

## **CO-LEARNING GENDER – FINDING POSSIBILITIES OF CO-PERFORMANCE**

### **in and through Mardapoti (A village in Chhattisgarh)**

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This work, at one level, travels within the rugged guidelines of ‘scandalous feminism’ (Rose, 2014), feminism that is ready to work through uncanny experiences of pain, suffering and disturbing aspects of the gendered every-day that are socially meant to remain naturalized/normalized. What is it to understand the world through these scandalous kinds of gendered experiences? Can we in this process find a new way to look at the world; a new methodology to approach processes of research, action, action research<sup>1</sup>? Perhaps we also need to contemplate that to re-think methodology what departures/turns will we have to take, what ruptures will we have to make in the existing pillars of perspectives? What detours will we need in social sciences to inaugurate action research? Should it be a turn to ‘praxis’? Should it be a turn to inter-disciplinarity? Should it be a turn to the ‘in-between’ of natural and social sciences? On most days in the village, I found myself ill-equipped in methodology to research on and engage with realities that function under uncontrolled conditions (where people, time, weather conditions, subjectivities, everyday occurrences, etc. are never constant). Reality, that unfolds itself under unrestricted conditions, in my limited understanding, finds natural science and human sciences in its bineric form incompetent to understand it. Reality, life and living are a conglomeration and complex coming together of, theory-practice, constants-variables, truths-illusions, etc. My reflections on both feminism and methodology stem from my experiences in village Mardapoti in which I was placed for 10 months during my MPhil in Development Practice. We (the MPhil Development Practice scholars) called it *Immersion* (not field work). We lived in and with our host family/families. We did not just study the village or do research *on* the community. We engaged *with* the community. Through our engagement we arrived at a *shared* ‘problem’. We researched the problem: in this case it was *pani ke samasya*. We engaged

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<sup>1</sup> Action Research is a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of ‘a circle of ‘planning’, ‘action’ and ‘fact finding’ about the result of the action’ (Lewin, 1946; as cited in Carr, 2006).

with the question of *pani ke samasya*. We worked our way – not just to an ‘infrastructural’ solution – but to a *gendered* ‘solution’. It required sustained reflection on feminism (in largely Gond contexts and in a mixed group of young women and men). It required reflection on methodology, as one occupied the Moebius of researching, actioning research and researching transformative action.

### **REACHING THE VILLAGE: (RE)LOCATING MARDAPOTI**

I worked in a village called Mardapoti, in Chhattisgarh. This is largely a Gond<sup>2</sup> village (53 Gond houses), with also Yadavs (11 families), Tamrakars (10 families), Muslims (2 families) and Devdas (2 families). This village I would argue is ‘not’ a village in the strict sense of the term. This village has had a unique history of women coming back to it after marriage. The village has seen a pattern in its life. Some women in the village married men from other villages and stayed back in Mardapoti; this practice in the village is called *lamsena*. Few women who had been married in other villages came back with their husbands, some without their husbands and sometimes with other men. Reasons to come back to Mardapoti were many, some came back in search of work, some because their in-laws were difficult to live with, some when their husbands died or left them, or when they left their husbands. These cases unravel stories of *double displacement*; women first got displaced when they got married and then as they settled in a new house, another displacement brought them back to their old yet new village; for this time these women were ‘outsiders’ who needed land to re-settle themselves. The other parallel form of expansion the village experienced was re-settlement of the paradigmatic kind; dislocation and resettlement because of the construction of the Gangrel Dam in 1979. In search of land and a space for acceptable living few families relocated and resettled in Mardapoti. My initial engagements in the village were with these re-settled women; they were my ‘local guides’.

### **ENGAGING WITH WOMEN IN MARDAPOTI**

I reached the village on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January 2016. I started making attempts to engage with people in the village. Women in the house would mostly be working when I visited them. The only way to talk to the women, enter their worlds, or perhaps build a relationship between our worlds,

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<sup>2</sup> Gonds are an adivasis community, who live in Central India and speak the Gondi language. They generally situate themselves in the governmental category of Schedule Tribe.

seemed in getting the hands ‘dirty’. As we would talk I broke *behda* (a forest fruit of medicinal value) and tamarind with them, helped them in cooking, washed utensils with them, sang their songs and took care of the little ones. Such interactions brought me closer to their life-worlds and made me think if women had consciously/unconsciously accepted themselves to be *lesser subjects* in this society. I questioned conditions that women lived in. I reached this struggle through a few anecdotes and narratives that came my way during the immersions.

“In a man-wife relationship, man role-plays the god.” Jamuna Bai said as we discussed instances of wife battering in the village. The premise of the man-wife relationship seemed to be based on man’s superiority such that, men had the right and power to violate women physically.

“I had lived for one and a half years in my natal home after the divorce, and my elders said I should go with this other man, else what would my future be?” says Siyabati Markam. Siya didi was a young bride when she realized that perhaps her husband was not interested in her. She went back to her natal home, and after a year came a request for another marriage. She was not yet out of the pain and trauma of rejection, especially when grounds of rejection were unknown. Yet she agreed to this other marriage with a much older already married man, where needs were very specific; the need was for her to bear him a child.

“I left my job and came back home after my mother’s death, because my father had met with an accident. It is painful for a daughter to lose her mother. There was a lot of loneliness, especially as I stepped into my mother’s shoes. Yet I could not go back. The wound on my father’s leg was open, he needed an operation. How could I leave him in such a condition? The people from the company often call me, but...” Sukhbati Markam after finishing her twelfth, left home to work in a company. After two and a half years, she got to know that her mother was critically unwell. However, when she reached the village, she was told her mother was no more. Sukh’s inability to deal with the loss made her leave soon. This sharing marks the time when she returns to the village the after her father’s accident. These stories urged me to work with these women, to see whether and how one could respond to these experiences.

### **THE TRUTH AND MYTH OF ‘PANI KE SAMASYA’**

Through a close engagement with the women’s groups (which included PRA activities like (i) Social Mapping, (ii) Hundred Seeds activity, (iii) Seasonal Mapping of Water Sources and (iv) Socio-gramy, (v) focused group discussions and (vi) individual discussions, including chance

encounters in the village Immersion), I along with the ‘community’ reached the question and issue of ‘*pani ke samasya*’ (*PkS*) that was explained as, unavailability of drinking water as also water for domestic use, especially during the months of summer. Most hand-pumps (which were eleven) in the village do not provide drinking water, for they were high in arsenic content. Drinking water is availed from two private bore wells (owned by influential Gond families) in a village of approximately four hundred people. The excessive heat in Chhattisgarh makes the land lose much moisture. Every year during summers the panchayat installed motor-pumps for the bore-wells to start its function, and took them away when the monsoons arrived. The community had to think what could be a possible response to this issue when one could see that water levels in the rocky lands of Mardapoti were inordinately low. Scarcity of water became a glaring issue when government-funded toilets were under construction in the village; Savita didi said, “Every morning we carry bottles of water to the fields to fresh ourselves, the government now tells us to use concrete washrooms. Each time the washroom is used one bucket of water must be flushed into it. We are seven people in the family how will we get seven buckets of water, especially during summers”. Water scarcity in the village made us draft a work plan – one that demanded the whole village to discuss its approach to this issue. Through several meetings, we however tried to understand PkS in a deeper manner, but before one could discuss the problem we would generally reach solutions; they (the women’s group) desired ‘Nal Jal Yojna’ or a pipeline system that brought tap-water in each house. It seemed we (the women’s groups and me) had picked up the dominant developmental response for PkS in rural contexts, which was an infrastructural response. Perhaps we were too well versed in the language of development to look at alternatives. Yet we started writing applications for ‘Nal Jal Yojna’ that could be submitted in different government departments. On 8<sup>th</sup> March 2017, James Tigga (my field guide from PRADAN) and few other people from a village called Chhindbhari came to Mardapoti. Most discussions among women in the village had become about scarcity of water painted by a constant lament. That day none of the women came to meet these men. This experience made me go back to the question of PkS – what was this issue of *pani ke samasya*? Was it indeed *the* problem?

PkS looked like a knot; a knot consisting of two threads. The first thread is manufactured from the cocoon of the context of the village, which perhaps had also configured a certain psyche/psychology of the village. There persisted a constant gloom in the village as the yellow

walls kept rebounding deadness. This psychological state brought me to re-think the village, to think of the *deadness in the everyday living*. Was what I called a ‘village’ “about lives rendered dead, rendered silent by deep and long-drawn experiences of pain, violence, of Otherness; not necessarily overt or coercive violence; but the subtle and surreptitious, yet ubiquitous violence of capital, of primitive accumulation, of displacement-dislocation, of landlessness?” (Chitranshi & Dhar, 2016, pp. 2). Women I worked with seemed to have a crypted face(t) to their lives. What remained crypted were perhaps effects of loss – loss of displacement as also loss of sense of ownership of space – effects that although crypted continued to express themselves in uncanny ways; was the absence of women the day James came such an uncanny expression. Women in the village already suffering through experiences of latent violence seemed to be in a *doubly disadvantaged condition*. This deadness and sense of loss tentatively disabled women to come together, to work together, for there was no rem(a)inder of commonness/togetherness in the village, making a collective work on PkS almost impossible in a short span of time.

The other thread was an understanding of the ‘issue of water’ as a scarcity and finding its solution in infrastructural installations. We had perhaps reached ‘Nal Jal Yojna’ too soon, for there was a constant desire in the women to be viewed as ‘empowered’ and choose the paradigmatic path taken by standard models of development for PkS. I was as if caught in the issue called PkS, the context of the village, and the women in the village; as if tied by the two threads. I perhaps needed to find another way to reach this issue.

### **RE-ORIENTING LABOR-LABORER RELATIONSHIPS**

I continuously wondered what could be ‘done’ about ‘water’; navigating between what remained crypted and what it projected. An interaction with young women in the village in context to comprehending the intersectional space of water and/in lives of women we reached experiences of labor.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2017 in a focused group discussion around water with young women, I asked, would their conversations near the bore-well not be hampered if a tap water system was installed in the village? They said, “But if water would be available at home, then we will not have to go out, we will not have to walk, *we have to walk too far*, because of which *our hands and legs pain*.” These discussions opened up a deeper relationship between young women and water in the village, perhaps that of *labor* and the *pain of laboring*. Labor here could be

understood as women's labor involved in fetching water from its source to their houses. Perhaps the route to solve the issue of PkS was also related to *labor*. I placed in front of them the uncritical distortedness of the (sexual) division of labor in the village. But Asrani said, "Change in thought is important but for that families would have to be consulted." Our closed-door meetings were spaces where young women spoke and developed opinions merely among and for themselves and any external change seemed a difficult inauguration. It is and has always been difficult for women to believe they can bring change, that they can initiate transformation.

On 28<sup>th</sup> of February 2017 I happened to meet few young men in the village. The sensitivity with which these men responded to the strict gendered division of labor in the village made me think perhaps we could merge the group of young women and men. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2017 the group took part in a PRA activity based on the gendered division of labor, that marked a stark difference in laboring activities between women and men. Sheshnarayan said, "A 'system' has been created such that women have to take care of the household chores and men do the outside work. The work at home is quantitatively more than the work outside. We were never asked to restrain from the household work, but somehow only women were trained in them and remained responsible for them." Could this 'system' be understood by practices of development? How could 'we' understand this system and rethink this division?

In a village where women and men lived separate(d) lives (especially the young), we initiated a process for them to enter into conversations. A mixed group was taking shape; a group where young women and men were beginning to 'talk' to each other – talk to each other through not simply an exchange of words, but also their practices had entered a conversational loop. A connection between the two parallel processes was forged through insistence on the question of labor. This space of a new 'connect' – where young women and men exchanged perspectives as well as their views on existing practices – generated an alternate path/perspective to 'pani ke samasya' in Mardapoti. Could *men's sharing of women's labor* offer us an alternative; the question remained? The household work was not received as demeaning by men in the village. We thus had a small window to re-orient subjectivities and co-create a space of shared labor.

We had thus found a more sustainable route for responding to the PkS. A route that was not only infrastructural (for we had not stopped urging government officials or development practitioners to help us with PkS), but also took the form of problematizing the strict division of labor that exists in the village. While development has remained largely woman-centric,

women's Self Help Groups being the prime mover, here a mixed group of young women and men was being forged. The group had nine regular members –Janki, Manita, Choti, Triveni, Hema, Abhishek, Sheshnarayan, and Kuleshwar. This was a mixed group of Gonds, Tamrakars, and Yadavs. Also, there were no blood-related kinship ties in the group except for Manita and Choti who were sisters. As the group questioned structures of the division of labor in the village, it also analyzed the consequences of these divisions; it re-thought their separated lives. I along with the young women and men started re-thinking the ethics of a 'shared' space. Thus, there were sharing of thoughts, imaginations, perhaps feelings too. There was also knitting through of relationalities– relations that were beyond amorous and the sexual yet symbiotic and osmotic.

In that sense our work in the process of catering to PkS *co-learned* gender. The process of reaching the moment/movement of labor sharing led to a contingent group formation, in which there was also shared creativity. We together wrote a script on experiences of young women's labor that '*wrote wrongs*' with a vision to '*right*' them (Dhar, 2015). We had not only created a group of young women and men but also forged *a different way of doing gender*, inaugurating care; caring for the other. Where the care continuum was not about women taking care of men, which is the obligatory mode of performance, but this time *men caring for women*; finding ways of co-performance of labor

## **CONCLUSION**

This work offered a different response to the gap in relationality (in our abilities to co-perform and co-create). There was a gendered angle in our response. In other words, I along with the group inaugurated the question of 'sexual difference', a lens to look at practices in the world; a lens to look at the world. We created a window for a possible dialogue between development and sexuation, introducing a gendered 'co' to development. What was this understanding of 'co'? What was the ethics of this togetherness? The process of immersion in the village Mardapoti and that of learning through the young women and men in the group brought me to think 'co'. The blur understanding of 'co' brought us to a 'relationship'; a relationship with the group. It appeared that a sense of 'co' –of being and creating together– demanded us to think of the group first, as also demanded us to put the group before us. It is perhaps in thinking about the group first that the sense of 'co' can be situated in. The group worked towards establishing such a relationship through its critical "thinking of practices" and "practices of thinking".

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