The Story Retold: Singleness and the Sanghathan

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After a long day of hard toil, on a hot summer evening in 2013, a group of Kondha adivasi women gathered in a dark and isolated corner of a village named Emaliguda. In the gathering, prevailed a disturbing 'silence'; 'silence' hinting at loss of words/language. This silence was the result of what an aged woman, Tulsi Pulaka, had just shared; an instance from her life she believed she could never forget; and yet she did not want to recall. This happened a few years ago when she was accused of theft in the neighboring house where she had been invited to perform a religious ceremony; when she was harassed and humiliated in front of the whole village. While narrating the incident, she got up in a haste, threw open the end of her saree, and revealing her bare fallen breasts, she cried in pain,

I stood before them like this and said, look for your money. Where is it? Find it. Later I went inside that house and forcefully took a handful of rice as my remuneration for performing the pooja. I know I should not have taken rice from the household where I was insulted. I should have refused any offerings from that house, but, then I would have slept empty stomach that night. I was forced that night to place my helplessness above my humiliation.

A frail, thin and 'pained' body was trembling with anger in front of the other women listening to her. And there was silence all around. The women in Emaliguda village had gathered that evening. This was the first time they had gathered to share with each other their experience of living (in) singleness, holding each other in silence.

Deep into the night, as women shared their lives with each other, I was told, “the night shall end, our stories will not”. Many nights have passed since then (2013 beginning to 2017 end) and many stories continue to unfold – stories of loss, pain, suffering, abandonment, rejection, violence, as also stories of defiance, struggle, and everyday resistance – stories of singleness that were buried deep inside. This paper narrates stories not of just pain and suffering but also stories of collective struggle, collective learning, creative joy and companionship – stories that have been ‘created’ and are still in the making as ‘we’ (single women in Rayagada and I) work together towards transforming our future. In other words, this paper is a kind of reflective/reflexive ‘looking back’ at the five year journey of working through (gendered) relationships (including relationships among women), collective action-ing, and co-learning.
Beginning (in) Singleness

This work began with collective articulation and analysis of the condition of singleness among Kondha adivasi women in Emaliguda village of Kolnara Block in the Rayagada district of Odisha. An initial survey in 2013 revealed that 35-40% women in the village are either never-married, widowed, or are separated from their husbands. The group discussions overtime helped us (single women and I) arrive at a two-fold understanding of singleness: (a) singleness as a condition depicting loneliness and alone-ness, including economic, political and cultural othering and exclusion, perpetual states of financial and emotional insecurity, life devoid largely of relationships and care, a huge work burden residing entirely on the woman’s shoulder, and the everyday life of a woman subjected to varied forms of socio-political discriminations and violence, and (b) as also a condition that has enabled women to lead at least a negotiated gendered existence in comparison to women under the direct and strict control of the hetero-patriarchal institution of marriage and the patriarch figure, the husband. In other words, singleness for us is as much about negotiating, and coping with, as also resisting patriarchal structures, as it is about everyday pain and suffering.

Mami Pedenti, a never-married single woman asserts, “Our happiness is ours and our sadness is also only ours. We do not have to worry about keeping a husband satisfied and happy. We can earn our own money and at times even spend it upon ourselves, which is very difficult for a married woman (in our context) to do.” Most never-married women in Emaliguda feel that they are comparatively much more liberated and can plan their life on their own, even if there are structural restrictions and control of a different nature. What also emerged in our group discussions was that even separated single women, given an option, would not want to remarry. They do not want to suffer again and experience the same kind of violence, detachment, alienation, negligence, stress, and crisis that they had to face when they were living with their husbands. Some said, “husbands tend to increase a woman's burden of work, create unnecessary troubles and disturbances at home; husbands also dominate.” Demystifying the common and popular assumption that marriage leads to happiness, Jaga Pedenti asks, “… it is not as if I am very happy at the moment, but what is the guarantee I would have been happy, had I been married?”

This understanding also takes us beyond the rather simple formulations of victimhood and the equally simple notions of agency that come to haunt us in the present times. In this regard, Tulsi’s experience is an experience of singleness. What was revealed and relived in her sharing was not just a story of poverty and hunger (which are quickly taken up as developmental issues to be resolved) but also of helplessness and humiliation (lived psychological experiences that do not find much space in the usual work of development focused heavily on the economic interests). Here, one does not intend to belittle the importance of working on economic questions related to poverty, hunger, deprivation etc. Rather the point is to highlight what gets obscured
(questions related to experience of gender, well-being, desire, dignity, life beyond material interests etc.) in the excessive focusing upon “developmental issues”. Analyzed further, Tulsi’s experience was not limited to experience of helplessness and humiliation (which reads Tulsi’s subject position only as a victim), but also of Tulsi’s protest when she decides to take away her rightful share of rice. This complex layering of varied ‘subject positions’, of loneliness and self-dependence, of suffering and resisting at the same time speak of singleness for us.

Arnalu Miniaka (Aiya) is a 45 year old woman who lives alone in a small self constructed house. She was 10 years old when she began working outside home. Due to the need to share responsibility of work both at home and outside, her parents never allowed her to go to school. She was 15 years old when she was forcefully married to a much older man. Her husband was an alcoholic and used to abuse her verbally, physically and sexually. Every time her husband forced himself upon her, she would be in pain for a long time. Even before she could recover from the physical pain, she was again sexually abused by her husband. At times when she tried to stop him she would be beaten badly. Even after about thirty years of separation from her husband, the scars of the violent marriage continue to haunt her.

In about a year of her marriage, she was pregnant with her first child. The first child died soon after birth and within six months she was pregnant again. “One night when I was sleeping my husband came home all drunk. I was scared. I did not get up. My husband got a big knife from the kitchen and tried to slice my neck. The next day I left my husband's home. I came back to my parent's house” Her second son was a few months old. But her husband did not let her keep the child. He took the child away and after a couple of months he re-married. Her parents did not take the separation very well. She was forced time and again to go back, make peace and live with her husband. But, Aiya was determined not to go back (“not to go back” is an important political position in a largely patriarchal tribal culture) and began working as a wage laborer in a factory.

Seven years later, she fell in love with another man at her workplace and decided to re-marry. The second marriage lasted only nine months. With time her new husband also became violent and asked her to leave the house. One night, he locked Aiya outside the house. She wept all night waiting for the door to be opened, but no one heard her cry and no one opened the door for her. In the morning, she decided to go back to her parent's house. This time when she came back to Emaliguda, her brother who lived with his parents refused to support her and after her father's death, he abandoned not just her, but their mother and their unmarried elder sister. Aiya now began a ‘new life’ with her mother and sister. Her mother and her sister worked as wage labor on other people’s farms and she worked in a factory. Even after her mother died, Aiya and her sister was not supported by her brother. A few years later, Aiya's elder sister also passed away. Since then Aiya has been living alone in Emaliguda in a small self constructed house. Sometime later Aiya left the factory job and began cultivating a small piece of ‘encroached’ government land. These never-ending struggles have paradoxically made Aiya quite independent, and have not
crushed her altogether, but this still does not take away the loneliness and insecurity about the future, that she experiences.

The two-fold understanding of singleness is also tied to a shift we made from singlehood (as a state of being single or a particular social positionality due to the absence of a male sexual partner – singlehood more as a marker of a woman's identity; such as the identity of a widowed, separated, abandoned, deserted, divorced, never-married woman) to singleness (as a condition, as a way of be-ing single; as an experience of living and feeling singleness in the absence or even in the presence of a male sexual partner – more as a ‘contingent emergent subject position’). Interestingly, shifting the focus from singlehood to singleness helped us understand the condition of Kondha adivasi women in a broader way. It led to the surfacing of the conditions of singleness that are lived within marriages and necessary coupledom. This involved women who are married and have husbands, yet face conditions that are similar to those faced by women who do not have or live without a male sexual partner. (Older) women whose husbands are (physically or mentally) unwell, women with alcoholic husbands, women with husbands who contribute to the household in no way whatsoever, women whose husbands are abusive and violent, women whose husbands have migrated and have not returned, to women living with men who care the least and are often indifferent to the presence of these women in their lives. We had thus moved from woman as an individual biological entity/identity to singleness as a lived experience and a socio-political condition – an experience or condition not limited to the widow or the poor or the adivasi – but which could be shared across age, marital status, ethnicity, class, and caste positions.

Aunla Kadraka whose husband works in the railways has a salaried job and earns a monthly income, but he brings nothing home. He spends all the money on consumption of alcohol. Aunla 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.”

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 ‘presence’ of a ‘good’ husband can also at times lead to the experience of singleness.

The continuous articulation and analysis of oppression and resistance within singleness connected us in a kind of collective form, that we named Eka Nari Sanghathan (Single Women’s Collective). The Sanghathan got forged as a space of friendship, belongingness and togetherness for women who have been either abandoned by their families or are treated as burdens and liabilities. The Sanghathan hosts companionship and a sense of care and security for women who experience 'singleness' as a result of social/familial othering. Ruayi Pedenti, who is a member of the Sanghathan, once said, “no one believed my story and no one ever understood my pain. I had no choice but to keep my sadness to myself. I could not share it with anyone, so I never shared it with anyone. … But now I share my feelings with my Sanghas (friends) in the Sanghathan because they believe what I say and they understand my pain …”

The coming together of women in the Sanghathan is not seen as a means to attain some common/shared goals (such as increasing numbers in order to attain rights and entitlements) but as an end in itself (where women come together to share their life with each other). This space is co-created every moment with the members of the collective, in the wake of a need for a collective for single women. However, it functions not only as a support group but also as a transformative space that can move beyond the standard models of addressing (single) women as victims to making sense of singleness as a living process – as also a response and challenge to hetero-patriarchy. Women in this collective journey engage and (re)think questions related to development, well-being, solidarity, rights, feminist consciousness and politics and these processes have been significant in building and strengthening more and more voices of resistance. Thus, the Sanghathan for us is both a politics of friendship and a form of a collective struggle and action (sanghathit sangharsha).

Since the Sanghathan belongs to the adivasi single women, the questions concerning women, gender, and hetero-patriarchy as well as the other collective endeavours that the Sanghathan undertakes, are all placed well within the particularity of the adivasi context. Moreover, building heavily upon the cultural ethos and value system that ties them together, single women in the Sanghathan have been re-creating new relationalities (ethico-political companionships) and redrawing old ones (those engrained in hetero-patriarchal systems). ‘Care for the other’ is held in the highest regard and continuous efforts are undertaken to maintain trust among each other. This work does not intend to romanticize adivasi culture, ethos and values as one remains aware of the inherent antagonisms, conflicts, discriminations and marginalizations that are part of Kondha
adivasi life-world. But it builds upon the disaggregated nature of adivasi society which has a lot to offer us in terms of rethinking and co-creating ethico-political values and transformative praxis.

Moreover, the collective repeatedly undertakes several processes in order to analyze and reflect upon group behaviour, group functioning, communication patterns, power dynamics, external/internal influences etc. Importantly, this work revisits the familiar idiom of “representation” and “leadership” and resists the formation of ‘woman leaders’ as it sees the very idea of ‘leadership’ (privileging and placing power in the hands of a few) as patriarchal. The Sanghathan has no elected/selected ‘leaders’. Whoever wants to join comes and whoever wants to share, speaks! All the members of the collective form the core of decision making and facilitation among themselves. Different roles and responsibilities are fulfilled by taking turns that are decided through consensus. The members labour together and simultaneously work towards mitigating power relations within the Sanghathan in order to arrive at a common and a non-hierarchized space.

There has been a significant change in the overall personality of the women in the Sanghathan. In the few initial meetings the women were not very comfortable in speaking with each other, especially in front of many people and in the presence of men. Most women would share their hesitation to speak and voice their opinion. Arnalu Miniaka (whose lived experience has been mentioned in the above lines) often said that because she is not educated she feels she does not know much about the world and hence she prefers silence. She believed that she lacked the ‘sophistication’ required to interact with people. However, slowly, her involvement and engagement in the Sanghathan deepened and she gained more and more confidence. The hesitation in her tone slowly receded. She is no more the hesitant, shy, petite woman sitting in the corner wrapped in her arms, only listening to all that is being said; rather, now even with the officials (mostly men), she is a strong, fearless, and an articulate woman who knows well what she argues for. She takes initiatives, direct conversations, encourages participation and even facilitates the group many a times. Her mobilization and strategizing skills have played an important role in bringing the Sanghathan members to form the collective and help critically raise the consciousness of the members. She ensures reaching each and every member of the collective and takes efforts to keep the collective in place. She deals with individuals in the collective with immense empathy and patience and works efficiently towards resolving conflicts of interests whenever necessary. She has also been undertaking huge efforts to mobilize women and raise consciousness around the need for coming together and pursuing an ethical engagement. She also acts as a bridge between the members of the Sanghathan and the larger village community. The resistance that is at times posed from the village heads and the families of the members of the Sanghathan, is often negotiated with in her supervision. Unlike most women activists, she doesn’t have a fiery voice. She is very soft and polite. However she always brings direction to the discussions and ensures that every member’s opinion and voice is
accounted for. It is also interesting how she often builds on what she learns from the space of the collective and what she gives back to the space. There are many other women like Arnalu Miniaka who have experienced a change in themselves overtime and have become exemplars for the others in the collective.

For the last two years, women from the Sanghathan have been working as my co-action-researchers. We have been visiting 6 villages in the Sikarpai Panchayat in Kalyansinghpur Block in order to explore and understand the experiences of women in different villages, the condition of singleness, their everyday lived reality and the nature of gender(ed) relationships. A lot of women from the other villages have come together to be part of the Sanghathan (about 130 women) and despite contextual differences, women have been engaging with each other on several issues and instances. The next section explores this journey of expanding the Sanghathan.

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 (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 road of/to transformation (more on the difference between development practice and transformative praxis in the later part of the paper). With my unsteady but careful hands clutching the handle of the shaking scooty on the muddy path, my shoulders held tightly by the woman sitting behind me and the back of the scooty grabbed cautiously by the woman 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.

As we began visiting the villages in Sikarpai, 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 the resources people lacked would take place. There were also days when we would return disheartened after waiting for hours and finding not more than a couple of women 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.

We would often observe women sitting together in one place talking to each other, late in the evening after finishing their day's work. We decided to meet women 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 the purpose of our visits. As we went about answering their questions and addressing to their curiosity, there was a movement from being perceived as an educated middle class professional/expert 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 Sanghathan in their own 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 Sanghathan was formed, what our experiences have been, the philosophy behind our praxis, and what all work we have done so far, provided us with an opportunity to generate interest among women in the Sikarpai area.

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?”. It was a constant struggle to get heard amidst the loudness of these questions and repeated assertions suggesting, “rural adivasi spaces are poor and lacking”. 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, cognizance 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 access to resources are not important or are of any less value, but our effort through the workings of the Sanghathan have been to move beyond mainstream developmental imagination and practice that perceives the ‘village’ and its inhabitants only through the framework of poverty and 'lack'.

This work since its inception has been arguing for a critical engagement with existing (somewhat under-theorized) practices that are hegemonic in mainstream development – and is continuously trying to arrive at a re-formed understanding of transformative praxis. It maintains that 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 ‘collaborative gender work with the *adivasi* women’ – fails to find much purchase in current developmental practices hegemonized by the women's self-help group models that are centered around ideas of material benefit and self-interest. This kind of theoretically informed gender work aims at *exploring and addressing concerns that continue to remain hidden* (in the obsessive focusing of developmental issues) and those that *resonate with *adivasi* history, knowledge and way of life*, thereby relying on *adivasi* women as 'capable' subjects creating possibilities for a collective (transformed) future rather than remaining mere beneficiaries of State-led development.

It took us long to explain the difference between the workings of the *Sanghathan* and that of the developmental organizations. A graphic representation and explanation of what we call, “the *circle*-triangle distinction: From Resources to Relationships”, helped us communicate better. The circle stands for resource related issues in women's life, for example, shortage of drinking water, inaccessible road, lack of electrification, absence or malfunctioning of governmental institutions, provisions 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, sexuality etc. This separation between the circle and the triangle highlights that the issues tied to the circle, at one level, require a 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, 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, the social, the economic, 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 *Sanghathan* 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 Sanghathan at Work**

ENS in the last four years has managed to lobby with the State and procure some of the rights and entitlements from the State. All widow, separated, and old single women now have access to pension. They have also been slowly receiving financial assistance for building houses under Indra Awas Yojana. However, in these engagements with the State, there has been an *ongoing reflection on the State-Citizen relationship and the hierarchy therein.* There also has been a marking of difference between procuring rights and entitlements simply as beneficiaries to working hand in hand with the State functionaries. Women have also come together to secure themselves financially by opening bank accounts in their own name in which they deposit part of their pension and the money they receive from their respective families as part of their remuneration for farm and house work; this was one among many other significant decisions the Sanghathan took— the decision of *negotiating with their respective families and ensuring a remuneration for the work they performed for their families.* This has led to a small yet significant change in the way single women are perceived in the family and the larger social.

Moreover, women in different villages have come together and opened up issues beyond singleness. Instances of singleness among married women have been hugely discussed and debated and voices of more and more women are being included in the Sanghathan. 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 have been taken up and women have been sensitized to think and reflect around these concerns. Apart from our regular visits to the villages in Sikarpai, women from all the villages we are working in, come together once in six months to meet each other, discuss and reflect upon concerning issues and plan the future course of action.

Additionally, the collective has also been involved in *creating models of self sustenance,* in *creating processes of working together and generating surplus* in order to take care of the financial needs of single women. For instance, for the last 2 years, the women in the Sanghathan have been collectively preparing *ambo-soda* (a traditional mango pickle) from the mangoes gathered from the forest. This pickle is kept for self consumption by the women themselves and the rest is sold to generate *surplus which is appropriated collectively.* The idea of making pickle is not to make a business venture but to *come together as labouring-creating subjects.* It is also to generate support for the members of the Sanghathan who are now old and are not in a condition to self sustain.
This year 35 women from the Sanghathan have come together to \textit{collectively cultivate paddy} by leasing 3 acres of land for the next 3 years. With the help of my colleague Ashutosh (who has joined us this year) and in collaboration with Dr. Debal Deb and Dulalda (from Basudha-\url{cindis.org/basudha/}), we cultivated \textit{indigenous seed varieties using ecologically-sensitive and traditional methods and techniques}. This year’s two-fold initiative of (a) bringing women together to do collective farming, and (b) moving beyond chemical farming to alternative ways of farming, has proved worthwhile. In today’s time when the farmers are being encouraged to produce and appropriate on an individual basis keeping self-interest in mind and are being lured into relying heavily on capitalist market based inorganic and chemical farming which emphasizes the use of fertilizers, pesticides and hybrid/high yielding seeds, this experiment of alternative farming with indigenous seed variety and ecologically sensitive methods was a big challenge in itself.

We faced many other challenges from unpredictable and delaying of the monsoon (that lead to lack of irrigation in the initial days and delayed sowing), to washing off (in the flash flood) of the bridge that connects Emaliguda to Pujarida village where the land is, performing all the farm work including tasks that usually/traditionally men in the families do (like preparing and cutting boundary of the field, spraying medicines, thrashing of the paddy etc.), to staying up till late night in the fields in order to regulate the amount of water on the land. However, the \textit{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 women walked a long distance (a couple of hours) 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/cigarette) 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 \textit{feels} so easy. It becomes much more difficult when we have no one to share it with”.

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. \textit{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.
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.

Co-learning

My role in this journey (both assigned to me and taken up by myself) from the beginning has not remain a fixed one; it keeps shifting from that of being the friend, the facilitator, the co-ordinator, the mobilizer, the trainer, the learner, the researcher, at times a guiding source and at others the one who was guided, a source of information, a link between the Sanghathan and other institutions and organizations, an insider who was entrusted with the property of the Sanghathan
(personal sharings, plans, discussions etc.) and an outsider with the potential of taking this initiative and struggle beyond its limits of remaining 'local'. In this way, this work cracks the binary of the researcher as the 'expert' since the aim of this work is to generate knowledge that gets co-created (Sanghathan members and I). This work has taught me how the so called outside 'expertize' cannot be deployed or accepted uncritically, rather, this work builds towards generating a collective ‘expertize’ thereby bridging the knowledge gap between what comes from ‘outside’ and that that already exists. This, for me was an experience of the process of mutual exchange, learning and co-production of knowledge.

The forging of the *Eka Nari Sanghathan* has been a very challenging process, yet it has taught me so many things about women’s experience, gender work and women friendships. It has encouraged me to think of the alternatives to development. It is the with these women from the *Sanghathan* that I have learned ‘gender’; I have learned how to ‘live’ relationships (even when in singleness); I have learned what it is to collective/mobilize and work towards common/shared futures. In another sense, this work has not only taught me ‘gender’, but *how to live life; live life ethically*. Like the *Sanghathan* members, my confidence and courage has also been building slowly with time. With every successive initiative, I learn something new (an unknown language, about relationships, collectivities, gender, agriculture, health etc.), face challenges, overcome problems, and find a way out. These processes, as if, are life in themselves; they are the driving force. This is not just any other job for me. This is like living life in its everydayness. Looking back, I realize that my involvement and keen interest in this work has not only to be able to do something with/for the single women in Rayagada. Rather, it is also a journey into my own self, towards making sense of my own condition of singleness and fighting my own feminist battle of 'making' 'space' for a woman who chooses to reject the hetero-patriarchal institution of marriage and wishes to lead a life of singleness without being questioned, without being challenged, without being mocked at, and without being harassed (both mentally and sexually). Traveling along with the *Sanghathan* members has been a significant experience, shaping my *be-ing* and the transformation that took place within me. I am a friend, a researcher, a facilitator and much more, and all these relationships that I shared with the women teach me something or the other. Be it learning to live in the rural, learning to share, from learning their language, to learning the significant lessons of life, death and politics, these women to me are great mentors.

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