

Towards aloneness: Collectivising in an *Adivasi* space

Deepika

One rainy evening in July 2017, Kiran told me that she once wanted to commit suicide. As we sat leaning on opposite walls, I was facing the backyard and she was facing the front door. We talked in hushed voices for whispered secrets needed to be protected. As I stared out, I saw the sun set and darkness take over the world of Raipara, a small village in Dhamtari, Chhattisgarh, India. Fiddling with the magazine in her hand, Kiran folded her legs and leaned forward. I could see tears in her eyes. But I had nothing to say to her. In that silence between us, the sound of rain outside increased every passing second. Kiran suddenly lifted her head as if to say something,

“...after all, my pain is my own. How can anyone else understand it? So, I put up a smile for the world. I did not tell anybody. You’re the only one I could tell. I don’t know why.”

There was a time when I found myself as lonely as Kiran told me she felt – not having anybody to talk to, feeling that nobody will understand my pain, finding death as the only way out of the misery. I knew this pain.

Throughout the two months of July and August in 2017, I ventured on a journey to find out relationalities between young women in Raipara. Kiran is 17 years old, belonging to the only Ganda family which is a Scheduled Caste according to the Constitution of India, in a village dominated by Gonds, which is a Scheduled Tribe. With narratives like “Everybody is a friend...but there is nobody who I could tell everything to” or “yes, we’ve grown up together but we’re so far apart now; we’re all very busy” or “sometimes, I do wish we could talk like we used to”, I was increasingly feeling a loss. For the time being, I’m terming this sense of loss as loneliness. Loneliness as a condition – a consuming and all-encompassing condition.

The action research that I’m doing as part of my M.Phil. thesis aims to explore the question of groups through the works of Felix Guattari. This is important because groups are not merely a collection or a summation of discrete individuals but a register that is qualitatively different. With this on one hand and deep narratives of individualization on another, the women I’m working with see-saw between becoming individual and becoming groups. I have also tried to look into Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* to understand everydayness in their lifeworlds.

August is a month of much excitement in Raipara. A cricket tournament is organized annually in the second week of August and this is the biggest event in the village. When I was there last year, I noticed something peculiar about how the audience was seated. The ground was

surrounded by older men from the village on one side, older women on another, younger men on yet another, younger women again on another side and the children would usually be with their mothers. I would always go and sit with the younger women aged largely between 14 and 24. Those days were very different because never before and never after have I seen all these young women sitting together. However, as soon as the matches for the day would get over, they would all disperse to their houses to finish any unfinished work they might have. I often wondered about this as this moment looks to be a moment when women came together. Though as mentioned earlier, I was continuously hearing in the individual conversations and also observing that they do not get time to sit together.

How does one understand this apparently fleeting moment of coming together around a cricket match then? I am looking at this moment critically because women coming together may not necessarily be a collectivising of women. With fixated gender roles which is a noun on the one hand and the experience of gender-ing which is a verb on another, a complex grid of gender, with tropes from both these aspects crossing each other, gets created. The question then is that in this complex of sex/gender system, where are these younger women placed?

This is another reason that makes the question of group important. When these women come together, is there an awareness of this grid of gendering that continues to influence everything they say or do? Is there any acknowledgment or recognition of their position in the sex/gender system? Do they come together to actually sit with each other or are they coming together because somehow, audience for the cricket match is segregated according to age and gender?

‘Deterritorializing’ the development sector

To understand collectivizing, one first needs to look into the history of it in Raipara. A lot of developmental intervention has been done in this village and many around it. My aim is to first ‘deterritorialize’ the development sector. The conventional understanding of empowering women, especially in the Adivasi context is to create micro-credit based Self Help Groups (further referred to as SHGs). This remains as the only model of women’s collectives in Raipara. However, as I have observed, SHGs in themselves seem to have some limits. For one, they are reduced to merely the collection of weekly stipulated amount of money from each member after which everyone disperses whereas, the idea of the model was to create conditions for women to come together apart from making them economically self-dependent (Kabeer, 2005). But the SHG model seems to have failed in the former.

Secondly, it homogenises the category of woman. A harmonious whole is created out of heterogenous bits. In Raipara as well as in a village in the next block, Palwadi (where my friend Kritika works), the women are always saying the same things – one grand narrative. The same story is being told every single time – “our lives have changed for good since we joined the SHG”. But it is the unsaid, unheard, silent stories that trouble me. How is it possible that all women have come to benefit equally? What originally even was the purpose of creating these groups? Why are women being categorized into one molar unit? The molecularity has been completely overshadowed. Moreover, in Raipara it is only the married women who are members of these SHGs.

To me, the model of the SHG looks to be Oedipal. Deleuze and Guattari talk about how desires are seen as negative and vouch for desiring bodies that are political. In *Anti-Oedipus* (1983), they say that sexuality is everywhere; “the way a bureaucrat fondles his records, a judge administers justice, a businessman causes money to circulate; and so on. And there is no need to resort to metaphors ... Hitler got the fascists sexually aroused. Flags, nations, armies, banks get a lot of people aroused” (p.293). In the same vein, I see SHGs sexually arousing. Terms like *jaagrakta* (awareness), *sangathit hona* (to collectivise), *ghar se baahar nikalna* (being able to move out of the house and take over public spaces), *sashakt mahila* (empowered woman), and *samooh ka register, bachat* (an SHG’s register and savings) are terms that arouse the development sector.

Lastly, it would be important to bring here Guattari’s distinction between subjugated/dependent groups and group subjects in *Psychoanalysis and Transversality* (2003). While the distinction is not absolute, he says that it is certainly a first step. Subjugated groups are groups that are structured upon totalization and unification while group subjects are defined by coefficients of transversality – these are divisible, malleable and permeable. Subjugated groups, unlike group subjects are unable to deal with its non-sense and finiteness termed as ‘death instinct’ by Guattari. To me, an SHG is the classic example of subjugated groups. Its unity is exteriorized – by way of savings, finances, bank accounts. It is structured both horizontally as well as vertically, it has an elected *adhyaksh* (president), a *sachiv* (secretary), a *lekhapaal* (record keeper or accountant).

I’m left wondering then that since this is the only model of collectivizing of women present in Raipara, what would it be to collectivise the younger, unmarried, non SHG related women? And if they too were to be collectivized in the model of the SHG, would it be considered a kind of reterritorialization? From the months of January to June in 2018, repeated efforts to collectivise with the young women were failing. Perhaps to collectivise does not even exist in the vocabulary of the Adivasi.

Adivasi lifeworld – a world of multiplicities

It is important to examine as to why some women of this age group ie 14 to 24 go through an experience of loneliness as I have claimed. This is also important in the context of an obsession with the discourse around SHGs and women's coming together. However, as noted, most of the SHG members would be aged above 19, and all of them are married. The women in SHGs then become an unnamed other for these younger women – emanating the model of collectivization – while they themselves live at the cusp of getting married and moving out of this village perhaps to join SHGs in that other village. Their condition is then that of being/belonging to neither here nor there. Also, given that these villages are also in a kinship network, what does this loneliness mean? Is this loneliness an attribute of being torn between individualization and older community ties? This then requires a psychoanalytic understanding of these women in addition to their social, economic, and cultural situatedness.

The conventional discourse of development has been that of moving from tradition to modernity. But this simple journey is put to question by the lifeworlds of these women. They live with attributes from both these worlds simultaneously thereby creating a different world of their own. The lifeworlds are plugged into the sockets of the village, the state as well as the market. At once, they are both individuals as well as parts of the community. Within their individualization, they never really find time for themselves and within the life in the community, they live lives in loneliness where they cannot tell anyone what pains they go through. Manisha, a 20 year old woman in the village once told me that she had never told anyone how much her body pains at night when she lies down to sleep. She said that all women in the village have body pain of some or another kind. But she had a feeling that hers was different, more than everyone else's but she did not think anybody would take her seriously. She thought nobody would understand her. How does one, in this case then, imagine a movement away from loneliness? How does one deal with this consuming condition of loneliness?

It must be noted that it is not as if there is no collectivizing of the young women at all. When a girl gets married, all her female friends from the village are called *lokadabin*. There exists a group of the *lokadabins* here who collect and save money because a day after the wedding, they are all supposed to go to the village their friend has been married into. The money is saved for that. But again, is this really a collectivizing of women that includes gendering of experience? Gendering of experience here is understood in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'rhizomatic' becoming without any origins or ends (Sotirin in Charles J. Stivale, 2005) It is seen as a process; a

process that is ongoing, subterranean, unconscious; a process to which women get interpellated in their everyday. In other words, the point I'm trying to make is that women in this village are placed in a complex positionality in the structures of gendering, all the while momentarily taking up gendered roles and gendered subjectivities. The experience of gender-ing is then a process of becoming. It is an unconscious continuity. What I mean by this is that there is a superficial aspect of gender that changes and recreates itself while the deeper matrix of gender continues to be the same.

Continuing with the concept of rhizomatic roots that “may [each] take off in its own singular direction and make its own connections with other roots” (as cited in Sotorin, 2005), I'm seeing the lives of these young women in such rhizomatic multiplicities with multiple entry and exit points, multiple relationalities and multiple worlds that they are living in simultaneously.

The coefficient of transversality

Much has been said about loneliness and coming together. The idea of coming together is usually associated with convergence or union. However, I understand it not as merging but as meeting; a meeting of people in their differences and similarities; a meeting that constitutes of crossing paths; multiple paths. What is it to come together in *friendship*? I'm trying to imagine a coming together of these young women in friendship. Although in this Adivasi context, is it even friendship? Or is it companionship? Or perhaps something new altogether?

As far as loneliness is considered, I wonder if we can move from this feeling of loneliness – a kind of mourning, a sadness that renders one incomplete – to aloneness? Loneliness being a condition and aloneness being a capacity to deal with the condition. Aloneness would be to live a life alone without feeling incomplete and sad. I'm viewing aloneness as Deleuzian joy – that which enables the realization of one's capacities.

While the contours of this aloneness will have to be delineated where these women come up with their own understanding of it, this movement from consuming loneliness to contingent aloneness would then be the transformational axis of this work. However, it is not simply a movement beginning from loneliness and ending at aloneness. I'm not seeing these as binary opposites; as perhaps end points of a spectrum. I'm seeing loneliness, aloneness and togetherness as potential pauses and stop points in the routes of the rhizomatic roots. Neither is origin, neither the destination. The movement is rather textural with “varying degrees of segmentarity” (Holland, 1991).

So I'm exploring the possibilities of creating a group with these young women – a group that could perhaps work towards sharing of thoughts, feelings, belongingness and experiences; a group that revisits seemingly lost connections and ways of relating with one another; a group that creates perhaps, for want of a better phrase, a 'continuum of communication' – in the wake of apparent separateness from each other.

Everydayness

As I tried relentlessly to collectivise with the women and failed every time, I started thinking that perhaps the narrative of being busy with household chores is in fact not merely a narrative but a condition in itself. I saw monotony in the lives of these women. As I spent day after day looking for a breakthrough, I only observed drudgery in their everydayness. And I was convinced after six months that breaking out of this monotonous life is almost impossible. Perhaps this was the only kind of life known to these women and thus coming out of it and sitting with each other even if to watch a movie was out of context.

On my last day however, it happened. We reached a breakthrough. Ten of us sat together and discussed what we want to do as a group. We charted seven activities and not ironically at all, playing cricket this August is one of them. There was a lot of energy in this meeting. We sat for more than two hours and talked about so many things. What I had been trying to do for the last six months was finally happening on my last day in the village. I wished it had happened earlier. And this wish made me think, what changed?

If life is monotonous, if everyday is full of drudgery, how did we finally sit together? How did that happen? In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze says that any kind of repetition is never really a reproduction of the *same*. Some kind of variation always occurs thereby introducing a difference. Can everyday then be monotonous? Can we instead think in terms of rhythm? From a simple monotony of a metronome to a larger range and variety of rhythm instruments? Can we think of the rhythm *in* everydayness instead of the monotony of everydayness?

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