirms that neither the totality nor the fragments possess any kind of fixed identity, prior to the contingent and pragmatic form of their articulation." (Mouffe 2005: 7).

She maintains that radical plural democracy, since it premises on the permanence of antagonism and conflict, runs a risk that these conflicts and antagonisms may never be resolved. In other words, there has to be an awareness that a pluralist democracy may never lead to a full realization of harmony,

... since the very moment of its realization would see its disintegration. It should be conceived as a good that only exists as good so long as it cannot be reached. Such a democracy will therefore always be a democracy 'to come', as conflict and antagonism are at the same time its condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of its full realization. (ibid: 8).

Thus, Mouffe is mainly arguing for a re-articulation of the political through values that emerge in the course of collective action and through 'being and belonging in

common'; a new conception of radical citizenship that respects both pluralism, interdependence and individual liberty. Mouffe claims,

... one task of a modern democratic political philosophy, as I see it, is to provide us with a language to articulate individual liberty with political liberty so as to construe new subject positions and create different citizens identities. ... [Moreover,] political philosophy in a modern democratic society should not be a search for foundations but the elaboration of a language providing us with metaphoric redescriptions of our social relations. ... it could help us to defend democracy by deepening and extending the range of democratic practices through the creation of new subject positions within a democratic matrix. ... a revalorization of the political understood as collective participation in a public sphere where interests are confronted, conflicts resolved, divisions exposed, confrontations staged, and in that way - as Machiavelli was the first to recognize - liberty secured. (Mouffe 2005: 56-57).

The question of relationality is seen as sexed/sexuated in Lacan. Lacan introduces a conception of a fundamental “non-relationship” in the sexual and between the sexuated; antagonism is thus, rewritten as the fundamental absence<sup>16</sup> or negativity of the sexual: “that in the sexual which is not is the relation: *there is no sexual relation.*” (Zupancic 2016: 88). This quote from Lacan “there is no (sexual) relation” is not a simple claim that there is no sexual relation as such; what it however explains is how there is an absence of (sexual) relationship in the existence of that relationship. Moreover, this absence of the relationship is not an absent absence; it defines the terms of the relationship.

The non-relationship gives, dictates the conditions of what ties us, which is to say that it is not a simple, indifferent absence, but an absence that curves and

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16 “it is not about an entity that is nowhere to be found empirically, although we know exactly what it would look like if found empirically; rather the opposite: empirically, sex exists very well (and we are pretty able to recognize, ‘identify’ it); what seems to be missing – to put this in Platonic terms – is the Idea of sex, its essence: what exactly is that we recognize when we say ‘this is sex’? ... Is there an Idea, a pure form of sex? The answer seems to be negative. ... The cause of embarrassment in sexuality is not simply something that is there, on display in it, but on the contrary something that is not there – something which, if it existed, would determine what sex actually is, and name what is ‘sexual’ about sex. Sex is all around, but we don’t seem to know what exactly it is. We could perhaps go as far as to say: when – in the human realm – we come across something for which we have absolutely no clue what it is, we can be pretty certain that it ‘has to do with sex’. This formula is not meant to be ironic. ... Sex is only in what does not work.” (Zupancic 2016: 88)

determines the structure with which it appears. The non-relation is not the opposite of the relation, it is the *inherent non-logic* (a *fundamental 'antagonism'*) of the relations that are possible and existing. (Zupancic 2016: 89)

Thus, relationality is always more than what it is; the 'more' of it lies in the absence or negativity, in its inability to point out what it is as an idea and a pure form.

It appears conscious and transparent rationality – rationality of the Cartesian kind (“I think, therefore I am”) – fails to either account for or encompass the space and scope of relationality and this failure, this irreducibility takes the question of politics to the threshold and doorstep of psychoanalysis; it takes the largely Derridean politics of Laclau-Mouffe to Lacanian psychoanalysis. It urges political praxis to open itself to ‘limits of love and knowledge’, to unsettle itself with the work of absence, and the negative and the unknown; all of which continue to determine our sexuated *beings*. Zupancic thus reads “Sexual is Political” more radically;

... not as a realm of being where political struggles also take place, but in the sense that a true emancipatory politics can only be thought on the ground of an ‘object-disoriented ontology’ ... that pursues not being qua being, but the crack (the real, the antagonism) that haunts the latter from within, informs it. (Zupancic 2016: 89)

However, the solution to this impossibility does not lie in the simple acknowledging of the absence, it is to understand closely how this absence shapes rationality, relationality and (the sexuated) being. It is to examine the nature of different kinds of relationalities that are born out of this fundamental absence or the meaningful foreplay of that (of relationality) which *is* and that which is *not*.

To acknowledge the non-relation does not mean to accept ‘the impossible’ (as something that cannot be done or abolished), but to see how it adheres to all things possible, how it informs them, what kind of antagonism it perpetuates in each concrete case, and how. This is the kind of acknowledgement that – far from closing it, only opens up the space of political invention and intervention. ... [More so because Lacan argues that] the social relations of power – domination, exploitation, discrimination – are first and foremost exploitations of the non-relation. (Zupancic 2016: 91-96)

Thus, an insistence on the constitutive non-relation is a must for political rethinking.

### **Conclusion:**

This paper was an attempt to reflect on the relationship between psychoanalysis, the subject, the social and the political in the context of the praxis of transformation and collective formation among adivasi single women. The praxis of transformation in turn led me to reflect on the psychoanalytic ground of self and social transformation and how it informs and shapes questions of political transformation; in that sense this reflection also helps to open up an enquiry into how gender work in developmental discourse requires rethinking based on the relationship between psychoanalysis and politics. By examining questions of the subject (based on *askesis* as condition for arrival at truth), solidarity (based on *eros* as an end in itself) and relationality (rethought in relation to 'antagonism' and 'non-relation'), with emphasis on “revolutions in subjectivity” and “subjectivity in revolutions”, the overdetermined nature of the praxis of transformation is explored. This formulation thus, challenges the dichotomized ways of thinking about political revolutions, social mobilizations and self-work and focuses on the complexity of *being* in (*non*)relationality that significantly determines the lives that are *lived* and the (ethico-political) futures that are *hoped* for. *Eka Nari Sanghathan* (in its small but significant ways) has embarked upon a collective journey through this rethinking (a rethinking which however remains contingent-emergent) and it hopes to keep *living* and *hoping* for the political psychoanalytically.

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