

From development practice to transformative praxis

B Chitranshi

Centre for Development Practice, Ambedkar University, New Delhi, India

Introduction

This paper grapples with the problem of the difficult work of/on transformation¹ in the adivasi rural, in the specific context of singleness among rural adivasi women in the Rayagada district of South Odisha. The appreciation of the problem stems from my experiences of being part of ongoing action research work that is an attempt towards foregrounding the lived experience (Guru and Sarukkai, 2012) of being single and being a woman by attending to the condition of singleness² among rural adivasi women and exploring alongside questions and (collaborative/collective) processes of transformative praxis.

This work began in 2013 in a village in Rayagada named Emaliguda and is currently in the process of expanding further in six to seven other villages in and around the district. The action research work so far has generated some insight and understanding around the condition of singleness³ among adivasi women and in the process has helped mobilize a single women's collective called Eka Nari Sanghathan (Chitranshi, 2015). This paper, is also a reflection on the questions that have emerged as a result of being immersed in what is commonly referred to as developmental work in the development sector. With critiques of the discourse and practice of development⁴ at hand, the search embarked upon three years ago continues still and the questions that were important then,

1 Dhar (2015), Chakrabarti and Dhar (2015a) and Dhar and Chakrabarti (2015b) marks the question of transformation along three mutually constitutive axes: a) the axis of the self (i.e. the psychological, the subjective) (b) the axis of the political (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) and (c) the axis of the larger social including social organizations, NGOs, collective and communitarian formations.

2 The paper builds on the experience (and subject position) of singleness as distinguished from the identity of singlehood. The identity of singlehood is usually understood as the state of being single due to the absence of a male sexual partner; identity such as widow, separated, abandoned, deserted, divorced, never-married, as against the experience (and subject position) of singleness more as a way of being single; as an experience of living and feeling singleness in the presence or in the absence of a male sexual partner, more as a contingent emergent subject position of a woman. Thus, single-ness being an experiential fact even if there was a husband, partner, or companion.

3 The condition of singleness largely depicts loneliness and alone-ness, including economic, political and cultural exclusion, perpetual states of financial and emotional insecurity, devoid of relationships and care, work burden residing entirely on the woman's shoulders, and subjected to varied forms of socio-political discriminations, marginalization and violence.

4 Development, as pointed out by the development critiques, was and continues to be an attempt at furnishing third world with all that it lacks and which the first world possesses. While the Oriental gaze of the West prepared a fertile ground for the growth of developmental logic, capitalism, in its varied forms, has slowly become a powerful scientific tool to enhance efficiency, productivity and competition in traditional economies. All traditional economies, hence, are viewed to be pre-capitalist in nature and the existence of non-capitalist economies, and diverse and distinct non-capitalist class processes still alive and operational in the global South, are rendered extinct.

remain alive and unanswered till today. Having struggled with these questions on the way, what has eventually become an object of enquiry is what can be called the praxis (as against pure practice that takes the form training-skill building-consciousness raising) of transformation.

Based on this, the paper seeks to explore collaboratively (that is, with the members of the Sanghathan) possibilities of methodological transformation in extant methods of transformation. It critically engages with existing (somewhat under-theorised) practices that are hegemonic in mainstream development, and try to arrive at a reformed understanding of transformative praxis. Paradoxically, mainstream development largely claims to speak of transformation, but mostly falls short of distinguishing transformation from State-sponsored or funded developmental deliverables. This paper shows how this action research work, which could also be called gender work in and with the adivasi rural, fails to find much purchase in current developmental practices hegemonised by the women's Self-Help Group (SHG) model. It also does not find much space in current frameworks of left politics hegemonised by metaphors of (violent) class struggle or demands on the liberal State.

Thus, the particular philosophy of transformative praxis that was generated along with the action research process gestures towards departures from both mainstream developmental conduits of action (marked by collectivisation for action, collectivisation as a means to an end), and traditional forms of Marxist and woman-centered, as against gender-focused, politics that have hitherto framed dominant discourses and practices of transformation. Through a critique of the existing empirical work of transformation in the development sector, the paper argues a rethink of extant philosophies of transformation, the possible learning and demonstration of which, is in the fractured stories and in the methods of praxis engendered by Eka Nari Sanghathan.

The paper advocates for ways that may help us to learn to learn from them, largely through (a) rethinking methodologies of actioning research and researching action simultaneously, keeping connections between theory-practice alive, (b) revisiting concepts such as woman, community, collectives, gender work, power and political, some of the concepts that have been conveniently co-opted by the discourse of development and are loosely deployed without much attention to what the concepts actually imply and the kind of implications these can have on our practice, (c) traversing the difficult and largely deferred path of exploring both the overt and the secret language/logic/ethos of adivasi life worlds and life forms as also gendered subaltern histories and worldviews that have hitherto been foreclosed, and finally (d) exploring impossible collaborative praxis of transformation, distinct from mainstream practice of development, that are geared towards rethinking the ethical and the political through the non-violent reconstitution and rehabilitation of desire and through re-subjection.

The violence and the valence of development

The process of development since the 1970s has claimed inclusion of women into existing capitalocentric and orientalist developmental interventions (Dhar and Dasgupta, 2014). The approach to Women In Development (WID), apart from its familiar feminist critiques, assumed universality of oppression and homogeneity of experience among women and failed to acknowledge the specific social and cultural contexts of women's lives. It looked like, from the banks of Narmada to the banks of the Mahanadi, the same developmental and gender empowerment

model⁵ was being put in place.

Research on the condition of singleness reflects how the developmental processes and agendas have left significant concerns of rural single women's lives unattended and unaddressed. While on the one hand, there is a developmental journey of taking along issues, in ways that can nevertheless be challenged, mainly pertaining to poverty, income, livelihoods and now even gender to an extent, on the other, this also has been a journey of silencing and foreclosing singleness and perhaps many such aspects of women's lives, as a condition and an issue.

It is interesting how singleness remains foreclosed in the apparently woman-centric developmental work in an area (Rayagada) with about 35-40 percent of women being single (accounting for widows, separated and unmarried single women alone, as per data generated through action research work). These women are collected into groups to promote micro-finance and livelihoods (developmental agendas) but the reality of their lived lives and their nodal experiences, such as singleness, is largely kept outside of these interventions. 'Within the developmental discourse single women are positioned as subjects 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-fulfillment or desire. The objective conditions of their existence seem to overwhelm their subjective being' (Pappu 2011).

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, as if makes possible the task of carrying on with the royal road to (capitalist) development. The so called women centric developmental approach, appears as a cloud, a lid or at worst a substitute signifier over the patient work of feminist theorisation and praxis of the political, or of the feminisation of the space of women (Achuthan, 2001). In this process, what mostly happens in the name of gender work is a certain kind of involving of the vast mass of rural and poor women for fulfilling the set developmental agendas. This is mostly done through mobilising women into groups and instrumentalising them to sell this approach in the name of gender consciousness. It is as if the foregrounding of biological women in the development sector has paradoxically foreclosed the question of the singleness of woman. To take it further, perhaps the foregrounding of women in the developmental sector in turn has rendered woman subservient to the interests of the community and in the process led to the obscuring of the feminist questions (that is, the apparent women-centrism in development has in turn precluded feminist politics and the women's movement (John, 1996). The SHG-to-Federation models followed by most Non-Governmental Organisations hegemonise not only the development practitioner but also collectives of women and in the process occults any feminist re-theorisation and practice of the political.

5 The way most NGOs work is to first mobilise women into saving-credit self-help groups in order to create a base for further developmental interventions. The women from these groups especially the so called leaders are then given trainings on various aspects like that of livelihood, gender and governance (most of which carries undertheorised uncritical knowledge of these aspects and has not much relation to the context and lives of women who are being trained into these). As the women get more educated in various fields, acquire a sense of what the development sector likes to call voice and empowerment, they are collected to form larger federations that can take up these issues at larger platform.

Unlearning development-learning transformation

The ongoing action research (Dhar, 2015) work hence attempts to mark its distinction and departure from existing capitalocentric, orientalist and gynocentric, (in claiming to working with and keeping its focus on women but actually remaining androcentric in nature and imagination), modes and practices of development. It, on the other hand, seeks refuge in researching the postcapitalist and postpatriarchal⁶ (political) praxis of transformation. This work standing at the cusp of research and transformation suggests that it is not enough just to know and to do, but to, at the same time, question what is it that one knows? How is it that one knows what one knows? How does one do what one does? So this work questions the very process and content of knowing (knowledge) and doing (practice), it calls for the need for continuous reflection and research on doing.

Based on the above understanding and learning, this reflective/reflexive writing on the praxis of transformation dares to ask; what is it to engage in a theoretically informed praxis of transformation vis-a-vis somewhat under-theorised practices of development. In other words, what is it to explore larger processes of approaching the question of political transformation through transformation in the psyche/self and in the social, as against transformation in the light of development which is embedded in somewhat instrumental and self-interested (liberal, capitalist and orientalist) practices of State-sponsored or funded developmental delivery oriented projects.

A few questions and hypothesis (as have emerged so far in the course of this work) that are worth exploring in the researching of the postcapitalist and the postpatriarchal praxis of transformation are as follows.

- 1. Traversing the difficult and largely deferred path of researching and exploring the secret (adivasi) life worlds as also gendered subaltern histories and worldviews that have hitherto been foreclosed.**

With regards to this work, since being adivasi emerges as a context for women's oppression, it appears women's oppression in Rayagada cannot be thought without an antecedent tribalness. We thus have to understand tribalness to understand women's oppression and singleness within it. This research work hence aims to place the woman question firmly within the history of the adivasi question in India.

The problem that one encounters here is that the history of the adivasi question is always already marked by the stamp of colonial anthropological assumptions and the assumptions of the developmental state. 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 and civilisation at times b) tribal societies are gender just/equal/sensitive. The valence of these two somewhat opposed generalities needs to be revisited and verified. We need to move beyond simple celebratory notations and equally simple derogatory denunciations of adivasi contexts. A research hence is needed on the question of gender and gendered relationships in adivasi spaces (taking along the question of the fragmented condition of women in adivasi contexts), as also the changing gender dynamics and the gendered histories in adivasi contexts.

6 As against anticapitalist or antipatriarchal practices.

2. Understanding nuances of fractured identities of women and the fragmented nature of women's oppression and dynamics of power within women as against strategies that are created in tandem with treating women as one homogeneous constituency.

In the context of South Odisha especially in Rayagada, the research hitherto has shown that women do not form a coherent whole in the (Kondha) adivasi spaces. In other words, women are not a generic or homogeneous constituency. There are matrices of fragments/fractures within the category woman. There is oppression at different and crisscrossing levels and the nature and experience of oppression among women varies. There are various kinds of subject-power-desire dynamics at play between women which reflect how oppression emerges in complex and contradictory forms, defying simple perpetrator-victim models so rampant in gender training modules in the developmental sector, within the category woman. Adivasi women's fractured nature of oppression thus needs to be further researched and theorised with respect to the questions of lived experience, life history, subjectivity, unconscious phantasy and context.

3. A focused gender work in and with the adivasi rural with an inside out understanding of life worlds and exploration of potential resistance therein.

As against the perpetuating theories of the World Bank or United Nations that are invading the adivasi worlds through various strategies such as micro-financing, capacity building and trainings, (designed in the languages alien to the language/ logic/ ethos of the lived adivasi worlds), perhaps what is needed is to generate newer theories of oppression and practices of resistance and transformation that are more experience sensitive, context sensitive and history sensitive. The question then is how can we move towards models more sensitive to adivasi life worlds and forms of life, models that can bring being adivasi, being woman, and being single into a dialogue?

It is to ask how we can learn from them 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 to learn to transform from a subaltern life world view? These questions require us to think further as to what it is 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 world.

These processes then, may also take us to examining ways in which this language and analysis of singleness, move a little away from the elite urban understanding of single women as independent, empowered, liberated, even the 'new woman', connected to circuits of capital logic and power flows? In other words, towards exploring whether there exists a difference between elite and urban understanding of singleness and the subaltern rural adivasi understandings. This appears important in order to foreground the question of difference in Indian feminism. In other words, what new openings, questions and understandings can feminism in adivasi spaces (which has largely been kept distanced and foreclosed from mainstream feminist politics) could bring to the political is a question worth exploring.

While arguing for taking note of this difference, I remain aware of the many critiques that feminism has posed to poststructuralism claiming that the difference that it posits only weakens feminist solidarity and divides the question of the feminist political. However, we should ask whether difference necessarily mean segregation and division? Perhaps, the questions that feminism now

needs to engage with is the question of difference of/on what? Does difference mean different? Or can we rethink feminism and politics along the lines of what Derrida calls difference? Is the question faced by us really about choosing between universality or particularity, or is there a third way between the two, what Chantal Mouffe (2005) calls particularising the universal or Butler-Laclau-Zizek (2002) calls contingent universal?

Since the category single women is already a heterogeneous category. Where on the one hand the experiences of single women are quite distinct and specific to the status of single-hood of women, on the other hand, there are many convergences and similarities in the conditions 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 reimagining solidarity, revisiting ethics and rethinking the political praxis of transformation, a possibility? It appears hence, our understanding of feminism in India requires serious engagement with questions of the fragmented/fractured nature of women's oppression as well as those pertaining to the differences that exist with respect to the standpoint, history and context of women's lived lives.

In this regard, keeping Dalit feminism as an important interlocutor, but while Dalit feminism inaugurated interesting questions with respect to the feminist political in the postcolony, what are the kinds of questions mobilisations of single women in the context of tribalness inaugurate for the feminist political? The distinction from Dalit feminism that I however intend to mark is that whereas Dalit feminism takes Dalit as an entry point and an experience or identity within which women's oppression has been theorised, 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 and as a question of the condition of singleness, this work resonates with the question of the working class condition and tribalness is the context within which singleness is to be theorised. It marks its difference also from the metaphysical or universal nature of working class oppression and politics, as located in the historical and ontological particularity of tribalness. The question then arises is; what can be the nature of feminism emerging from this reconstitution of the particular-universal double? Or is it something else not universal as class condition and not particular as identity, but it remains a question of singleness as a condition in the context specificity of tribalness? Is this then an impossible third? Is this another way of approaching the existing debate between difference/diversity and sameness/commonness within the feminist political?

4. Engendering a process of transformation marked by collectivisation as a means to an end rather than collectivisation simply for some action/agenda/cause.

In solidarity being an end in itself rather than a means to achieve some end, as we find strength in the being-in-common, we may slowly take our politics back home rather than seeking benefits from outside (mainly State) in the beneficiary mode. With attention to questions of self-transformation and social transformation, through rethinking of ethics and subjectivity, what also simultaneously needs to be revisited is the nature of democracy and the State-citizen relationship. Since usual politics is installed in the language of demanding citizens rights and entitlements from the liberal/welfare State, this political philosophy and praxis centred around pain and desire, marks its departure from producing individualized self-interested political subjects, collectivising to amplify numbers in order to gain visibility and demand individual rights, to searching for a politics of

relationality among ethico-communitarian subjectivities. We have called this political rethinking of solidarity, Sanghathan⁷. Thus, there is a need to explore impossible collaborative praxis of transformation distinct from the practices of mainstream development and that are geared towards rethinking the ethical and the political through non-violent reconstitution of desire and re-subjectivation.

5. Rethinking of methodologies of actioning research and researching action simultaneously and at every step in order to keep connections between theory-practice and elite perspectives-gendered subaltern worldviews alive.

The methodologies of action research call for a rethinking while attending to the question of the praxis of transformation. It not only requires critical and creative transformation in approaching and reaching the 'problem' but to also include the above mentioned points and processes while actioning research and researching action. In the last few years the focus of the development sector has been oscillating between mapping conditions of wealth mainly evaluation of income, savings, assets for need assessment, and wellbeing, largely focused on states of happiness and fulfillment of aspirations. However, this work lays emphasis on shifting the paradigmatic frames to bringing in and working with stories of both despair and desire (desire not only as erotic desire but also as desire for the ethico-political). In other words, through collective analysis of despair and struggles as also of subjugation and subversion, we may explore possibilities and find our way towards the desired 'political' and towards desiring the political.

With respect to gender work, as Murthy (2003) suggests, we need to make a shift from descriptive understandings of gender roles to more analytical understandings of gender relations. Where the former emphasizes behavioural differences, the latter places emphasis on the power relations between people. For instance, the analysis of discussions in the Sanghathan largely centres around dukha/kashta, pain and sense of humiliation, and also around struggles, forms of resistance, everyday negotiations, desires and coping mechanisms. This helps build an understanding of gender relations and gendered histories as well as constitute political subject positions that are far removed from simple and usual descriptions that are provided largely in gender trainings of how women play roles that are different from that of men, or explanation around usual sex (as biological) and gender (as social) divide.

Moreover, the approach and listening involved in the engagement process between participants and the action researcher needs to be rethought. A distinction needs to be marked from an instigating perspective where the attempt is to make the participants understand what patriarchy, gender, feminism (mostly untheorised uncritical outdated universal definitions and understandings) mean,

⁷ Our imagination of a Sanghathan and the meaning we attach to it lies in 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 us was building up a space where friends would come together, to be with one another and to be there for one another. Moreover, another way in which we understand and imagine our Sanghathan, and this is primarily drawing upon how Sanghathan has been conceptualized by Ekal 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. Thus, when understood as a whole, Sanghathan for us meant a platform, a space, a journey and a relationship that shelters a collective of friends in struggle and action.

even if they are being explained through a way of questioning and the way a researcher could engage when she is actually the one who wants to understand what these mean from the participant's perspective, when the intention is not only to make the participants understand but to also learn from them. To site an example, in one of the conversations with a leader didi, who has been trained in gender by Jagori and PRADAN and now trains women in other villages, I was asked if I could explain to her what gender means. Seeing me surprised, she smiled and said, "Although I have been trained in gender, I do not exactly know what it means." I asked her what she thinks gender is, based on the trainings she has received and provided. Her mostly confident and certain tone changed and she said in a low, hesitant voice, "I am not sure. I doubt my understanding but I think gender means danger." When asked what she means by that, with further uncertainty she said "no-one in the gender training has ever said what gender is but what I understand from what we have been taught is that if women (who are no less than men) come together, they can be danger." She explained a little more and perhaps by danger she meant that when women realise that they are equal to men, they can be as dangerous and as masculine as men.

At this point I realised how much of a danger our present discourses of gender are/can be. We go on perpetuating and prescribing not only foreign, but also intensely masculine formulations of gender, feminism, development and politics, in the name of trainings that can't even conceptualise for itself what these mean. This work, in contrast attempts to ask what can be the frames of feminising the work of transformative praxis as against existing masculinist models of development?

Conclusion

The philosophy of transformative praxis as against development practice that we envision through the Sanghathan and its inner workings, is premised on a re-defining of collectives, of ethics, of solidarity, and of politics. In other words, it is a re-defining of relationships, of beings in relationships, subjects who are not individualised self-interested subjects but subjects aware/conscious, even if partially, even if fleetingly, of the inevitability of their existence in relationship to the other (Tagore, 1962). The other who is similar but may also be different (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. It is about acknowledging, analysing and hosting contradiction and antagonism as much as celebrating commonalities, in the making of the collective. Moreover, these questions suggest revisiting concepts such as woman (women as fragmented subject positions as against women as a constitutive whole), community (as not just given but as a process of being-in-common), collectives (as contingent and emergent and at times an end in itself vis-a-vis cause oriented/agenda driven coming together of women), focused gender work (generating knowledge around gendered histories and raising consciousness around forms of women's fragmented oppressions and engaging in feminising of the political as distinguished from androcentric frameworks of development that claim working with 'all women' assuming women as ex-officio feminists (Achuthan, 2001), workings of power (understood as micro, subtle, surreptitious, even unconscious as against understanding power as transparent, locatable and operating at the level of the conscious), concept of the political (involving relationalities, friendship, love, ethics as also contradictions and antagonisms as against traditional politics of either/or, friend/enemy and us/them).

Secondly, it is not necessarily just re-claiming of spaces as usual development and political rhetoric

goes, but also about co-creating a personal-political-collective space of their own based on bonds of trust and friendship. This space then becomes a critical space for discussions, articulations, analyzing, and theorising of both women's fractured oppressions and forms of resistance in hetero-patriarchal structures. These processes perhaps involve countering and confronting not only the larger world out there (class/caste/gender, rural-urban, citizen-state divide), but also a world that they build together, the Sanghathan, the hierarchies and power dynamics in intimate personal/social relationships, differences of age, background, exposure, social contradictions, subjectivities etc even among women in the collective, and finally also of the world within (our internal dilemmas, pain, biases, envy, anger, contempt). Unless relationships are redefined in a new language of antagonism and contradiction and hence forged through a thorough understanding, recognition and countering of hierarchies and differences at varied levels, that of the political, the social and the self, perhaps all our attempts at transformation shall continue to fall short.

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