

## **We too can dream!**

### **RGF Report 2017-2018**

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It began with a dream; a dream that was not dreamt but rather envisioned as a hope to live. It was a dream to labor, nurture, and co-create life in harmony with an irrigated agricultural land and an adjacent forest where the women from the *Sanghathan* would labor, live and sing, a 'land' where women would be 'free'. This is Aiya's dream for the *Sanghathan*, perhaps for single women, in general. I know this dream is suspect to many critiques and questions such as, a land for women alone? Why? Will this not isolate single women further? In this era of feminist work taking place not just with women but also men, does not this keeping away of men and segregating women to build life without men, a regressive movement?, and so on. I am well aware of these problems and so is somewhat Aiya, but dreams are not slaves to reasons and rationalities. Dreams do not have an 'appropriate' language. Dreams are driven by desire and hope, in this context, desire to be free and hope for a life of harmony. It is also true that dreams don't come true; this is not my cynicism speaking because I am a true utopian at heart and I believe in dreams. What I mean is dreams do not come true as such, at least not in the truest form. In the translation of dreams to what we wrongly call 'reality', there is always something that gets lost. There is as if a negotiation between what of the dream can remain and what of the 'reality' can change. The loss holds the remainders of the dream that fail to impress the practical side of reality and simultaneously crafts careful holes in the consistent walls of reality that lighten up with the entry of a dream. Loss is not always negative. It builds, as it breaks. This year for us in the *Sanghathan* has been a year of dreaming, negotiating, learning, laboring, losing, drowning, playing and dancing. With so much happened, there is a new 'life' to the *Sanghathan* that Aiya's dream gave birth to.

In June 2016, Aiya and Mami didi from the *Sanghathan* had joined me for a visit to Basudha. Basudha in the deep forests of Bissumcuttack (about a couple of hours away from Rayagada) is a small 2.3 acre farmland on rent in an *adivasi* village. Over 1200 folk rice varieties and 30 other crops are grown and preserved on this farm every year, as a model of ecological agriculture, combining traditional and scientific ways of multiple cropping. The forest, agriculture and humans come to co-exist in Basudha. It is home to its founders Dr. Debal Deb and Mr. Debdulal Bhattacharjee and Mahendro and Sabita who belong to nearby village but work and live at the farm. The architecture of Basudha is ecologically sensitive with three hutments made of adobe, mud, lime, sand and stones, with straw thatched roofs. It has three EcoSan dry toilets, whose dry

compost enriches the farm soil. The campus is off-grid, and solar powered (see <http://cintdis.org/basudha/>).



As we spent the whole day understanding the work in Basudha, Mami didi and Aiya were surprised (a) to see how traditional methods of farming that they had left behind could be so useful and productive and (b) to find many varieties of local produce that have slowly evaded from their agricultural life, especially after the coming in of BT cotton in the area. They gathered a few rooted stems and leaves, a handful of seeds and plenty of memories to go back and share with their *Sanghas* that in Basudha, in the middle of a forest some people were doing agriculture the way the *adivais* earlier used to do. They returned quite fascinated and almost in disbelief. How could this be possible? Was agriculture without fertilizer and pesticides possible anymore? Why were some people preserving what *adivais* were leaving behind as a sign of backwardness? Is there any value in the modern and developed times to what *adivasi* life and culture has created and cultivated since ages? They were quiet on the way back. I also chose not to disturb them. I could sense their morning excitement of seeing their past alive had by evening turned into mournful nostalgia. A sad realization of what all they have lost overtime had set in. When I dropped them home, Aiya asked me hesitatingly if it was possible to for us to build our own Basudha. I smiled at her because I had no answer for her. But her hope had made me hopeful.

By the time we had visited Basudha, agriculture planning in the villages had already happened. People had purchased the seeds and sowing was only a few days ahead. I was confused if I should open up the discussion around agriculture at this point. It was too late given we were at the onset of the agricultural season. To plan for the next season, it was perhaps too early. However, I was convinced I had to begin there. It couldn't wait. We were already too late! A few days later, it was our monthly meeting in Emaliguda. In the meanwhile I had read all about the

Mondragon Corporation<sup>1</sup>, a workers' co-operative in Spain and I wanted to discuss this model with the Sanghathan members. The plan was not to follow the Mondragon model (it is also not possible given the difference in context) but to explore possibilities of co-laboring among the *Sanghathan* members. I felt it was important to derive learnings from the model and create an account of co-laboring and the need for it that fitted our context. This was an effort at 'translation', a translation not from one language to another but a translation of language of theory and practice of collective laboring to a form that could communicate to women in the *Sanghathan*, a form inscribed in their 'language'. I gave this translation a form of a story, a story that brought together ideological truths and principles that Mondragon Corporation stands for and a contextualized fantasy that could make the story more relatable and real. My intention behind creating this story was not simply to narrate an account of successful practice to inform women of what Mondragon Corporation was about but also to plant a seed of hope and possibility that could make us think about practices and transformations that we could engender.

Collective laboring is part of *adivasi* life in Rayagada. Sharing labor, helping others and voluntary involvement in laboring activities is part of cultural life among the Kondhs. Women work in each other's fields, co-perform household chores, look after each other's children, share the produce whenever need be, and undertake roles and responsibilities on behalf of each other. Most of these exchanges and collective work remain outside monetary accounting. Overtime these cultural value systems are slowly fading away and money as a form of exchange is becoming more and more popular, however there are still many small instances of non-monetary exchange and collective processes of laboring that are in place. In other words, alongside several capitalist class processes, *adivasi* life worlds are also organized around an assemblage of noncapitalist class processes and socio-economic experiences. Some of these range from single women farmers engaging in what Resnick and Wolf (1987)<sup>2</sup> call 'independent' or 'self appropriate' class processes, individual performance of surplus labor with collective appropriation of surplus generated from a common piece of land, individual performance of surplus labor and individual appropriation of surplus, local market trading and local credit systems, non-monetary exchanges like barter, labor exchange and sharing, co-operative exchange, gift economy, shared household labor, social reproductive work and care work undertaken mainly by women. Building upon such instances and realities, combining them with

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<sup>1</sup> Mondragon Corporation is the embodiment of the co-operative movement that began in 1956, the year that witnessed the creation of the first industrial cooperative in Mondragon. The corporate values that mark this model are cooperation, participation, social responsibility and innovation. The corporation's mission combines the core goals of a business organization competing on international markets with the use of democratic methods in its business organization, the creation of jobs, the human and professional development of its workers and a pledge to development with its social environment.

<sup>2</sup> Resnick, S. A., & Wolff, R. D. (1987). *Knowledge and class: A Marxist critique of Political Economy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

the story I was crafting, I believed we could imagine collective processes of laboring. This was important for 2 reasons: (a) to understand, explore and hold onto collective forms of laboring, exchange and sharing, i.e. to learn from existing non-exploitative and postcapitalist processes and to build upon these processes to create more such spaces and (b) to resubjectivize and explore possibilities of shift in subjectivities (from noncapitalist and pre-capitalist to postcapitalist subject positions) through collective creation, exchange and sharing.

The story thus was as follows:

Once upon a time there was a small village. The inhabitants of the village were mostly farmers. They used to work hard in the fields to earn their subsistence and between the forest, the local 'haat' and the agricultural produce all their needs were satisfactorily met. Things began to change with the entry of an industry in the nearby area. Most men and women were hired as daily wage labourers leaving no time with them for agricultural activities. People began earning in cash and their dependence on the market eventually increased. They began buying most of their necessities from the market and were motivated to earn more and more to be able to survive. The work in the factory was hard and required them to labor all day in return for a small wage that was just enough to make ends meet. Yet this shift was perceived as a sign of development as it carried with it a promise of eradication of poverty and deprivation. It promised more goods and services and more employment for the people.

However, somehow even after years of working in the factory, people were not moving up the economic ladder. Their condition was not improving. On a closer look, there was a sort of imbalance in the life that existed before. Their lands on which now mostly women labored alone because men were in the factories, were not managing to produce much. As a result the lands were being slowly taken up by the rich to set up more and more industries. The air in the village seemed heavy and polluted. The rivers were becoming scantier and dirtier. The forest was depleting. As time passed by, the inhabitants of the village began falling ill, they stopped enjoying the food they ate, they had no time for leisure and the work in the factory seemed boring and mundane.

As people began thinking they realized how their lives had significantly changed; not for better but for worse. How people had become more individualized and cared less for their community, their village, nature, environment, and their surroundings. These reflections led them to ask what could be done to recover what all they had 'lost'. Could they work together towards rebuilding their lives? Was it possible to come together and do things collectively to earn and to replenish their fields, their rivers, their forest and their lives?

I left the *Sanghathan* members with these questions. I was told they were experiencing the same situation but have not perhaps reached the point of alert yet. Some women said they are aware of how destruction is going to hit them soon as a result of inorganic agricultural practices, increasing dependence on the market and factories and so on. Aiya at this point shared her

experience of visiting Basudha and said that she felt the answer to these problems could be re-establishing our connect with nature. She explained to the women how in Basudha some people are trying to recover lost *adivasi* knowledge and practices of agriculture and crop varieties and how that seemed to her like a different world from where we live now. There is no dearth of fresh air, clean water, healthy forest and agricultural produce. As she was talking about Basudha so passionately, Mami didi laughingly said, “Aiya has gone mad. She has been continuously talking about finding a place in the middle of the jungle with surrounding agricultural land and water source. She thinks we all should shift to such a place, do agriculture and live together without any problems of this world where we live now.” Aiya shyly smiled and said, “yes. This is my dream for myself and the *Sanghathan*. We can live happily there and be free”.

All the women laughed loudly, however not dismissively. I could sense Aiya’s dream had touched each one of us. Perhaps the laughter symbolized hopelessness, a dual realization of desire and its impossibility. Hopelessness is a beautiful state to be in; it is marked by both hope and the limits of it. Although read as the opposite of hope, I feel hopelessness also carries hope, it is where desire is still alive, it still breathes. Aiya’s dream seemed impossible because it was a dream. But I knew we could cull out scattered pieces of it to build something anew, a new that was engrained in the old; a future could be imagined through recovering the past. This is where we wanted to think of what this ‘new’, this future consisting of the remainders of the dream and the negotiations in reality would look like. I proposed we think of something small yet something that will bring together what we wanted and how we wanted it.

The next time we met the women had decided to do agriculture together. We had no idea how this would happen, where we will do it, what all we will produce and how everything will unfold. But we wanted to explore possibilities. I was apprehensive of how 40 women would do agriculture together? Will the *Sanghathan* break in the process? It was a huge risk. I felt giving this decision time and thought was important. And this year we were not prepared to do agriculture. The season was almost beginning and there were too many loose ends. I shared my apprehension and proposed that we could begin with something smaller as we prepared ourselves to do agriculture in the next season. Everyone seemed convinced and agreed that next year would be better. After a lot of discussion, we decided we will divide the *Sanghathan* members in groups of two (20 women in each group) and prepare mango pickle and rice papad.

The women in the pickle group decided to collect mangoes from the forest and those in the papad group contributed 250 gms rice flour each. I offered to contribute financially towards other input costs and to labor with them. Once the mango was collected from the forests we decided to follow an Andhra recipe so that we could sell the pickle in the local market. None of us knew how to make rice papad so I googled the recipe. As it goes, papad and pickles are not easy to make and given this was our first attempt at these preparations that require precision and years of experience and knowledge, our papads turned out to be a tad bit salty and hard to eat. We decided to not sell the papad and keep it only for household consumption. Since the amount was not too much, women shared small amounts of it among themselves.

The pickle also did not turn out to as per our expectations. But it was good enough to keep some and sell some. I took a small amount to Delhi and a few friends and family bought the pickle. Our major sale happened when Gurpreet and I put up a stall at ISI where Jagori was celebrating its 30 years of togetherness. It was the right occasion to present the *Sanghathan* in a feminist space. A lot of women bought the achar and at the end of the day we had a good collection.

The process of making rice papad and mango pickle was very interesting and engaging. Women got together, distributed the work amongst each other, took responsibility at each step and enjoyed the whole process. I also learnt a lot as we went along. Although a few errors here and there but the time we spent in the forest gathering mangoes, in the kitchen preparing papad and pickle and at the rooftop drying these was filled with joy and laughter. This initiative was not simply to create a business venture but to come together as laboring-creating subjects. The pickle was kept largely for self-consumption and the rest was sold to generate surplus that could be collectively appropriated. It is also to generate surplus for women in the *Sanghathan* who are old and unable to self-sustain themselves.



The next year we again gathered mangoes from the forest and decided to make pickle. This time I insisted we prepare *ambo soda*. *Ambo Soda achar* is a *Kondha* recipe of sweet and sour (as also a little tangy and hot) mango pickle that forms a very important part of *Kodha* diet, especially during the summers and the rainy season. Every household prepares this *achar* for daily consumption and it is also believed that consuming it during high fever helps bring down temperature.

The mangoes are collected from the nearby forests and the pulp is kept for drying. It is dried till it somewhat solidifies and then *Gud* (Jaggery) and some other ingredients are added to enhance the flavor of the *achar*. The pickling process takes a couple of days and thereafter the *achar* is ready for consumption. This *achar* making has been part of *Kondha* world since forever. Women in each household prepare the *achar* as soon as mangoes are available in the forests.

In the year 2017 a few friends had visited Emaliguda and really appreciated the ambo soda achar that Aiya prepared. Since my immersion days, *ambo soda* has been one of my many favorite *Kondha* dishes. When others from outside also began liking the achar, I thought why not try making ambo soda in the *Sanghathan* this time and see if we can create market for it. The women were initially very hesitant. They were skeptical that people will not buy *ambo soda achar*, given it is an indigenous recipe. After a long discussion we decided to produce a small quantity and see if people buy the achar this year. To our surprise, we could collect close to 10,000 rupees from marketing it to friends in Delhi and at CDP. The response has given us confidence to produce more ambo soda achar and sell it to generate surplus in the *Sanghathan*. This process has also in some ways helped break the notion among women that indigenous food recipes are backward and not good enough for the world outside. Since the sale of ambo soda, women in the *Sanghathan* have been offering ambo soda to everyone who visits Emaliguda and have been taking pride in their preparation.



This small yet significant process of achar making for two consecutive years taught us, especially me the strength of collective laboring and sharing. I was convinced we could do agriculture together. Our discussions and learnings continued as we kept looking for an agricultural land to lease. Our primary concern was where would we get money for the land? In the discussions women had decided not to rent or buy land as this would require lot of spending. There is a cultural practice of land leasing among the *Kondhas*. Any land owner who requires cash urgently puts out his land for lease in exchange for some ready cash. The leasing party cultivates the land for 3-4 years after which the principle amount that was paid in the beginning is returned by the land owner and the land is given back to him. The *Sanghathan* members got in touch with several people and we finally decided to take lease of 3 acres of land that is adjacent to a water canal in Pujariguda village. Since the distance to the land was around 2-3 kms after crossing a bridge that connected Emaligida and Pujariguda, the women thought it was a good deal. The women collected some amount, Prof. Dhar made a generous contribution, and I used my savings to gather money to pay for the lease.

I was a little skeptical of the deal because it traditionally involves no paper work. It is the elders of the village who finalize the deal in their presence and there is no suspicion about returning the money or utilizing the land etc. However, since I was new to this process, I insisted we get the legal papers signed. The women did not show much interest in the process as they were convinced that they knew the landowner too well and there was nothing to worry about. They kept telling me that it was my urban upbringing that made me skeptical. At this point, Ashutosh joined us in Rayagada and he made it possible for us to get the papers made and signed. His joining us for the agricultural work gave me confidence. The paper work was quite a challenge as the land owner lived far away. There was no means to get in touch with him since the phone signals did not work there and we had to mediate continuously through his neighbor who was negotiating on his behalf. Finally when the papers were ready, Ashutosh along with Aiya and Neelama didi went to the land owner's village and got the papers signed.

All this while there was some discussion on what we will cultivate on the leased land. I had been very clear from the beginning that we shall not produce cotton on the land we will use for collective farming. Several discussions took place to understand how cotton is environmentally degrading, does not ensure any movement towards food security, leads to debt traps and demands extensive laboring activities and engagement. Since cotton is the dominant cash crop in the area and functions on the illusion of huge profit, every year people cultivate cotton in hope for cash income. As our discussions took place, women slowly agreed to not cultivate cotton. Later because the land we leased was lowland, it got quickly decided that we shall cultivate paddy. Ashutosh calculated how much per woman per day consumption amounts to, and our goal was to produce the same or more amount of rice in order to ensure food security.

We also invited Dulalda to survey the land and run a one day workshop with the women on the political economy of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, what are the harmful effects, how we can engage in ecologically sensitive farming without using chemical pesticides, herbicides and

fertilizers and what are the possibilities of production with the use of indigenous seed varieties. Dulalda spoke for hours explaining the need to shift from inorganic farming to ecologically sensitive farming. He emphasized on the processes where nature itself can take care of the agricultural cycle and how farmers are lured by the capitalist market into the trap of purchasing seeds, fertilizers, pesticides etc from the market leaving them with nothing in the end. As women listened, they questioned. For them using chemical fertilizers and pesticides is a given now. It was hard for them to believe agriculture is possible without these expensive inputs from the market. And even after repeated efforts women were doubtful if we shall gain anything by doing agriculture without marketed inorganic fertilizers and pesticides.

We had several discussions regarding how we will do agriculture, what seeds we will sow, what kind of fertilizers and pesticides we will add and how will we bear the expenses. Every time we met our discussion revolved in circles, especially with respect to the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. I could see how the hegemony of the capitalist market and changing agricultural practices and policies worked to make farmers dependent and insecure. There was no faith in natural or ecologically sensitive farming even after 7-8 women had witnessed the work in Basudha. They believed in Basudha this kind of agriculture was possible because it was surrounded by the forest, the soil was healthy and there was enough water. They agreed that the excessive use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides for agriculture in general and cotton production in particular had been responsible for environmental degradation in our villages, but now there was no way out of it. They believed that there was more need for fertilizers and pesticides now to be able to produce enough on the land that had no fertility and strength left of its own.

Whereas perhaps Ashutosh and I were focusing on how we could shift to ecologically sensitive farming with traditional seed variety, the women in the *Sanghathan* were more concerned about the yield and the quantity of production. Finally Ashutosh and I had to enter into a negotiation where women decided to use chemical fertilizers and pesticides in regulated amounts, only twice during the whole cycle and that too in smaller quantities compared to how much they use otherwise. We substituted the chemical fertilizers and pesticides with the use of organic pesticides prepared from cow urine and neem leaves and organic fertilizer made of neem seeds that remain as a residue after extraction of oil. This negotiation on the limited use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides and introduction of organic fertilizer and pesticides was the most challenging phase for both Ashutosh and I. We also organized another exposure visit to Basudha for women to witness ecologically sensitive farming. Dulalda and Mahendro engaged with the women, clarified their doubts and questions, and overall it was a good learning experience.





Slowly as we progressed, the women agreed that we could replace chemicals with organic substances and their openness towards trying alternative methods was increasing. The perception around indigenous seed variety, chemical fertilizers and pesticides was slowly changing as we engaged in alternative practices. Although this year we sowed both indigenous seed varieties and high yielding seed varieties, with the use of both chemical fertilizers and pesticides and organic fertilizers and pesticides, the fact that on around same area of land, the indigenous seeds offered a good and healthy yield and even with limited use of chemicals, our produce did not get hampered, there was a shift in how women perceived alternative methods. It appeared some faith at last got restored in traditional ways of farming.

In the capitalist system, an economic process is understood as a simple business venture without considerations into its impact onto other connected areas such as environment, health, ethics of laboring, appropriation and distribution etc. In our endeavour we wanted to move away from the capitalist imagination to a somewhat post-capitalist process where agriculture is not seen simply as an economic process in isolation to questions of health, environment, labouring, appropriation and distribution. Ashutosh and I repeatedly encouraged discussions related to agriculture in

connection with food habits, health and ecologically sensitive methods. In present times, when agriculture is seen as a business activity alone, concerns related to what kind of produce we cultivate and what harm does it do to our health and environment are questions that remain unattended. Our effort at collective farming with the *Sanghathan* did not want to ignore these pertinent aspects tied to the activity of agriculture. It is a different imagination when Mami didi says that, “this land is like my own womb and the crop is like my growing child”. This connection with agriculture is something that the capitalist world fails to understand. The logic of nurturance, sharing, looking after the environment, protecting many other lives inside the land, in the accumulated water, on the crops, feeding the crop and being fed by it, is a perspective that remains unavailable to the modern day capitalist world. For us these lives mattered, ecology mattered, our health mattered.

Once the produce was about to be harvested the neighbours on the land and the people in Pujariguda village began enquiring what seed variety we had used? How did it gain so much health and height? How was our production so high in spite of one time use of chemicals on the land? It was a happy moment for Ashutosh and me to hear women from the *Sanghathan* say that they had done traditional seed variety which they did not need to buy from the market, that if people were interested in cultivating these seed varieties they could take the seeds from us but only on the condition that they would not use chemical farming. What Dulalda, Ashutosh and I had been explaining to the *Sanghathan* members in the last few months was now being suggested by them to the others in the villages.

In today’s time when the farmers are being encouraged to produce and appropriate on an individual basis keeping self-interest in mind, when they are being lured into cash crop production for the big industries and in times of increasing reliance on the capitalist market for inorganic and chemical farming which emphasizes the use of fertilizers, pesticides and hybrid/high yielding seeds, this attempt at collective cultivation was more of an experiment towards exploring ways to do alternative farming with indigenous seed variety and ecologically sensitive methods. Ashutosh and I also realized on the way how the next year we need to be better prepared. This was quite a struggle but we respected the fact that the women did not obey us blindly. They fought with us, challenged us, and at times kept us out of the decisions. However, as we practiced alternative methods, laboured collectively, and attained fruits of our labour, we all realized the potential of possible alternative methods in farming. The differences, the struggles and the negotiations also in a way defined collective farming for us. This year we plan to be better prepared having learned from our mistakes from last year and to continue to work in the direction of post-capitalist collective and ecologically sensitive farming.

There were many other challenges we faced in the process. The unpredictability and delay in monsoon led to lack of irrigation in the initial days followed by delay in ploughing and sowing. The bridge that connected Emaliguda and Pujariguda (where the land is) got washed off in the flash flood that had hit us just before the sowing process began, as a result, women had to walk

for about 8-10 Kms every time they came to the fields. They also performed all the heavy work that usually men do in the agricultural lands. Except ploughing that was done using the tractor, all other work from breaking and building the boundary of the land, spraying organic pesticides, carrying loads of harvested paddy over their heads, and thrashing the entire produce, was all done by women alone. Women also stayed up till late night in the fields in order to regulate the amount of water on the land. They used to hide behind the bushes, sleep on the rocks and come back early morning to ensure that the supply of water in the field was not disrupted.

Beginning from the work of preparing the land, cutting and building the boundary, treating and sowing the seeds, transplanting the crop, treating the land with fertilizers and pesticides, regulating water in the field, harvesting of paddy, thrashing and separating paddy from hay, straw and husk, packaging of the harvest, loading, unloading, distributing paddy to the members, drying paddy, milling it into rice, and handling the finances all the work was done collectively. A couple of times the *Sanghathan* members broke into arguments and disagreements when during the growing period only a few women were being repeatedly asked to look after the condition of the land and the crop and to visit the land in order to regulate the water. Those who took responsibility usually ended up doing more work than the others. However, soon this was brought up in the meetings and all the women were paired up to pay regular visits rather than a few.

In spite of these struggles and challenges, the *collective spirit of the Sanghathan kept us going and we managed to work through all kinds of constraints*, ranging from financial to physical, psychological and environmental. The work was mostly distributed according to the age with younger women taking up more laborious tasks, however, each and everyone, irrespective of their age, participated and contributed to the labouring process except Daima Pedenti who unfortunately met with an accident a few days before the sowing and could not be part of any work. The women walked long distances to reach the land, lifted heavy weights, performed back breaking work all day, stood without shade whether it rained down or the sun scorched above and still they sang in harmony as they worked, laughed their heart out during the small *pika* (traditional beedi) break, ate together under the mangrove and walked back home in joy after completing the work day after day. *Their bond strengthened as they travelled, worked, sang, smoked and ate together.* Their happiness was beyond measure on the days all 35 of them would come and finish the work in a couple of hours. They would at times say, “when we work together, the work *feels* so easy. It becomes much more difficult when we have no one to share it with”.

The first day all 35 women gathered to sow seeds, it was a sight to see. I was told that “one earns the right to eat only when one sows the seed”. It was for the first time I was becoming aware of the story behind the food that easily reaches my plate every day. I wondered if I had the right to eat the food I never produced. I laboured that day. I sowed seeds with 35 women and my body

felt the pain that goes in producing the food we eat. Sowing is an act of labouring that requires women to continuously remain bent in one position. As I struggled to find my ground in the wet muddy fields with half my legs submerged, I sowed seeds that would be someone's food someday. I always knew in theory that struggles led to gains, but this was perhaps one of those moments where I experienced what this meant. The ease, with which women performed the work and finished it, was surprising to me. I was half their age, and I was half capable of what they could do. Throughout this agricultural cycle, I engaged in each and every labouring activity to make my body aware of the efforts that go behind cultivating food. At the same time I was also becoming aware of my body and its limits as it had never known laboring in this way before. This memory of labouring and sharing the field with women from the *Sanghathan* was perhaps the most important learning in the last year.

Not only the performance of labour, even the appropriation and distribution of the produce was a collective endeavour and everyone including Daima (who could not participate this year) was given equal share of the produce. The *Sanghathan* teaches as it learns – this collective journey of producing, appropriating and distributing paddy equally has left us all (the women, Ashutosh and I) with lot of new learnings, reflections, and most importantly strengthened relationships. We celebrated the this process of collective labouring and learning on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January when we organized a bhoji for all the women in the *Sanghathan* and the people who have been associated in this work with us. Next to the river under the mangrove we met, cooked lot of amazing food, sang, danced, ate together the rice we had cultivated and played *kabbadi*. We all spent the day together in celebration of our journey and collectivity.











## Meeting on Gendered Division of Labor

Under the mangrove in March 2017, around 75 women and 3 men from 6 villages gathered for our annual meeting. The *Sanghathan* members from Emaliguda were joined by women from Kirkalpadu, Damini, Mahendarpur, Jamboguda. A few women from Rivolkana village in Gadiseskal panchayat also joined us in order to understand *Sanghathan*'s work. There are a lot of single women in Rivolkana village and they have been showing interest to join the *Sanghathan* for a very long time. The *Sanghathan* members had already met the women from Rivolkana twice and the invitation to the annual meeting was to introduce them to the *Sanghathan*'s work and think about how we could build future connections. This year the plan is to explore 5 new villages in the Gadiseskal Panchayat.

The meeting began with Neelama didi and Aiya discussing the work *Sanghathan* did so far and what are some of the issues they are planning to work upon in the near future. Issues related to alcoholism, abuse, marital/sexual violence, masculinity, body, sexuality, gender discrimination, division of labour, preventive health care mechanisms and access to government schemes and provisions were proposed and it was discussed how we could come together to mobilize more and more women, and think, reflect and sensitize ourselves around these concerns. Mami didi also discussed the work that the Nirbhaya Federation has been doing over a couple of years and how there were connections and learning that we all could draw upon.

The main discussion that day revolved around gender division of labor as this seemed to be a common issue among all women and perhaps the simplest to discuss in a large and open setting such as this one. The discussion began with Paro didi from Emaliguda openly sharing about her problems and workload in the family. She is very old now and lives with her husband. She lost her younger son last year and the family has not been able to recover from the loss yet. Her elder son and his wife and children live opposite to her house. In spite of her son, his family and her husband, Paro didi shared how the entire burden of working in the fields and at home lays upon her old and tired shoulders. Tears rolled down her eyes as she described her every day. Her elder son refuses to look after the old parents. He hardly contributes to the mere earnings his parents get by producing cotton. Instead he takes away half the share of their earnings claiming that the land they cultivate belongs to him as their only son. Paro didi's husband often drinks and fails to work given his old age and excessive drinking. She narrated how she alone looks after the house, the fields and her husband. There is regular dispute in the house given shortage of food, excessive workload upon her and her husband's drinking problem.

As Paro didi shared her condition of singleness, many women began opening up about theirs. Some women from Mahendarpur and Jamboguda also shared their lives with us. There was a common chord that connected these women, especially women who are married and yet live in similar conditions of singleness. This discussion was then followed by a small activity where I asked women and men to collect the same number of straws, leaves, small sticks, and stones spread around according to the number of laboring activities they perform in one day. It was no

surprise that women had close to 17-19 things collected as signifiers of the amount of work they did and the men could collect no more than 3-4. A few women from the *Sanghathan* had collected materials reflecting upon the work of both women and the men in their family.

It was found that the burden of work was maximum on the young girls. We often talk about women's labor as all women do the same work. But here it was visible how younger women were expected to do more work than women elder to them. They had no time to play or study unlike the men their age. It was interesting to see the huge difference in the works performed not just between men and women but also among women. Whereas women and girls woke up at 3 or 4 am in the morning to cook, clean, fetch water, attend to cattle, look after the children, and go to the fields, the men said they never had to worry about waking up early. They would get up around 8, eat, listen to music, roamed around with friends, played volleyball and cricket and if need be go to the fields or take the cattle for grazing. Everyday routine work was not something they were responsible for. There was no set routine for them to follow. Only in times of need they would work.

However, this was mostly true for young boys who were not married. Gupto, a young married man claimed adult men living alone with their wives did share some work. This of course did not include household work, but he shared how he contributed more or less equally to working in the fields. However, he was still freer to go out, meet his friends, spend time doing nothing as compared to his wife who has to be on her toes every minute of the day. Some younger married women seemed to agree with Gupto. They shared how their husbands sometimes when they are not drunk, helped them in the kitchen and in the fields when no one was watching. They also said how they wished for men to contribute and share women's burden of work. However, these small possibilities and hope lay with only a couple of women in the meeting.

As women shared the amount of work they did, I asked men how they felt about it. Gupto said, he never realized how much work women do. It is also because he never realizes they are working, it is as if this is all they do. It is a given that men are supposed to be sitting, laying on the cot, relaxing or playing as women move from one job to the other. He said, there was a need to do something about this however, he remains unsure if things can ever change.

As I enquired if it was possible that men also contribute towards laboring, it appeared I had said something strange and out of this world. Not just men, but even women were quite convinced that men were not meant to work, only women were. When Neelama didi said why can't men fetch water, there was a burst of laughter in the meeting. Alayi didi said, everyone in the village laughs at a man who brings water home or cooks for the family. He is not considered lesser a man, a womanly man if he performs household duties. As I went about questioning this belief suggesting how these are norms that are socially structured so that men could be free of responsibilities and women be burdened more and more, I was told that this is how it has been for ages. I realized because women have been in a habit of working all day, laboring did not seem to bother them much. Moreover, there is not much expectation from men. This debate

continued in the meeting and it was a good discussion to open up the issue. A range of perspectives and ideas were explored while we all wondered whether this division would ever dissolve and what can be done in this direction.



Post the meeting we all ate together the food Debi didi and Manika didi had mainly cooked. The other women and I helped cut vegetables, wash utensils, cook rice, serve the food etc. After lunch we all sang and danced together and as women joined in the danced one after the other, it symbolized our work and the future possibilities.



## Women's Health

In August 2017 we lost one of the members of the *Sanghathan*, Dai Kadraka to reasons unknown to us as also to the doctors in the district hospital. She had been unwell for sometime and her treatment was continuing in the district hospital. As she recovered a little, she told other women that she has a feeling she will not survive this illness. Her fever had been cured but the boils in the lower part of her body were not going away. Tired every now and then from going to the hospital 30 kms away, she decided to end the treatment. On the night she was feeling a little better because of no fever after a long time, she took her last breath. Her sudden death shook all of us. We collected money in the *Sanghathan* to perform her last rites. When we met next, there was sadness all around and as we remembered her there were many questions and insecurities that surfaced. The (un)certainty of death was one, the other was how do we ensure a better health mechanism and care system in the *Sanghathan*. The problems with the State health care are not unknown to any of us, the distance to the hospital, the quality of health care and check ups, the

waiting time, the way people especially women are treated and so on; the list is endless. For us two discussions were of prime importance: 1. how do we rethink mechanisms of health care in and with the systems that claim to provide it, and 2. How do we look after each other in the *Sanghathan*. What will be our mechanisms of care in the collective.

The discussions around health opened up in great detail. We explored connections between food consumption, laboring activities and health. There were also discussions around how we will look after each other, especially women who do not live with their families or are ill treated by the families. For example, Daiama Pedenti who met with an accident had a poor condition. Her family refused to take her to the hospital. One of the reasons was expenditure involved but the other was also that her family did not bother much whether she lived or not. They used to throw her medicines away saying there was no cure for her condition. The members in the *Sanghathan* decided to look after Daiama didi and began giving her medicines and proper food that could help her recover. There were also instances when women from the *Sanghathan* would take other women in the village to hospital, get them checked, stay with them if admission was needed and look after them once they were back in the village. Mami didi and Neelama didi especially have been taking initiatives in this direction. Other women mostly look after each other in the village.

We also organized an exposure for some to the Christian charity hospital in Bissamcuttack which looks after patients better and provides better health care; although this hospital is also a couple of hours away and involves basic expenditure. The discussion on health also strengthened as we tried to move away from curative health care to preventive health care. The discussion that used to be earlier focused upon how problematic and inaccessible hospitals are were slowly moving to how food consumption and agricultural practices be rethought. The harmful effects of chemical fertilizers and pesticides on health were getting discussed and the new morality around non consumption of animal protein was also being questioned. Given huge presence of religious and modern forces in the village, a lot of women have stopped consuming meat. This understanding was being questioned and some women began changing their food habits. Aiya had been suffering from the problem of frozen shoulder and continuous body pain for a couple of years now. She began consuming an egg every day and a couple of months later her pain significantly subsided. Similar discussions and change in practices were being encouraged in order to strengthen preventive health care in the *Sanghathan*.

In addition to this, Prof. Anup Dhar who initiated the discussion around preventive health care, offered to do medical check-up in Emaliguda and in the villages in Sikarpai. Preliminary check up was done to examine hemoglobin levels, blood pressure, pulse, calcium and iron deficiency and bodily pain. Women were asked problems they have been facing and medicines were assigned to all. Low hemoglobin levels, low blood pressure and deficiency of calcium and iron was a general condition in women. It was interesting to find that the older women's hemoglobin levels and iron-calcium content fared better than the younger women. Some women who had specific health issues were checked for the particular problems and further tests and medication

was assigned. The following list gives a glimpse into the first preliminary check up that was done, advised check up and medication assigned.

SN	Name	Age	Sex	Pulse	BP	Medical Issues	Advice
1	SITTE PEDENTI	70+	F	84	160 BY 80	HANDS, LEGS, BACK PAIN/ HB V LOW/NUTRITIONAL DEFICIENCY	
2	ARNALU MINIAKA	45	F	80	90 BY 50	HANDS, LEGS, BACK PAIN/ HB V LOW/NUTRITIONAL DEFICIENCY/Suspected Haitus Hernia	UTI to be done
3	ORALU PEDENTI	45	F	80	100 BY 70	HB-OK, GASTRITIS, MENOPAUSED, BONE PAIN	Post menopausal osteoarthritis suspected.
4	TURUNJI PEDENTI	55	F	80	80 BY 60	HB V LOW/CONSTIPATION SINCE 4 TO 5 DAYS	Lump in stomach could be due to constipation
5	SITTAI PEDENTI	47	F	84	120 BY 70	Fever at night, body pain, HB Low, Daughter and father in law diagnosed with TB; urine very yellow	Suspected TB; Blood to be tested for TB (ESR)
6	SALME MANDIKA	51	F	76	136 BY 78	HB LOW, AMOEBIASIS, IRREGULAR HEART BEAT	CARDIAC CHECK UP S3
7	PARO PEDENTI	57	F	80	120 BY 70	Body Pains HB Low	Nutrition
8	SIMO PEDENTI	58	F	76	120 BY 70	Amoebiasis, HB Low	

9	PONDU SUNAMONI	55	F	80	140 BY 80	HB Low, nutritional deficiency	general check up
10	JOGA PEDANTI	65	F	80	120 BY 70	HB Low, nutritional deficiency	
11	WANO PEDENTI	50+	F	80	120 BY 70	HB OK Gastritis	
12	BARKINI PEDENTI	55+	F	76	100 BY 80	bone pain	
13	BALAMMA PEDENTI	45+	F	80	142 BY 82 150 by 82	HB Low, nutritional deficiency	Urine examination needed
14	SITTE BIDA KKA	43	F	92	120 BY 80	HB OK	
15	LINGO PEDEDNTI	45	F	80	100 by 60	HB OK back pains, Menstrual bleeding continuous	Gynaec check up
16	SALME PEDENTI	37	F	100	100 by 70	HB very low, Menstrual Pain	iron supplement
17	NILAMA PEDENTI	45	F	80	110 by 70	HB Low menstrual Pain	
18	TULSI PULAKA	75+	F	80	100 by 60	HB Low, Hands and leg pain	Calcium supplement
19	MAMI PEDENTI	30	F		100 by 70	HB Low	
20	DEBI PEDENTI	45	F		110 by 70	HB Low	
21	KAMALA KONDAGARI	35	F		110 by 80	HB Low	
22	PARO PEDENTI	47	F	60	90 by 60	when stomach aches she gets fever, constipated (?)	Isabgol
23	AUNLA PEDEDNTI	50	F	76	90 by 160	HB OK Gastritis	
24	RUAI BIDIKA	75	F	76	90 by 60	HB OK back pains	
25	KATI KADRAKA	47	F	70	130 by 80	HB OK Hands, leg and back pains	Calcium supplement
26	PUTEMA PEDENTI	55	F	80	120 BY 80	Breathing trouble, palpitation, bone pains	CARDIAC CHECK UP
27	JANAKI PEDENTI	46	F	80	100 BY 70	left lung has crackle	Chest X Ray

						sounds	
28	DIAMA PEDENTI		F	80	100 BY 70	Accident with head injury, oath neurological disorder	Neurobion to be given
29	KAMSALI HIMRIKA	38	F	80	140 BY 80	abdomen has knotted pain, slight palpitation	Metrogyl
30	JIAMA WADAKA	33	F	80	110 by 80	Back Pain, Gastritis, HB Low	Iron/calcium supplements
31	PONDU HEMALI	55	F	72	100 by 70	fever since 3 days, HB Low	Antibiotic
32	ANAMI PEDENTI	49+	F	84	120 BY 70	Bleeding every week for a year, heavy bleeding, complete hair loss	Scanning of Uterus





### **For the Future**

This year we have been planning towards moving beyond chemical and inorganic modern methods of farming with hybrid and high-yielding seed varieties. In the villages in Sikarpai discussions have been initiated and land and crop mapping has been done in order to research the context and work towards ecologically sensitive farming with traditional and indigenous seed varieties. Visits to Basudha have been organized and in the annual meeting planned for this April the agenda is agricultural planning. We will be inviting Dulalda to open up the discussion and motivate people to think about this movement.

Also we have over the year come in contact with and have been thinking about possible collaboration with many organizations doing similar work. Calcutta based organization named Sappho working on the question of sexuality among LBTQ and single women has been approached and two members from the organization working with single women's group in Assam had visited us to explore the work and build connections. There are some people in Bhubaneswar working on the issue of land rights and indigenous food marketing that we have met and established contact with. Our collaboration with Basudha has strengthened with agriculture work and in this direction we hope to explore the work of a local organization named Nirman and Living Farm. Recently, Mami didi and I had visited Mumbai for a workshop on collaborative knowledge production organized by CORO and TISS Mumbai. CORO has been working with single women in the Maratwada district and we are in the process of collaborating with the organization.

Also Mami didi will be awarded by NFI, Delhi for her commitment towards working with women at the grassroots level and her voluntary engagement in the work she has been doing with the *Sanghathan*.

Every successive year we plan to engage extensively with 5-6 villages in different Panchayats, so that we have an expanded reach in the area and the *Sanghathan* could be built across different contexts. 5-6 villages a year seem few but the engagement of our work is more qualitative than quantitative. We believe that by simply expanding to large number of villages we may not be able to build strong bonds between women and also learnings and reflections from our work may get hampered. This work focuses on in-depth engagement with the lives of women and towards building transformed futures. Along with my co-researchers (we will go on adding co-researchers as we move to more villages in different Panchayats over the years) the plan is to understand and explore the nature of hetero-patriarchy and socio-cultural controls and taboos in the *Kondha adivasi* culture that oppress and exploit women. The work also focuses on spaces and structures that are gender just and operate differently than mainstream understandings of feminism; the focus is also laid on exploring traditional ethics and values that hold and assist functioning of the 'communities'. These explorations and reflections coming from *adivasi* life world would help us build upon our work while rethinking and redrawing gendered experiences, practices and relationships and in transforming lives through collective living and caring. Thus the work is largely to understand, rework and (re)build gendered relationships, processes and ethics of care that draw heavily from *adivasi* culture and context that these women are part of rather than building upon foreign understandings of feminism that have continued to guide us so far.

Although the plan is to work largely on building *adivasi* gendered collectives, specifically we also plan to engage deeper with related issues of sexuality, violence, gendered division of labour, preventive health care, eco-sensitive and collective agricultural practices, models of self/social sustenance, learning spaces that will focus heavily on *adivasi* knowledge systems and practices (rethinking learning beyond formal western education systems), and building collective processes that are democratic and non-hierarchical in nature. The question before us is to how to move with this vision in non-violent yet affirmative ways. The work shall remain deep rooted in the context, and yet may offer insights and knowledge that may be helpful for rethinking transformative work in general. It is towards this aim of *newer learnings, common becomings, and deeper bondings* that we at *Eka Nari Sanghathan* would keep working.