TRANSFORMING THE POLITICAL-
POLITICIZING TRANSFORMATION
EKA NARI SANGHATHAN IN EMALIGUDA,
ODISHA

BHAVYA CHITRANSHI
2016
“For Saroj, who believed in this work and made it possible ...”
Transforming the Political—Politicizing Transformation

Eka Nari Sanghathan in Emaliguda, Odisha

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The Beginning

Two years of MPhil Development Practice has provided me not only with knowledge and experience but also a home and many relationships. I have learned in these two years that where one lives is not necessarily home; rather ‘home’ is that which is lived, in other words, home is where one builds a life that one wishes to live. Emaliguda\(^1\) (a distant village in Rayagada\(^2\) district of Odisha) is that ‘home’ for me, far away from where I used to live in Delhi. This village, situated between a ‘modern’ and ‘developed’ stretch of a highway and a long and beautiful river called Nagaballi is home to many like me—those caught between the so-called charm of ‘modernism’ and the so-called limits of (the theory of) ‘backwardness’. A life where the modes of living derived from a road and a river are distinctly marked; the road as an opening to

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\(^1\) The village falls under Gadisaskal panchayat in Kolnara block. The total population of the village is 951, in 171 households. Of these, 880 people are Schedule Tribes (Kondha tribe), 70 are Schedule Castes and 20 are Sundis (Other Backward Castes).

\(^2\) Rayagada district comprises 11 blocks, 171 panchayats and 2,667 villages. The Kondha tribe forms the majority of population in the district, followed by the Souras.
the outer world that is different in many ways, one that one can enter and exit but to which one can never belong, where one has to continuously make efforts at becoming someone else (leaving one’s tribalness, rurality, historicity behind and adopting civility, urbanity, modernity so as to become or at least be a part of the ‘inevitable’ becoming the ‘other’—as ‘developed’ as the ‘other’), one who is ‘fit’ to enter that ‘other’ world—the ‘developed’ world, one who can be accepted/included in/by this ‘other world’. On the other side is the river where life has a different meaning, as if it carries one’s essence; it is where one is born and where one dies, it is where one lives and belongs; the river with a life of its own shares a relationship with those for whom it is a source of everyday life and livelihood. The river is where one is accepted as one is, the river being a part of one’s tribalness, rurality, historicity, where one can be an adivasi.

Taking the ‘highway’ (literally, as a journey from Delhi to the village and, metaphorically, as an agenda of development) with me, I entered Emaliguda as a development practitioner, a practitioner who had insufficient knowledge of the highway, of the river, or of the lives negotiating at the cusp of the two in their everydayness. Far removed from the city life I had led hitherto, lost among strangers, unknown cultures and languages, had I not found a home and new relationships, I would have failed to survive in Emaliguda. If I, who was identified initially as the ‘didi from PRADAN’³, had not become ‘Bhabiya—Arnalu ru jiya’ (Bhavya—Arnalu’s daughter), I would have not managed to live long in Emaliguda.

There are about 270 households in Emaliguda, of which one is home to Aiya⁴ (Arnalu Miniaka) and me. Aiya invited me to live with her in her house the very first day I

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³ PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) is an NGO, working across eight states. It works to promote and strengthen livelihoods for the rural poor. PRADAN has been working in this village for 4–5 years and there are several SHGs of women, formed as a development initiative, in the village. The MPhil programme is a collaboration between Ambedkar University Delhi and PRADAN, and as action researchers, we are placed in the villages in which PRADAN works.

⁴ Aiya in Kuvi language (language of the Kondha tribe) means Ma (mother). Kuvi is the tribal language of the Kondha tribe of the area.
visited the village. When I shifted to her house with my luggage, she handed me the keys to her house before leaving for the fields; this gesture of hers touched me deeply. My anxiety regarding living alone in a new place suddenly turned into immense gratitude as I took the keys from her. That day, I experienced, perhaps, for the first time what trusting the other could really mean. Aiya’s trust that I (a total stranger) would take care of the house in her absence was much bigger than the trust I had in her (equally a stranger to me) at that time. Her trust in me was bigger because it sprung from a concern for me (I could stay at home and rest) unlike my trust in her which concerned only me (whether I would be able to live with her?). Seeing her selflessness, I felt an instant connection to her and I entered the house as if it were mine, a house that I was being given responsibility for. I had never experienced anything like this before. I was taught to trust those who I knew closely and was trusted by only those who knew me well. I kept wondering how could anyone leave her house in the hands of a total stranger; an outsider? Perhaps my inability to make sense of Aiya’s unconditional trust in me resided in my urban upbringing that never appreciates or even approves of trusting a stranger. All I had learned was skepticism that humans hold for fellow humans. I wondered if ‘trust’ holds any meaning when the other is known; what is the need for something like ‘trust’ when there is familiarity between two people? Perhaps ‘trust’ only holds true meaning when it involves interaction between complete strangers, when it sparks off the beginning of a relationship between an (un)known self—and an unknown other. My first (un)learning and my first lesson in the village was this, a lesson taught by my (m)other in Emaliguda.

Gradually, as days passed, we became close to each other, with Aiya treating me like her own child. Aiya is separated from her husband, who took away their newborn child from her; she told me that her son would now be the same age as I am and she believes that God has sent me to her. Aiya and I used to sleep next to each other and at night she would tell me about her life. I could barely understand her, given the language barrier between us. Aiya would speak in Kuvi (her native language) and I did not know Kuvi at all at that point. With time, I learnt Oriya from some women in the village because it was easier to learn than Kuvi. When I began learning Oriya, Aiya began speaking a little bit in Oriya too (which earlier she was very shy about). Thus,
we began understanding each other much more; learning Oriya helped me interact with other women in the village too.

Every morning I was woken up by Aiya, and she used to prepare tea for me. I was moved by this because people in the village do not have tea. However, because I liked a cup of tea in the morning, Aiya and I had tea together. Later, we would go to the cotton fields where I helped Aiya pluck cotton and then we bathed in the river. Aiya gave me a sense of the riverine way of life in the village. She taught me to draw water, wash clothes, and bathe in the river, using the rough stones on the river bank, etc. She taught me to look at the river differently, to look at it not only from the perspective of a tourist, who gets lost in its aesthetics but also to see it as an important (re)source of life in the village.

In the afternoon, I would come back and walk around the village trying to talk to people. Many of the didis (especially women from the SHGs) were very enthusiastic about talking to me. We communicated through sign language initially, asking questions that could be answered easily. The didis laughed at my lack of knowledge about the village and language, and at how different I was from them. Sometimes, they tried teaching me their language and how to be in the village. Language however seemed to be the biggest challenge; perhaps language is a developmental challenge as well.

During the initial days of my stay, I found it difficult to communicate with the women. One day, I had gone to visit Kante didi. I could sense that she was very upset about something. She spoke a lot about herself and her family in Oriya. All I could understand was that she was sharing something about her brother, who had left them (her mother and the two sisters) after his marriage. She was unmarried and took care of her mother with her sisters. Life was so difficult. Not knowing the language, I could not say much to console her. It was quite awkward when after every 3–4 sentences, she would ask me if I understood what she was saying. I felt very helpless. This helplessness of being unable to communicate and connect with people motivated me to learn the language first and foremost. Some women, such as Mami didi, Aiya, Kante didi, and Jiya didi, who saw my struggle, helped me by teaching me small and simple words in Oriya.

Kuvi is the native language of the Kondha tribe, and most of the women in the village speak only Kuvi. The men and a few younger women, who move in and out of the village for work purposes or education, have learned Oriya over the years. The other women have picked up smatterings of Oriya from those who traverse between the
two spaces; yet, they are not fully confident about speaking in this language. My
spoken Oriya was worse than theirs (even today), and I was always laughed at for
not knowing their language. I believe this gave some women more confidence when
speaking with me in Oriya. With time, the huge language gap slowly lessened.

As I became more proficient with the language, I was able to understand Aiya much
better than before. Her tears and the pain in her heart slowly reached me and brought
the two of us closer. Her immense trust in me, her unconditional love, the care and
the warmth that she offered me gave me strength, courage, and motivation to continue
my village immersion. I remain uncertain whether it was our loneliness and some
kind of void in our lives that connected us both; it certainly gave me an opportunity to
experience a beautiful relationship with a beautiful person. Living with Aiya brought
me closer not only to her but also to her life full of pain, struggle and challenges.

Aiya is a 45-year-old woman, who lives alone in a small, self-constructed house. She
was 10 years old when she began working outside home; her parents never sent her
to school. She was 15 years old when she was compelled to marry a much older man.
Her husband was an alcoholic and used to abuse her verbally, physically, and sexually.
At that age, when she had very little understanding of the abuse she was facing, she
was frequently raped by her husband. Before she could recover from the pain, she was
raped again, and whenever she tried to stop it, she was beaten brutally. Within a year
of her marriage, Aiya became pregnant. Her first child died at birth, and within six
months she was pregnant again. She was beaten even during her pregnancy.

“He used to hit me with whatever he could get hold of; a hot burning log, heavy
utensils, tools... He would hit me in the chest, kick me in the stomach and thighs,
and choke me by gripping my neck. One night, when I was sleeping, he came home
completely drunk. I was very scared and did not get up. He got a huge sharp knife and
stood above my head trying to slice my neck. That night, I somehow gathered courage,
cought hold of his hand and shouted for help. I was rescued by the neighbors. The next
day, I left his house and went back to my parents’ house.”

Her son was a few months old at that time. Her husband took away the child and after
a couple of months married another woman. Her parents did not take the separation
very well. She was forced, time and again, to go back, make peace and live with her
husband. Aiya was determined not to go back and began working as a wage laborer
in a factory. Seven years later, she fell in love with another man at her workplace and
decided to remarry. Unfortunately, her second husband also turned out to be very violent and the marriage lasted only for a few months. One night, she was beaten and locked out of the house. She wept all night waiting for the door to be opened but no one heard her cry and no one opened the door for her. In the morning, she returned once again to her parents’ house.

This time when she came back to Emaliguda, her brother who lived with his parents refused to support her. After her father’s death, he abandoned her, their mother and their elder sister, who was unmarried. With a lot of struggle, she began a new life with her mother and her sister. Her mother and her sister used to work on other people’s farms and she used to work in the factory. After her mother died, life became all the more difficult for Aiya and her sister. A few years later, Aiya’s sister passed away as a result of an incurable illness. Since then, Aiya has been all alone. She stopped working at the factory and began cultivating a small piece of encroached government land; whatever she produces on that land is what sustains her through the year.

These relentless struggles have made Aiya quite independent; yet, this does not take away the loneliness and insecurity about the future that she experiences every day. She works very hard, all day by herself, both within and outside the household. There are days when she returns very tired from the field and her eyes and back pain a lot. She has no one to share her burden of work with, and is left with no choice but to do everything alone. There are days when she sleeps on an empty stomach; days when she is extremely tired or ill and is unable to work. She has no one to share her grief with. She usually spends her nights crying in pain remembering her sister and mother. For the first time, as I lived with her, I got a glimpse into the life of a single woman and came close to understanding the daily struggles and challenges that single women live with.

I also built relationships with other women of the village, especially Mami didi, Jiya didi, Kondari didi and Kante didi; all of who are either unmarried or abandoned by
their husbands. As our involvement and engagement deepened, I began getting sense of the life they lead, their past and ongoing struggles, their position in the family and community, their fear of what will happen in the future when they have no one to depend upon. I understood through my interactions with them and access into their lives that many women’s lives were similar to the life Aiya lived. Soon their concerns became as much a part of my life as for them; this relationality and connectedness motivated me to begin my journey with them and other single women in the village.

Why Singleness?

Mami didi, Aiya, Kondari didi, Jiya didi and Kante didi are all members of PRADAN SHGs. In spite of the presence of a large number of single women in the SHGs, I was informed that discussions around singleness among women have never taken place in the weekly meetings. In one of the oldest SHGs, named Shri Shri Chaitanya Thakur, eight women of a total of ten are unmarried, separated, or widowed. Yet, concerns related to their singleness never surfaced in their discussions. The presence of such a large number of single women in the SHGs and, at the same time, the absence of conversations around it became a cause of concern for me. Interested in exploring this further, and to begin talking about lives that single women lead in this village and the issues concerning them, the didis from the SHGs and I organized meetings (of SHG members, relatives, neighbors, etc.) in the village.

A random survey was conducted in the village, revealing that out of about 250 women, 90 are single, if being single is understood as the physical absence of a male ‘legitimate’ partner in the lives of the women. Of the 90 women, 22 were widowed single women, 17 separated single women and 51 were never-married single women (above 25 years of age).

The presence of such a large number of single women in one village pointed to the need to delve deeper into the aspect of singleness in women’s everyday lives (research) and, simultaneously, to explore ways to address issues that surface as a result of the same, thereby ushering in transformation (action). Toward this end, action
research has been deployed not as an end in itself but as a methodology for generating a philosophy of collective transformative praxis. The ‘action’ and the research have moved hand-in-hand rather than one following the other. In this process of ‘action-ing’ research and researching action, the findings have led to some kind of action, and the action(s) has(ve) been researched.

This action research is more relevant because, at present, there are very few studies available on single women. Those that have been conducted “have sought to uncover the different ways in which a single woman copes in her life or have sought to illuminate her responses vis-a-vis life, career and family in the main” (Jethani 1994; Krishnakumari 1987; Rathaur 1990; as cited in Pappu 2011: 371). However, these studies have mainly been conducted in the urban spaces and essentially ‘on’ single women. This work however, is rooted primarily in a rural setting and is not a work ‘on’ single women, rather ‘with’, ‘for’ and ‘by’ rural single women. It does not limit itself to being research alone but extends into action research. Second, the available literature on single women seems to more or less conform to the common discourse around single women, including only widowed, divorced, separated and unmarried women, and treating this larger category as an undifferentiated homogeneous category. This work attempts to problematize this common discourse and offers insights into the heterogeneous nature of the lived reality of single women in the village.

Amidst the existing literature on single women in India, there seems to be writings available on widow women (Chen 2000) and, to some extent, also on never-married women (Jethani 1994 and Pappu 2011). However, with respect to separated, single

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5 ‘Action research’ is reflective writing on the reflexive process of righting wrongs. In other words, action research is both about ‘righting’ and writing. It is about writing on the actual or lived process of righting wrongs—a process lived by both the researcher and the community. Righting wrongs is about: (a) engendering a process of necessary transformation, a process owned by communities in which the transformation process is being initiated through some kind of catalytic activity, (b) documenting the process in its infinite complexity and contradiction, and (c) generating somewhat abstract learnings and explanatory frameworks out of the experience of transformation, for the community and the development sector at large. In short, action research is about (a) research-ing a problem, (b) action-ing based on research findings and problem identification and possible (re)solution, and (c) research-ing the process of action-ing retrospectively (see Dhar 2015). Action research as a methodology (hence, a means to an end and not an end in itself), in our work, is largely driven by a philosophical imagination of engendering transformation.

6 “Single Women are those who:
(i) have reached a marriageable age and are yet not married,
(ii) are widows,
(iii) are divorced or separated.” (Krishnakumari 1987: 3)
women, hardly any significant study seems to be available. A few studies that cover separated and divorced single women are either limited to studies on women-headed households or focus specifically on their economic aspects (see Kirti Singh *Economic Rights and Entitlements of Separated and Divorced Women*, 2010).

This skewed nature of findings and knowledge production on different aspects of what we have called single-hood is definitely not accidental. It is both an outcome of, a response to and in resonance with how women have been identified, ‘targeted’, ‘visibilized’, and channelized by larger developmental agenda, and the feminist and nationalist movements. Rekha Pappu traces “moments in which the category of single women were explicitly invoked: the early feminist/queer movement of the 1980s, the developmental moment of the 1980s and 1990s and the moment of liberalization and globalization ushered in from the 1990s onwards” (Pappu 2011: 375). The nationalist movement and the early feminist movement brought to the forefront issues related to *Sati*, widow remarriage, etc., thereby invoking the category of widow women in India. Similarly, Pappu states that *The Towards Equality Report* that marked the foundation of the women’s movement in India recognized the existence of unmarried women. However, the movement, while generating its critique of the institutions of family and marriage, never attempted to directly address the unmarried single woman. Thereon, as a result of efforts undertaken by feminist economists, the developmental agenda moved towards inclusion of women, who were heads of households, and the larger focus remained on addressing only the economic aspects of single women’s lives. Later, the discourse around single women took another turn altogether when it became part of popular understanding that because of the socio-economic changes following liberalization and globalization, the number of single women in the country was on the rise. Women are becoming economically independent, are making better career choices, and are, at the same time, exercising their choice to remain unmarried. This claim is highly contentious and can be challenged at many levels.

Thus, these moments, which co-opted the category ‘single woman’, worked their way through exclusion-based inclusion of widowed and never-married single women, leaving out separated and divorced single women. This may be so because of the controversial nature of such single-hood, wherein the socially sanctified institution of marriage is not only escaped from and rejected but is challenged in a way that it fails to provide the woman the very ‘protection’, ‘legitimacy’ and ‘security’ that this institution claims to offer. Thus, the linear connection between political and developmental
agendas undertaken and the specific nature of the studies being conducted at the time highlight how power influences knowledge production and how knowledge that is produced is appropriated and subsumed within the larger developmental-political context. This work becomes important in order to revisit the power and politics of knowledge production that has happened so far as well as to challenge and critique the larger developmental and political moments that have premised themselves on such exclusions.

**Who are *WE***?

“No one believed my story and no one ever understood my pain. I had no choice but to keep my sadness to myself. I could not share it with anyone, so I never shared it with anyone. But now I share my feelings with my Sanghas in the Sanghathan because they believe what I say and they understand my pain.”

Rupayi Pedenti, Member, *Eka Nari Sanghathan*, Emaliguda

These words seem to suggest that historically women have been left, left to suffer alone and suffer in silence. Rupayi *didi*’s experience has taught her that the world around her refuses to believe her story and fails to understand her pain. The story of pain and sadness that Rupayi *didi* could not share with anyone is the story of her singleness. A story full of everyday challenges and suffering that a woman goes through in the absence of a legitimate male sexual partner, mainly a husband, in her life. A woman is regarded single not because she does not have family, friends and acquaintances but because she does not have a husband whose presence is, as if, necessary in order to bring legitimacy to her life.

This absence of a husband in a woman’s life begins to shape the nature of her other relationships—she is single(d) socially thereby marking singleness as a primary attribute dictating and determining her existence. She is socially forced and ‘punished’ to lead her life alone and, most of the times, left to deal with her loneliness. In such a condition of social ostracism, it is not hard to believe that a single woman has no choice than to keep her sadness to herself because she has no one who will believe her story and understand her pain.

Amidst many such unshared, kept-within, silenced and lost, yet-available, in scatters, speaking hesitantly and softly, partially found stories of singleness among women in
the village, we (40 single women and I) envisioned a collective dream—a dream in which we found each other, where we ‘listened’ to, believed and understood each other. Through this process, we began to also find our own self(s); the self(s) we may have repressed, lost or even got (re) formed in the process. We embarked on this collective journey to turn our dream into our reality. The reality we built together, through our struggle and action is our Sanghathan named Eka Nari Sanghathan: a realized dream that gave Rupayi didi and all of us, who believe each other’s stories and understand each other’s pain, our Sanghas (friends and companions).

Throughout this work, I refer to the 40 single women in the village by and with whom the Sanghathan was forged, envisioned and ‘traveled’, as Sanghathan members; I do not attach the same status to my own self because a) my ‘privileged’ location, background and position as an urban, educated, middle-class woman marked a difference in my overall experiences; although there were resonances, largely there were stark differences in how we experienced our singleness; b) I was aware that my engagement and involvement in the Sanghathan had a time limit attached to it and I could not commit myself to being a member of the Sanghathan in ways that these 40 women did and could, given their ‘privileged’ location in the village. Hence, although I was a Sangha and a co-traveler, I was not a member of the Sanghathan.

My role (both assigned to me and taken up by myself) did not remain a fixed one; it kept shifting from that of a friend, a facilitator, a coordinator, a mobilizer, a trainer to a learner, a researcher, at times a guiding source and at times to one who was being guided, a source of information, a link between the Sanghathan and other institutions and organizations, an insider entrusted with the property of the Sanghathan (personal sharing, plans, discussions, etc.) and an outsider with the potential of taking this initiative and struggle beyond its limits of remaining ‘local’ (through writing). I am fully aware that this translation from ‘what happened’ to ‘what is documented’ is an act of transition, loaded with problems of voice, power, privilege, and representation.

7 Wherever I mention myself along with the 40 single women, I have used the term ‘we’ or ‘our’ to represent us. Otherwise when I speak only of the women, I use ‘they’ or ‘their’.

8 The term Sangha in Oriya means ‘friends’.
Throughout this work, therefore, I have cautiously and consciously attempted to negotiate with these problems.

My ethical dilemma regarding documentation of the descriptions of violence (mainly physical) faced by these women, holds. Not only is it inadequacy of language that limits documenting ‘lived experience’ of the intense nature of these violent descriptions but also one’s own inability and inhibition of foregrounding the memory of those experiences for the larger world (even if it involves doing so in the voice of these women). Only those descriptions are included here that were shared by the women publicly and those that qualified their consent. The documented descriptions, in very subtle forms, therefore, offer us only a small glimpse into the deeply extreme and intense experiences of violence faced by some women.

This work also cracks the binary of the researcher as the ‘expert’ because the knowledge that has been produced in this work is the knowledge that has been generated together by us (Sanghathan members and I). This work was geared towards generating a collective collaborative expertise (as against uncritical acceptance of outside expertise) thereby bridging the knowledge gap between what comes from outside and that which already exists in the field. This was a process of mutual exchange, learning, and co-production of knowledge.

As this exploration with single women continued, we found ourselves moving from understanding ‘single-hood’ of women as a marker of their constructed identity and a state of being to delving deeper into comprehending ‘singleness’ among women, which lay its focus on the ‘condition’ and ‘way of being’ of a single woman. This movement from ‘single-hood’ to ‘singleness’ took us deeper into the everyday experiences of single women, their struggles, ways of negotiating and coping with the challenges that are thrown at them as a result of their single-hood. This movement also led to the questioning of and exploration around whether the category ‘single women’ is fixed at all. In other words, given the already existing heterogeneity among single women, we were struggling with the question: do only those women, who clearly qualify as never-married, separated and widowed single women, form what could be called ‘single women’? If yes, how were we to explain...
the condition of those women, who shared similar experiences as those of the never-married, the separated or the widowed women, because their husbands have migrated for long periods of time, leaving them behind? Or those women, whose husbands are in jail? Or those women, whose husbands are critically ill? And so on. Is physical ‘absence’ of a husband (‘absence’ understood as a broader category) a sole criterion for recognizing women as single? This is the question with which we grappled.

As the focus shifted from ‘single-hood’ to ‘singleness’, the already defined and fixed category called ‘single women’ fell flat on its face. When singleness became our frame of reference, it no more mattered whether the women, who shared the common experience, in terms of the condition in which they are living (the condition of singleness\(^9\)), were leading their lives in the physical absence or presence of a husband. As we proceeded, these explorations sharpened with more and more ‘married’ women joining the discussions and sharing their condition of singleness despite the so-called physical presence of a husband. Experiences of Kundo didi and Paro didi\(^10\), who are both married and live with their critically ill husbands, offered important interventions and strengthened discussions around cracking the fixity of the larger undifferentiated category of ‘single women’.

Given these questions, research was conducted to explore the problem of singleness among women in much greater detail. This was conducted in two phases. The first phase helped broadly to articulate everyday realities related to the singleness of women and mainly involved open-ended group discussions that moved in diverse directions. In the second phase, the research was structured and close-ended.

**Towards Exploring “Who is a Single Woman in Emaliguda?”**

The objective of the research conducted in Emaliguda village was to build a nuanced understanding of the lives of single women in the rural setting, to produce knowledge around their ways of survival (economic as well as social), to establish links between singleness and poverty, singleness and violence, singleness and discrimination,

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9 Briefly, this refers mainly to living-in conditions, in which one is in a perpetual state of loneliness, largely devoid of any kind of familial support (whether living with or without family members), emotional or/and financial dependence, being subjected to mistreatment and violence in the home, having to overwork in order to ensure survival or earn a ‘space’ in the home, having no, or very little, access to family property, land or land produce, and receiving no support from the state, etc.

10 Kundo didi and Paro didi joined the Sanghathan meetings much later; with their involvement in the Sanghathan, we revisited our understanding of ‘single’ women.
singleness and marginalization (even among single women). In other words, it was an attempt to understand the nature of various socio-economic and cultural problems related to the singleness of women by exploring the depth of the lived experiences of singleness among women and simultaneously constructing a counter discourse of singleness as experienced by the women themselves.

The research in the first phase began with sitting in large public meetings mostly with SHG members. Discussions revolved around who are single women? What does singleness mean? What are the reasons behind the condition of singleness of women? What kind of lives do they lead? In the process, we explored the nature of insecurities, fears, pain, happiness, and future aspirations of single women, the nature and burden of their work, the dynamics operating in their families, including the various ways in which single women are perceived in the family and the larger ‘social’ setting.

Interestingly, the meetings that was attended by all the SHG members initially slowly reduced to only single women from these SHGs regularly attending them. Some women, who are part of PRADAN SHGs, helped organize meetings with other women in the village. As we proceeded and the discussions became more and more centered on the concerns of single women, the attendance of SHG members, who are not single, began falling, and other single women, who were not part of any SHG, rose. The normalcy constructed around marriage and its privileges prevented married women (who are not yet single) from building an understanding that at any stage of life, a woman can enter into the condition of singleness (be it abandonment, separation or being widowed); this hampered the participation of women in the meetings. A need for a separate forum for single women was advocated, in which they could first understand and articulate issues and concerns for their own selves before reaching out to others. These meetings, therefore, soon became single women’s meetings.

A larger epistemological framework of feminist standpoint theory was deployed because “Feminist Standpoint Epistemology is a unique philosophy of knowledge building that challenges us to (1) see and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women and (2) apply the vision and knowledge of
oppressed women to social activism and social change” (Brooks 2007: 55). According to this theory, women are given the central position and their experiences are treated as the starting point to build knowledge. Sandra Harding in *Whose science? Whose knowledge?* (1991) has theorized this as a situated knowledge perspective. Moreover, Well-being ranking\(^{11}\), a participatory research appraisal method, was conducted to gain further insight into the lives of single women and to understand what ‘well-being’ meant to single women. This was also done to bring to us awareness as to which women were facing most severe ‘hardships’, living in a state of perpetual ‘un-well’ being and, thereafter, to generate a discussion on what can be done to bring about a change in the condition and how.

Questions, narratives, and well-being ranking were examined in focused group discussions and semi-structured group interviews. I made a conscious attempt to use the group discussion and the group interview methodologies because I wanted to ensure that the experiences that were shared, facts that were stated, data that were generated, and the analyses that discussions would bring to the surface should not be available only to me as a researcher or something to be published for the academic world out there. Instead, my aim and effort was also to leave these behind with the single women, as a property of the single women’s collective. Simultaneously, this was an ‘experiment’ in laying the foundation of relational politics, in other words, for a kind of ‘connectedness’ that could develop between these women, emerging from sharing and sheltering their shared experiences and identification of being ‘single’. Throughout the process of research, I made sure that the explorations and discussions were held in large groups so that women come to know about each other, slowly and steadily open up with each other, find strength in collective sharing and empathize with each other. This was an attempt towards forging newer forms of relationships, and at the same time, developing and strengthening the existing relationships among single women in the village.

During the process, I realized that this was no more within the bounds of being called just a research because, for the single women, it was slowly becoming a process of revisiting experiences that they had buried deep down. This process led to the opening up of some internal silenced spaces that had been obscured in their everydayness.

\(^{11}\) Well-being ranking as a participatory research methodology helps to develop a shared understanding of the meaning and factors of ‘well-being’ and categorize households according to their relative well-being status. The ‘well’ is concerned with values and assessment. ‘Being’ suggests the importance not only of economic security and physical health, but also of subjective states of mind and social relationships.
Through these interviews and group discussions, women examined their lives on their own, and articulated their concerns and issues. The status of their singleness (which over a period of time, they had come to accept as normal and natural) was being questioned and opened up for inquiry. They told me that, prior to this, they had been part of many surveys and interviews but this was the first time that they were being asked about ‘them’, the struggles they had faced in life, and their survival against their loneliness and aloneness. Because our engagement had deepened and my relationship with these women had strengthened, this process impacted me too. I felt grateful that they shared their lives openly with me; I empathized with them and found myself experiencing a strange mix of emotions—sadness, anger, and anxiety that arose as a result of coming face to face with the intense suffering of these women. This process, at many points, was very painful and disturbing—for the women as well as me.

Below are the reasons for some women in Emaliguda being unmarried, separated, or widowed. For some women, it was not just one reason but a combination of several that are responsible for their single-hood today.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never-Married Single Women</th>
<th>Separated Single Women</th>
<th>Widowed Single Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. No marital alliance ever came.</td>
<td>1. Alcoholic husband</td>
<td>1. Married at a very early age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. There was no money in the family to arrange for the wedding and meet dowry demands.</td>
<td>2. Domestic violence</td>
<td>2. Husbands were much older.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12 This was in reference to the nature of surveys and questionnaires (usually national surveys and surveys conducted for social science researches) aimed at generating data for a purpose that has very little to do with the people on whom research is being done; wherein people are rendered ‘objects’ of research and become sources of information that necessarily do not even concern them. For example, Census data collection, general data collected about the village and people in the village, etc.
<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. The groom was not considered fit for marriage.</td>
<td>3. Ill-treatment by in-laws (did not get adequate food to eat and proper clothes to wear; made to work all day without help from any other family member)</td>
<td>3. Remarriage after a certain age and if with children are not permitted,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. By the time the alliance was fixed or marriage was supposed to take place, women had surpassed the marital age defined by the elders in the family.</td>
<td>4. Polygamy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The eldest daughters in the family usually do not get married in order to take care of their ageing parents and/or younger siblings.</td>
<td>5. If the couple is unable to conceive, the burden is automatically put on the woman and she is abandoned.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Never-Married Single Women**

The reasons described in the table are specific to a particular rural tribal context and differ to a great extent from the reasons highlighted by Urmila Jethani in her book *Single Women* (1994). There is no element of aspiration, choice, and freedom when it comes to marriage of an *adivasi* woman in Emaliguda. Women do not get married for varying reasons and they are deeply rooted in the social reality of the village. In some

13 She states, “Due to modernization, women are becoming financially independent by taking up jobs. Their aspirations have also increased and they are not willing to accept a forced marriage. They want to have a life partner of their own choice. These high aspirations do not get fulfilled so easily. They spend their youth getting a good professional degree and job, and often cross the marriageable age. Finally they decide to remain unmarried.”

21
cases, the woman herself, at times, decides not to get married or the family decides against it (in cases where the groom is not considered ‘fit’ or/and if the woman’s labor is required in her natal family to run the household) but usually women do not have the freedom to remain unmarried. In fact, most young, never-married single women wish to marry someday. However, their wish to get married often gets thwarted because of the factors described in the table, that is, no alliance comes for them, there is no money in the family to arrange the wedding, the dowry demands are high, their natal family rejects the alliance, they have crossed the socially determined ‘marriageable age’, and/or they are solely responsible for looking after their siblings or/and old parents; many a times, more than one of these reasons contributes to them remaining unmarried.

Among the Kondha adivasi, the tradition is that the woman’s family never proposes the alliance to a man’s family first. Historically, men abducted the women to whom they wanted to get married, and their families would then gather to get them married. Slowly, this practice declined; yet marriages are arranged, keeping the interest of the man in mind. A woman gets married only if a man’s family comes forward with a marriage proposal. Many women in Emaliguda have never received marital alliances; hence, for their families, there was no question of getting them married. Such practices render some women ‘unfit’ for marriage, leaving them to believe that they are unmarried due to some ‘lack’ and ‘fault’ of their own or of their family.

Many a times, the expenses for a wedding, including the dowry\(^\text{14}\) pose a hindrance and many women remain unmarried. If the girl’s family does not consider the prospective groom ‘fit’ to be married, especially if he is an alcoholic and/or irresponsible towards his own family, does not work at all, etc., it can reject the alliance on these grounds. In some cases, women themselves have exercised the choice to remain unmarried, considering the fact that the man will not prove to be a ‘responsible’ husband. If alliances are denied once or twice by a girl’s family, no more alliances come for that girl. At times, the parents of the girl refuse to get her married, especially if she crosses

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\(^{14}\) The dowry in Emaliguda village is in the form of gifts, exchanged between the bride and the groom’s families. The whole village collectively decides the items and the terms of exchange. Items that are usually given from the bride’s family to the groom’s family include expensive and big household items such as cupboards, TV, beds, dressing tables, etc., to small items such as utensils, rice, vegetables, comb, oil, knife, and match boxes. Post-marriage, the expenses of the travel back to boy’s village are borne by the girl’s family. The boy’s family gives the bride gold, and rice, and around Rs 5000 cash is given to the girl’s family. Twenty years earlier, this amount was Rs 21. The overall expenditure in the wedding that is to be borne by a girl’s family ranges from Rs 80,000–1,00,000.
a certain age (around 28–30 years), beyond which she is not considered a ‘perfect housewife’ and ‘fit to work’.

The ‘marriageable age’ is apparently determined along the reproductive age of a woman. After a certain age (mostly 28+), it is believed that women do not retain their reproductive ‘power’ and even if they do, the reproductive years left to them are so few that they may not be able to produce enough children for the family. Hence, it is not only a matter of her capacity to produce (to labor) but also to (re)produce that determines whether she is marriageable or not. These reasons highlight the invisible but strong connection between marriage and women’s labor (both productive as well as reproductive). In the adivasi space, the burden of work rests entirely on the shoulders of women (in the household as well as in agricultural lands) and only women are responsible for running the household, taking care of it and ensuring livelihoods. The institution of marriage becomes an important means to keep this skewed gendered division of labor in place. Every family requires at least one woman in her reproductive age to take charge of the household as the ‘perfect housewife’ who is ‘fit to work and to reproduce’. If this criterion does not seem to get fulfilled, women are rendered unfit for marriage. Following the logic that women are needed by families to run the households, most of the women who are the eldest daughters, are ‘retained’ by the natal family as a result of the demand on the labor that is needed in the family. They either look after their siblings and by the time the siblings grow up, they cross the so-called ‘marriageable age’, or are responsible for looking after old parents. In other words, given the responsibility of the family, many women in the village remain unmarried.

**Separated Single Women**

The dominant reason behind separation from husband is alcoholism and domestic violence. Even in households in which husbands were not alcoholic, an extreme level

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15 *We often come across data that show that girls are either not sent to schools or drop out after a certain age because their labor is required by the family. This is one kind of ‘retaining’ of women within the household, to exercise control over their lives and labor power; that has recently begun to find place in the larger developmental interventions in education, with education being one of the major sites of development. However, since marriage or non-marriage, largely understood as the domain of the ‘personal’ or at best a familial issue that does not need to figure in or get addressed as part of any developmental agenda, finds no connections with issues around women’s labor and exploitation therein and hence, the discourse and practice of development can continue to leave ‘unaddressed’, the questions around marriage or non-marriage.*
of violence has either forced women to leave the husband’s house or they have been abandoned. Many women have separated due to the ill treatment and violation at the hands of their in-laws. Reasons ranging from not bringing enough dowry, not working enough in maintaining the household, not being able to bear a child, to not being a dutiful daughter-in-law and wife are cited as responsible for the abuse by the in-laws and, ultimately, when it becomes unbearable for the women, they either decide to leave the house of the in-laws or are deserted.

**Widowed Single Women**

There are a large number of old, widowed, single women in the village. This is primarily because they were married at a very young age to men much older to them. Most women above the age of 55 years are widowed. These days, girls are not married at a very young age but as recent as 15 years back, girls got married between 13 and 15 years of age. Owing to the mistreatment by their in-laws, many widows return to live with their natal family, their children or, at times, even live alone. The reasons cited by Chen (2000) for the high proportion of widows in India are: “Marriage in India is near universal, husbands are five years older on average than wives, male mortality rates are rather high, women begin to outlive men after their reproductive years, and most importantly, widow remarriage is infrequent” (Chen 2000: 3). Some of these reasons hold true for the widowed women in Emaliguda. Interestingly, all separated single women become widows, once their so-called husbands die. Clearly, even though separated, these women remain trapped in the institution of marriage.
Singleness: A Reality in Everydayness

“I had a much better life when my husband was alive. Now there is nothing left. My own children have forgotten me. They are my sons but they are not at all worried about me. We were very poor when I was pregnant and all my pregnancies I survived by drinking water alone. Even under such tough conditions, I took care of my children and raised them well. Now the very same children have become so indifferent to me, they do not even talk to me. This is my life and this is how it is going to be till I die. If I do not work, I will not get to eat. I am very old, and even if I am in pain or I am unwell, I still have to go to work. There has not been a single day, after my husband’s death, that I have not gone for work.”

Lachchi Pedenti, Widowed Single Woman, Emaliguda

Lachchi didi is a 70-year-old widow, who leaves the village at six in the morning in search of daily wage work, in order to ensure her day-to-day survival. Even at this age, at which she says she gets tired by the end of the day, she believes she is quite strong and has not stopped working because she does not want to depend upon anyone till her last breath. Lachchi didi belongs to Emaliguda village and got married to someone in the same village. Seven years ago, her husband passed away. She has two sons and one daughter. When her husband was alive, she used to live with her younger son, but one year after his father’s death, he abandoned Lachchi didi. Neither of the sons looks after her now. Her husband owned two acres of land; both the sons took one acre of land each and left nothing for her. For five years she lived all alone and survived with a little help from Manika didi (her niece who lives in the same village). For the last two years, Lachchi didi has been living with Manika didi and her family because the house that Lachchi didi had built for herself collapsed in bad weather conditions. She had nowhere to go and no house to live in; Manika didi then took her home, when she

16 The question of everyday takes two forms here. One, the everyday of a single woman’s life and the everyday of the state (which remains equally foundational in conceptualizing the woman’s every day). In that sense, the woman’s every day and the state’s everyday (Sharma and Gupta 2006) form a mutually constitutive yet contradictory ensemble. This work consciously focuses on the everyday experience of singleness as a condition that determines a woman’s life in Emaliguda, to a large extent and in ways more than one. The focus on the everyday experience of singleness helps us to open up the question of the ‘woman’ in a rural village quite differently; it highlights how the ‘woman’ is a fractured/fragmented category and how the question of gender and development takes another turn through invocation of singleness among women. The foregrounding of this experience becomes important given the larger politics around gender that in its promise to ‘include’ women (mostly women as homogeneous entity in order to perpetuate politics of sameness and illusory solidarity) excludes difference and singularity of experience (experiencing womanhood and experiencing varied forms of oppression and marginalization).
realized that Lachchi didi’s children, living in the same village, did not care.

“After my husband died, I was left with nothing. Not even clothes to wear. I used to cover myself with the jute bags used to store rice. It was as if my whole life changed. Everything ended with my husband. Everyone was aware of my condition but no one helped. My children were very young then, and with great difficulty, I brought up three sons and one daughter. My husband owned five acres of land but since my children were small and I had to look after them, I could not work in the fields. I had to lease the land to someone else and survive on whatever small produce came from sharecropping. After my sons got married, they divided the land among themselves and asked me and my daughter to leave the house. I am 60 years old now and can hardly work. My daughter, who is unmarried, looks after me and I am completely dependent upon her. I will die soon, so I am not worried about myself but I often wonder how my daughter will survive after I am gone. She will be all alone. She has looked after me. But, who will look after her?”

Pawala Pedenti, Widowed Single Woman, Emaliguda

These narratives take us to the statement, “The death of a husband can bring tremendous changes in a woman’s life in terms of her social identity and relationships, her living arrangements, and her access to property. The death of a husband can well be catastrophic in economic terms. When her husband dies, a woman has to negotiate support from others, see the well-being of her family decline, or take charge.” (Chen 2000: 313). However, “Not all widows have relatives they can depend upon for support. Many are widowed at a young age and remain so for the rest of their lives as remarriage is not a common practice. Often social norms restrict their rights to residence, property and employment, and impose a gendered division of labor as well as seclusion.” (Chen 2000: 3). These narratives speak well to the description provided by Chen because they depict the condition of widowed single women in Emaliguda village. Most of the old widow women, having fulfilled their responsibilities of raising their children while mourning and coping with the loss of a husband, deal with the difficulties and struggles in making ends meet. Having lived a life of an ‘unwanted’ and ‘inauspicious’ woman, they continue to face the hardships of old age when their own children abandon them or treat them as a burden.

Jethani (1994) highlights that never-married single women “are found in almost every community and are exploited, humiliated, and harassed. These single women
constitute a segment whose individuality is rarely recognized and who mostly suffer a lot at the whims and fancies of men inside and outside their families” (Jethani 1994: vi). There are a large number of never-married, single women in Emaliguda village, who mostly stay with their parents or one of the parents. These women have to take charge of the entire household and take care of their parents as well. This happens usually when sons get married and they either leave the house of their parents or in the absence of the father make their widowed mothers and sisters leave the house. Very rarely do sons in this community look after their old parents or/and unmarried, abandoned, and widowed mothers/sisters. Almost all of these women work in the fields as wage laborers and also undertake other wage works. Some women have access to family land as well, but they have no rights over the family property or the resources of the household. In some cases, in which are living with their brothers, they are considered a burden and are rarely treated with respect.

“I live with an elder sister who is also unmarried and a widowed mother. My father owned 3 acres of land but after my brother got married, he left the house with his wife and children and started cultivating the land all alone. My brother took over the entire land saying that he has children to feed whereas I, my sister, and my mother have no one else to feed. We have no generation ahead of us. I do wage labor and work on leased land to support my sister and mother. We often get threats from my brother’s son to vacate my father’s house that we are living in and occasionally they fight and take away the money that I earn. I get scared whenever I think of what will happen when I grow old and am unable to work. Who will support and feed us?”

Kante Pedenti, Never-Married Single Woman, Emaliguda

Most Never-Married Single Women shared that they do not feel connected with the members of the family, especially if they are living with their brothers and their families. Most single women said that they share neither their happiness nor their grievances with family members. However, if there is another single woman in the family, especially a widowed mother or an elder sister, some of the women, at times, share their problems with them. By and large, single women feel quite lonely, isolated, and depressed. The fact that they are treated as a burden by their own families is disturbing.

Some women, especially those who have been abandoned by their husbands, live alone, have no family land, and cultivate encroached government land. So do those
with small family landholdings. Many separated single women, who have children, bear the sole responsibility of raising children all by themselves. Many of them do not even have the *patta* over the land on which they have constructed their houses.

“My husband used to beat me a lot, and when I was about to give birth to my second child, he threw me out of his house. I came back to my village because I belonged here. But people in this village do not think the same way. I paid a sum of Rs 5000 to get a small portion of land in order to build a house. My house is kuchcha and dilapidated. Whenever it rains, water fills the house and there is no place to sleep or sit. The rice that I store gets destroyed. Now the landowner wants me to return his land to him but I have no place else to go. I am fighting every day to ensure a roof over our heads. Life is very difficult. I have to do everything alone to raise my son.”

Jiya Pedenti, Separated Single Woman, Emaliguda

Single women in this village are socially perceived in specific ways and are also subjected to various restrictions and taboos, so much so that women themselves internalize the perceptions and the restrictions. A widow is perceived as a ‘*randi*’—a woman responsible for the death of her husband. Widows are not allowed to remarry especially if they have crossed a certain age and have children. Although it is not considered auspicious for a widow to remarry, it is not a complete taboo. If a woman gets widowed at an early age, she at times gets married again. Widows are not allowed to wear bangles, *bindi*, or bright colored *sarees*. Chen maintains that widows survive in a state of ‘living death’ and “the projected ideal is that the widow should never become independent of her dead husband but must remain trapped in a lonely, isolated condition, living in the world but representing death” (Lamb 1993 quoted in Chen). In effect, “the widow’s position in society is defined solely through her relationship to her deceased husband” (Chen 2000: 131).

Widows are prohibited from participating freely in rituals and celebrations in the village. They can watch but are refrained from touching all that is considered ‘pure’ and sacred. They are not allowed near a newly married couple because they are considered inauspicious. As Chen, clearly states, “The link between cultural ideals and social
reality—between ideology and practice—are the marriage, kinship and caste systems which organize and structure women’s daily lives. In very real everyday ways, these institutions and the underlying ideology of gender relations interact to restrict the capacity of widows to make individual choices and to take individual actions. These restrictions often have dire consequences for widows and their children, both those who manage on their own and those who live as unwanted dependents.” (Chen 2000: 354).

This nexus between cultural ideals and social reality reinforced by the institutions of marriage and family, which translates into various forms of controls and restrictions, continues to shape lives of other single women as well. Women abandoned by their husbands are perceived as characterless, disobedient and not fit enough to be good wives or daughters-in-law. If they get separated from their husband at an early age, they have the option of marrying again; however, this option no longer exists if the separation takes place when they are in their late twenties or early thirties. They are usually disrespected by their own family members for not living with their husbands. In case they are living with their brothers, they have no say in matters related to the household and no control over household resources and property because, it is believed, that after marriage they no longer belong to the natal family. In the words of a few separated single women in the village:

“We cook but cannot eat at will. Only when our brothers and fathers have eaten are we served the left-overs by our sisters-in-law...Even when we are living separate from our husbands, we have to follow all the rules and regulations of married women. We cannot buy things on our own, cannot move about freely without permission and have to ask for money from family members.”

Even when all the ties from the husband and his family are broken, a separated single woman remains ‘married’ if not to her husband, to the institution of marriage. She is expected to live the life of a married woman till her husband dies, after which she becomes a widow. The separation, therefore, is just a physical separation that changes a separated single woman’s life, yet keeps it the same. The only difference is that when she is with her husband, she is controlled by her husband and in-laws and when she is separated from her husband, society gains the legitimacy of becoming her controller.

Unmarried women are repeatedly reminded that they have no share in the family property because they are not a part of the natal family (because they were supposed to get married into another family). They have to labor and earn enough if they wish
to live with their parents or brothers. They are often taunted by family members and others in the village about being unmarried and having no children. Whatever quantity of gold they wear since childhood is their only wealth; if this gold is taken away from them, they are not valued even by their own family members. They are subjected to humiliation and exploitation and this results in a sense of inferiority, sadness, distress, and even depression.

The initial group discussions and group interviews suggested that single women in the village, although constituting a large number of the total population, have neither any rights nor any financial or emotional support from members of their family and community. They are barely treated with respect and a number of taboos and restrictions are imposed on them. All they possess is their ability to work and sustain themselves till they are capable of working; the fear of having no one to depend upon in the future is common to all single women.

“The major reason behind the feeling of emotional insecurity in single women is their fear of loneliness in old age” (Jethani 1994: 163). This fear of loneliness, lack of emotional support and financial security, especially in the old age when one’s capacity to labor decreases and possibility of illness rises, was highlighted in the discussions that were focused on analyzing how the lives of single women are different from those who are not single. Many single women stated that they often feel lonely and if they had children to look after, who would later look after them in their old age, they would have had a more secure life. Although they also admitted that there is no guarantee that the children would look after them in their old age because most children, especially sons, in the village do not, the hope of having someone of their ‘own’ in life, seemed to matter.

Interestingly, the single women did not emphasize the need to have a husband; all of them said that husbands are a burden. The unmarried women thought they are comparatively much more liberated and can plan their lives on their own, despite restrictions and control of a different nature. Mami didi voiced what all of them thought:

“*Our happiness is ours and our sadness is also only ours. We do not have to worry about keeping a husband satisfied and happy. We can earn our own money and, at times, even spend it on ourselves, which is very difficult for a married woman to do.*”
Even the separated single women agreed that given an option they would not want to remarry. They did not want to suffer and experience the same kind of violence, negligence, stress, and crises that they had to face when they were living with their husbands. They strongly believe that marriage brings only sorrow and control and thought they are better off being single and living away from their husbands and in-laws.

“Husbands tend to increase a woman’s burden of work, create unnecessary troubles and disturbances at home, and dominate their wives.”

Thus, many of the unmarried single women, having crossed the so called ‘marriageable age’, said that they do not regret being unmarried. In fact, they thought they are better off than the married women, who are constantly engaged in domesticity, looking after husband and children, dealing with everyday problems associated with marriage, and are controlled by their husbands. Demystifying the common popular assumption that marriage leads to happiness, Jaga didi summed it up beautifully,

“It is not as if I am very happy at the moment, but what is the guarantee that I would have been happy, had I been married?”

This important political question, generated as a critique of the dominant institutions of marriage and family, has been posed a) to the larger hetero-patriarchal structure, which has constructed what happiness should mean for women and, with an objective of exercising its control over women, has normalized the importance of marriage in women’s lives; b) to the world of feminism wherein even with the existing critique of the institution of marriage, this myth around marriage leading to ultimate happiness and security has still not been fully problematized; c) to the dominant developmental paradigmatic understanding, which has still left unattended and unaddressed personal yet political issues related to marriage and family.

In the course of this action research work and as the Eka Nari Sangathan was formed, a much more structured, organized, in-depth, and detailed research was conducted. With 40 single women coming together and forging a Sangathan, an attempt was made this time to understand the socio-political and economic condition of single women in a manner that could/would inform our future steps towards transformative praxis. In other words, the research was geared towards explorations that could take us to possible interventions and ‘Righting of (articulated) Wrongs’ (Dhar 2015). The findings of this study highlighted the marginalized socio-economic and political status
of single women, who are left to themselves to live a life that is unjust and undignified. It reflected the various forms of discrimination, oppression, exploitation and violence that the larger hetero-patriarchal world perpetuates upon single women. Ranging from social ostracism of rendering them alone for life to subjecting them to numerous kinds of taboos, restrictions, and controls, these work together towards making them economically vulnerable and depriving them of their rights over food, wages, family property, and land.

Moreover, it foregrounded the condition of singleness wherein one is in a perpetual state of not only aloneness but of also loneliness, largely devoid of any kind of familial support and care, be it emotional or financial, where one has to overwork in order to ensure survival or earn a ‘space’ in the family. This research also included two married women, who are part of the Sanghathan, because they share the similar condition of singleness with their husbands being critically unwell. They face severe hardships in managing everything on their own, along with constantly having to look after their ailing husbands.

In addition, the study depicts how along with this ongoing overt social violence and oppression, the lives of single women are also marked by coercive violence of mainstream ‘development’, which at best recognizes widowhood as victimhood and has no space whatsoever for women who are unmarried, separated, mentally and physically differently abled, and those who are ‘married’ yet single (because these states of singleness may throw challenges at the dominant institutions of marriage and family). When understood as a socio-legal 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 (with 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. Thus, the ‘developmentalist’ state and its mechanisms very cleverly foreclose the category of ‘single women’ by invisibilizing them and keeping their issues and concerns outside the domain of the political and developmental discourse.

In totality, therefore, the socio-economic, cultural, and the political wrongs that have,

\[17\] The (older) women whose husbands are critically (physically and mentally) unwell, women with alcoholic husbands, women whose husbands 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 more ways than one, ‘wronged’ the lives of single women in Emaliguda, reflected how the problems that these women face in the everydayness not only persist at the level of the society but also in the overall imagination of the state wherein there is complete overlooking of the fact that there are women amongst ‘women’, who are perhaps ‘outside’ the ambit of the so-called dominant institutions of ‘family’ and ‘marriage’. There is an invisibilization of sorts of single women and their concerns by government policies and provisions. Their issues hardly surface in government documents or agendas. “They (single women) are estimated at 40 million but continue to be invisible to the government. Women who have been abandoned, deserted, never-married continue to be excluded in the census and government welfare programs.” (www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/...single-women.../45116952.cms).

The Violence of Development

Development, as practice and discourse, has been severely critiqued for its attempt at furnishing the ‘Third World’ with all that it lacks and which the First World possesses. This othering of what is seen as the ‘lacking/lagging’ Third World assumes that there is only one fundamental way of bettering human lives (this action Research in Emaliguda was an attempt to find other ways), wherein, First World countries being the benchmark, the time and space of the Third World countries has to be continually rewritten till they become ‘developed’. The nations that are so-called developed in this sense stand on top of the development ladder and the ones below are assigned the task of necessarily replicating them by making, unmaking, and re-making themselves. Given this hegemony of development (synonymous to modernism, economic growth, progress, and so on) the so-called ‘Third World’ is rendered inferior and lacking in self-definition and there is no faith that it is capable of speaking and constructing its own language of ‘development’ or of something beyond or outside of development.

Hence, development with all its powerful mechanism(s) begins to succeed in gaining legitimacy of exercising control over countries while producing newer forms of knowledge(s), practices, policies, strategies, theories, etc. Development thus, premising heavily on Capitalocentric-Orientalism and constructed by western and

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18 In the discourse of economic development, the devalued space of tradition or the Orient has come to be known as ‘third world’; where third world-ism is equivalent to backwardness, and backwardness is equivalent to being third world-ish (Chakrabarti and Dhar 2009: 28).

19 Whereas the oriental gaze of the West prepared a fertile ground for development, the industrial revolution and capitalism became new scientific tools to enhance its productivity. All traditional
modern institutions, becomes the basis for identifying what/who qualifies as ‘underdeveloped’. The power of this ‘constructed’ knowledge is such that this recognized area/category is immediately brought into the limelight and is then ‘treated’ with liberal doses of development. In other words, it is inclusive development and ‘target-group terminology’ (that is, who should be or is included) of multi-national institutions that help in turn to legitimize development interventions. According to Wood, such interventions do not do so much to improve the conditions of the poor/target as to create a kind of Imaginary of underdevelopment, which is both politically and technically manageable. Similarly, Escobar argues that development derives its power in part by creating ‘visibilities’, that is, by making ‘target groups’ visible as problems to be solved and acted on’ (1995a, chapter 5; as cited in Everett 1997: 138). Chakrabarti and Dhar (2012) deepen this understanding by arguing that it is not only that development defines and designs a universal path but also, in the process, as a hegemonic discourse and practice, it foregrounds the Third World and forecloses the ‘world of the third’.

One such ‘underdeveloped target group’ in the development agenda of the United Nations since 1970s has been the category ‘women’. Women had been left out of the process of development and, it was believed, there was a need to add them to this ‘progressive’ agenda. Thereon, the process of development took upon the administrative task of integrating women into development and this regime has been

economies are viewed to be capitalist in nature and the existence of non-capitalist economies, diverse and distinct class processes still alive and operational in the global south, are rendered extinct. “Capitalism becomes a centre, an essence or a nodal reference point in terms of which non-capitalism is conceived, discussed and policed (by a set of policies). What gets erased in the process are the multi-faceted, non-capitalist modes-of-being and the diverse possibilities they may reveal” (Chakrabarti and Dhar 2009: 29). Thus, ‘development’ is not an empty word but loaded with the logic of Capitalo-centrism and Orientalism. The over-determination of Capitalo-centrism and Orientalism produces a conceptual couple Capitalocentric-Orientalism (Chakrabarti and Dhar 2009).

20 Geoff Wood (1985) shows that the philosophy and process of inclusive development also means labeling inappropriate Others as first not appropriated and then creating conditions for their movement from the inappropriate(d) to the appropriate(d).

21 “The process of foreclosure is secured through a foregrounding of WOT (world of the third) in a substitute language—the language of third worldism. The foregrounding of WOT in the language of third worldism protracts further the foreclosure of WOT. The realm of the foregrounded (the ‘real’), the foregrounded (the ‘real’ victim—‘real’ evil/‘real’ dystopic—‘real’ utopian/‘real’ Dark Continent...) and the hegemonic are produced in one turn and not turn by turn. The language of WOT remains the forbidden realm of the hegemonic; not WOT per se; but the language that relates to WOT.” (Chakrabarti and Dhar, 175).
‘constructing’ women in a particular manner, bringing them to the forefront and planning developmental interventions in and around ‘women’ declaring them the “agents and beneficiaries in all sectors and at all levels of the development process” (Kabeer 1994: 2).

Although the ultimate objective of the Second Development Decade remained to ensure increase in output, greater equity and social progress (UN, 1989a, p.41; as cited in Kabeer 1994: 2), empowering women for achieving these agendas remained an important step. This was because the idea behind integrating ‘women in development’ (WID) was premised on the assumption that the lives of women will automatically improve once they become a part of the process of development. Conceptual linkages were formulated between economic development and women’s issues, and women’s ‘inclusion’ in development was rendered indispensable. “Poor women became a sound economic and political investment” (Batliwala and Dhanraj 2006: 22) not only for international aid agencies but also for national bodies involved in ensuring growth. In India, the central and the state governments and the rural banks began promoting SHGs and women’s savings and credit programmes through various schemes.

“The DWCRA scheme in 1982/1983 introduced an explicit gender approach to rural development. It was intended to raise women’s socio-economic status and to encourage their economic self-sufficiency by inculcating the idea of professionalism and accountability through (economically) empowering poor rural women. The scheme... depends exclusively on the formation of SHGs” (Dutt and Samanta 2006:289). This task of economically empowering women was also heavily undertaken by upcoming Non-governmental Organizations (NGO). These agencies, governmental and non-governmental, regarded poor, rural “women as hard working, easier to mobilize, more honest, and better credit risks. They would selflessly work for the betterment of their entire families and communities, and were thus great poverty alleviation agents” (Batliwala and Dhanraj 2006: 22).

An example of this widespread promotion of women’s SHGs can be located in Rayagada district of Odisha. In this district, Vikas Shakti, a government programme, initiated the formation of saving credit groups of women in around 2006. In 2008, PRADAN began intervention, in collaboration with Mission Shakti and 200 SHGs were identified. Members from a few SHGs in Emaliguda village, Gadiseskal panchayat, and Porchuapadar village, Budaguda panchayat said that about seven years ago, they

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22 Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas
were approached by the members of *anganwadi* and Forest Department to form SHGs of women. These SHGs were provided with a loan from the government with which to start the process; eventually, the SHG women were required to save Rs 50 per month in order to be able to access the loan provided.

As a result, the moneylender in Emaliguda village, responsible for maintaining the accounts of the group, manipulated the records and withdrew a good amount of money from the savings of the SHGs. Also, the SHGs in Porchupadar failed to maintain proper records of transactions. With PRADAN’s intervention in the existing SHGs, the importance of maintaining systematic individual accounts and transactions was brought to the fore; for undertaking this task, young, educated men were trained by PRADAN as accountants (since many women lacked elementary education in this part of Odisha).

Whatever benefits women receive from these SHGs remain mostly economic in nature; in this enmeshing of discourses of women’s empowerment and economic gains, the question around overall transformation seems to get diluted. A further analysis shows that the economic benefits derived from SHGs do not necessarily empower women (even economically). This is because the decision-making power about how much to save, what amount of loan to take, and how much and where to spend the money is not always in the hands of women. Even the decision of joining the SHG or not mostly depends on the male heads of the household. Also, as argued by Linda Mayoux, “Women’s own interests are frequently subordinated to those of household poverty reduction and programme financial sustainability. In many cases programme staff openly state that the main motivation for targeting women is because they are perceived as more conscientious and ‘docile’ clients. Unlike men they are prepared to devote considerable time and energy to group activity which decreases programme costs. Women are therefore a convenient, cost-effective and comparatively risk-free means of channeling loans to men within households and creating a saving base” (Mayoux 2003: 4).

Even after joining these SHGs, the active members are often disrespected by the family and the community because they defy social norms at times. For example, active members invest a lot of time in exposure visits and training programmes offered by the agencies and occasionally have to travel out of the village. These actions have repercussions, and women have to continuously negotiate with their families and the community. They are often called names and are mocked at as the ‘*gundas*; or
‘madamjis’, who work for the ‘sarkar’ and the ‘sansthas’, or those who just like to roam around. At times, they have to face violence as a result of their involvement in the groups. These changes, taking place in the lives of the so called ‘change-makers’ (changes that are not foreseen by development interventions), impact the lives of these women in many ways. How women’s lives are impacted personally and socially, the difficulties they face, and how they cope with the changes that they experience are neglected issues in the developmental process.

Moreover, as Dutt and Samanta (2006) highlight, the emphasis on groups is based on a communitarian understanding that fails to take into consideration the diversity of issues pertaining to different women in the group. A closer observation of SHGs in Rayagada showed that although women are members of the SHG, they are not equal members of the group. A few women are the leaders, and participate actively, and a few women are left behind in this process. During group meetings, a few women dominate the discussions or decisions, and a majority of the women fail to find that space within the group where they can also contribute. The distribution of work and responsibility, the sense of confidence and ownership, the level of participation and enthusiasm to the group seem to be greatly skewed in nature.

In addition, the savings and credit group constituted by women belonging to varied class/caste/creed backgrounds is left to itself to cope with the internal dynamics of the group, which often hinders the growth of individuals in the group. For example, women belonging to lower class/caste positions mostly experience exclusion at the hands of other women in the group. The chronically poor and landless women also usually remain outside this network due to lack of assets and inability to save money. These inequalities within the group and outside are largely ignored by the agencies.

Difficult, therefore, it is to say that the policies of WID and the strategies undertaken by the international, national, and local agencies have been able to improve the condition of women. The narrow and reductionist approach, based on the assumption that economic benefits will empower women, overlooks and ignores the nexus of gender discrimination and relations that exists on the ground. As Koczberski (1998) points out, the inter-related problems with WID integration efforts is closely tied to the modernization agenda. Women’s position and overall status can be improved by bringing them to the formal economic and political structures; this belief is premised on the assumption that women are not already participating in the process of development because they are mostly tied to the informal and household economy.
This view represents a narrow understanding of women’s work as unproductive and is based on the simplistic co-relation between women working in the formal public sphere and their status.

These instances highlight that SHGs are made to function in such a manner that the major aspects of women’s social and personal lives remain outside the ambit of these SHGs and the interest of development agencies. Women are viewed as economic agents of development, independent of oppressive social relations and conditions that inform their life. This neglect of context specificity of women’s lives (largely shaped by the interplay of fractured and complex forms of oppressions and discrimination that they face) and the limiting of their role to smoothly continue the process of development seems to be a strategy of instrumentalizing women for the process of development. Absent in the development process is the analysis of the lives that women lead in the specific contexts; the policies and strategies that are developed to integrate women, therefore, fail to speak to the experiences of women.

As the research with single women progressed and the fact about invisibilization of concerns around singleness unfolded, it became obvious that the developmental agendas have left the concerns of rural single women unattended and unaddressed. Development plays a significant role in determining and influencing human lives; whereas this journey addresses issues (in ways that can nevertheless be challenged) pertaining to poverty, income, livelihood, health, education, and now gender, it has also been a journey of silencing and foreclosing singleness as a condition and an issue. The lives of single women are marked by the covert yet coercive violence of mainstream ‘development’ and development practices/interventions (I have in mind both epistemic violence, say the violence of the ‘historical inevitability thesis’ on adivasi worlds and forms of life, and the violence of primitive/original accumulation), which, at most, recognizes widowhood as victimhood but has no space whatsoever for women who are unmarried, separated, or married yet single.

For instance, how singleness remains foreclosed in the apparently woman-centric development work in an area (Rayagada) with about 35–40 percent women being single (accounting for widows, separated and unmarried single women alone) is interesting. These women are collected into groups to promote micro-finance, livelihoods, health, education, etc., (‘development 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 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: 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 development that assimilates an appropriate(d) ‘other’ (that is, widowhood) on the one hand and that chisels out and silences the screams and pain of an inassimilable inappropriate(d), at times resisting, other (that is, singleness) on the other.

From Development to Transformation

“‘Development stinks,” says Gustavo Esteva (1987) because whether defined in conventional or in unconventional terms, whether viewed as a concept or as a social process, it is fundamentally incompatible with social justice, human rights, autonomy, and cultural survival. Development in all its forms is contaminated by its origin in the structure of repression implicit in the social sensitivities produced by colonial exploitation and by the systematic scientization and desacralization of life and living nature” (Nandy 2004: 316). There is no reason and no definite need for every society to pass through the stage of so-called development for moving into a just society. According to Arturo Escobar (2012), “Development is the last and failed attempt to complete the Enlightenment process in Asia, Africa and Latin America... [thus] rather than search for development alternatives, we need to speak of alternatives to development” (as cited in Roy 2003: 80).

However, given the spread, institutionalization, and the power of development in subsuming possible alternatives to development (the language of which can again be determined by the discourse of development), it seems nearly impossible to divorce it completely from the existing reality. “Development, as both an idea and a set of practices, has become so pervasive and so powerful that it is increasingly difficult to imagine alternatives that are outside of the development framework” (Everett 1997: 137). This work, with all its interest and intent of contributing towards building and living in a desirable world free of suffering(s), injustice, exploitation, and oppression of all forms, clearly emphasizes the need to develop an understanding of development and find a way out of the hegemonic frameworks of Orientalism and Capitalo-centrism.
that continue to haunt international discourses on development.

Perhaps, it is important also to begin founding new meaning(s) and forms of transformations that are embedded in the particularity of the ‘local’, the social, its economy, and culture; rather than transplanting concepts and practices from the West to the ‘rest’. The choice of the change that specific ‘communities’ want to see for themselves should be in their own hands, and any approach should encompass their needs and aspirations rather than a universal regime, completely devoid and alienated from specificity of the ‘local’ context, being imposed upon or/and adopted by them. As Ashis Nandy (1984) suggests, “No theory of oppression can make sense unless it is cast in native terms or categories, that is, in terms and categories used by the victims of our times.” There is need, therefore, for context-sensitive and context-specific theories geared towards transformational futures.

When suggesting that these understandings ought to emerge from the specificity of the ‘local’ or/and communities, I am neither invoking the popular myth that the ‘local’/communities are homogeneous, singular, and unproblematic entities free of power relations and dynamics nor am I proposing that the alternative meanings of transformation that we are trying to explore lie secretly hidden with the existing spaces. The proposition, instead, is that while advocating such an approach, we need to engage with the idea of ‘community’ and the ‘local’ critically (as K.C. Bhattacharya suggests in ‘Swaraj in ideas [1954]’) rather than assuming that a community already exists. The need is to unpack the context, understand social relations, explore the specificity of the ‘local’, and create conditions for a contingent and emergent ‘being-in-common’ that can envision and engender transformation.

As an action researcher, my belief is that the constructed ‘victims’ (those bearing the brunt of the process of development so far and have been strategically neglected) of development have immense potential for fighting the mammoth framework called ‘development’. “The impossibility of a global order must be affirmed as a truth and

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23 This monograph has focused on critiques of development universals or the kind of globalism that informs international development agencies working their way through Third World backwaters. In that sense, the monograph looks to turn to the local. This is, however, not to take the local or the perspective of the local as sacrosanct, pure, or pristine. The monograph remains informed by the critiques of the ‘local’, critiques that have not been fully elaborated upon.

reaffirmed as a truism...the local cannot be fully interior to the global, nor can its inventive potential be captured by any singular imagining...A local ethic proffers respect, not just for difference and autonomy but for self understood as capability.” (Gibson-Graham 2001: 3-4). Given the spread and reach of the dominant understanding of development, it is important to engage, question, and simultaneously develop newer ways of theorizing and practicing. In other words, generating an understanding of transformation that is (con)temporary, provisional, contingent, context-specific, and context-sensitive, that is, open to the future.

With this understanding in mind, when the lives of the women in Emaliguda were being explored, singleness among women appeared as one of the major conditional aspects of women’s lives. Because SHGs seemed to have left this important aspect of women’s lives behind, in spite of its indispensable (and problematic) presence among women, the need to generate collective articulation and analyses around the lives of single women in Emaliguda became an important agenda for us. Based on this articulation, discussion, and analyses, we initiated the process of transformation in the village.

This work draws its learning from Eka Nari Sanghathan and attempts to engage with the idea and practice of development, questions its hegemony, and moves from an understanding of development to a newer philosophy and praxis, naming it transformation—collective, collaborative transformation embedded in the transformation of the social, the political, and the self. MPhil in Development Practice and the journey along with the Sanghathan members has helped me look at the question of transformation (discussed later) primarily at the cusp of (i) the axis of the ‘self’ (an axis usually attended to by the psychological; I shall however problematize ‘self’ and move to ‘subject’ towards the end of the paper), (ii) the axis of the ‘social’ (an axis usually attended to by ‘social’ organizations, including NGOs; an axis that according to me is not in any way bereft of questions of power) and (iii) the ‘state, citizenship, vote-focused understanding of the political’ (an axis usually attended to by political parties).

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25 Dhar (2015), Chakrabarti and Dhar (2015a) and Dhar and Chakrabarti (2015b) mark the question of transformation along three mutually constitutive axes: a) the axis of the self (that is, the psychological, the subjective) (b) the axis of the political (remaining critical of the usually reduced understanding of the political to the liberal state and the vote, they invoke transformations in the realm of relationships of power, including transformations in the state) and (c) the axis of the larger social, including collective formations.
Solidarities

The continuous insight, articulation, and collective analyses of the struggles and challenges in the lives of single women, the issues concerning them, their lower and ignored socio-political and economic status, the strategies of survival they adopted, their negotiations and coping mechanisms, devised as a result of having to live the condition of singleness—together generated not only a feeling of sadness in the group but also led to welling up of anger. With a realization that “My experience of oppression, being a single woman, does not belong to me alone, but is an experience shared by many others”; that “I may be single but I am not alone,” generated a need to stand together, to be able to raise our voices, ‘visibilize’ ourselves, bring our issues to the surface and change our position socially and politically. This intense process, involving a movement from single-hood to singleness, marked a political moment for us because it helped establish an active political subject position of single women, who were now becoming aware of their political potential and envisioning transformation as (contingent-emergent) actors of transformation and not mere victims and beneficiaries of the development policies of the state.

The sharing of the lived experiences of single women, whether widowed, separated, never-married, married yet single brought to the surface that whereas, on the one hand, these experiences 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 condition(s) of their singleness. Thus, while retaining the complexity and inevitability of heterogeneity among single women, our attempt was to explore similarities and commonalities that could bring single women together. These developments gave way to the idea of forging a Sanghathan.

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’ to San(gha)than, meaning a coming together of friends; wherein ghathan in Hindi implies coming together in order to build, construct, and organize, and sangha 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. Sanghathan in this sense meant for us a way of relating with each other, the significant other, who is also eka nari (single woman) like oneself. This marked for us a beginning of politics of relationality (discussed later) that premised on the connectedness among the sanghas, given the nature of our interconnected and interwoven lives.
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)²⁶, Rajasthan, is that that a Sanghathan entails a form of a collective struggle, (Sangha)thit (Sangha)rsha, wherein along with generating an understanding of people’s oppressions, constructive collective action²⁷ (ghathan) is undertaken to challenge power structures and work together to enhance well-being. A Sanghathan in this sense becomes a journey of collective-constructive action in collective struggle, and collective struggle in collective-constructive action. When understood fully, Sanghathan for us meant a platform, a space, a journey, and a relationship that shelters a collective of friends in struggle and action.

This re-imagined form of organization thus premises on horizontality of beings in a communicative-relational and emergent-contingent common, wherein although there is space for difference, contradiction, and antagonism, continuous conscious efforts are undertaken to lessen hierarchic gradients that exist and emerge in the process. Thus, a sense of ownership, ethos, and responsibility on behalf of the members is an important feature of a Sanghathan. The Sanghathan culture involves keeping meetings very simple and economical so that the members do not have to depend upon external agencies and can themselves bear the costs. This self-dependence and self-sufficiency ensures sustainability of the Sanghathan—a culture that can carry itself for long. Participation and decision-making come from the members themselves, and the Sanghathan becomes not only a support system for the members but also a weapon to fight for their rightful position in the society.

Based on the above conceptualization and vision, a Sanghathan was forged by single women in Emaliguda in order to create a space where they could come together, share their concerns, open up their lives to one another, become part of each other’s sorrow and happiness, call each other their ‘own’, and take upon themselves the responsibility of transforming their lives for the larger well-being.

The Sanghathan came into being in August 2013 and was named Eka Nari Sanghathan

²⁶ “Sangathan is a Hindi word, meaning ‘organization’ and it carries the connotation that struggle will be a part of the work of the organization, along with constructive action... Simply struggling ‘against’ others will not in itself bring about a better or a new situation, some ‘constructive action’ or collective learning, planning and working together is also necessary.” (Shrivastava and Chaudhary 2011: 16)

²⁷ According to Charles Tilly, “Collective Action itself is a broad but simple concept; it includes all the ways in which people join their efforts in pursuit of common ends.” (Tilly 1977: 11)
by the 40 members, who gave life to it. They decided to meet once every month in order to share, discuss, and analyze their lives so that they can collectively highlight their issues and understand various forms of oppression faced by them. Given the nature of the open-ended and semi-structured meetings and discussions, the flexible yet organized format, members could engage with one another more intensively; the openness and flexibility helped them evolve as a collective.

The collective journey of the single women of Emaliguda, which began with emotions, connectedness, and relationships, expanded through women’s networks and interwoven lives, and brought them together, based on their collective reflexive articulation and analysis, creating a space to stand together for one another, bringing private concerns out into the public space, finding strength in solidarity and constituting contingent-emergent political subjectivity.

In the four months, after August 2013, that I was away from the field, and at the university, trying to engage with the concepts and develop an understanding of Collective-Action, Justice, Politics-Resistance-Transformation, and Well-Being (through the third semester courses), the Sanghathan, at the same time, was preparing to begin its journey as and of ‘collective action’, of formulating its own concept and understanding of ‘justice’, of engaging in ‘politics’, posing and dealing with ‘resistance’, ushering in ‘transformation’ and enhancing ‘well-being’.

When I went back in January 2014, I observed that what I had imagined had slowly begun turning into reality. The ‘space’ where single women as a collective could open up to each other, share, cry, laugh, trust, reflect, argue, discuss, make plans, strategize, and claim as their own, was already under construction. The foundation of the journey of the single women’s struggle and collective action was in the process of being laid. The foundation was our relationship with ourselves and with each other, our numerous ways of relating with the ‘other’.

Perhaps, my absence from the field for four months played a crucial role in bringing these women together because the process of mobilization did not take place through and in the presence of an external agent. Instead, the single women themselves mobilized each other. They came together because they wanted to create a space
of their own, they identified with one another, they shared common interests and condition, they wanted to highlight, question, and analyze the silence and normalcy constructed around singleness and singleness, and they believed they had the potential to bring about transformation that they were envisioning for themselves.

The initial meetings of the Sanghathan revolved around discussions related to issues resulting from singleness among women, from problems that they have to face in their everyday lives, work-related drudgery, whether they have a proper house to live in, whether they have access to proper clothing and food, how their village community and individual families treat them, whether they have any support from their relatives, how they do not have access to household income, how they face problems voicing their concerns, etc., to discussing things like the importance of having savings bank accounts in their name, access to government schemes and programmes such as Pensions, Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY), MGNREGA\(^28\) Job Cards, Public Distribution System and land rights for single women. In other words, the Sanghathan members were trying to understand the various forms of socio-political and economic deprivations resulting from singleness and, simultaneously, thinking about ways in which the righting of the articulated wrongs could be undertaken.

What played a significant role was the exposure visit that a few members undertook in October 2013. They were given an opportunity to attend a three-day conference, organized by National Forum for Single Women’s Rights in Delhi. This initiative was undertaken by Dr. Ginny Shrivastava\(^29\) and my Field Supervisor\(^30\) as an attempt to providing exposure to members of the Sanghathan, regarding the presence of single women in various parts of the country, how these various associations of single women in different States have been organized and functioned, what role the Sanghathan has played in enhancing well-being and keeping them connected with other single women in other parts of the country, and finally, to explore the possibilities of alliances that could be forged between the National Forum and Eka Nari Sanghathan in Rayagada, Odisha.

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29 Dr. Ginny Shrivastava is the founder of The Association of Strong Women Alone, and Rajasthan member of the Secretariat of the National Forum.
30 Mr. Saroj Narayan Barik of PRADAN was my Field Supervisor.
The Sanghathan members decided collectively that Mami *didi*, Aiya and Relama *didi* would attend the conference, and later share their learnings and experience with all the other members. The Sanghathan members contributed financially to meet the expenses of the three members in Delhi. Through this conference, the women came in contact with the existing Sanghathans of single women in places such as Rajasthan, Gujarat, Punjab, Maharashtra and Jharkhand, and their struggles, achievements, and contribution to society. We learned how a large number of single women coming together could strengthen the development of both single women and the larger society. They could lobby around issues, do advocacy with the state, and gather state support, through impacting policies by making themselves ‘visible’. We experienced the strength in solidarity and learned how by slowly bringing reforms at the level of the State and the ‘social’, we can work towards building a just and equitable society.

At the three-day conference, Mami *didi*, Aiya, Relama *didi*, my Field Supervisor, and I met other single women from other parts of the country and also Dr. Ginny and some forum members, who guided us and took us through their experience of working with single women. What motivated and inspired us was the presence of a large number of single women in the conference. We witnessed movement(s) (both social and political) rising from the sharing of experiences of various local Sanghathans of different States. This not only reflects the immense potential that single women possess to bring about change in their socio-economic and political condition but also pointed to the importance of getting hold of existing state provisions; proposing, raising, and ‘helping’ the State to imagining newer and much-needed reforms in policies and provisions.

After these three members returned to Emaliguda, a meeting was held to share their experience and learnings.

Mami *didi* said:

“I realized there are single women world-wide, not only in Emaliguda, and that too a large number of them. They also face numerous problems and suffering. We are not alone in this. They all share their grief with each other; do not hesitate to cry in front of each other; sing with each other; laugh with each other; they are all there for one another.”

Aiya said that she gained immense motivation and confidence after seeing how single
women in other parts of the country have come together and fought for their rights collectively. She continued:

“They have not only been successful in getting their rightful entitlements from the State but also are continuously working to change their condition in their homes and villages. Because they have been working for so long, they are much better at articulating their problems, writing about these, and sharing these with the world; in spite of being single, they are breaking all norms and restrictions imposed on them by society.”

When the members were asked what they felt after coming to know about what all happened in Delhi, Barkini didi said:

“We will also try and do similar things for ourselves. We will also be united and fight for our rights. Slowly and steadily, we will also be able to improve our lives because women from other parts of the country have been able to do it and we will also learn many things in the process.”

Our discussions formulated the need to first and foremost work towards ensuring and securing survival of/for single women. The Sanghathan decided to prioritize and work towards claiming their right to food, right to space, right to social security benefits, and right to employment, in order to at least ensure that in the days to come, single women in Emaliguda do not sleep hungry at night, have a roof above their head, are not financially dependent upon anyone, and have work available to be able to earn a living. The problems faced by old single women in the village were the most severe, and to begin with ensuring pensions for them became a priority for the Sanghathan members. I was told:

“Because old, single women are unable to work and take care of themselves, and no one in their families looks after them, it is important to get pensions for them so that if they get some money, they can take care of some of their expenditure. Their brothers and other relatives may start helping them, seeing that they do not have to spend money on them.”

Not surprisingly, members prioritized survival mechanisms for those women, who are not only deprived of social relations but are left with no capacity to work and make ends meet. They all believed that it was not fair to claim pensions for women between the ages of 30 and 50 years, before ensuring pensions for older women.
The members had agreed to work on a priority basis, depending on claiming government entitlements first for those, who needed them the most. This represented a strong presence of ethics in the political imagination of the Sangathan and marked the journey of self-transformation. Many are the instances when the Sangathan members taught me that the question of the political is not bereft of the question of the ethical.

A few Sangathan members, who are also SHG members, took the initiative of filling in pension forms, first for the old women, then the widowed, destitute women, and differently-abled persons. Because the date for the palli sabha was drawing near, a list of not only widowed and old but also unmarried and separated single women above the age of 40 years was submitted in the panchayat office along with demands for separate job cards, ration cards, and Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) for women living alone in the village. For many women, this was the first time they had heard about the palli sabha and the gram sabha, and their right to participate and raise concerns and demands in these public meetings.

A large number of women met the sarpanch, the village-level worker and the social welfare officer and articulated their problems and demands. An application, with information about all the issues single women face and their demands, along with the list for pensions, job cards, ration cards, and IAY, was submitted to the Collector. This experience gave the Sangathan members a lot of hope, enthusiasm, courage, and confidence.

Along with the discussions around inaccessibility and unavailability of government schemes and provisions, the importance of having individual savings bank accounts (in order to have a secure future) was also under discussion. Sangathan members helped each other open savings bank accounts in the nearby bank; every member now has a bank account in her name. Later, the other women, including married women of
the village (who are not part of the Sanghathan), opened bank accounts in their names with the help of the Sanghathan members. Having their own personal bank account has given the women a sense of independence and an assurance that they can now claim a portion of the income they earn and will not have to depend on anyone, now and in the future.

In addition to this, the Sanghathan is also working towards sensitizing the village community about the problems and oppression faced by single women thereby beginning a dialogue with the community and engaging further on this issue. Sanghathan members met the Youth Club members of the village, shared their experiences with them, created a space for collaboration, and together these two groups have decided to meet once a month and work not only on issues related to single women but also for overall development of the village.

Our attempt, thus, went beyond the boundaries of the Sanghathan, beyond working just internally upon transforming our (collective) self. Members made various efforts to move beyond the closed doors of their subjugated lives. They opened up in order to interact and engage with the world outside while securing their future financially, politicizing the issue of singleness among women, claiming rightful entitlements, proposing changes at the policy level, occupying public spaces, and planning village-level interventions, in order to better their position in the village. Thus, this process of attempted transformation has been a simultaneous process of transformation at the level of the self, the social, and the political. Significantly, this space did not cease to evolve. The processes that began in August 2013 are continuing. Our ground, our space, the relationships between us and the institutions involved, the solidarity in the Sanghathan and the meanings generated and reformed in the process, are all still getting created, re-created, shaped, and re-shaped as part of this journey that has just begun.

“The night shall end, our stories will not ...”

Salme Pedenti, Member, Eka Nari Sanghathan
The next section brings out some of the instances from the lives of the single women—painful instances shared because of the trust and friendships that were developing, instances that reflected the bravery with which women narrated their grief, instances that filled our eyes with tears, and instances that brought us all together and strengthened us.

**A Life without Dignity**

Trying to explain how single women are continuously suspected and abused, Tulsi didi narrated an instance when she had gone to a house to perform some *pooja*. After completing the rituals when she was about to leave, the members of that family accused her of stealing the money that was kept near the idol. She was abused and humiliated in front of the whole hamlet. It was an attack on her self-respect, and the fact that she was single and had no one to support her made it easy for people to point fingers at her.

As she narrated the incident, Tulsi didi got up suddenly, pulled open the end of her saree and cried out in a loud voice:

“I stood before them like this and said, ‘Look for your money. Where is it?’”

It was very intense; her anger and helplessness were palpable. I could feel her pain. I could see how fresh her scars were, even today. She was trembling and screaming in pain. She spoke in Kuvi, and I could understand every emotion that she was trying to convey. There was silence for a few minutes. Tulsi didi continued, saying that after this she went into the house and forcefully took a handful of rice as her remuneration for performing the *pooja*. She said that she should have not taken the rice from the household where she was insulted. She should have refused any offerings from that household but her helplessness was such that she had to take that handful of rice. Otherwise, that night she would have slept without any food. She fought with them, resisted, and did not give the rice back. Tulsi didi cried her heart out after narrating the incident and I realized that she was crying not so much because she was humiliated, but because that night she had been ‘forced’ to place her helplessness above her humiliation.
Life under Threat

Sunamoni didi and her mother owned about an acre of land that they had leased out to someone to cultivate on share cropping basis. Last year, because there was no produce from that land, they were entitled to get Rs 2000 from the government as compensation. There was a delay in getting this payment. Her brother kept asking her to give the whole amount to him. One day, he beat her and her mother brutally and said that if he did not get money by his next visit, he would kill Sunamoni didi. She cried,

“My own brother told me that he would go to the extent of killing me if I did not give him that money. It was so easy for him to say that.”

Sunamoni didi filed a case against him, which she lost, and till today the fight between her brother and her continues. She lives in the constant fear of getting killed someday.

Fear of Survival

Dai didi is old and is often abused and beaten by her brother and his family. When she spoke about this with the members, there was a discussion about whether the members should talk to her brother and his family. However, with tears in her eyes, Dai didi said,

“Where will I go if my brother asks me to leave the house? How will I survive? Because I am old and cannot manage on my own, I cannot live alone. In my brother’s house, I have to make many compromises and face many problems, but what choice do I have? What food I get to eat and in what quantity is decided by my sister-in-law. If some day something good is bought or some vegetable is collected, it will first be eaten by my brother and his family. Only if there is any left over, I will get to eat it. But, at least I get to satisfy my hunger.”

Nothing of Her Own

Wana didi came back to live with her brother when she decided to leave her husband. But no one in her brother’s family looks after her or treats her with even a little respect, in spite of her managing the entire household, in spite of her working all day in and outside the house. She said,

“Even the space that I have been given in the house is very small. It is a part of the kitchen where I work. Almost every day there are fights in the house. I want to save
some money for my future but I have no money to save in the bank. My brother refuses to give me money to buy clothes and bangles. When I told him I want to open a bank account and save money, he threatened me and said that I will have to live on my own if I ask for money. He said if I wanted to save, I should earn money on my own. He will not give me any. Where do I have the time to work anywhere else and earn money? Nor am I at the age when I can look for work outside. I work in the fields with him but I get no money for that work. There is no happiness for me at all. Every day I feel sad and regret that I am alive.”

The Mad Woman

Nimayi didi is very old and lives with her brother. She said,

“If one day I am not at home, no cooking takes place. It is so difficult for me to work in this age but I still have to work. My brother and his sons call me ‘mad’ because sometimes I cook without taking bath. They have no realization how difficult it is for me. When I was young, I could not do anything for myself because I was responsible for the family and now that I am old, I still cannot do anything.”

The Darkness of Loneliness

Male didi says,

“… it is very sad when one has to return to an empty house. When one lives alone and comes back to a house where there is no one waiting or to talk to, one feels very lonely. Even if there are at least two people living together, one does not have to lock the house. But to come home, open the lock and enter a dark house is like entering the darkness of loneliness.”

Coming Together of the Sanghas

In the first Sanghathan meeting that the Field Supervisor and I witnessed, I heard that it was only after 2–3 Sanghathan meetings that everyone started coming for these meetings. Initially, only about half the members were present; others did not consider coming for the meetings as very important. Aiya raised the concern with the members:

“Some of us have to go from door to door to call members to the meeting. Even so, some people come and others do not. If we keep having meetings without everyone being present, everyone will not have the same kind of information. Only if everyone
comes for the meetings, can we conduct meetings properly. It is very important for each member to attend Sangathan meetings.”

Aunla didi added,

“We have so many problems that only we are aware of. If we want to do something about the problems we are facing, we will have to share them with each other so that all of us come to know about each other and then can work towards finding solutions. This can only happen if we come for all the meetings and discuss collectively about what we can do together and for each other.”

Aiya gave the example of Wana didi, who once told her brother clearly that she has equal rights over the family property as he does. During one of the family fights over how the family property would be divided, she told her brother that she has an equal share in the family land and she should get her due share when it was divided. She said that her brother and his family could live off his share and she would survive on hers. Aiya said,

“Had Wana didi not come for the Sangathan meetings, she would not have known about her rights and would not have been able to tell her brother clearly about it. She would have cried and would have been deprived of her rights. But now that she knows this and that there are Sangathan members, who are supporting her, she can claim her right to her share in the family property.”

Janoki didi added,

“In our homes, we are treated no better than the cattle. No one is interested in listening to our grievances. In the meetings, we have that space where we can share our problems, discuss what we can do to change our condition. So it’s very important to be present for the meetings.”

Aiya also shared that she was not aware of many things before the Sangathan was formed. It was after attending the Sangathan meetings and discussing about each other’s lives, each other’s happiness and sadness, and coming to know a little about government schemes for single women that she thinks that she is beginning to get to know many things. She said she believes that after becoming part of the Sangathan, the members have begun understanding their own lives in a much better way. Mami didi said,
“We will realize the merits of sitting and talking to each other only when we all start doing it together.”

Members who had been conducting meetings since the beginning were trying to reach out to the others by explaining to them the relevance of sitting for these meetings. It was a learning experience for me to observe how well some women in the Sanghathan were actually playing the role of mobilizers. This was both a concern and a challenge for these members but sitting in meetings and discussing about themselves in an organized way was a new experience for many women in the village. Initially, some women did not consider these meetings important; it was only after a few meetings that they were able to find some relevance for themselves. Evidently, the Sanghathan was going through a self-evolutionary process.

The members gradually agreed to be present for meetings in the days to come. I was to engage with the Sanghathan members for four months for the action research, in order to begin working on the issues that were identified. We, therefore, needed to meet more regularly than once a month. I did not want the Sanghathan to schedule their meetings according to my requirements. I decided to engage with the women through some activities rather than only through discussions, which took place in the monthly meetings. Through the stories of single women in other parts of the country, by sharing songs that have been written by other Sanghathans, by attempting to write our own song, etc., I tried to develop a habit of us sitting together every alternate evening. My conviction was that as we kept doing this, we would slowly move into discussions that determine our journey ahead.

In another meeting, the discussion again centered on the issue of members not coming for meetings. Regular members had called all the others yet some members could not come and others did not want to come. The reason for absenteeism, I was told, was because a few members of the bigger hamlet believed that the Sanghathan plans to oppose the State and they did not want to be part of such an ‘anti-State’ uprising. Hearing this, I asked the members present whether we had come together to work against the State at all? I was reassured when I hear their reply: “This was a false perception of those members; simply because we wanted to present our condition to the State and demand our entitlements does not make us an ‘anti-State’ collective.”

I asked the Sanghathan members that if such a perception was building up around what the Sanghathan stands for and what its aims and objectives are, should we not
undertake the responsibility of clarifying this and discussing openly with everyone as to how and why such perceptions build up and how can we ensure that we all remain on the same ground? The members present were quite angry with those who did not come to the meeting. They said, in anger and disappointment, “It is their responsibility not ours to come for the meetings; they are using this as an excuse because the women from the bigger hamlet live in much better conditions and do not feel the need to really bring about a change in their condition.” The Sanghathan remained torn on this issue and some members agreed that it was a good idea to attempt to engage with the absent members and see how they respond.

I insisted that we should not assume that some women do not want to change anything about their living conditions. The fact that they were a part of initial meetings shows that they were interested. I suggested that if all members agreed, we could give it one try and then decide, rather than remaining quiet about this issue and letting some of our sanghas leave. It was not just a matter of some women not coming for the meetings but, more importantly, the message that we were sending to the larger society seemed to suggest that we were working in opposition to the State. I thought it was important to clarify this false perception because we need to be careful in how we progress in our journey. We will perhaps need to clarify at every stage that we are neither against the State nor against society (nor the village community); only then will we be in a position to negotiate issues. We cannot function in isolation. We need both the State and the villagers to participate in this struggle. It is necessary to be careful and vocal about what it is that we are trying to achieve, and how.

In the next meeting, some members could not reach the meetings on time because they had to finish all their work before that. They said it was very difficult for them to attend meetings before 8 p.m. A unanimous decision was taken that the meetings will take place late in the evening after everyone finishes their work. I told them that we would not begin the meetings before 7.30 p.m. so that everyone can attend as and when their work gets over.

Some members thought that the meetings were scheduled too frequently (thrice a week, every alternate day). They said coming for the meetings every other day is not possible for them. Finishing their work early every other day did not seem feasible for them. This concern was valid; however, I believed that if the members valued these meetings, they will have to give this work a permanent place in their schedule. I chose to remain silent on this issue and left it to the members to decide how often they
wanted to hold meetings. The members decided to meet twice every week and, when necessary, to conduct more meetings.

Regular members once again tried to convince everyone about the importance of these meetings and that they would benefit from it. If we each did not take out time to discuss problems and together find solutions, it will become very difficult to proceed. About working against the State, Mami didi clearly said,

“The objective of the Sanghathan is not to go against any institution, person(s), or State but to provide a space for single women in the village to meet and engage with each other, to know each other, discuss our issues, find solutions to our problems not by fighting or opposing anyone but by raising our voice for our rightful entitlements and making others understand our condition and our struggles.”

Aiya added:

“Our strength lies in our unity and if only a few of us stand up for the cause, it means lesser strength. Therefore, all of us need to do things together.”

I was reassured when the members tried to convince everyone to attend the meetings in spite of the disagreements they had had in the previous meeting. In subsequent meetings too, there was an insistence upon sitting for meetings and conversing with each other in order to strengthen the Sanghathan. In Janoki didi’s opinion,

“Only if we are united can we work towards our well-being. If we are not united, people will easily break us and take advantage. It will become easy for them to suppress us. If we stand together in solidarity, no one will be able to cause any problems and we will together reduce the burden of the troubles we face.”

As these discussions on attendance and solidarity continued, more and more women started coming for the meetings. After a few weeks, I was told that we needed to have three meetings in a week because the dates for the palli sabha and gram sabha were approaching, and we needed to prepare ourselves for them. The enthusiasm of the Sanghathan members encouraged me a lot and kept me motivated. I was elated that we were coming together not only for a ‘cause’ or the redressal of it, but rather we were ‘coming together’ for ‘being together’. Our solidarity was not only aimed at achieving some goal or arriving somewhere; instead, we were trying to achieve solidarity as an end in itself, we were trying to find each other with each other, we
were creating conditions so that we could agree with each other, argue with each other, be friends with each other.

There were also instances when some of the Sanghathan members began dominating the discussions and a few women would take charge of initiating discussions. In these situations, as a facilitator, I reminded all the members that we need to ensure that all participate in the meetings equally. Everyone should feel that they have an equal opportunity to share and discuss and it is the responsibility of the Sanghathan to ensure that we do not repress voices amongst us, leaving some of us behind in this journey. Keeping our focus on first learning to listen to each other, empathizing with each other, finding strength in each other, and giving time for friendships to evolve with each other, the Sanghathan members and I worked towards building relationships, towards becoming and ‘being-in-common’.

The Sanghathan slowly emerged and expanded as a space where most members eventually opened up and shared their grievances, discussed ‘personal’ and ‘private’ matters, and got to know each other better. They were slowly becoming Sanghas. This transformation was no less than any we could have imagined. This journey was about transforming ourselves—the collective transformation of the self and the transformation of the collective self. Our ‘coming together’, however, was not devoid of internal struggles. The dynamics of the Sanghathan changed each moment as we progressed. In almost every meeting, emphasis was laid on the importance of forging and strengthening relationships by sharing personal experiences with each other, building trust among each other, having the same set of information, and finding strength in our solidarity. All of this was a part of the process, therefore, it is not easy to identify the precise moments in which these relationships were forged, trust was built and solidarity realized; significant it is that the Sanghathan was constantly undergoing these processes. It constantly highlighted the importance of these aspects in coming together and repeatedly grappling with the need for relational politics thereby thinking and re-thinking the question of the ‘political’.

**Transformation?**

The dictionary defines transformation as a marked change in form, nature, condition or function, appearance or character, especially one for the better. The synonyms of transformation are alteration, change, conversion, re-modeling, reshaping, and redoing—the list is a long one, ending interestingly in ‘revolution’. What is more
interesting is that the antonyms of transformation are preservation and conservation. This made me wonder if the objective of this action research is really to alter, change, convert, remodel, reshape, redo in some form, nature, condition, function, appearance, and character into something better? Were we really trying to alter, change, and convert something into something else? Completely? I would say no. At least the philosophy of transformative praxis that has been partially cultivated with the Sanghathan seems to detach itself from understanding transformation as completely altering, changing, converting, or re-modeling social reality; preserving and conserving certain forms, natures, conditions, functions, appearances and characters of adivasi life worlds is as important as some level of alteration, change, and conversion. The members and I found ourselves negotiating between these two extremes of altering, changing, converting, remodeling those that demanded necessary interventions and preserving, conserving, retaining certain local forms, natures, conditions, functions, appearances, and characters. Our action research journey suggests that it is somewhere at the uneasy cusp of converting and preserving that transformation needs to be formulated.

Moreover, when the term transformation is broken down into trans-formation, it seems to provide a meaning to the term that resonates with our journey in/of the Sanghathan. ‘Trans’, the dictionary\(^{31}\) says, could be defined as beyond, across, into another state or place, surpassing, transcending and changing thoroughly. And formation\(^{32}\) means the act of form-ing something or the process of be-ing formed. If we bring to dialogue these meanings of ‘trans’ and ‘formation’, transformation could be an act or a process of moving beyond and across an existing form, into another state or place (or topos) through surpassing, transcending, and changing thoroughly.

Can the journey of the Sanghathan then be seen as trans-formation? The journey of the Sanghathan is indeed a continuous process of moving beyond and across (partially, at least, if not fully):

- the existing boundaries of knowledge of the self and the world around us, as also the relation between self and the world.
- the structures and the relationships that the women were/are embedded in.
- the fear, the hesitation, and the control that was/is imposed.
- the crypt—the burial ground—of their sorrows and pain.

With the Sanghas coming together and forging solidarities, sharing their lives with one

\(^{31}\) dictionary.reference.com/browse/trans
\(^{32}\) www.thefreedictionary.com/formation
another and the larger society, securing their future financially, and attempting to work along with the State and Emaliguda village, these (r)evolutionary (that is, changing) processes led to a ‘movement’ into another state, and ushered in formations of a new kind. A new space of one’s own (Sanghathan) emerged, friendships blossomed (albeit with their inherent contradictions of age, class, caste, past experience), and subjectivities were at least partially (re)constituted, awareness of the rights and claims of citizen subjects and knowledge of oppression were enhanced, fears, hesitations, and controls (to a large extent) were surpassed. Thus, this entire journey, in a way, was an experience of transcending without transgressing, of altering and preserving, of Badlav (change) instead of Badla (revenge), and of persuasion rather than conversion in its simple sense.

This action research work, while keeping ‘transformation’ as an object of enquiry, has engaged back and forth with mainly the three axis of transformation, (i) the axis of the ‘self’ (an axis usually attended to by the psychological), (ii) the axis of the ‘social’ (an axis usually attended to by ‘social’ organizations, including NGOs—an axis that, according to me, is not in any way bereft of questions of power) and (iii) the ‘state, citizenship, vote-focused understanding of the political’ (an axis usually attended to by political parties). This work depicts how these three sites of transformation perhaps need simultaneous engagement because one does not necessarily follow the other. However, this formulation holds only when the understanding of the ‘political’ (through its departure from traditional, contemporary, and largely dominant forms of politics) is revisited thereby making way for political rethinking in terms of (in our case) politics of pluralism and politics of relationality. The hypothesis being when politics is re-defined and re-imagined with pluralism and relationality as its determining forces, it offers an understanding of political transformation, which seems inseparable from social transformation and self-transformation. These three sites of transformation, through entering into a ‘trialogue’, seem to blur the existing boundaries among them.

**Redefining ‘Political’ in the Pluralistic Politics of Relationality**

The re-thinking and redefining of the ‘political’ in politics premises itself on the critique of traditional forms of liberal and Marxist political thoughts that are driven

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33 Where, under liberal frameworks, individual interest, individual liberty, and individual rights remain the center of politicization, through electoral politics, including constitutional government, “elected representative bodies, competing political parties and secret ballots” (Markoff, 1996; as cited in Bystydzienski and Sekhon 1999: 3), under Marxist frameworks, the
by notions of concentrated power, ‘expert’ political subject, and universality. This work mainly draws on theoretical works of Chantal Mouffe (2005) and Martha Ackelsberg (2010). Whereas Mouffe in her book is arguing for politics of pluralism, given the inevitability of antagonism, Ackelsberg draws our attention to the politics of relationality, emphasizing the role of emotions, women’s networks and relationships in women’s activism.

I begin with questioning the idea of power being concentrated in the hands of the State/subject. In the last few years, the idea of centralized power has been challenged and power is now understood to be more fluid in the interstices of everyday life than being limited and concentrated. This, in turn, challenges the oppressor-oppressed binary and understands power in its omnipresence, ubiquity, and immanence. Second, the political agenda in traditional politics frameworks has been attempted either through electoral representation or vanguardism because the ‘masses’ have been assumed to possess a consciousness that is either ‘incapable’ of presenting itself and hence the need for ‘representation’, or a consciousness that is ‘false’ and justifies the need for the revolutionary consciousness of the vanguard.

site to be politically organized is ‘class’, through a process of development of class consciousness among the proletariat whose subjectivity is assumed to be solely constructed and constituted through historical materialism, and the understanding of politics that emerges from this kind of ideology, remains constrained within the limits of revolution that ‘is to come’. In both these forms, power is assumed to be concentrated entirely in the hands of the State and the other (individual in the liberal thought and the proletariat in the Marxist thought) is rendered as powerless. This gives rise to somewhat concrete and secure oppressor-oppressed dualisms (that is, akin to binaries) and politics in both these frameworks is understood to be only in terms of restructuring of State power. Second, the responsibility of pursuing this agenda of restructuring State power is either in the hands of the officials of competing parties elected under liberal democracy or in the hands of the vanguard, which is supposedly a class conscious elite-turned-proletariat. Finally, both Liberal political thought and the Marxist political thought imagines politics as a closed totality, in which the so-called oppressed (mostly represented by officials or vanguards) organizes, resists, and challenges the power of the State (that is assumed to be the sole oppressor) and this understanding of power trapped in the black box has been dictating what is political in traditional politics. This universality rejects all particularity and specificity of existing socio-economic realities. It also rejects micro-processes of power, as also the subtle and the surreptitious, subject-producing (and not just subject repressing) nature of power. In other words, it rejects the heterogeneous and contradictory nature of the processes of power.
The last question(ing) is what post-structuralist philosophers call ‘closed totality’ and ‘universality’ of traditional forms of politics wherein the language of power, oppression, organization, resistance, and the political subject are rigidly defined universally, and any other form of political uprising, which falls out of this already existing, predefined\(^{34}\), traditional political trajectory is rendered pre-political, non-political or apolitical.

The nature of the ‘political’ proposed here includes viewing power as a micro-process productive of subject positions, somewhat akin to what Butler in *Psychic Life of Power* calls ‘subjection-subjectivation’ (1997), breaking the silence around constructed normalizations of oppression (remembering, however, how we ourselves are complicit in processes of subtle and secret normalization), raising the issues and concerns of the ‘oppressed’ (not, however, as a unified subject or a whole identity), resisting socio-political power hierarchies (hierarchies that are in a flux), making claims over individual/community rights and thereon. However, we depart from the traditional forms mainly on the grounds that our ‘political’ is co-constituted by an (im)possible politics of pluralism/polymorphosity, politics of relationality among the political subjects and contingent subject positions, who are not advocating the ‘cause’ of the other but come together themselves to understand and pursue their own personal as ‘political’.

This formulation argues that power exists in fragmented, complex, and contradictory ways within the micro-structures; power is not a thing but a process; a micro-process albeit inhabiting the pores and interstices, the nooks and corners of everyday life. The main contribution to rethinking the notion of power has been made by Michel Foucault\(^{35}\). Foucault highlights that the power of discourse is such that while, on the one

\(^{34}\) Marxist misunderstandings of the women’s movement or feminist misunderstandings of the sexuality/queer movement stem from such an universal language of politics; non-understandings of Gandhian and Tagorite politics (which are more about social and self-transformation) also stem from such an universal language of politics.

\(^{35}\) As highlighted by Mark C. J. Stoddart (2007), Foucault’s formulation of power seems to have four characteristics. First, power is not only a macrosocial phenomenon; rather, we must understand power as operating throughout a multiplicity of sites at a local level. Second, power is not only repressive; it is not only a tool of control wielded by one class or set of social institutions over subordinate classes but that power also flows in multiple directions. Wherever mechanisms of power are mobilized, there are also opportunities for resistance. Third, notions of a ‘Great Refusal’, in the Marxist sense of a proletarian revolution, are untenable (Foucault 1978: 96). Just as power operates at essentially local sites, so do ‘points of resistance’ appear ‘everywhere in the power network’ (p. 93). This notion of resistance further emphasizes the essentially local nature of power. Taking these characteristics together, we may note that the most important aspect of power is that it is fundamentally relational. (Stoddart, 2007: 205).
hand, it constitutes subjectivities that internalize social power and social inequalities, on the other hand, there is an inherent potential within these constituted subjectivities to what Derrida calls desist these social inequalities and establish a possible political emergence. Mouffe states that the rethinking of politics cannot happen without rethinking the political subject. She connects the question of the subject and of what could be called the subtle and somewhat secret structure of hegemony. Hence, she emphasizes the need to develop a theory of the political subject.

Mouffe (2005) proposes that while re-imagining the political, the political subject needs to be understood as a “decentred, and a de-totalised agent, a subject constructed at the point of intersection of a multiplicity of subject positions between which there exists no a priori or necessary relation and whose nodal articulation is the result of hegemonic practices. Consequently, no identity is ever definitively established, there always being a certain degree of openness and ambiguity in the way the different subject positions are articulated. What emerges are entirely new perspectives for political action, which neither liberalism, with its idea of the individual (who only pursues his or her own interest), nor Marxism, with its reduction of all subject positions to that of (working) class identity, can sanction, let alone imagine.”

Mouffe 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. This, in turn, opens up the multiplicity of various forms of subordinations in which the subjectivity is situated; women in Emaliguda came to me as a living example of Mouffe’s formulation. “Thus, this deconstruction discards the supposed unity and homogeneity among women as ‘women’ and conceive the social agent as constituted by an ensemble of ‘subject positions’ that can never be totally fixed in a closed system of differences, constructed by a diversity of discourses among which there is no necessary relation, but rather a constant movement of overdetermination and displacement” (Mouffe 2005: 77).

The identity of the political-social subject being located in its multiplicity and contradiction is always contingent and temporary rather than being fixed, unified, and homogeneous. However, this is not to say that there is absolutely no historical, contingent, and variable link between subject positions but instead to highlight the prevalence of strategic essentialism (or what Spivak, taking off from Derrida, calls mad essentialism) within feminist politics, wherein the category ‘woman’ has to be often adopted and used, especially for representational politics and in other situations, challenged, abandoned, and refused, thus making the category ‘woman’ a site of
political action when it seems to be getting constituted and constructed by hegemonic structures.

Having gained some insight into the nature of the feminist political subject (one which is fraught with complexity), it becomes important to engage with what solidarity would mean in this new imagination of the ‘political’. Solidarity, unlike within traditional, political forms, does not cease 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. Solidarity, therefore, with a new imagination of the ‘political’, remains not just a means to attain a common goal but becomes an end in itself. This is one sharp break with traditional politics and our work in Emaliguda stands testimony to such an unfinished effort wherein the relationship between individuals in the collective earned a place higher than the ‘cause’ that was being promoted.

This is so because the political subject, in this formulation of the ‘political’, is not assumed/expected to be devoid of her embeddedness in her social relations and conditions, (whether situated, constituted, or constructed). In fact, it is this very embeddedness of the political subject (whose self, personal, social, and political subjectivities are in continuous interaction with each other) with which she enters the ‘common in the making’ and this, in turn, forms the foundation and determines the potential of the political emerging in the individual and, henceforth, the development of the collective.

While drawing from Foucault’s distinction between the two elements of every(day) morality36, we understand how this ‘new’, ‘political’ subject must undergo a transformation of the self (Foucault calls it askesis or ‘care of the self’37—as against

36 In Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality, Foucault distinguishes the two elements of every 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. 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.” (Gibson-Graham 2001: 4).

37 Care of oneself is about attending to oneself, being concerned about oneself (epimeleia heautou). Care of oneself is a sort of thorn, which must be stuck in [one’s] flesh, driven into [one’s] existence, and which is a principle of restlessness and movement, of continuous concern throughout life—epimeleia heautou is an attitude towards the self, others, and the world...epimeleia heautou is also a certain form of attention, of looking. Being concerned about oneself implies that we look away from the outside...we must convert our looking from the outside, from others and the world etc., towards ‘oneself’. The care of the self implies a certain way of attending to what
the Christian ‘ascetic’—in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* [2005]); a ‘self-formation as an ethical subject’. This ‘political’, therefore, speaks a new language of not only rationality but of relationality in politics. It speaks of not only reason but of affect in politics; not only criticality but creativity in politics; not only morality but of ethos in politics; not only empathy-compassion but of love and friendship in politics.

Ackelsberg offers insights into the distinct nature of feminist politics undertaken by women’s collectives, premised on the importance of relationships, networks, and feelings, separating it from other forms of politics. “[W]omen bring a totality, an all-or-nothing feeling to action. It is something of which trade unions and political parties with their hierarchies and agenda know little, and to which they can give little. This totality is not just of the work day but of the whole day, not just of wages but of feelings, not just of economics but of relationships” (Cockburn; as cited in Ackelsberg 2010: 34). Ackelsberg states that not only do women find it easy to develop connections between concerns that are their own and those of the others, they also make efforts to maintain the relationships that give life to the community.

In short, unity, seen as a necessary condition for any political mobilization, is an inherent component of women’s daily experience of interconnected lives. “There is no guarantee of course, that a politics that takes account of women’s networks, or that focuses and builds on relationships between people, in general, will be open, non-racist, and non-exclusive. Yet, conceptualizing politics and political behavior around relationships, rather than around interests, provides at least the possibility of a more open, egalitarian perspective” (Ackelsberg 2010: 24). When studying the process of the evolution of a collective, there is a need to include the reality of women’s lives, and the networks and activities that make such mobilizations possible. We explored such interconnections, and the visible and the invisible of such feminine networks in Emaliguda, as we went about arriving, even if incompletely, at our collective, *Eka Nari Sanghathan*.

Ackelsberg highlights that historically women’s resistance has not received much...
political recognition (especially amongst classical or orthodox Marxists, not of course Gibson-Graham kind of feminist Marxians) because women’s personal concerns operating in the ‘private space’ did not qualify as a legitimate and appropriate subject matter of politics; it was not seen as publicly and socially relevant. However, at the same time, the strength of women’s collectives has been that they are centered around issues that are immediate and affect women affectively, not just as individual isolated beings but as members of the larger community belonging to diverse class, caste, and ethnicity conditions. “Women’s daily engagements and activities around networks of friends, family, and neighbors, give rise to their political consciousness, and their coming together is not necessarily an outcome of an external call from the organized unions, political parties, etc., but a call that is internal, non-competitive, non-hierarchical, what Colin Ward calls ‘spontaneously organized’ in Anarchy in Action (1973), with shared vision of bringing out collective concerns to the surface of the political system that stands at a distance and seems to control their lives” (Ackelsberg 2010: 23–24).

Ackelsberg argues that community-based activism gives way to changed consciousness that impacts knowledge generation, strengthens resistance, and opens new possibilities of strategies of resistance. “Through working with others, and confronting institutions, many women have come to a better understanding of the power relations that affect their lives and of their own abilities—together with others—to have some influence on them” (Ackelsberg 2010: 33). The process underlying this change is undoubtedly dynamic and multi-layered; also unpredictable. It can develop political consciousness and strengthen networks while, at the same time, homogenizing and isolating women’s networks, thereby hampering effective collaborations. Commonality of experiences and identity can lead to inclusion of some and exclusion of others; conflicts can arise in diversity, and it is important to view these conflicts as important contexts for change. Thus, “communities—and the network of relationships they nurture and on which they are based—have been, and can be, important contexts for politicization....and can be important sources of empowerment” (Ackelsberg 2010: 35–36). The political mobilizations that grow in the womb of people’s own experience and concerns are the most effective forms of organization.

Although Ackelsberg’s focus, in some ways, on inherent relationality among women seems to be essentialist, she does not deny the presence of antagonism within and outside women’s collectives. In fact, she points out, like Mouffé, that these
sites of conflicts should be acknowledged and be utilized as important contexts for politicization. In other words, Ackelsberg is arguing for an understanding of relationality that acknowledges and builds on existing antagonism and conflict, and by accepting that ‘othering’ and ‘exclusion’ is as much a part of women’s activism, she opens up a space for the politics of pluralism in relation to politics of relationality.

Mouffe, on the other hand, begins by drawing our attention to the politics of pluralism. She seems to be emphasizing the role of ‘relationality’ in formulating a new language of the ‘political’ that is premised on the acceptance of antagonism that exists in the social. When critiquing the universalizing assumptions and pretensions of traditional political thought, Mouffe states that “instead of the heralded ‘New World Order’, the victory of universal values, and the generalization of ‘post-conventional’ identities, we are witnessing an explosion of particularisms and an increasing challenge to Western Universalism” (Mouffe 2005: 1). She highlights that feminism has attempted to unveil certain forms of exclusion that were concealed under the notion of universality by discussing the beginning of feminist criticism of universality, with Carole Pateman pointing in turn towards the exclusion of women in classical, democratic theories.38 Today, the language of rights that are being demanded and claimed is based upon the expression of differences, constructed and rooted in particularism, multiplicity, and heterogeneity. Mouffe maintains that, “Universalism is not rejected but particularized, what is needed is a new kind of articulation between the universal and the particular.” (Mouffe 2005: 13).

Based on a critique of liberal democracy, when engaging with Carl Schmitt, Mouffe is suggesting an informed enquiry into the nature of modern democracy by highlighting the constitutive role of antagonism in social life, which strongly determines 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 rejection of inherent antagonism seems to be responsible for the failure of traditional forms of politics in remaining democratic and participatory. Mouffe (2005: 3) states,

38 “The idea of universal citizenship is specifically modern, and necessarily depends on the emergence of the view that all individuals are born free and equal, or are naturally free and equal to each other. No individual is naturally subordinate to another, and all must thus have public standing as citizens that uphold their self-governing status. Individual freedom and equality also entails that government can arise only through agreement or consent. We are all taught that the ‘individual’ is a universal category that applies to anyone or everyone but this is not the case. ‘The individual’ is a man.” (Mouffe 2005: 13).
“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. This can happen when the other, who was until then considered only under the mode of difference, begins to be perceived as negating our identity, as putting in question our very existence. From that moment onward, any type of we/them relation, be it religious, ethnic, national, economic or other, becomes the site of a political antagonism.”

From here, 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 need to rethink the sustenance of the ‘political’ in its pluralism. This is a kind of radical, pluralist, democratic politics, 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, as one of the many strategies geared towards pursuing and deepening the democratic project of modernity. This articulation 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.

This rethinking of the ‘political’, in the 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 multiplicity of the existing forms of subordination. 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 39)

39 “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).
When 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.

Mouffe (2005: 4) maintains that,

“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.”

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 for transforming the identity of various groups so that the convergence among the groups is not only limited to an allegiance of varied interests but 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. 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 because radical, plural democracy premises on the permanence of antagonism and conflict, it 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.” (Mouffe 2005: 8)

Mouffe is mainly arguing for a re-articulation of politico-ethical values through (post) modern political philosophy, values that emerge in the course of collective action, and through ‘being and belonging in common’. It provides a new conception of radical citizenship that respects both pluralism, inter-dependence and individual liberty. According to Mouffe (2005: 56–57), “

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...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.

This formulation of the ‘political’ with its emphasis on relationality and pluralism highlights that once the ‘political’ is re-imagined in the way it is done above, political transformation (which is constituted by the experience and structure of emotions, relationality, ethics, love, friendship, adverseness, antagonism, conflict, contradiction, common identification and ‘othering’, political principles and values that speak of persuasion rather than conversion [see Hannah Arendt, The Promise of Politics, 2007]), cannot be arrived at in separation from social transformation and transformation of the self. The three stances of traditional political thought that we have critiqued and revisited above (that is, the centrist understanding of power, the identitarian understanding of the political subject, and unexamined universalism) have shown in their redefining that unless there is transformation at the level of the social and the self, transformation of the political remains incomplete and one-sided.

This overdetermined nature of transformation raises a question to the historical assumption that political transformation precedes the long-drawn social transformation
and only when political transformation is achieved can there be scope for transforming the social. Transformation of self was never rendered important or even necessary for political transformation. However, the discussion above highlights the necessity of transforming simultaneously the site of the political, the social, and the self. “Scholars like John Dewey (1927, 1939) and, more recently, Chantal Mouffe (1992) and Avigail I. Eisenberg (1995) argue for a more ‘positive’ interpretation of human liberty and the process of democratization as an avenue for greater self-realization and self-development of individual capacities through participation in social life of the community.” (Bystydzienski and Sekhon 1999: 5)

This formulation of the ‘political’ provides a model that challenges dichotomized ways of thinking about political participation and social mobilization, focusing on transformation of the self and on the complexity of relationships in which real lives are embedded, and on the need to recognize ‘beings in relationships’ as political actors. Through transformation of self, there is a need to socialize political transformation (that is, have a social face to transformations that happens at the level of the state) and politicize social transformation (that is, have a political face to transformations that happen at the level of NGOs and non-state social actors). This Action Research, through the journey of the Sanghathan, has attempted to bring the three (including economic transformation) into a ‘trialogue’ with each other, and from there made an attempt to develop a philosophy of transformative praxis. The question that remains open through this work is:

“What are/can be community/local/cultural frames for transformative politics?”

**In Lieu of a Conclusion**

This journey with *Eka Nari Sanghathan* has been a journey of coming together, sharing experiences, building trust, and developing relationships in so many ways, known and unknown, strengthening solidarity even with the inherent fractures among us, interactions inside and outside *Sanghathan*, processes of facilitation and mobilization, visible and invisible processes involved in enhancement of agency and well-being, raising our voices, silent participation, making demands, helping each other and learning together. These processes were all overlapping, interconnected and, in ways more than one, interdependent. For example, on the one hand, the relationships that were developing between us became the basis of coming together in raising our concerns publicly, at about the same time, the processes involved in ‘visibilizing’ ourselves were, in turn, strengthening our bonds.
Eka Nari Sanghathan led to 40 single women in Emaliguda claiming time and space. This newly found time and space curvature belonged entirely to these women, who never before had a chance to sit together and talk about themselves. In Barkini didi’s words,

“There are many problems that women like us have to face in the ‘absence’ of familial relationships. Before we began sitting together to discuss these problems, we did not know much about each other’s lives. We had never thought about our problems collectively because we hardly have time for ourselves. We work from the beginning of the day till the end. Where was the time before to think about our problems? Now in our meetings, we have started paying some attention to ourselves and to the problems we face.”

The Sanghathan gathered all the women in one place. And now that they know about each other’s lives and the problems they face, they think collectively as to how they can help each other and find solutions for those problems. This journey has not only brought these women close to each other but has also helped them find strength in collective sharing and collective action. The struggles in this journey have been many but the burden of them was not too heavy because it was shared by 40 women. The women were single but they were not alone any more.

I observed how conversations about the importance of being united, standing for each other, empathizing with one another, sharing one’s pain, etc., did not remain limited with time to the Sanghathan meetings only. These conversations became part of their everyday life. Now, when these women meet in casual gatherings, part of their conversations are around what is going on in each other’s lives, whether they are facing any specific problems at home or otherwise, and what all they can/should do to improve their condition. On several occasions, I found one person encouraging another to leave all her apprehensions and fears behind, take charge of her life, confide in other Sanghas, and act collectively. The way these interactions found their way into the regular meetings of the Sanghathan was encouraging. Perhaps, a continuum was being formed between the casual gatherings and Sanghathan meetings, and as the ‘personal’ was being politicized, the political was also being ‘personalized’. Political discussions were increasingly becoming an integral part of single women’s lives, perhaps unconsciously and effortlessly. It was, as if, an emergent being-in-common among single women was taking shape, almost surreptitiously. I had in the process moved from being a catalyst to a pleasantly surprised beholder.
In the process of the formation of the Sangathan and of ‘right-ing wrongs’, an overall change was observed in the Sanghas. These processes led to the building of confidence and courage as engagements deepened with one another in the Sangathan, with other people in the village, with State officials and those in positions of power and authority. Along with the building of knowledge and awareness around issues and concerns, functioning of the State and other institutions, procedures, policies, and provisions in place, etc., the realization of the political potential in the self and the collective was increasingly taking shape. As these women helped each other to learn and grow, a massive change in the perception about themselves took place. In spite of the difference of single-hood and the differences of thought, opinions, actions, and understanding at times, the Sanghas stood together and kept the Sangathan alive.

The change in Aiya’s overall personality was very moving and encouraging for me, personally. In the initial meetings, Aiya was not comfortable speaking in front of many people, especially in the presence of men. She had shared with me that she hesitated to voice her opinion because she thought that she did not know much and her opinions were too naive. She said she preferred to remain silent because she believed that she lacked the sophistication required to interact with people. Slowly, her involvement and engagement in the Sangathan meetings deepened and she gained more and more in confidence with every passing meeting. The hesitation in her tone slowly receded. She is no more the shy woman, who used to sit in one corner, arms wrapped around herself, listening quietly to all that was said. Now, even with the officials (mostly men), she is a strong, fearless, and an articulate woman. She takes the lead in meetings, initiates discussions, encourages participation, and even facilitates the group. This change happened not in some woman in a distant village but to someone at home, in my home.

Journeying with the Sangathan members has been a significant experience, shaping the be-ing, and the transformation that took place within me. I have played many roles and have formed many relationships in Emaliguda with the Sangathan members. I have been friend, researcher, facilitator, and much more; the relationships I shared with the women taught me something or the other. Be it learning to live in the rural, learning to share, learning their language, learning the significant lessons of life, death and politics, these women have been, to me, great teachers.

The most important realization is that my involvement and keen interest in this work was not only to be able to do something with/for the single women in Emaliguda but
it was also a journey into my own self, towards making sense of my own condition of singleness, and fighting my own feminist battle of ‘making space’ for a woman, who chooses to reject the hetero-patriarchal institution of marriage and wishes to lead a life of singleness without being questioned, without being challenged, without being mocked at, and without being harassed (both mentally and sexually). One question that drove me constantly was, can we move towards becoming a transformed society, in which it is okay to be single, to live freely outside of a hegemonic marital arrangement, where a woman need not necessarily carry the trace of a legitimated ‘man’ over her identity and being?

It was important for me to find answers to the question that I began this work with on this journey. Can relationships built in this process of transformation, with bonds of empathy, love, and friendship, between single women mark a new beginning of imagining new kinds of relationships that are non-exploitative and non-oppressive? Can they be the ground for personal-political relationships embedded in the environment of solidarity and connect? In that sense, this work, for me, is a hope for a newer world, a hope for newer kind of relationships where there is love, ethics, empathy, togetherness, as also justice, freedom, and equality.

From the very beginning, this work has found its strength in the varied nature of relationships that were forged in the process. The politics in/of relationality and relationality in/of politics are something I learned from and along with the Sanghas. From the deep and special relationship I share with Aiya to finding so many friends in the members of the Sanghathan, I have slowly learned what it is to live (in) relationships, what it is to love the ‘inappropriate’ other, unconditionally perhaps, what it is to respect differences holding onto, at the same time, the similarities, what it is to ‘gift’ without expectation of anything in return, and how to retain patience and persevere in this long struggle. I was taught by the Sanghas how love takes us to the political and how the political takes us to love. I learned with them that politics does not require ‘killing’ of the ‘other’. It requires persuasion, persistence, and patience. It requires us to love. To use the words of a philosopher companion and a guide, who is equally responsible for shaping my larger politics, “After all, what is politics without love, and what is love without the political? … To love is to persevere.”

The experience of the journey of collective (in) action, helped me understand what a collective means, what it can entail, how collectives can or cannot be forged. I learned about the processes that a collective may undergo; the ever-changing and
evolving nature of it, and the importance of affect, ethics, empathy, responsibility, and respect in its members. I also learned how to mobilize, organize, facilitate, take lead, participate in discussions, listen to the others, and encourage and make space for silent and hesitant voices. In short, I learned what it is to be (in) a collective.

Like the *Sanghas*, my confidence and courage increased slowly with time. I was nervous in my initial interactions with government officials or others alike. I remember my first visit to the *panchayat* office; I could barely speak. I always felt I was being closely ‘scrutinized’ (being an outsider, not knowing the language). On the day of the *gram sabha*, I reached the *panchayat* office a little earlier than the *Sanghathan* members. I was made to sit in a room full of people, who held some official rank and kept talking among themselves in some language I did not understand. I remember feeling completely out of place and for some reason I was so scared that I wished that the *Sanghathan* members would arrive soon. As soon as I saw Kondari *didi* enter the gate, I jumped up from my chair, ran towards them, and hugged her tightly. I was so relieved upon seeing them all; it was as if I had suddenly regained my lost strength. That day, I realized how much I (that is, the single woman in me) needed the *Sanghathan* members—the collective of women. I thought I may be single but I am not alone. I learnt to mark the distinction between single-ness and being alone.

It has been a difficult exercise to put this experience to words, to write it without my co-travelers, to write about them, without them. From the usual difficulty of where to start and where to end, there have been days when I have sobbed quietly, sitting in my room going through my field notes, remembering Aiya while writing about her. On other days, I would smile happily, reading how I was initially teased by these women about not knowing the language, about not knowing how to bathe in the river, about not knowing how to cook food on the choolah. Revisiting the notes also encouraged and motivated me to write and tell the world our (unfinished) stories of transformation—stories of success and of failure. I was entrusted with a responsibility, and I wanted to do full justice to it. Even after having written so much, there is so much more left to be written. Perhaps I can never translate this experience wholly into words, into language. There will always remain some ‘loss’; words fall short; language in the last instance, looks inadequate.
To Think Together...

To conclude, let me use a metaphorical axis that I began this monograph with. When I see Emaliguda, the image that comes to mind is that of a village sitting between the ‘modern’ and the ‘developed’ stretch of a highway road and a long, winding river called Nagaballi at the other side. The lives in Emaliguda are caught between the so-called charm of ‘modernism’ and the so-called limits of ‘tradition’. A life where the modes of living derived from a road and a river are distinctly marked; road as a two-way transaction with the outer (modern/developed) world that one can enter and exit but where one does not belong as also this alien outer world that can enter and exit this inner world that it does not belong to. On the other side, we have the river as the repository of the inhabitants and of their everydayness. It symbolizes the life that is led in the village, it itself is considered ‘life’, carrying the traces of the tradition in which these lives are embedded.

It is as if we always find ourselves torn between the road and the river—the road as paradigmatic of modernity, development, capital-logic, industry and the river as paradigmatic of tradition, backwardness, feudal-logic, agriculture. Put in another way, we find ourselves torn between the giving up the riverine life-form and the taking up or adopting the life-form of the highway. In other words, we find ourselves torn between the ‘riverine’ form of life we cannot give up and the highway life-form we cannot (not) adopt. Modernist logic suggests: give up the riverine and adopt the highway. Traditionalist logic suggests: hold on to the riverine, stay away from the highway. The questions that haunt me are:

What is it that we are doing as action researchers? Holding on to the riverine or adopting the highway?

What does the ‘community’—if there is one, and if there is any—need? What does the ‘community’ desire? What could be the language of its demand?

How should one go about transformative social action? Which path does one take?

Do we know what the ‘riverine’ means? Do we have a rich and a deep enough understanding of the ‘riverine’? Do we not need to study the ‘riverine’ in greater depth—so as to make sense of its coordinates—to see whether we wish to give up the ‘riverine’—the good, the bad and the ugly about it—what it is in the ‘riverine’ that we need to build upon and what it is that we need to give up?
Do we need to know what the ‘highway’ means? Do we need to have an equally rich and deep enough understanding of it? So that we are able to see and experience its hegemony? Are we able to see that that lies ‘outside’ of it? What would it mean to think transformation from/for the ‘outside’?

With respect to the ‘political’ or with respect to ‘gender work’, I think we need to find a middle ground between the ‘riverine’ and the ‘highway’, between discourses of gender at work in the riverine and discourses of gender at work in the highway. The highway is marked at times by historical, materialistic logic, or by the simple opposition between man and woman, or by the logic of violence, or by a World Bank discourse of gender empowerment in under-developed contexts, or by simple percolations of first-wave and second-wave feminisms in some NGO circles. And the riverine is marked by unknown/unexplored theories and practices of subaltern feminism—(an)Other way to look at gender and feminism, (an)Other meaning of gender and feminism that the subaltern withholds. Can there be a middle ground that talks to both? Can we write a ‘new’ history (of feminism) of/with adivasi single women? Can we ‘know’ and explore a ‘new’ existing and resisting world of feminism in adivasi single women? Can we dream of a ‘new’ future of transformation, of feminism with adivasi single women? Can the difficult path of the Sanghathan offer us a middle ground or the middle path?
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BIO-NOTE

Bhavya Chitranshi is currently Fellow in Action Research at the Centre for Development Practice (CDP), Ambedkar University Delhi. She has her Masters in Gender Studies and an MPhil in Development Practice wherein she worked on the question of ‘singleness’ among Kondha adivasi women and co-founded the Eka Nari Sanghathan (Single Women’s Collective) in a village named Emaliguda in the Rayagada district of South Odisha. Her present project is an extension of her MPhil work to six villages in Sikarpai panchayat of the district. The Sanghathan working largely at the interface of being single, being ‘woman’, and being adivasi has been engaging with questions around transformative praxis that take us beyond the hegemonic practices of state and capital-centric development and given perspectives around class struggle and feminist politics. This work, albeit remaining in a close dialogue with these discourses and practices, departs significantly in rethinking transformative social action. The question of transformation in this work is being re-imagined at the uneasy cusp of psychoanalysis and politics; thereby looking at the threefold axis of transformation, namely the subject, social and the political transformation.
Rohini Gadhiok Foundation

Established in 2011, the Rohini Ghadiok Foundation is committed to supporting institutions that aid students through educational, technical and vocational training programs. It aims to contribute towards the making of a just and egalitarian society; to inspire hope, lend a hand and directly engage people, by promoting the ideals, values and principles espoused by Rohini Ghadiok, the development professional after whom the Foundation is named. Some of their initiatives include transforming education for underserved children in urban India through the Parikrma Humanity Foundation; supporting social entrepreneurial outreach initiative, imparting skill-training and providing employment opportunities to young people especially from rural, disadvantaged districts across the eastern states of India through Gram Tarang and other such endeavours.
Ambedkar University Delhi

Ambedkar University Delhi is a public University with a campus-based, unitary structure with research, postgraduate and undergraduate programmes in the social sciences and the humanities. Bharat Ratna Dr B.R. Ambedkar Vishwavidyalaya, Delhi (Ambedkar University, Delhi or AUD) was established by the Government of the NCT of Delhi through an Act of the State Legislature in 2007. The University is named after Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the visionary Indian reformer, who believed in education as the right weapon to cut social slavery… (Which) will enlighten the downtrodden masses to come up and gain social status, economic betterment and political freedom. The University aspires to combine equity and social justice with excellence, and to pioneer an institutional culture of non-hierarchical functioning, team work and creativity. The University strongly believes that no knowledge becomes socially productive unless it spreads across society, transcending barriers of caste, creed and class. Only then can teaching and learning become liberating undertakings, contributing to the promotion of equality, social justice and excellence.

Centre for Development Practice,
Ambedkar University Delhi

In tune with the larger AUD objective of ushering in engaged social sciences in the University context CDP places the question of (rural) transformation – including transformation of human subjects – at the core of its inquiry, research and practice. The overarching objective of CDP is to critically engage with and reflect on existing developmental discourse and practice, usher in psychological-psychoanalytic sensitivity in our work with communities (including an awareness of questions of ‘transference-resistance’) and thereby rethink and rework the associated developmental sectoral practices and practices of self, social and political transformation in the rural and forest communities.

The Centre for Development Practice (CDP), has a two-pronged focus: one, the creation of a cadre of action researchers to engender transformative social action in the space of ‘rural development’; two, the establishment of the CDP as a vibrant space/platform for dialogue between development practitioners, action researchers and academics, engaging in collaborative research, documentation and anthologies of action and practice.
MPhil programme in Development Practice

The MPhil programme in Development Practice anchored by the School of Development Studies and School of Human Studies is a space to bring theory and practice, research and action to dialogue and to create knowledge of the rural with the rural through action research projects. In this endeavour, CDP supports SDS and SHS in conducting a curriculum where learning is based on a dialogue between field immersion and classroom experience. The students are immersed in existing sites where PRADAN is working and each student is assigned a field faculty (staff of PRADAN) along with a faculty from AUD to guide them through this journey. The main attempt of this learning programme is to create collaborative journey between the action researcher, community and the development worker. In a word, the MPhil programme – through MPhil dissertations – generates knowledge on transformative social praxis while it engages in, takes part, ushers in, and catalyzes transformative social praxis in largely adivasi and partly dalit contexts.

In the MPhil programme we thus try to

- Engender a small process of transformation in parts of rural India, a process owned by communities in which the transformation process is being initiated through some kind of catalytic activity by the researcher, who is in turn making an attempt to know in-depth what is wrong, knowing with the community as co-researcher.

- Documenting the process in its infinite complexity and contradiction.

- Generating somewhat abstract learnings and explanatory frameworks on transformation out of the experience of transformation for the development sector and the social at large.

- This process leads to the writing of the MPhil Dissertation.