Desiring Transformation: Transforming Desire

Report to the Rohini Ghadiok Foundation (RGF) (Jan 2016-Dec 2016)

Bhavya Chitranshi
Desiring Transformation: Transforming Desire

Bhavya Chitranshi

From the women on the scooty...

The ‘main road’, turned upside down with narrow and temporary ‘side-lanes’ offering way to the ever speeding trucks, the overloaded TATA magics (something really magical about these mini vans fitting no less than 20 people in, above and outside it), and rashly driven bikes (honking masculinity), takes us (the Sanghathan members from Emaliguda and me) to the villages in Sikarpai panchayat of K. Singhpur Block (about 30 km away from J. K. Pur where I reside and 15 km from Emaliguda village). Leaving the main developmental road, it is as if every time we leave from home to visit these villages, we take the difficult, temporary, risky and less traveled

---

1 *Eka Nari Sanghathan* is an *adivasi* single women’s collective in Rayagada district of South Odisha. This *Sanghathan* was formed by 40 single women of Emaliguda village in August 2013 and since then its members have been working autonomously towards understanding and transforming the nature of gender(ed) relations and opposing in a non-violent way 'gender oppression' and discrimination in *kondha adivasi* space. Through consciousness building and collectivization we have been trying to mobilize more and more single women in the area. This *Sanghathan* has evolved as a space that hosts friendships and togetherness for women who experience 'singleness' in their everydayness due to practice of violence, marginalization, discrimination and social/familial Othering. This space has enabled *adivasi* single women to engage and (re)think collectively around questions of development, well-being, solidarity, rights, ethics, feminist consciousness and politics and has led to the building and strengthening of voices of resistance and dissent. Since this *Sanghathan* belongs to the *adivasi* single women, larger concerns around women and gender are raised from the particular condition of singleness in the *adivasi* context. The questions pertaining to self, social, economic and political transformation stand at the centre of our larger praxis.
road of/to transformation. With my unsteady but careful hands clutching the handle of the shaking scooty on the muddy path, my shoulders held tightly by the didi sitting behind me and the back of the scooty grabbed cautiously by the didi sitting behind her, is how we try to make our way through the uncertain maze of side lanes. With the speedometer needle oscillating between 30 and 40, it is this journey together, with this carefulness, this dependence and this holding on to each other, that helps us move ahead (slowly yet steadily) on the side lanes of transformation.

Kondari didi, Neelama didi, Janaki didi, Male didi, Aiya (Arunalu) and Mami didi from Emaliguda are my co-action researchers. The decision to do this work together, to visit other villages, and to share the Sanghathan with more women, was undertaken by the members of the Sanghathan. The reason (we thought) was, if anyone can explain the work we have done for two years and if anyone can mobilize more women to join us and continue our journey of collective transformation with us, in the best way possible, it is only these women from the Sanghathan; women who have forged the Sanghathan and have build it day after day. Their confidence to mobilize women and the excitement of traveling to other villages and meeting new people and old relatives was accompanied by a sense of joy and commitment. We decided to take turns in

---

2 Chitranshi (2016) argues for a critical engagement with existing (somewhat under-theorized) practices that are hegemonic in mainstream development – and tries to arrive at a re-formed understanding of transformative praxis through the workings of Eka Nari Sanghathan. This work highlights how mainstream development that claims to speak of transformation, mostly falls short of distinguishing transformation from (somewhat instrumental and self-interested practices of) State-sponsored or funded developmental deliverables. The action research work with the Sanghathan – which could also be called ‘gender work in and with the adivasi women’ – fails to find much purchase in current developmental practices hegemonized by the women's self-help group model; it also doesn’t find much space in current frameworks of left politics hegemonized by metaphors of (violent) class struggle or demands on the liberal State. This particular philosophy of transformative praxis gestures towards departures from both mainstream developmental conduits of action (marked by collectivization for action – collectivization as means to an end) and traditional forms of Marxist and woman-centered (as against gender-focused) politics that have hitherto framed dominant discourses and practices of transformation.
pairs to visit six villages within our reach. These villages namely are, Shantinagar, Belakona, Kirkalpadu, Dhyamolima, Jambaguda and Mahindarpur in Sikarpai panchayat of K. Singhpur Block.

A series of discussions took place in the Sanghathan towards setting up the objective of visiting other villages. In the first few months, most of the meetings were centered on which villages to visit, how to engage, where and how to begin, and how to build and strengthen the Sanghathan. In one of the many initial meetings, following suggestions were made:

1. We will visit nearby villages in Gadiseskal Panchayat, turn by turn, and interact with single women in these villages. We will share with them the importance of forging a Sanghathan and add more members from other villages. This was thought primarily because, some of the SHG members and friends in the nearby villages were continuously insisting on initiating such a process in their villages and were quite interested in becoming part of the Sanghathan. Also, since these villages were close to Emiliguda, it was easier for the Sanghathan members to travel to these villages on a regular basis.

2. To initiate discussions in the new villages around expanding the Sanghathan and involving more single women from those villages.

These suggestions raised a few questions in my mind because it appeared that while emphasis was being laid on the expansion of the Sanghathan, we were barely thinking about exploring new villages, tracing their history and context, and generating an understanding of the condition of singleness and the nature of gendered relationships in these villages. Perhaps, we had become

---

3 Singleness among Kondha adivasi women (in this work) is understood as an overdetermined reality marked around, (a) the psychoanalytic subject (with affective states like states of fear, loneliness, unwantedness, pain etc.), (b) the social (marked by the violence and oppression of larger hetero-patriarchal structures) and (c) the
too certain about our knowledge and praxis, and hence replicating what had happened in Emaliguda and adding more women to the Sanghathan seemed to be our primary focus. The questions that crossed my mind were: a) Were we rendering our praxis as hegemonic? b) What if the context turns out to be different? c) What if we are assuming that the philosophy and the praxis of the Sanghathan is the only way? d) What were we looking for in these villages? e) And finally, what was contingent-emergent about our praxis and politics?

I decided to put out my doubts in the Sanghathan, knowing fully well that these questions would throw us off (since the excitement and energy regarding expansion was too much in the Sanghathan) but at the same time these reflections seemed important and I was confident that we shall find a way together. Aiya responded by saying that, “because we have begun this work on singleness, it is our responsibility to mobilize women in other villages and work with them towards addressing the problems that are faced by single women. But for this we need to know the conditions in which single women lead their life. If they do not relate to the issues that we are invoking, how will they become a part of the Sanghathan?”

Later, Jiya didi also suggested that we first need to engage with single women in other villages inquiring as to what does singleness mean to them, what are the ways in which single women cope with the challenges and suffering, and what are the forms of oppression, marginalization etc. Reflecting upon how we had moved about this work in Emaliguda, she insisted that,

“we need to research the condition of singleness, similar to how we began this work in Emaliguda. We realized the need for a Sanghathan because we were able to articulate and analyze our issues and concerns only after a significant number of political (which is symptomatic of the epistemic violence of the capital-state nexus and foreclosure of singleness in developmental work and the women's movement).
meetings and discussions took place. In the initial meetings, we could not articulate our problems straightway and it took us many interactions and discussions to open up our lives, reflect back and understand our condition of singleness. A similar process needs to take place in the other villages too. We should neither assume their need for a Sanghathan, nor should we impose our ideas upon them.”

Our discussion intensified and the Sanghathan members agreed that before mobilizing women into the Sanghathan, we need to first try and understand the experiences of the women in these villages, the condition of singleness, their everyday lived reality and the nature of gender(ed) relationships and dynamics of the village as a whole. It was assumed that as these discussions would engage women into analyzing their lives, their sense of everyday oppression and resistance; these will also offer us clues as to how to move forward with questions of mobilization and collectivization. It was decided that a core team of 6 members will begin action research and the findings and experiences will be shared and discussed with the whole Sanghathan from time to time.

As we began visiting the villages of Sikarpai panchayat (we could not continue working in Gadiseskal panchayat for some reason), we received a variety of responses ranging from curiosity, hospitality and acceptance, to suspicion, disinterestedness, and rejection. In the initial days, we would go from house to house requesting women to sit with us. There were days when a few women would gather and some discussions around the 'problems' in the village and what all resources people lacked would take place. There were also days when we would return extremely disheartened after waiting for hours and finding not more than a couple of women who would be interested in talking to us. We were often told that “there is no sense of oneness in the village and women do not value sitting together for meetings.” At other times, we were asked politely to not waste our time visiting these villages because people either had no time or
they were simply not interested. It was becoming extremely difficult to bring women to sit together and engage in a dialogue with them.

We would often observe women sitting together in one place talking to each other, late in the evening after finishing their day's work, but due to minimal engagement of outside organizations and agencies (governmental and non-governmental), the 'practice' of women sitting in groups, mainly self-help groups (as it existed in villages like Emaliguda and many others in Kolnara Block where developmental organizations have been working since long) was not very common in this area. Most women are part of self-help groups that have been formed overtime, but they hardly sat together to deposit and save money. I realized, that because I was being viewed as an NGO worker bringing women from Emaliguda to help me conduct meetings around saving and credit and to translate from Kuvi (adivasi language) to Oriya, we were failing to generate much interest.

We decided to meet women during the time they sat together in the evenings to slowly become a part of their everyday discussions. Our repeated (purposeless) evening visits to these villages gave us an opening and helped us build some friendships and familiarity. Women slowly began opening up to us and there was immense curiosity among them around why we, three women on the scooty, roam around the area, from village to village. They would often ask who we were, where we were from and what was the objective of our visits. As we went about answering their questions and addressing their curiosity, there was a movement from being perceived as an educated middle class professional/expert/trainer bringing adivasi women to help her work in the villages to now being regarded as “ma mane” (women) from Bepliguda (original name for Emaliguda before it became to be known as Emaliguda in the official records), who have forged a Sangathan in their village and work on women's issues with a “didi from dilli”. This process helped us to communicate that this work was not mine alone, rather it was initiated and is being taken forward by the women in Emaliguda. The initial discussions on why and how the
Desiring Transformation: Transforming Desire

_Sanghathan_ was formed, what our experiences have been, what is the philosophy behind our praxis, and what all work we have done so far, provided us with an opportunity to generate some interest among women in Sikarpai.

However, time and again, we were still faced with the most popular question 'rural' spaces have learned to ask as victims and beneficiaries of development – the question being – “what can we get from you?” and “how will we benefit from coming and sitting for the meetings?”. We realized that even when the engagement of development organizations in the area is bare minimum, the questions, concerns and discourses that development has given birth to, are as alive and thriving as they are in spaces that are loaded with developmental interventions. It was a constant struggle to get heard amidst the loudness of these questions and repeated assertions suggesting, “rural _adivasi_ spaces are poor and lack in resources”. Moreover, the issue at hand was also the manner in which these concerns were being communicated and the ways in which we were being approached; these mostly came in the form of a 'cry' of a victim poor third world woman, lacking resources, knowledge and capability to change her condition, making constant demands for all that she was _supposed_ to demand for, and all that we were _supposed_ to provide. It is not that the concerns around poverty and problems regarding

---

4 Thakur (2014) discusses how rural development programmes have altered the meaning of the village in the social imagination. The village in the developmental discourse ceases to be that which it _actually is_ and is rather conceptualized as the 'rural', as poor, backward and lacking (in) development. This understanding of the village as rural, as that which is _not_ urban, _not_ modern and _not_ developed, takes away from the village the credibility for self definition and legitimates developmental statist intervention.

5 “As a system of representations, development discourse served to universalize and homogenize third world cultures, creating the possibility of subjecting 'developing' countries to economic, cultural, and political transformations offered in the name of eradicating underdevelopment and ushering them onto the path of development... power is exercised among and over the peoples of the third world not so much through repression but through 'normalizing' the condition of underdevelopment and 'naturalizing' the need for development.” (Gibson-Graham and Ruccio 2001: 159).

6 “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).
access to resources are not important or are of any less value, but our effort through the praxis of the Sangathan has been to move beyond mainstream developmental imagination and practice (that perceives the ‘village’ only through the framework of poverty and 'lack') to more theoretically informed gender work that explores and addresses concerns that continue to remain hidden (in the obsessive focusing of developmental issues) and that builds on adivasi history, knowledge and way of life, thereby relying on adivasi women as 'capable' subjects creating possibilities for a collective (transformed) future and becoming.

It took us a long time to explain the difference between the workings of the Sangathan and that of the development sector organizations. A graphic representation and explanation of what we call, “the circle-triangle distinction: From Resources to Relationships”, helped us communicate in clearer manner. The circle stands for resource related issues in women's life, for example, shortage of drinking water, landlessness, absence or malfunctioning of governmental institutions and policies etc. The triangle, on the other hand, stands for (interpersonal) relation related issues in women's life, thereby representing issues like singleness, violence, gender discrimination, woman's relation to her own body-being, health and sexuality etc. This separation between circle and the triangle highlights that the issues tied to the circle, at one level, require a

7 “It is to ask (how) can we also learn from adivasi worlds, theories and praxis of feminism (rather than trying to always teach ‘them’ our theories and practices of 'feminism')? (How) can we learn to be political and what is it learn to transform from a subaltern life world(view)? These questions require us to think further as to what is it to listen to a subaltern voice? Can we begin to see, for instance, what patriarchy, gender, power, violence, oppression, resistance, or the ‘political’ entails in the subaltern wor(l)d?” (Chitranshi 2016: 3).

8 According to poststructuralist feminists, the potential of feminist politics lies in the questioning and destabilizing of the category “woman” that is produced and regulated by social norms and it is this opening up and re-articulation of the category “woman” that will determine the nature of the feminist subject within feminist politics. According to Gibson-Graham subject needs to be understood as capability, “as both powerfully constituted and constrained by dominant discourses, yet also available to other possibilities of becoming” (Gibson-Graham 2006; xxxvi). (For more on the question of the subject refer to Chitranshi’s upcoming paper in CUSP (titled “Singleness and the Sangathan”).

9 This exercise was designed and developed with Prof. Anup Dhar, Director, CDP who has been a mentor and a co-traveller since the inception of this work.
negotiation with the state and government officials, largely as 'rightful' beneficiaries of developmental policies and programmes, however, the issues tied to the triangle require a rethinking of gender(ed) relationships, ethico-communitarian ways of being and transforming ourselves and our socio-economic-cultural context and conditions. Women are burdened by issues tied to both the circle and the triangle. But how to address these issues and what we become in the process is an important question that gets opened up through marking this distinction between the circle and the triangle. This also takes us to other questions such as,

a) Do we remain as beneficiaries relaying solely upon the developmental state and other organizations (something the 'circle' insists we do) or do we take charge of transforming our present and future through transforming ourselves and our social relations and context (something the 'triangle' becomes symbolic of)?

b) Where do we begin from, the circle or the triangle? Can working through the triangle strengthen our position to negotiate better with (non)governmental organizations? Can rethinking social (gender) relations and strengthening 'local' collective bonds take us towards transforming the self, social and the political, thereby lessening our reliance on outside agencies such as the state?

This exercise, through marking a sharp distinction between the work of development and the work of the Sangathan and therefore, opening up these questions has helped us destabilize the dominance of practice and discourse of mainstream development in the villages we are working. It has enabled us to prepare a fresh ground of our own.

The challenges and concerns that came along with working in these villages, led us to reflect on our initial framework and objective of collectivizing single women; it also informed our areas of enquiry, our research questions and our way of approaching the condition of singleness. We, at the Sangathan repeatedly examined and discussed these challenges, concerns,
reflections and experiences and through this an attempt has been made to arrive at contingent (re)solutions that help us explore the *adivasi* “life-world” in general and the condition of women and the experience of singleness within it, in particular. Our journey has shown us that it is important for us to rethink the existing methodologies of researching and practicing in the *adivasi* spaces; at the same time keeping our objects of enquiry and areas/angles of transformation open. A two-day workshop with Prof. Anup Dhar (conducted with me and the five women who visit these villages) that largely focused on violence and re-wrote the given script of violence on women in *adivasi* contexts (showcasing the disaggregated nature of violence and patriarchy vis-a-vis the assumed reality of either-or which understands *adivasi* societies as either all patriarchal or fully gender just) not only helped us to build upon the methodology of working on questions of violence on women, but it also enabled us to reflect upon the limitation of over reliance on women’s narratives and experiences.

These reflections and thoughts motivated us to think of more creative ways of generating knowledge and discussions about the condition of women and the nature of patriarchy in the *adivasi* context. It showed us how the translation of theoretical insights into different kinds of (group) activities and engagements, take us to generation of deeper ideas, thoughts and knowledge as also intensified action and praxis. Thus, the initial months of our action research work urged us to mark sharp distinction between workings of the Sanghathan and that of the larger mainstream development, it pointed towards the need for a deeper understanding of the 'woman question' in *adivasi* contexts and helped us rethink questions of methodology and praxis in the village spaces, in order to build on a transformational path and philosophy (even if it continues to be the side lane).
The (single) ‘woman’ in the adivasi context: Reflections from women as ‘women’

“A woman has breasts and vagina and can give birth to a child.”

“A woman is the one who works all day for the family, without much help from the others.”

“A woman menstruates. Before a body starts menstruating, it is a person. She is considered a girl and is allowed to play with boys and interact with men. As she menstruates, the girl becomes a woman. She is no more allowed to walk or talk freely, especially around boys and men.”

“At the parent's house a girl can do most of the things she likes without worrying too much. After the girl is married and goes to her in-laws house, she is bound to take up all the responsibilities of that household and give upon things she likes.”

“A woman gets a “shot” (can be loosely translated as jolt) when a man touches her. The feeling can sometimes be exciting and at other times be discomforting. A husband's touch in the bedroom can also be as displeasing as the touch of an unknown man in the bus. A man's touch during the day and his touch during night are quite different. A woman always knows a man's intention by the way he touches her.”

“A woman is not a human. She is treated worse than the cattle. She is abused. She is beaten. She is made to do all the work. She gives birth to children, raises them, takes care of the family and then she is left alone to die. She has no family. She has no home.”

These quotes are some of the responses to the question we were trying to explore with women in the Sikarpai area; the question was “What is 'woman'?” This exploration seemed important...
in order to understand the idea of 'woman' as it gets constructed and constituted in the psycho-
social reality and gender discourse of the kondha adivasi life world. However, given the muteness
around the woman question and women's issues, it was mostly very difficult to initiate and open
up such discussions. In the initial interactions, I was often told, that, “We do not think about the kind
of life we live as women. We just keep ourselves engaged in the work, live with whatever we have
and keep doing things to sustain our families. If we sit to talk about our lives we will keep crying.
It is very painful to think about our life as a woman. All the pain and suffering comes back.” However,
as this 'space' for/of women was slowly getting created, women were opening up to each other
and to us. Some women later said,
“we now realize how difficult life is for each woman. Before this, we did not have much idea
about the lives that other women live. One keeps struggling with one's own life. The kind of
violence that other women face inside their households is not visible from outside. We think that
one is sad because one does not have enough to eat, and the one who looks to have enough also looks to be happy.
But this is when one is looking from outside. The reality is very different when one gets to see
the inside.”

The above mentioned responses coming from women as 'women' offered us insights into
not only “what is woman” but also what it means to be a 'woman' in the kondha adivasi space. The
process also highlighted how women's experience and issues related to living life as 'women',
mostly get suppressed and often forgotten in the excessive foregrounding of developmental
issues. Our conversations, which were often left open-ended, were stimulating insights and
critical thinking with respect to understanding one's own life and the gendered reality. It was
around their experiences that this knowledge was getting generated. Lastly, these discussions

marginalization are often diverse and different even among women. The category woman is a
fragmented/fractured category constituted through range of psychic and social flows and matrices of power,
subjection, and liberation. There is a need to move beyond simple biological frameworks determining the figure
known as the woman.
along with generating a certain sense and consciousness around the idea of 'woman', also helped establish its connection with the condition and experience of being single and that of being adivasi.

The understanding of singleness for us expanded as we engaged with women. During the course of exploration we observed that the number of single women in Sikarpai area is not as high as it is in the Kolnara block. There are fewer single women in these villages, largely widows with a few exceptions of separated and never married single women. The exploration around the general ‘condition of women’ in the area suggests prevalence of many forms and conditions of singleness that are lived within marriages and necessary coupledom. These conditions range from singleness among old married women whose husbands are mostly unwell and unable to work, women with alcoholic and ‘good for nothing’ husbands, women whose husbands are abusive and violent, to women living with men who care the least and are often indifferent to the presence of these women in their lives. In this sense, there are very few women who admit to be living peacefully with their husbands, are supported in/by their families, and are devoid of the feeling of loneliness/alone-ness. Although, the condition of singleness varies among women, the experience of it largely remains the same; it is between the pain of singleness and the singleness of pain (pain that is experienced alone) that most of these women live their life.

“Once women become old and are unable to work, they are abused and held responsible for family disputes, breaking the family etc. The same brothers who in the young days depend entirely on their sisters and claim to love them the most, in the later years, accuse them for everything that goes wrong. And those women, who are not able to work at all after a certain age, are eventually thrown out of the house by their families. Our brothers, husbands, sons, nephews, and in-laws never realize how much we do for them, what all sacrifices we make everyday. We live under continuous fear of getting abandoned one day. So, it is not that women become single only because they do not have a husband or their husbands have abandoned
them, but also because their own families abandon them. This way every woman can become single someday. … Single women have no one they can call their own. They do not have a husband that they can say is hers, they do not have a child they can call their own. Even if she has children they abandon her once she is old. Hence, for a single woman the suffering is not just that of being poor and deprived but also that of being lonely, being alone. If a woman keeps herself attached to her family and children, she is ill-treated, abused, violated and looked down upon. And if she detaches herself, then she has to face difficulties of life all alone. Ultimately, single women are just left with some clothes and tears and they wander here and there in that state.”

Harsha didi in one of the discussions shared with us how happy she was at her parent’s house before marriage. She was never pressurized to work all day and was treated with lot of love and care. But after she got married, her life changed drastically. All the responsibility of running the household, working in the field, taking care of the husband, children and in-laws, etc. fell on her young shoulders. The weight of responsibilities increased after her husband died. Her two sons and two daughters were quite young at that time. She had to look after the entire family, ensuring their survival, by working all her life. One of her sons later died in an accident. At present, she lives with her younger son and his wife but she is constantly reminded of how unwanted she is in that household where people are just waiting for her to leave the house or to die soon. Given her old age, because she does not manage to do much work, she is often abused by her daughter-in-law for being a ‘burden’ on the family. She is made to spend all her old age pension money on buying household items; she is accused of being selfish and irresponsible if she spends even a penny of it upon herself. She says, “among us adivasis, if a woman spends money upon herself, she is looked down upon by everyone. She has to spend all the money she earns for running the household and taking care of the family members.”

However, an adivasi man is mostly free from the responsibility of the family, the ‘burden’
of work and contributing financially at home. Aunla didi’s husband works in railways. He has a salaried job and earns a monthly income, but he brings nothing home. He spends all the money on consumption of alcohol. Aunla didi is old and lives alone in a small dilapidated hut in the corner of the village, in spite of having a husband, four sons, two daughter-in-laws and grand children. While telling us about her husband, she says,

“he does not come home for months. When his money is spent, he comes back to me. I have to then take care of him and feed him. I am old and have to work all day in other people's field to be able to manage one time meal. But my husband does not understand any of this. He keeps complaining that I can't give him proper food to eat. From where am I supposed to get money for expensive food? He spends everything he earns and when he is left with nothing, he comes back to trouble me. ... When I was pregnant with my first child, he left home and returned after 4 years. I raised my son with so much difficulty. Now all my sons refuse to look after me. Two of them are married. They live in the same village with their wife and children, but they refuse to keep me with them. My daughter-in-laws and my husband accuse me of having sexual relations with my sons"11.”

A man, who works, brings money home, and does not beat his wife, is understood to be a “good” husband. But is that enough is something Basanti (who is not more than 20-22 years of age) asks from us. Basanti lives with her husband who does masonry and brings substantial money home. She tells me with a sad smile on her face, “He is a good husband. He does not beat me like other men beat their wives. But, there is no happiness between us. He goes for work in the morning and comes back late at night. There is no problem as such but we never spend time together. He does not even talk to me.” Bansanti helps us understand that the experience of singleness is indeterminate of presence or absence of a male sexual partner. A mere physical

11 Sexual relationships between mother and son, father and daughter, and between family members, in some cases, exist. Although incestuous sexual relationships are considered a taboo and are often kept hidden, suspicion around such relationships is not very uncommon in kondha adivasis.
Desiring Transformation: Transforming Desire

Bhavya Chitranshi

‘presence’ of a ‘good’ husband can also at times lead to the experience of singleness. On the other hand, an ‘absence’ marked by a sudden death of her husband, speaks of another kind of singleness that Gauri experiences every minute of her life.

Gauri who is Basanti’s friend (the same age as Basanti) lost her husband in an accident about a year and a half ago. She depends entirely upon 5kgs of rice (that she gets from Public Distribution System) for her survival because she cannot go out for work leaving her two small children behind. She lives under extreme circumstances, taking care of her children all alone. She breaks down as she says,

“I fail to understand anything that people tell me. Whatever they say, I forget. I am unable to keep anything in mind. I keep thinking about my days with my husband. We were very young when we married. We never used to take life seriously. We used to enjoy each other’s company and used to spend a lot of our time together. As we were growing, we were also learning to live life and face its difficulties. But before we could do all this, he died. I keep thinking about all this. And the more I think, the more miserable I feel. I do not want to remember him. He is gone and all the responsibility now is solely upon me. I never thought he will just go out of my life like this. I was not prepared. … Now people keep advising me on how I should manage my life but I keep missing him. When I see other couples laughing, working and taking care of their children together, I feel very lonely. I want all that for myself, but I have lost him forever.”

These narratives and other interactions with women opened up for us an entirely new and different side to singleness. These experiences helped us understand the different kinds of struggles, sufferings, marginalization, and violence that women undergo and varied forms of negotiations and resistance mechanisms they undertake in order to ‘survive’ the institution of marriage and family; at times they remain inside it and at other times they are outside of it. However, the sense of loneliness, lovelessness, and unwantedness, along with the fear of
abandonment and losing the capacity to work, seems to be a common experience among women in this world (not only that of the adivasis but the world in general); the world which is structured and sutured in the masculine 'language' – a world where masculine need, demand and desire is met and fulfilled unquestionably and with utmost care. This makes me think then, that singleness is not a result of an absence of a male figure/partner but an absence of the 'language' of the 'feminine'; it is the absence of this 'feminine' language in the masculine world which perhaps renders all women single.

The experience of being woman, being single and being adivasi often took women back to adivasi history and past. The questions around how adivasi lives were organized and lived many years ago, what was the status of marriage, gender relations and singleness then, and what forms these have taken today were constantly discussed. The recollection of these memories of the past was consonant with the perception of their reality at present; present as if was a medium to go back to the past. Thus, these conversations oscillated between “days back then” and the “times as they are now”. Through this dialogue between the past and the present, the intention is also to move towards thinking what kinds of transformed and common futures we would aim to work towards. The adivasi understanding of 'time', in at least some ways, helps us to think of the possible connections between adivasi past and future. Interestingly, the nature of 'time' is repetitive and cyclical in the kondba adivasi world. 'Time' transforms depending upon the nature of interaction between nature-animal-human (when nature, animal and human are one and when they become distinct).

The world, according to these women, “begins with satyajuga, a time when everything is peaceful and in 'right' order. All the 'rules' and 'regulations' of this time are followed and nobody causes any harm to another living/non-living being. Truth is spoken and the path of 'truth' is followed. There is no wrong doing and injustice. A certain code of ethics is always in place. In this juga, animals, plants and trees can also speak like humans. There is no distinction between
the three. Humans can be in (sexual) relationships with lions, bears, birds, snakes and trees and there is perfect harmony between nature, animal, and human. After satyajuga, time moves to tretajuga, in which lie is spoken and crime is committed for the very first time. Some forces become negative and cause harm to the others. However, most part of the world continues to follow the path of truth and righteousness. This juga experiences loss of language in the plants and trees as animals and humans begin to exercise power. Then comes dvaparajuga, in which 'wrong' doing and injustice increases and the world gets equally divided between negative and positive forces. There is theft of material belongings as these become more important than anything else to the human world. Animals and birds lose their ability to communicate with humans as we move from tretajuga to dvaparajuga. At present, we are in the next phase of time, which is the kalijuga. In this juga, nobody respects the other. The 'self' becomes most important and everyone is powerful and capable of wrong doing. In kalijuga animals start fearing humans and the love, faith and trust between them is lost. Humans take control of nature and loose respect and ethics towards fellow human beings, animals, plants, and birds etc. Once kalijuga ends (as a result of disputes, murders, destruction of human life in natural calamities, massive accidents etc.), satyajuga would repeat itself.”

This sense and understanding of time as cyclical and capable of transformation gives us a hope to think and work towards a transformed future. For the kondha adivasi world, the past is never fully dead and the future is never fully unknown. The present thus can be seen as a possibility to work through the rem(a)inders of the past and hope for the future. These discussions, however, are always embedded in the complex play of the adivasi 'present' which is on the one hand, informed by the rem(a)inders of its history and context, and on the other hand, by 'modern', statist, capitalist, religious, and developmental dreams and reality. As a result of this messed up 'reality' we often find contradictions and contrasts in the meanings that get assigned to being adivasi. Some of the snippets from these conversations are documented below.
“Our forefathers were mainly forest dwellers and used to hunt and gather food from the forests surrounding them. Eventually, through trial and testing, they gained knowledge of what food was fit for human consumption and what all could be cultivated by them. Initially, small patches in the hills were cultivated to produce forest products only. Overtime, people began cultivating individual pieces of land. Those who worked on other people's land were given one handful of rice and 5 paise as wage in the beginning. Then slowly we began getting flour from the government. We used to stand in long queues to get a handful of wheat flour. We used to mix that flour in water and have it so that it could last for few days. After many years we began getting rice and thus rice became a part of our diet. Later, schools came to the village. Now every child in the village goes to school. In our times, we had not even heard of school. We used to wrap a small cotton piece of cloth around the waist and when we saw pants and shirt (school uniform) for the first time, we all laughed because we felt very shy. We did not know the importance of education back then. We used to work and that, we thought was enough to keep us and our families fed. Our elders thought what benefit will we get from studying because nobody had to educate themselves in order to get food. Slowly, people have understood why schools are there and why education is important. Living life has also become a little easier now in terms of getting education, food, and clothes.”

“Singleness among women has been a prominent part of our history. Most single women worked on other people's land as wage laborers, cultivated small patches of land on the hills and sold firewood to ensure their survival. They used to depend on forest products for most part of the year; wild fruits and seeds formed main part of their diet. Their condition has remained marginalized since ages and nobody looked after them or cared for how they survived. They used to wander from one place to another. Even about 50 years back, old women in the village used to do wage work for 2 Rs/day. Wages for women increased overtime from Rs 5 (nearly 30 years back) to Rs 20 to Rs 35 and 50. Now it is Rs 100 since 2 years. Single women continue to
be the lowest paid wage laborers among all people in the village. Older women are ill-treated because they fail to contribute to household labor. They were not respected then, they are not respected now. The condition of single women has not changed much from earlier times. Families look after women till women can work and support the family in return. ... Widows were earlier not allowed to sit and sleep on the cots, wear slippers, and talk in front of 'respected' people. They had to obey everyone in the village, be it the elders, children or people of the same age. A widow could not wear colored clothes, bindi and bangles. They were kept away from auspicious events and celebrations. But slowly the rules and regulations have been changing and control over widow women's lives has lessened. Women can now wear what they want; they can also remarry if they wish”.

“Earlier there was no marriage. I never got married. I lived with the man who abducted me and had children with him”, a 90 year old woman told us. Marriage between women and men began happening much later. Earlier, men would abduct women of their liking and bring them to their house. They would spend the rest of their life together. Eventually, as marriage became a norm, women were still abducted and brought to men's families. After a few days men would ask women's hand in marriage from women's families and through an exchange of some rice and money (bride price was paid to the woman's family) marriage was fixed. In recent years, the rituals of marriage have become much more rigid and modernized. Nowadays, the practice of abduction and bringing woman home has stopped. However, the proposal for marriage, even today, comes only from the man's family; the woman's family cannot propose an alliance for marriage. If an alliance comes for a woman, she gets married, otherwise she remains unmarried. Couples in love, living together without marriage (separately or with the man's family) is also a possible arrangement. If the man's family agrees to the relationship and their living together under the same roof, a couple can do so without necessary marriage. They can also have children without being married. However, since marriage has been instituted as a norm, these
relationships are often looked down upon.

In the opinion of some women, love affairs and love marriages are becoming more and more common now given a change in the pattern of female-male interaction and introduction of technology (given the influence of modern day cinema and media through television and telephone as a medium for virtual interaction). “Women in our times were scared to even smile and talk in the presence of men. If a woman smiled at another man, it was believed that that man could abduct her and marry her forcefully. They would often run and hide inside the house, upon seeing unknown men. The girls and boys of this generation are comparatively very free and comfortable with each other and take no time to get involved physically. Young girls of 15-16 years end up being victims of forced sex, miscarriage and abandonment. Rape and murder of young girls upon rejection is becoming very common these days. Although, girls in today’s time are educated, they know nothing about sex, safety and reproductive health. Sexual intercourse and child birth is very risky at a tender age and if a girl gets pregnant she has to undergo operation in the hospital. In our days, delivery used to happen at home and women in the family used to ensure that child birth takes place safely. There was no need for any medicine or treatment, pregnant women used to consume millets and saag and performed certain kinds of work in specific postures that kept the child's position in the womb right and helped in safe and easy delivery. These days pregnant women have to depend on the advice of the doctors, take a lot of medicines, eat expensive food items and fruits and even then institutional deliveries involve much more risk.”

Recollecting early days of their (mostly arrange) marriage, a woman said, that, “a husband and wife, in our times, would usually take about six months to one year to be able to speak to each other and indulge in sexual relationship. At that time, girls were not married off before they turned 18-20 years of age. But even at that age, they would have very little or mostly no knowledge of what it is to be in a physical relationship with a man. The man's family would
Desiring Transformation: Transforming Desire

make the woman sleep alone in one of the rooms inside and then urge him, late at night, to go
to her room. Most men would force themselves upon the women and beat them if they did not
conform. Women would also be threatened of abandonment and re-marriage by men if they
refused sex. And as this force and threat would continue, the woman would give in one day,
losing her earlier sense of fear and shame. At times, women were also drugged\textsuperscript{12} by the
husband's family, as the intake of the drug arouses women sexually. Those women, who do not
succumb to these tricks and tactics, either return to their parent's house or in some cases commit
suicide.”

One woman shared her experience of being with her abusive and alcoholic husband,
where she used to think of him as her father (since he was much older to her in age) during the
day and as he would come close to her at night, he used to appear as “a hungry lion approaching
his target”. “At 15 years of age, when I understood nothing, I would cry throughout sexual
intercourse till I would fall unconscious. When I used to regain my consciousness, I used to feel
lot of pain and would realize that something had been done to my body. There was no question
of pleasure at all. I do not understand why people associate sex with pleasure? I got separated
from my husband because he used to force me in bed and beat me a lot. I do not fear ghosts, I
fear men like my husband. ... After a few years I re-married another man whom I loved, but sex
was never pleasurable. It was always painful. I was abandoned by my second husband also, and it
has been more than 15 years now, but I have never felt the need for sex. It only reminds me of
pain.”

That sex is forced and results in pain seemed to be a general consensus in the room that
day. It was only one woman among 23 women, who said that she enjoyed sex with her husband
when she was fond of him and when he treated her well. The discussion on women's sexuality
and forced sex in marriage highlighted invisibilization of sorts of women's sexual needs and

\textsuperscript{12} The drug is combined with husband's saliva, dog's urine and pig's excreta and mixed in the woman's food.
desires. It spoke of experiences of singleness and pain in sexual (marital/non-marital) relationships. For women, sex is often associated with pain because it involves force and caters only to the needs of men. Moreover, there is a kind of conservative perception with regards to women desiring sex because the discourse around sexuality, is largely informed by mainstream religious understandings (guided by notions of morality and repression) and modern scientific knowledge (advocating difference of hormonal and sexual urges between men and women). It is believed that women who remain unmarried for life, whose husbands have abandoned them, or whose husbands have died, feel no desire for sex or physical intimacy. Those women who desire to be in sexual relationship and want to have children, get married even after remaining single for long. This highlighted how the question of desire and sexual need only arise for women within marriage and not for those outside of it.

Moreover, most of these perceptions around marriage, relationships outside marriage, sexuality, reproductive health and body are closely tied to moral notions of what is socially accepted and what is not. Social norms become dominant guiding principles and morality becomes a governing factor in framing gender relationships and discourses. Thus, rethinking questions of gender, requires rethinking of the social order, as also rethinking around questions of morality. The work of gender, therefore, is not a simple work of making women financially independent, owners of material resources, training them in taking their name, voicing their opinion or making them capable of taking their decisions. As important as these aspects of women's lives are, gender work needs to also take into account questions of women's body, sexuality and desire seriously. The objective is not only to make women agentic and 'empowered', but to also transform the larger psychological, social, and cultural context which is largely structured and guided by masculine and patriarchal forms and language.
**Working Towards Transformation?**

*Meeting under a Mangrove*

After six months of working in the Sikarpai area, it was decided by the Sangathan members that a big meeting with all seven villages (six in Sikarpai and Emaliguda) will be conducted under a mangrove near Dhyamolina. Over 130 women from these villages joined the meeting. As women from different villages interacted and engaged, a sense of relatedness was felt in the meeting. After a simple introduction, women divided themselves in small sub- groups ensuring each group had participation from at least two women from every village. Most women shared their experiences in the sub- group and a range of issues and concerns opened up as women met and discussed. Violence upon women and alcoholism in men were identified as the most prominent issues concerning women in the area.

However, this meeting in itself was a huge motivation for women. Such a large number of women sitting together brought confidence in them to work together. Women talked, sang songs, cried, and laughed as the meeting went on. They all left quite happy and satisfied and it was decided that they will meet every six months to be able to share their experiences, plan for future work and learn from each other.

The questions that got raised through this meeting were: How can women come together without leaders? How can one think of the 'political' without 'representatives' without the familiar idiom 'representation'? The meetings every six months are an attempt in this direction. A large number of women came from different villages without a leader. The villages were not represented by a few selected or elected women. Whoever wanted to come, came. Whoever wanted to speak and share, spoke. Can this lead to a rethinking of the (feminist) political? Can this lead to a rethinking of (gendered) transformation?
Alcoholism

Since consumption of alcohol in boys and men surfaced as one of the major issues concerning women in the Sikarpai area, we have been working towards exploring the reasons behind consumption of alcohol by men and the ways in which we could sensitize them towards understanding its effects and impacts. In Jambaguda village, some efforts have been taken towards mobilizing men and generating an understanding of why there is such a huge dependence on alcohol. The discussions have also been directed towards raising consciousness around effects of alcoholism on men and their families. These discussions have been twofold; firstly, how excessive consumption of alcohol affects mental and physical health of men and secondly, how it impacts lives of children, women and other members of the family directly and indirectly. Women in this village have been sharing problems they face as a result of living with alcoholic husbands and some men who have been attending the meetings have began working towards reducing alcohol consumption.

However, this has been the most difficult work to do because initially men would threaten women who used to sit for the meetings and discuss “household problems”. We were often asked to stop the conversation in the middle and leave. Although this problem is not easy to work upon and resolve but women in Jambaguda have been trying different ways in which we can better the situation. We were told, “Only when men in this village stop consuming alcohol, we can do something. Otherwise, our life is all about working all day and getting beaten at night. Men lose all sense of responsibility and respect when they are drunk.” It was suggested by women that we take up the issue in front of village heads and through repeated engagement with men, we can arrive at a solution. Some examples of stopping production of alcohol in Emaliguda and substituting with production and selling of other food items have been shared and it has been decided that in the coming months women from Emaliguda will present a theater on the issue in all the six villages in order to sensitize people on the issue of alcoholism.
Body mapping

We have been engaging with questions of the body, sexuality and desire through body mapping exercises with women in these villages. This exercise centered around mapping experiences of pain in a woman's body has helped us open up discussions on reproductive health, menstruation, notions of purity and pollution, sexuality, desire, which parts of a woman's body are considered inferior and why, and why most of the issues related to women's body remain silenced and ignored, and so on. In other words, the mapping of pain has opened up the body-being into several flows and forms that speak of the labouring body, the menstruating body, the birthing body, the foreclosed body, the polluted body, the dirty body and the suffering body. Women, through citing both psychological pain and physical pain have taken the discussions on body beyond simple mind-body dualism. The pain of loneliness, the pain of verbal and physical abuse, the pain of abandonment, unwantedness and that of humiliation and hurt was pointed out along with pain that comes from laboring all day, during menstruation, pregnancy and child birth. There is a lot of interest that has been generated around body mapping as it has opened up a wide range of issues and concerns that women hardly ever manage to share and discuss. Several discussions of experiences around body, sexuality and health have enabled women to express their doubts and confusions regarding the same and have also made them think why these questions and aspects of women's lives remain less talked about and ignored.

Postcapitalist being-in-common

There are several capitalist class processes in place in the adivasi space, however, adivasi life worlds are also organized around variety of noncapitalist class processes and economic experiences. Some of these range from (single) women farmers engaging in what Resnick and Wolf (1987) call independent or self appropriative class processes, individual performance of surplus labor
with collective appropriation of surplus generated, individual performance of surplus labor and individual appropriation of surplus generated from a common piece of land, local market trading and local credit systems, non-monetary exchanges like barter exchange, labor exchange, co-operative exchange, gift economy, shared household labor, social reproductive work and care work undertaken mainly by women.

Taking inspiration from Gibson-Graham's idea of postcapitalist praxis and from the work of community economies, the women in the Sanghathan in Emaliguda decided to produce pickle with mangoes gathered from the nearby forests. Women came together and performed collective labour and this working together was an experience of immense pleasure and joy. The idea of making pickle was not to make a business venture but to come together as laboring-creating subjects, a form of collective laboring and appropriation of surplus. The pickle was consumed by the members of the Sanghathan and the surplus that got generated from its sale at a feminist event in Delhi has been kept to be used in the times of emergency by the members collectively. This experience of pickle making has brought women even closer and has helped in reflecting critically upon ideas of individual surplus generation and appropriation. It has also opened up discussions around capitalist and exploitative class processes as also existing noncapitalist and possible postcapitalist class processes. There is a renewed faith in laboring collectively and appropriating the surplus collectively. Alongside, the decision of producing mango pickle every year (now in a more systematic way and at a larger scale), there are also plans to engage in collective postcapitalist farming in the coming future.
References


