Single Beings and Collective Becomings: Reflections from Eka Nari Sanghathan

Bhavya

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 distant Odisha. In the gathering, prevailed a disturbing 'silence'; 'silence' hinting at loss of words/language. This silence was the result of what an aged single 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; a memory that haunted her nevertheless. 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 single women listening to her. And there was silence all around. The single 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 and 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 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. These stories from Emaliguda and six other villages, over the last 4 years (from 2013-2017) have helped us (single women and I) arrive at a two-fold understanding and script 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\(^1\) 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 is as much about negotiating, and coping with, as also resisting patriarchal structures, as it is about everyday pain and suffering.

This two-fold understanding of singleness is also tied to a discursive 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’). Singleness, in this sense, has not only been an exploration of the question of Who (i.e. who is a single woman? – pertaining to identity) or just of the What (what is a single woman?); but also of How, ie. how does one become single (what is the social ontology of singleness)?

In the dominant discourse, a woman is regarded single not because she does not have family, friends and acquaintances, but because she does not have a husband. Women who are widowed, divorced, separated, deserted and never-married are commonly regarded as single. This ‘absence of a husband’ in a woman’s life begins to shape the nature of her other social relationships and as a result she is single(d), thereby marking the husband’s absence as a primary attribute dictating and determining her gendered identity and existence, or for that matter, her sexistence. At times, accused of being the cause for the (untimely) death of the husband or not ‘good’ enough to get married or keep the marriage going, she is socially cornered and ‘punished’ into leading a life alone. In this way, she is either perceived as a ‘victim’ suffering in the absence of a male protector/provider or as an ‘evil’ responsible for his absence.

Moreover, shifting the focus from singlehood to singleness helped us understand the condition of Kondha adivasi women in a broader way. The conditions of singleness that are lived within marriages and necessary coupledom began surfacing. This involves women who are married and

\(^1\) 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, at least most of them, 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?”
have husbands, yet face conditions that are similar to those faced by women who do not have or live without a male sexual partner. The meaning of singleness, thus extends itself to include (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.

Once women become old and are unable to work, they are abused and held responsible for family disputes and breaking the family etc. They are considered a mere burden and are eventually thrown out of the house. These women live under continuous fear of getting abandoned one day. Thus, women become single not only because they do not have a husband or their husbands have abandoned them, but also because their own families disown them.

While telling us about her husband, Aunla 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 in order to manage one meal. But my husband does not understand any of this. Whenever I fail to provide, he beats me up accusing me of having sexual relations with my own son².

On the other hand, 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.

The varied experiences of singleness take us to different kinds of struggles and sufferings that Kondha adivasi women undergo. In addition to loneliness and unwantedness, the fear of abandonment haunts lives of these women. The relationship they share with their families is far more complex than what seems to be at the surface. There are many women who live alone having abandoned by their families (especially older never married women and separated

² 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.
women) and there are also women who share the household with their parents/brothers/husbands/in-laws (mostly those who can still perform labouring activities at home and outside), however, in either situation, these women continue to negotiate their everyday existence in/with the family; at times remaining ‘inside’ and tied to it (even when they have been separated from their families) and at others moving away/’outside’ of it (while sharing the same roof with the family members). In spite of the oppressive, exploitative, and at times violent space that family is (and it is not as if the women in these villages lack consciousness of feminist critiques of family and marriage), there is some value that is attached in being-with and belonging in relationships. Unfortunately, given the privileging in hetero-patriarchal structures, ‘family’ seems to be one of the primary sites hosting (false) promises of care and belongingness. Or is it due to dearth of other forms of socio-political relationalities that we resort back to oppressive structures of family? The question is whether there be communitic alternatives to the hetero-patriarchal institution of family that oppresses, exploits and abandons women at its whims and fancies? Can belongingness be found/forged in non-familial but familiar spaces that emerge with a possibility of a shared/common future; spaces of care and companionship, working through the complexities of power, affect, intimacy and desire.

Our work in Rayagada is an effort in this direction. Eka Nari Sanghathan, an adivasi single women’s collective, that emerged as a result of sharing of women’s experiences and stories of singleness, works towards re-imagining and re-constituting an emergent-contingent, being-in-common\(^3\). The Sanghathan is evolving as a space that can host companionship, togetherness, belongingness and a sense of care and security for women who experience ‘singleness’ in their everydayness due social/familial Othering. Belonging to the same village, most of these women share kinship ties and there is a sense of cultural (adivasi) ethos that drives the nature of these relationalities. Building upon these already existing kinship ties and ethos, single women in the Sanghathan have been re-creating new relationalities and redrawing old ones. This work thus, is a work of affirmative/affective praxis of transformation – mainly transformation of the self, the larger social and the political (see Chitranshi 2016).

Thus, the Sanghathan in this work – as a non-primordial collective (as distinguished from primordial identitarian communal claims) is understood as a coming together of friends. Sanghathan also entails a form of collective struggle, wherein along-with generating an understanding of peoples’ oppressions, constructive collective action is undertaken towards challenging power structures and working together towards enhancing well-being. Sanghathan derives its meaning from the word Sanghathan itself. When the word Sanghathan is broken down as San(gha)than, ghathan in Hindi implies coming together in order to build, construct and organize and Sanghas in Oriya means friends. San(gha)than for us, is thus, both a politics of friendship and a form of a collective struggle and action (sanghatit sangharsha). It premises itself on the one hand, on an ethico-politics of pluralism (Mouffe 2005), and on the other, on the

---

3 Nancy
(im)possible forging of relationships, love and friendship.

Moreover, 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. Our work depicts how an excessive reliance on so called effects of development take us away from the affective states/experiences and affective (routes/roots to) transformation. “Within the developmental discourse, single women are positioned as subjects in need of governmental support; issues of land, wages and health assume primary importance. Significantly, absent from the discussions about single women's rights are issues of their self-fulfilment or desire. The objective conditions of their existence seem to overwhelm their subjective being” (Pappu 2011: 379; italics mine). It is interesting how singleness remains foreclosed in the apparently woman-centric developmental work in Rayagada with about 35-40% women being single (accounting for widows, separated and unmarried single women alone). These women are collected into groups to promote micro-finance, livelihoods and other so called “developmental agendas” that claim to “empower” women, but the 'reality' of their lived life and their nodal experiences (singleness being one among many) is largely kept outside of these interventions.

In the questioning of the 'effectiveness' of (mal)development, which has reduced questions of women's issues (related to questions of gender and power in relational contexts) to issues of women (issues related to claiming material/tangible resources), this work attempts to take an affective turn to transformation. This work in the rural *adivasi* areas, situated amidst the hegemonic functionings of the developmental State and NGOs, is trying to understand what happens when development is displaced from an obsession with the effective to the affective; from enunciations of the rational, 'conscious', the utility maximizing rationale to what Seigworth and Gregg (2010) call “gradient of bodily capacities to act and be acted upon, born in *in-between-ness* and residing as accumulative *beside-ness*”?

The *Sanghathan*, hence,

departs from the usual politics installed in the language of demanding citizen rights and entitlements from the liberal/welfare State producing individualized self-interested subjects collectivizing to amplify 'numbers' in order to gain visibility. The philosophy and praxis of this work focuses equally on the questions of self and social transformation (rather than remaining a mere beneficiary of the so called benevolent State); it re-imagines solidarity in a way that it ceases to be a bond of unity or agreement between individuals united for a common political cause; rather, it begins to find relevance in the emergence and sustenance of the contingent and emergent *being-in-common* itself. Thus,

solidarity within this praxis of transformation, remains not just a means to attain a common goal but becomes an end in itself; and this is one sharp break in Eka Nari Sanghathan with traditional politics (Chitranshi 2016: 16-17)

In the lieu of a Conclusion: Zigzagging with Deleuze and Guattari

This work of (and not simply on) “practical philosophy”, engages with Deleuzian-Guattarian thought to arrive at new 'problems', open up new ideas, and explore new ways of collective 'becoming'. “Deleuze (1925–95) saw himself as part of a tradition of philosophy which challenged and disrupted life, such that new concepts and ideas would result in new possibilities for action and practice” (Colebrook 2002: xi). This ongoing action research work with Eka Nari Sanghathan wishes to become representative of such ‘philosophical doing’ as it undertakes the overdetermined task of disrupting the ‘common-sensical’ way of life (marked by standard structures and discourses of patriarchy, capitalism and development) and giving birth to newer concepts and ideas in order to engender the contingent-emergent praxis of transformation.

The understanding of singleness generated through this work produces a cut in the common discourse surrounding singlehood. The double or split meaning of singleness and the deterritorializing of the conservative statist discourse on singlehood has enabled us to disaggregate the hetero-patriarchal nature of the adivasi reality. It shows us that all of socio-cultural reality is not patriarchal in nature, when singleness is read as both a site of oppression (unacceptable in a largely hetero-patriarchal world obsessed with the dominant institution of marriage) and also as a site of resistance and affirmation (as it works its way through and beyond the institution of marriage and the everyday practices of patriarchy).

The 'crafting' of the concept, we are calling, singleness, has in a way introduced us to newer possibilities that could be engendered towards building non-teleological feminist futures. The continuous articulation and analysis of oppression and resistance within singleness has connected us in a kind of collective form, that we call Eka Nari Sanghathan. The Sanghathan as a response to the condition of singleness (largely loneliness and socio-political exclusion), urges us to work through existing forms and (im)possible formations of relationality (working through relations of affinity, rethought beyond repressive structures of family and Oedipality). Perhaps singleness, is, in itself, an anti-Oedipal concept. Thus, can these reflections and reworkings premised upon Guattari's idea “we are all groupuscles” take us towards “the search for a new subjectivity, a group subjectivity” (Deleuze in Guattari 2015: 7)?

Deleuze and Guattari's work help us to take a detour (a differenciated tour) from contemporary developmental work and even forms of feminisms that are installed in the language of identity, representation, rights and forging of women's groups in order to amplify 'numbers'. Illusory
bonds of 'unity' among self-interested subjects driven by a sense of sameness and common cause seems to have become paradigmatic of most developmental and political interventions taking place in the adivasi contexts. The so called “third world victim woman”, the figure of the widow woman suffering in the absence of male protector and provider, is brought to the forefront as a homogeneous entity, thereby eclipsing all existing and possible forms of differences and flows of power among women. The Sanghathan, tries to depart from this kind of homogenizing and obscuring, thereby arguing for treating the process of coming together of women as an end in itself rather than just a means to attain some pre-determined goal. What can be the multiple modalities of different body-beings in touch with each other sharing an “affective social field”, is an ongoing enquiry of this work. Can the working of the Sanghathan take us to newer modes of “becoming with” and “becoming towards” the other? In what ways can a Sanghathan of “multiplicities composed of heterogeneous singularities in dynamic compositions” (Sotirin 2005: 99), explore flows and intensities of rhizomatic 'becoming'? The meaning of transformation for us, lies in this process of immanent thinking and living which on the one hand challenges and disrupts common sense and everyday ways of life and on the other produces newer, divergent and differenciated forms of relations, thoughts, becomings and life. Our work in Rayagada stands testimony to such an unfinished journey.

Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of becomings – becomings which are always “in the middle and in-between” – take us beyond the essential forms, fixed identities, predetermined subject positions, structured functions, transcendent values, logical and moral explanations, and molar oppositions. The concept of becoming-woman, especially finds relevance with regards to this work, as it signifies becoming something else, something beyond that which always already exists in the form of 'being' a woman in the hetero-patriarchal normative world. Becoming-woman, for Deleuze and Guattari is not to imitate or imbibe womanliness but to defy dominant molar forms and relations in order to conceive “molecular woman” and “molecular political movement” that "slips into molar confrontations, and passes under or through them" (Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 276). Although, this concept of becoming-woman has been put to critique by 'difference feminists' – focused on the question of sexual difference, it finds relevance in its creation of possibilities around what life and body can do through challenging molar identities and binaries, like woman, like singlehood.

In this context, Braidotti (2002) urges us to explore connections between sexual difference and becoming-woman as she believes that the question of sexual difference can be opened up given the transformatory nature of becomings. Since Deleuze and Guattari, through the problematizing of the man-woman binary, argue for a possibility for “thousand sexes” (Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 278), their conceptualization of the sexes cannot be reduced to the logic of the One or the Same. “In relation to their becomings, they are certainly opposed to neutrality and sameness since becomings, becoming-woman, child, animal, molecular are the process by which molar identities are complicated. They see a proliferation of multiplicities and differentiations in their
understanding of becoming. For Braidotti and other Deleuzian feminists, becomings break desire away from repression, away from the [Freudian theatre of the] unconscious and oedipal desires. Becomings are new transformations that are always occurring and never stop” (Blake 2009: 69).

Becoming-woman, thus, helps us not only rethink questions of body and politics beyond identity but also urge us to explore recomposition of masculinities and femininities through deterritorializing opposing sexual binaries as “both men and women become-woman” (Deleuze and Guattari 2005: 278). The *Sanghathan* could be seen as *that* evolving space where these questions and concerns are discussed and analyzed and efforts are undertaken to work through standard or given structures and discourses of hetero-partiarchy, capitalism and development. Thus, how can transformative praxis be conceptualized beyond fascisizing, reactionary, confrontative, and paranoid modes of organizing and in-between molar and molecular forms of politics, or what Deleuze and Guattari call in-between macro and micropolitics, is a question that requires serious attention.

The hypothesis that this work with single women in Rayagada proposes is that working through the condition of singleness and gender relations in the particularity of *adivasi* space, can perhaps slowly take us to intensities that carry the potential of disrupting the fixed sexual binaries, dissolve the category 'woman' and challenge the hetero-normative way of life. Or perhaps it is the other way round; and I remain a little undecided. Some of these processes are partially evident in the work of the *Sanghathan*. The concept of singleness has helped us problematize the binary man/woman by splitting up the homogeneous categories and showcasing fractured matrices of dominance, oppression, resistance and affirmation. Alongside, the *Sanghathan* can be read as a form of revolutionary desire that post-Deleuze and Guattari is understood as a positive creative flux and force of life. I say this because the *Sanghathan* as productive desire, could move towards producing life and diverging multiplicity of relations that are constantly transforming and getting created. Deleuze and Guattari, render desire political through moving beyond the oedipal understanding of desire as negative, or as repressed resulting in turn from the logic of lack and this kind of understanding of desire requires “thinking of a different kind of body and a way of thinking about the body differently” (Blake 2009: 34).

Similarly, the *Sanghathan of Eka Nari* (Single Women) as desiring-production, in taking us beyond the unit called family, acts as a connecting force that may produce relations of affinity and affect between multiplicity of body-beings. While arguing for anti-oedipal desire, the *Sanghathan* tries to inaugurate a different idea and imagination of the larger social rather than simply getting produced by it. Thus the *Sanghathan* on the one hand, can be understood as that force, that desire which connects differentiated bodies in order to think and produce life creatively and differently, and on the other, it may also move towards production of non-familial anti-oedipal flows that can deterritorialize molar forms and structures. The recurring problem we face in this work is the hold of molar forces – like developmentalism – either State-sponsored or
that of aided agencies – or say, older loyalties to family and currently new age pop spirituality or Christianized religiosities overriding adivasi life worlds.

_Sanghathan_ then becomes a struggle between what Guattari calls “subjugated groups” and “group subjects”. “Groups are subjugated no less by the leaders they assign themselves, or accept, than by the masses. The hierarchy, the vertical or pyramidal organization, which characterizes subjugated groups is meant to ward off any possible inscription of non-sense, death or dispersal, to discourage the development of creative ruptures, and to ensure the self-preservation mechanisms rooted in the exclusion of other groups. Their centralization works through structure, totalization, unification, replacing the conditions of a genuine collective “enunciation” with an assemblage of stereotypical utterances cut off both from the real and from subjectivity” (Deleuze in Guattari 2015: 13-14). Group subjects on the other hand are defined by “coefficients of transversality” that ward off totalities and hierarchies. Guattari treats the question of “transference as vehicular” and takes it away from dual relations to group relations, as also from that of vertical hierarchies to horizontalities. For Guattari, they are agents of enunciation, and environments of desire.

The question to us is how and whether _Sanghathan_ will become group subjects? What would its relation be with subjugated groups? Would it itself end up becoming a subjugated group? Is the coefficient of transformation, then in the coefficient of transversality? Is it in the tension between becoming subjugated groups, marked by the role of a synthesizer operating through rationalization, totalization, exclusion and becoming group subjects, where unification occurs through analysis? How will analysis and desire come to be on the same side, with desire taking the lead? How would we constitute in the group the conditions of an analysis of desire, on oneself and on the others? How to pursue the flows that constitute myriad lines of flight in adivasi society?

This paper aims to build on the ‘uneasy’ interaction and relationship between _being_ single and _becoming_ an contingent-emergent- ‘being-in-common’ – the _Sanghathan_ –What does this collectivizing around singleness do to our understanding of heteronormativity and that which is rendered its ‘outside’; including experiences of heterosexuality that do not conform to hetronormative standards? How does the understanding of ‘singleness’ transform as we work through existing ‘norms’ and co-create possibilities for alternative _becomings_ – _affective becomings_ informing relations of personal and political intimacy, desire and sexuated existence. In other words, this paper asks, what _is_ it to encounter questions of subject-power-desire as and when single women collectivize themselves? Lastly, what does an alternative praxis in the light of these questions do to the larger space of the feminist political? The paper thus tries to inaugurate the question of singleness within not just the hegemonic Heteronormative Order, but also within the extant politics of queering? Can singleness offer us in feminist and queer politics _another_ , an Other appreciation of the
outside, an outside that requires caring attention as we work through our gendered and sexuated (lived) experiences of the everyday.