Transforming the political – politicizing transformation: beyond developmentalism

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Abstract

This paper builds on an 'action research' project that took transformation as an object of inquiry within the context of collective mobilisation and formation of *Eka Nari Sanghathan (Single Womens' Collective)* in a tribal village Emaliguda in the Rayagada district of Odisha. The process of public and collective articulation, and analysis of the everyday experience and condition of singleness in rural women, gave way to the becoming of a collective where women who have been abandoned by their families, or have been widowed or have been left unmarried, have come together with an objective of paving the Sanghathan's (i.e. organisation's) own path, spelling out its own well-being, carving out its own language of empowerment, and taking charge of a possible common future. A future beyond mere and already stated and dictated developmental agendas. This is an emergent and contingent being-in-common that premises itself on the ethico-politics of relationality, and politics of pluralism, and also politics of love and friendship. As this initiative progressed towards collective (in) action, while engaging with the state, the society at large and one's own self as ethico-political subject, the attempt has been to revisit the hegemonic understanding of the discourse and practice around development through generating a critique of the capitalocentric and orientalist nature of developmentalism, and through this interrogation, arrive at a re-imagination and re-formulation of development. It also makes a move towards understanding the question of transformation in its three inter-related axes: political, social, and self. This research is a kind of reflexive writing on the process of righting wrongs, reflecting how an in-depth transformative process requires these three sites of transformation to be engaged with continuously and simultaneously in a trialogue. This paper attempts to offer a possible philosophy of transformative praxis that engenders change and collective formation among the gendered subaltern through participatory processes of self-reflection and reflection on the process of collectivisation, through an engagement with Marxist, Gandhian, and Tagorite takes on transformation, as also contemporary (trans)formations around new social movements post Laclau and Mouffe (1985).

Keywords: Transformation, Singleness, Politics of Relationality, Politics of Pluralism, collective (in) action, ethico-political subject.

Introduction: what is it to listen?

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 in the Sanghathan because they believe what I say and they understand my pain.

（Rupayi Pedenti, Member *Eka Nari Sanghathan*, Emaliguda)

This voice although comes from a specific context of a far distant village named Emaliguda in Rayagada district of Odisha, however, the first half of this quote reflects an experience that touches every woman's' life in ways more than one. The most generalised and universal statement that is ascribed to women quite loosely, goes like, 'it is impossible to understand a woman'. Although this statement is used quite often, does any reflection take place around thinking as to why we as a larger hetero-patriarchal society fail to understand women and women's' experiences? This statement is made often, in passing the onus of not being understood on to the women themselves, without turning back the gaze onto ourselves to look into where are we failing in believing and understanding women and the pain they experience as women? Do we lack a listening ear? Do we lack empathy? Do we lack enough sensitivity and affect that is required to contain someone else's sadness and pain? Then the important question is not only 'Can the subaltern speak?'[1] but to extend it further and ask ourselves 'Can the subaltern be heard?' Do we allow and prepare ourselves to listen to be able to believe and understand a woman and her pain.

The above quote seems to suggest that historically we have failed to listen and as a result women have been left to suffer alone, to continue to suffer in silence. Rupayi didi's experience has taught her that the world around her refuses to believe her story and fails to understand her pain. The story of pain and sadness that Rupayi didi could not share with anyone is story of her singleness. A story full of everyday challenges and sufferings that a woman goes through in the absence of a legitimate male sexual partner, mainly a husband in her life. A woman is regarded single not because she does not have family, friends and acquaintances, but because she does not have a husband whose presence is necessary in order to bring legitimacy to her life.

Thus, women who are widowed, divorced, separated, deserted and unmarried are commonly regarded as single women. This absence of a husband in a woman's' life begins to shape the nature of her other relationships and as a result she is single(d) socially thereby marking singleness as a primary attribute dictating and determining her existence. She is socially forced and 'punished' to lead her life alone, all by herself, most of the times left alone to deal with her loneliness. In such a condition of social ostracisation, it is not hard to believe that a single woman has no choice than to keep her sadness to herself, since she has no one who will believe her story and understand her pain.

Amidst many such unshared, kept within, silenced and lost, yet available in scatters, fragmentarily out there, speaking hesitantly and softly, partially found stories of singleness among women in a village

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1 Taking the argument from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988).

named Emaliguda, we[2] (40 single women and myself) envisioned a collective dream. A dream where we found each other, our significant other, where we listened to each other, empathised with each other and believed and understood each other. And in this process, we began to also find our ownselves, selfs that we may have repressed, lost or even that which got (re)formed in the process. We also listened to our ownselves and embarked on this collective journey to turn our dream into our reality. This reality that we have build together through our struggle and action, is our Sanghathan, named as Eka Nari Sanghathan, a realized dream that gave Rupayi didi and all of us, our Sanghas[3] (friends and companions) who believe each other's stories and understand each other's pain.

Throughout this work, I refer to the 40 single women in the village by and with whom the Sanghathan was forged, envisioned and traveled. As for the Sanghathan members, however, I do not attach the same status to my own self since, my privileged location, background and position as an urban educated middle class woman marks a difference in my overall experiences, and although there were resonances, largely there were stark differences in how we experienced our singleness, I was aware that my engagement and involvement in the Sanghathan had a time limit attached to it and I could not commit myself to being a member of the Sanghathan in ways that these 40 women did and could, given their privileged location in the village. Hence, although I was a Sangha and a co-traveler, I was not a member of the Sanghathan.

Moreover, my role in this journey, both assigned to me and taken up by myself, did not remain a fixed one, rather it kept shifting from that of being the friend, facilitator, co-ordinator, mobiliser, trainer, learner, researcher, and at times a guiding source, while at other times the one who was being guided, a source of information, a link between the Sanghathan and other institutions and organisations, an insider who was entrusted with the property of the Sanghathan (personal sharings, plans, discussions), and an outsider with the potential for taking this initiative and struggle beyond its limits of remaining 'local, through writing. This task of documenting our journey is a task of immense responsibility towards my Sanghas who have entrusted me with taking our journey to the outside world. Moreover, writing is also a social responsibility towards the larger academic world and the development sector for whom new knowledge is to be produced.

This work cracks the binary of the researcher as the 'expert' since the knowledge that has been produced in this work is the knowledge that has been generated by us (Sanghathan members and myself). This work depicts how the so called outside expertise was not deployed or accepted uncritically, rather, this work was geared towards generating a collective collaborative expertise thereby bridging the knowledge gap between what comes from outside and that that already exists in the field. This was a process of mutual exchange, learning and co-production of knowledge. I learned much more by the end of our journey than what I had begun with and I am certain that it has been the same for the Sanghathan members. However, I am fully aware that this translation from 'what happened' to 'what is

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2 Wherever I intend to mention myself along with the 40 single women, I have used the term we or our to represent us. Otherwise when I am mentioning only them, I use they or their.

3 The term Sangha in Oriya means friends.

documented' is an act of transition loaded with problems of voice, power, privilege and representation. Thus, throughout this work with intense thick description of the process and maximum use of the voices of the members, I have continuously attempted to negotiate with these problems.

This work majorly is a documentation of our journey that began in Emaliguda village of Rayagada[4] district, Odisha as an Action Research project. This village comes under Gadisaskal panchayat in Kolnara block surrounded by a beautiful river flowing on the side called Nagaballi. Total population of the village is 951, with people residing within a total of 171 households. Among these, 880 people are Schedule Tribes (Kondha tribe), 70 Schedule Castes and 20 are Sundis (Other Backward Caste). PRADAN[5] has been working in this village since 4-5 years and there are several Self Help Groups (SHGs) of women in the village that have been formed as a development initiative.

Actioning research and researching action

A random survey was conducted in the village and it showed that out of about 250 women in the village, 90 women are single, if being single is understood alone in terms of physical absence of a male 'legitimate' partner in the lives of the women. Out of the 90 women, 22 were widowed single women, 17 separated single women and 51 are never-married single women (above 25 years of age). The presence of such a large number of single women in one village not only came as a surprise but also insisted on the need for us to delve deeper into the aspect of singleness among women's' everyday lives (research) and simultaneously to explore ways in order to address issues that surface as a result of singleness of women, thereby ushering in transformation (action). Throughout this journey wherein action research has been deployed not as an end in itself but more as a methodology towards generating a philosophy of collective transformative praxis, the action and the research, have moved hand in hand rather than one following the other. Every research initiative has led to some kind of action and every action has been researched. Hence this work is a work of actioning research and researching action through documentation of the journey of process of transformation that began with Eka Nari Sanghathan.

This action research finds relevance more so since at present there are very few studies available on single women. Those that have been conducted have sought to uncover the different ways in which the single women copes in her life or have sought to illuminate her responses vis-a-vis life, career and family in the main (Jethani. 1994; Krishnakumari, 1987; Rathaur 1990, as cited in Pappu, 2011). However, these studies have mainly been conducted in the urban spaces and essentially on single women. This work however, is rooted primarily in a rural setting and is not a work on single women, rather with single women, for single women and by rural single women. This work does not limit itself to being a research alone, but extends into becoming an action research. The available literature on single women seems to

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4 Rayagada district consists of 11 blocks, 171 *panchayats* and 2667 villages. The Kondha tribe forms the majority of population followed by Souras in the district.

5 PRADAN (Professional Assistance for Development Action) is a Non-Governmental Organisation working across eight states. It works to promote and strengthen livelihoods for the rural poor.

more or less conform to the common discourse around single women[6] thereby including only widowed, divorced, separated and unmarried women, thereby treating this larger category as an undifferentiated homogeneous category. Whereas, this work, contextually, attempts to problematise this larger common discourse and offers insights into the heterogeneity of lived reality of single women in the village, thereby expanding and revisiting the discourse around single women.

Furthermore, even amidst dearth of existing literature on single women in India, there seems to be more availability on writings on widow women (Chen, 2000) and to some extent on never-married women (Jethani, 1994 and Pappu, 2011). However, with respect to separated single women, hardly any significant study seems to be available. A few studies that cover separated and divorced single women are either limited to studies on women headed households or focus specifically on their economic aspects (see Kirti Singh *Economic Rights and Entitlements of Separated and Divorced Women* (2010)).

This skewed nature of findings and knowledge production on different aspects of singlehood is definitely not accidental, rather, this is acutely incidental and contextual. It is both an outcome as well as a response in resonance with how women have been identified, targeted, visibilised and channelised by larger developmental agenda and the feminist and nationalist movement. Rekha Pappu traces 'moments in which the category of single women were explicitly invoked, the early feminist/queer movement of the 1980s, the developmental moment of the 1980s and 1990s and the moment of liberalisation and globalisation ushered in from the 1990s onwards' (Pappu, 2011). The nationalist movement and the early feminist movement brought to the forefront issues related to Sati, and widow remarriage, thereby invoking the category of widow women in India. Similarly, Pappu states that 'The Towards Equality Report' that marked the foundation of women's movement in India recognised the existence of unmarried women. However, the movement while generating its critique of the institutions of family and marriage never attempted to directly address the unmarried single woman. Thereon as a result of efforts undertaken on the part of feminist economists, the developmental agenda moved towards inclusion of women who were the heads of the households and the larger focus remained on addressing only the economic aspects of single women's' lives. Later, the discourse around single women took another turn all together, when it became a part of popular understanding that as a result of socio-economic changes following liberalisation and globalisation, the number of single women in the country was on the rise. This is because it is believed that as women are becoming economically independent and making better carrier choices, at the same time, they are exercising their choice to remain unmarried. This claim is highly contentious and can be challenged at many levels.

Thus, these moments that co-opted the category of single women to fit them in the larger political agenda, not only moved on with exclusion based inclusion of widowed and never-married single women, but these also left behind and excluded separated and divorced single women, perhaps because of the severely controversial nature of this kind of single-hood, wherein the socially sanctified institution of marriage is not only escaped and rejected but is challenged in a way that it fails to provide the woman

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[6] Single Women are those who:
    (i)   Have reached a marriageable age and are yet not married.
    (ii)   Are widows.
    (iii)   Are divorced or separated. (Krishnakumari, 1987).

the very protection, legitimacy and security that this institution claims to offer. Thus, the linear connection between political and developmental agendas that were undertaken and the specific nature of the kind of studies that were being conducted during the same time, highlight how power influences knowledge production and how knowledge that is produced is appropriated and subsumed within the larger developmental-political context. Thus, this work becomes important in order to revisit the power and politics of knowledge production that has happened so far, as well as, to challenge and critique the larger developmental and political moments that have premised themselves on such exclusions. Moreover, through this critique, this work has attempted to generate a new theory of transformative praxis that redefines development and re-imagines politics.

From development to transformation

Development was-and continues to be for the most part-a top down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach that treats people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of progress...It comes as no surprise that development became a force so destructive to third world cultures, ironically in the name of people's interest.

(Escobar,1999)

Development, as pointed out by the development critiques, was and continues to be an attempt at furnishing third world[7] with all that it lacks and which the first world possesses. This 'othering' of the third world assumes there is only one fundamental way of bettering human lives (action research in Emaliguda was an attempt to find other ways), wherein, first world countries being the benchmark, the time and space of the third world countries has to be continually rewritten till they become developed. The nations that are so called developed in this sense stand on top of the development ladder and the ones below have been assigned the task of necessarily replicating them by making, unmaking and re-making themselves, in an attempt to fit to a unified economic, political and social order of the world. All the differences pertaining to culture, economy and politics of different communities and nations, belonging both to the 'developed' and the 'underdeveloped' world are overlooked and the fixed categories of first world and third world are established thereby formulating latter as a site ready to be impregnated with the dosage of development.

Moreover, in the hegemonic description of development, as synonymous to modernisation, economic growth, progress, advancement, and so on, there is no faith that the third world is capable of constructing its own language of development. The third world is rendered inferior and lacking in self-definition and hence people in the underdeveloped countries are viewed only as actors, victims, beneficiaries, participants and followers of western philosophy of development. These global assumptions have given birth to a strategic and legitimate way of continuing economic plunder and exploitation, all in the name of development which ensures that colonialism is still alive and is continuing in newer forms.

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[7]   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).

Hence, development with all its powerful mechanism(s) has succeeded in gaining the legitimacy of exercising control over third world countries thereby producing newer forms of knowledge(s), practices, policies, strategies, and theories. While the oriental gaze of the west prepared a fertile ground for the growth of development, capitalism, in its varied forms, has slowly become a powerful scientific tool to enhance its productivity. All traditional economies, hence, are viewed to be capitalist in nature and the existence of non-capitalist economies, diverse and distinct class processes still alive and operational in the global south, are rendered extinct. 'Capitalism becomes a centre, an essence or a nodal reference point in terms of which non-capitalism is conceived, discussed and policed (by a set of policies). What gets erased in the process are the multi-faceted, non-capitalist modes-of-being and the diverse possibilities they may reveal' (Chakrabarti and Dhar, 2009). So development is loaded with the logic of capitalocentrism and orientalism. The over-determination of capitalocentrism and orientalism produces a conceptual couple capitalocentric-orientalism (Chakrabarti and Dhar, 2009).

'Development stinks', says Gustavo Esteva (1987), because whether defined in conventional or in unconventional terms, whether viewed as a concept or a social process, it is fundamentally incompatible with social justice, human rights, autonomy and cultural survival. Development in all its forms is contaminated by its origin in the structure of repression implicit in the social sensitivities produced by colonial exploitation and by the systematic scientisation and desacralisation of life and living nature (Nandy, 2004). There is no reason and no definite need for every society to pass through the stage of so called development for moving into a just society. 'According to Arturo Escobar (1995), development is the last and failed attempt to complete the enlightenment in Asia, Africa and Latin America, rather than search for development alternatives, we need to speak of alternatives to development' (as cited in Roy, 2003).

However, given the spread, institutionalisation and the power of development of subsuming possible alternatives to development, (the language of which can again be determined by the discourse of development), it seems nearly impossible to divorce it completely from the existing reality. 'Development, as both an idea and a set of practices, has become so pervasive and so powerful, that it is increasingly difficult to imagine alternatives that are outside of the development framework' (Everett, 1997). This work, with all its interest and intent of contributing towards building and living in a desirable world free of suffering(s), injustice, exploitation and oppressions of all forms, clearly emphasises the need to develop an understanding of development and find our way out of the orientalist and capitalocentric frameworks that continue to haunt international development.

So without completely rejecting development in all totality, perhaps it is important to revisit the concept and practice of development and begin founding new meaning(s) and forms that emerge from specific contexts and remain limited in its application. It is important to restore our belief in the fact that there can be no one ultimate definition of development. There can be no one ultimate way of going about development. Development, as an idea as well as a social practice, needs to be embedded in the particularity of the local, social, economy, and culture, rather than being transplanted as it is from the west to the rest. The choice of the change that specific communities want to see for themselves should perhaps be in their own hands and any approach should encompass their needs and aspirations rather than a universal regime, completely devoid and alienated from specificity of the local context, being

imposed upon or/and adopted by them. As Ashis Nandy, in his article 'Cultural Frames for Transformative Politics: A Credo' (1984), suggests, no theory of oppression can make sense unless it is cast in native terms or categories, that is, in terms and categories used by the victims of our times. Thus, there is a need for context sensitive and context specific theories of development geared towards transformation.

However, while suggesting that developmental understanding ought to emerge from the specificity of the local or/and communities, I am neither invoking the popular myth that the local/communities are homogeneous, singular and unproblematic entities free of power relations and dynamics, nor am I proposing that the alternative meanings of development, that we are trying to explore, lie secretly hidden with the existing communities. The proposition, instead, is that while advocating such an approach, we need to engage with the idea of community and the local critically (as KC Bhattacharya suggests in 'Swaraj in Ideas'), rather than assuming a community already exists. There is thus a need to unpack the context, understand social relations, explore the specificity of the local and create conditions for a contingent and emergent being-in-common[8] that can address questions around development and move towards not only evolving and developing the idea and practice of development but also simultaneously envisioning the nature of transformation.

As a development practitioner, my belief is that the constructed victims of development, who have been bearing the brunt of the process of development so far and have been strategically neglected, have immense potential of fighting the mammoth framework called development, while at the same time re-shaping it and restructuring the idea and practice of development, which is development of the local, in the language of the local with the local and for the development of the local. 'The impossibility of a global order must be affirmed as a truth and reaffirmed as a truism. The local cannot be fully interior to the global, nor can its inventive potential be captured by any singular imagining. A local ethic proffers respect, not just for difference and autonomy but for self understood as capability' (Gibson-Graham, 2003).

In no way, however, I am trying to romanticise or overvalue marginalised cultures, and in no way I mean that these cultures and traditions are ever perfect and free of violence, exploitation and oppressions, but it is true that they are at close proximity with the kind of life people lead and would perhaps want to live. Then why should not the kind of development and transformation that is to be envisaged be embedded in that very context thereby addressing local forms of violence, exploitations and oppressions? Why can't it be generated from that very context of the local and remain in that space rather than becoming a universal idea and practice of development for different contexts, (this is of course not to say that ideas, concepts and frameworks cannot travel, the paper is trying to problematise the one-way nature of the travel, travel from the north-west to the rest of the world). Although we cannot fully deny the fact that even the present culture(s), aspirations and needs of what Gibson-Graham (2003) calls the local (as against Hardt and Negri's global) and Chakrabarti and Dhar (2009) call the world of the third (as against the third world) have been colored by the discourse of development,

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[8]   See Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) *The Inoperative Community.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

yet re-imagining and re-defining development from the vantage point of the local/world of the third seems to be more democratic, ensuring greater participation and meaningful sustained transformation.

For this articulation of transformation, it is necessary that the communities bearing the brunt of developmental interventions in their daily lives participate and engage collaboratively to push the imposed development out of their lives and make space for needed transformation(s) desired by them since these emerging transformations are to be a part of their everyday lived reality. Thus, given the spread and reach of the dominant understanding of development, it is important to engage, question and simultaneously develop newer ways of theorising and practicing development, which holds relevance for the people who shape and reshape its meaning discursively. In other words, generating an understanding of development which is (con)temporary, partial, provisional, contingent, flexible, context-specific, context-sensitive and ever evolving, in other words, open to the future.

With this understanding in mind, when women's lives, located in the very context of the village, were being explored, singleness among women appeared as one of the major conditioning aspect of women's lives in Emaliguda. Since the operating SHGs in the village, that have emerged as a result of developmental interventions, seemed to have left this important aspect of their lives behind, the need to generate collective articulation and analysis around lives of single women in Emaliguda became an important agenda for us. Based on this articulation, discussion and analysis, we began the process of transformation in the village. This work, hence, is an attempt towards imagining transformation of the local, with the local, in the language of the local and for the local. In other words, this work is a process of co-envisioning transformation that is born(e) in the specificity of the context of the local.

When development is re-imagined in this way, it marks a movement from the hegemonic understanding of development to a newer understanding of development as, sustained transformation. Thus, in the course of this work, our object of enquiry has been what is called transformation. MPhil in Development Practice and the journey along with the Sanghathan members has enabled me to look at transformation, primarily, through the three main sites; (a) political transformation, (b) social transformation and (c) transformation in and of the self. This work shows how these three sites of transformation perhaps need simultaneous engagement since one does not necessarily follow the other.

To begin understanding transformation, the internet dictionary defines transformation as a marked change in form, nature, condition or function, appearance or character; especially one for the better. The synonyms of transformation being alteration, change, conversion, re-modeling, reshaping and redoing, and the list was a long one ending interestingly in revolution. What was more interesting was that the antonyms of transformation were preservation and conservation. This made me wonder was the objective of this action research really to alter, change, convert, remodel, reshape, redo some form, nature, condition, function, appearance, and character into something better? Were we really trying to alter, change, and convert something into something else? Completely? I do not think so. At least the philosophy of development practice that has been generated above, as a result of critiquing dominant western ways of conceptualising development that speaks in turn the language of complete alteration, change, or conversion, detaches itself from understanding transformation as completely altering, changing, converting or re-modeling the social reality of the local. Preserving and conserving certain

forms, natures, conditions, functions, appearances and characters of the life in the local is perhaps as much important as some level of alteration, change and conversion.

Thus, as a practitioner of development situated in the local context, drawing on my knowledge and learnings from both the classroom and the field, I believe, the community and I found ourselves always negotiating between these two extremes of altering, changing, converting and preserving and conserving, retaining certain local forms, natures, conditions, functions, appearances, and characters, while at the same time trying to alter, change, covert and remodel those that demanded necessary interventions. Our action research journey suggests that it is somewhere at the uneasy cusp of converting and preserving that transformation needs to be formulated. Perhaps an enquiry into transformation began with transforming the understanding of development, wherein the attempt has been to alter the dominant understanding without completely rejecting development.

Having highlighted that transformation in the local context remains in the nexus of altering/converting and preserving/conserving, it is also important to highlight the site of transformation in order to reduce its level of abstraction in its everyday practice. The three models of transformation, namely, political transformation, social transformation and self transformation that have been mentioned above, need to be closely understood, both as a set of ideas and how these emerged in the course of this action research. The theorisation as well as the practice seems to be generating a trialogue between these three sites of transformation and this opens up a possibility of generating a philosophy of transformative praxis.

First, let me try to elaborate on what I mean when I say political transformation and how it is being distinguished from earlier formulations of the dominant ideology of politics. In this section, I am attempting to transform the hegemonic and traditional ways in which politics has been understood and practiced for many years. And once political is reformulated as relational and in pluralism or multiplicity, it becomes clear as to how political transformation is impossible without transformation of the social and the self.

Redefining 'political' in the pluralistic politics of relationality

While, re-thinking and redefining the political in politics, I am mainly critiquing the traditional forms of liberal and Marxist political thought[9] that premise itself upon notions of concentrated power, expert

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[9] While under liberal frameworks individual interest, individual liberty and individual rights remain the center of politicisation, through electoral politics, under Marxist frameworks, the site to be politically organised is class, through a process of development of class consciousness among the proletariat whose subjectivity is assumed to be solely constructed and constituted through historical materialism, and the understanding of politics that emerges from this kind of ideology, remains constrained within the limits of revolution that is to come. In both these forms of political thought, power is assumed to be concentrated entirely in the hands of the state and the other (individual in the liberal thought and the proletariat in the Marxist thought) is rendered as powerless. This gives rise to somewhat concrete and secure oppressor-oppressed dualisms (i.e. akin to binaries) and politics in both these frameworks is understood to be only in terms of restructuring of state power. Secondly, the responsibility of pursuing this agenda of restructuring state power is either in the hands of the officials of

political subject, and universality. This work through revisiting these concepts, opens up inquiry into understanding power as fluid cracking the oppressor-oppressed binary, rendering resistance a possibility thereby establishing an ethico-political subjectivity, wherein the political potential of the so called oppressed herself is realised and reached. Moreover, through advocating politics of pluralism, the notion of closed totality and universality has been problematised.

This work mainly draws on theoretical works of Chantal Mouffe (The Return of The Political, (2005) and Martha Ackelsberg (Resisting Citizenship: Feminist essays on Politics, Community and Democracy, (2010)). While Mouffe in her book is arguing for politics of pluralism situated in the antagonism that prevails in the society, Ackelsberg draws our attention to politics of relationality emphasising the role of emotions, women's networks and relationships in women's activism.

I begin with questioning the idea of power being concentrated in the hands of the state/subject. In the last few years, this idea of centralised power has been challenged and power is now understood to be more fluid and spread out in the interstices of everyday life than being limited and concentrated. This, in turn, challenges the oppressor-oppressed binary and understands power in its omnipresence, ubiquitousness and immanence. Secondly, the political agenda in the traditional politics frameworks has been attempted either through electoral representation or vanguardism, since the masses have been assumed to possess a consciousness that is either incapable of presenting oneself, hence the need for representation, or a consciousness that is false and justifies the need for the revolutionary consciousness of the vanguard.

The last question(ing) is that of what post-structuralist philosophers call 'closed totality' and 'universality' of traditional forms of politics wherein the nature of power, oppression, organisation, resistance and the political subject is unquestioningly and rigidly predefined in a universal language and any other form of political uprising which falls out from this already existing and already defined traditional political trajectory, is automatically rendered either pre-political, non-political or apolitical. Marxist misunderstandings of the women's movement or feminist misunderstandings of the sexuality/queer movement stem from such an universal language of politics, non-understandings of Gandhian and Tagorite politics, which are more about social and self transformation, also stem from such a universal language of politics. However, in this work the attempt is to bring out to the surface the importance of opening up space for incorporating or making space for a politics of pluralism (Mouffe, 2005) which refuses to identify blindly with traditional forms of politics.

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competing parties elected under liberal democracy or in the hands of the Vanguard who is supposedly a class-conscious elite-turned-proletariat. Lastly, both Liberal political thought and Marxist political thought imagine politics as a closed totality where the so called oppressed (mostly represented by the officials or the vanguards) organises, resists and challenges the power of the state (that is assumed to be the sole oppressor) and this understanding of power trapped in the black box has been dictating what is political in traditional politics. This universality rejects all particularity and specificity of existing socio-economic realities. It also rejects micro-processes of power, as also the subtle and the surreptitious, subject-producing (and not just subject repressing) nature of power. In other words, it rejects the contradictory and heterogeneous nature of the processes of power.

The nature of the political that I am trying to propose is in a way a reformed continuation of traditional forms of politics where we are once again questioning power structures. However power is now seen as a micro-process productive of subject positions, somewhat akin to what Butler in *Psychic Life of Power* calls 'subjection-subjectivation' (1997), breaking the silence around constructed normalisations of oppression, (remembering however how we ourselves are complicit in processes of subtle and secret normalisation), raising the issues and concerns of the oppressed, (not however as a unified subject or a whole identity), resisting socio-political power hierarchies, hierarchies that are in a flux, making claims over individual/community rights and thereon. However, we depart from the traditional forms mainly on the grounds that our political is co-constituted by (im)possible politics of pluralism/polymorphosity, politics of relationality among the political subjects and contingent subject positions, who are not advocating the cause of the other, but come together themselves to understand and pursue their own personal as political. Thus they politicise the personal and personalise the political.

In traditional politics, power has been understood within the binary of the powerful state and the powerless citizen/proletariat/woman. However over the years this centrality and this concentration of power in the state has been questioned and propositions have been made that power exists in fragmented, complex and contradictory ways within the micro-structures. Power is thus not a thing, but a process. A micro-process albeit inhabiting the pores and interstices, the nook and corner of everyday life. The main contribution towards rethinking the notion of power has been made by Michel Foucault[10]. Foucault highlights the power of discourse is such that on the one hand it constitutes subjectivities that internalise social power and social inequalities, while on the other hand, there is an inherent potential within these constituted subjectivities to what Derrida calls desist these social inequalities and establish a possible political emergence. Mouffe (2005) states the rethinking of politics cannot happen without rethinking the political subject. She connects, so the question of the subject and of what could be called the subtle and somewhat secret structure of hegemony. Hence she emphasises on the indispensable need to develop a theory of the political subject.

Mouffe proposes that while re-imaging the political, the political subject needs to be understood as a 'decentred, and a de-totalised agent, a subject constructed at the point of intersection of a multiplicity

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[10] As highlighted by Mark CJ Stoddart (2007), Foucault's formulation of power seems to have four characteristics. First, power is not only a macrosocial phenomenon, rather, we must understand power as operating throughout a multiplicity of sites at a local level. Second, power is not only repressive, it is not only a tool of control wielded by one class, or set of social institutions, over subordinate classes, rather, power flows in multiple directions. Wherever mechanisms of power are mobilised, there are also opportunities for resistance. Third, notions of a 'great refusal', in the Marxist sense of a proletarian revolution, are untenable (Foucault, 1978). Just as power operates at essentially local sites, so do points of resistance appear everywhere in the power network (p. 95). This notion of resistance further emphasises the essentially local nature of power. Taking these characteristics together, we may note that the most important aspect of power is that it is fundamentally relational. (Stoddart, (2007)

of subject positions between which there exists no a priori or necessary relation and whose nodal articulation is the result of hegemonic practices. Consequently, no identity is ever definitively established, there always being a certain degree of openness and ambiguity in the way the different subject positions are articulated. What emerges are entirely new perspectives for political action, which neither liberalism, with its idea of the individual (who only pursues his or her own interest), nor Marxism, with its reduction of all subject positions to that of (working) class identity, can sanction, let alone imagine' (Mouffe, 2005).

Thus, Mouffe argues for deconstruction of essential identities as a necessary condition for understanding various forms of social relations in which lives of political subjects are embedded. This in turn, opens up the multiplicity of various forms of subordinations in which the subjectivity is situated, women in Emaliguda came to me as a living example of Mouffe's formulation. 'Thus, this deconstruction discards the supposed unity and homogeneity among women as women and conceive the social agent as constituted by an ensemble of subject positions that can never be totally fixed in a closed system of differences, constructed by a diversity of discourses among which there is no necessary relation, but rather a constant movement of over determination and displacement' (Mouffe, 2005).

The identity of the political-social subject hence is located in its multiplicity and contradiction and hence is always contingent and temporary rather than being fixed, unified and homogeneous. However, this is not to say there is absolutely no historical, contingent and variable link between subject positions, but instead to highlight the prevalence of strategic essentialism (or what Spivak, taking off from Derrida, calls mad essentialism) within feminist politics, wherein the category 'woman' has to be often adopted and used, especially for representational politics and in other situations, challenged, abandoned and refused, thus making the category 'woman' a site of political action, when it seems to be getting constituted and constructed by hegemonic structures.

Moreover, having gained some insight into the nature of the feminist political subject, one which is fraught with complexity, it becomes important to engage with what solidarity would mean in this new imagination of the political. Solidarity, unlike within traditional political forms, does not cease 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. Hence, solidarity with a new imagination of the political, remains not just a means to attain a common goal but becomes an end in itself, and this is one sharp break with traditional politics, our work in Emaliguda stands testimony to such an unfinished effort, wherein relationship between individuals in the collective earned a place higher than the cause that was being promoted and addresses or/and the individual constituting the collective.

This is so because the political subject, in this formulation of the political, is not assumed/expected to be devoid of her embeddedness in her social relations and conditions, (whether situated, constituted or constructed), in fact, it is this very embeddedness of the political subject, whose self, personal, social and political subjectivities are in continuous interaction with each other, with which she enters the common in the making and this in turn forms the foundation and determines the potential of the political emerging in the individual and henceforth the development of the collective.

Moreover while drawing from Foucault's distinction between the two elements of every(day) morality[11], we can understand how this new political subject, must undergo a transformation of the self (Foucault calls it askesis or care of the self,[12] as against the Christian ascetic, in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject (*2005)), a self-formation as an ethical subject. This political, therefore, speaks a new language of not only rationality but of relationality in politics. It speaks of not only reason but of affect in politics. Not only criticality but creativity in politics. Not only morality but of ethos in politics. Not only empathy-compassion but of love and friendship in politics (Derrida calls it politics of friendshi*p*).

Ackelsberg offers insights into the distinct nature of feminist politics undertaken by women's collectives, premised on the importance of relationships, networks and feelings, separating it from other forms of politics. 'Women bring a totality, an all-or-nothing feeling to action. It is something of which trade unions and political parties with their hierarchies and agenda know little, and to which they can give little. This totality is not just of the work day but of the whole day, not just of wages but of feelings, not just of economics but of relationships' (Cockburn, as cited in Ackelsberg, 2010). Ackelsberg states that not only women find it easy to develop connections between concerns that are their own and those of the others, they also take efforts to maintain the relationships that give life to the community.

In short, unity which is seen as a necessary condition for any political mobilisation is an inherent component of women's daily experience of interconnected lives. 'There is no guarantee of course, that a politics that takes account of women's networks, or that focuses and builds on relationships between people, in general, will be open, non-racist, and non-exclusive. Yet, conceptualising politics and political behavior around relationships, rather than around interests, provides at least the possibility of a more open, egalitarian perspective' (Ackelsberg, 2010). Thus, while studying the process of the evolution of a collective, there is a need to include the reality of women's lives and the networks and activities that make such mobilisations possible. We explored such interconnections and the visible and the invisible of such feminine networks in Emaliguda village, as we went about arriving, even if incompletely, at our collective the Eka Nari Sanghathan.

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[11] In Volume 2 of the History of Sexuality, Foucault distinguishes the two elements of every morality. The first element is the code, or the principles. But the second and often more important element is the cultivation of the ethical person. According to Foucault, the 'relationship with the self is not simply self-awareness but self-formation as an ethical subject' (1985) and there is no forming of the ethical subject without modes of subjectivation and practices of the self that support them' (Gibson-Graham, 2001).

[12] Care of oneself, is about attending to oneself, being concerned about oneself *(epimeleia heautou)*. Care of oneself is a sort of thorn which must be stuck in (one's) flesh, driven into (one's) existence, and which is a principle of restlessness and movement, of continuous concern throughout life – *epimeleia heautou* is an attitude towards the self, others and the world. *Epimeleia heautou* is also a certain form of attention, of looking. Being concerned about one self implies that we look away from the outside.We must convert our looking from the outside, from others and the world towards oneself. The care of the self implies a certain way of attending to what we think and what takes place in our thought. The *epimeleia heautou* also always designates a number of actions *excercised* on the self by the self, actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms and transigures oneself. With this notion of *epimeleia heautou* we have a body of work defining a way of being, a standpoint, forms of reflection and practices which make it an extremely important phenomenon not just in the history of representations, notions, or theories, but in the history of subjectivity itself or, if you like, in the history or practices of subjectivity.

Ackelsberg highlights that historically women's resistance has not received much political recognition, (especially amongst classical or orthodox Marxists, not of course Gibson-Graham kind of feminist Marxians), because women's personal concerns operating in the private space did not qualify as a legitimate and appropriate subject matter of politics, it was not seen as publicly and socially relevant. However, at the same time, the strength of women's collectives has been that they are centered around issues that are immediate and affect women affectively, not just as individual isolated beings but as members of the larger community belonging to diverse class, caste and ethnicity conditions. 'Women's daily engagements and activities around networks of friends, family and neighbors, give rise to their political consciousness and their coming together is not necessarily an outcome of an external call from the organised unions and political parties, but a call that is internal, non-competitive, non-hierarchical, what Colin Ward calls 'spontaneously organised' in Anarchy in Action (1973), with a shared vision of bringing out collective concerns to the surface of the political system that stands at a distance and seems to control their lives' (Ackelsberg, 2010).

Moreover, it has been argued by the author that community-based activism gives way to changed consciousness that impacts knowledge generation, strengthens resistance and opens new possibilities of strategies of resistance. 'Through working with others, and confronting institutions, many women have come to a better understanding of the power relations that affect their lives and of their own abilities-together with others-to have some influence on them' (Ackelsberg, 2010). However, the process underlying this change is undoubtedly dynamic and multi-layered; also unpredictable. On the one hand, it can develop political consciousness and strengthen networks, at the same time homogenising and isolating women's networks, thereby hampering effective collaborations. Commonality of experiences and identity can lead to inclusion of some and exclusion of the others, conflicts can arise in diversity, but it is important to view these conflicts as important contexts for change. Thus, 'communities-and the network of relationships they nurture and on which they are based-have been, and can be, important contexts for politicisation, and can be important sources of empowerment' (Ackelsberg, 2010). The political mobilisations that grow in the womb of people's own experience and concerns are the most effective forms of organisation.

Although Acklesberg's focus, in some ways, on inherent relationality among women seems to be essentialist, she does not deny the presence of antagonism within and outside women's collectives. In fact, she points out, like Mouffe (discussed later), that these sites of conflicts should be acknowledged and be utilised as important contexts for politicisation. In other words, Ackelsberg is arguing for an understanding of relationality that acknowledges and builds on existing antagonism and conflict and by accepting that 'othering' and exclusion is as much a part of women's activism, she opens up a space for politics of pluralism in relation to politics of realtionality.

Chantal Mouffe, on the other hand, although begins by drawing our attention to politics of pluralism, she seems to be emphasizing on the role of relationality in formulating a new language of the political that is premised on the acceptance of antagonism that exists in the social. While critiquing the universalising assumptions and pretensions of traditional political thought, Mouffe (2005) states that 'instead of the heralded 'new world order', the victory of universal values, and the generalisation of post-conventional identities, we are witnessing an explosion of particularisms and an increasing

challenge to western universalism.' She highlights that feminism has attempted to unveil certain forms of exclusions that were concealed under the notion of universality by discussing the beginning of feminist criticism of universality with Carole Pateman pointing in turn towards the exclusion of women in classical democratic theories.[13] Moreover, in today's time the language of rights that are being demanded and claimed is based upon expression of differences, constructed and rooted in particularism, multiplicity, and heterogeneity. Mouffe (2005) maintains that, 'Universalism is not rejected but particularised, what is needed is a new kind of articulation between the universal and the particular.'

Based on a critique of liberal democracy, while engaging with Carl Schmitt, Mouffe is suggesting an informed enquiry into the nature of modern democracy by highlighting the constitutive role of antagonism in social life, which strongly determines the nature of the politics of pluralism. She critiques traditional political thought for its inability to capture or perhaps silence the extant and all pervasive antagonism in the social while constructing a universal language of politics as a politics of the so called masses. This rejection of inherent antagonism seems to be responsible for the failure of traditional forms of politics in remaining democratic and participatory. Mouffe states:

When we accept that every identity is relational and that the condition of existence of every identity is the affirmation of a difference, the determination of an 'other' that is going to play the role of a constitutive outside, it is possible to understand how antagonisms arise. In the domain of collective identifications, where what is in question is the creation of a 'we' by a delimitation of a them, the possibility always exists that this we/them relation will turn into a relation of the friend/enemy type, in other words, it can always become political in Schmitt's understanding of the term[14]. This can happen when the other, who was until then considered only under the mode of difference, begins to be perceived as negating our identity, as putting in question our very existence. From that moment onwards, any type of we/them relation be it religious, ethnic, national, economic or other, becomes the site of a political antagonism.

(Mouffe,2005)

From here Mouffe goes on to say that once it is established that the world exists in antagonisms and politics has its underlying potential amidst these antagonisms, there is a need to rethink the sustenance of the 'political' in its pluralism. This is a kind of radical pluralist democratic politics that is based on the notion of radical democratic citizenship, which stands in opposition to the neutral and neutered conception of citizenship thereby establishing a common political identity amidst the diversity of

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[13] 'The idea of universal citizenship is specifically modern, and necessarily depends on the emergence of the view that all individuals are born free and equal, or are naturally free and equal to each other. No individual is naturally subordinate to another, and all must thus have public standing as citizens, that uphold their self-governing status. Individual freedom and equality also entails that government can arise only through agreement or consent. We are all taught that the individual is a universal category that applies to anyone or everyone, but this is not the case. The individual is a man.' (Mouffe, 2005).

[14] 'Schmitt has pointed out, that antagonisms can take many forms, and it is illusory to believe they could ever be eliminated. In those circumstances, it is preferable to give them a political outlet within a pluralistic democratic system.' (Mouffe, 2005).

democratic struggles. She proposes radical democracy as a new political philosophy, one of the many strategies geared towards pursuing and deepening the democratic project of modernity, an articulation that needs to construct a new language of subject positions, a new form of plural and democratic individuality, and a new concept of democratic rights of the individual that can only be exercised collectively.

Thus, this rethinking of the political in light of pluralism involves breaking away from notions of entrenched rationalism, individualism, and universalism, if the political agenda is to make space for various democratic struggles that include the multiplicity of the existing forms of subordination. However, this break from rationality, individuality and universality does not mean that these ideas are to be abandoned, but, rather, to point out that they are 'necessarily plural, discursively constructed and entangled with power relations. It means acknowledging the existence of the political in its complexity, the dimension of the 'we', the construction of the friend's side, as well as the dimension of the 'them', the constitutive aspect of antagonism.' (Mouffe, 2005). While establishing relationality between 'we' and 'them', Mouffe points out that a distinction needs to be marked between enemy and adversary in order to create or maintain a pluralistic democratic order. She maintains that:

It requires that, within the context of the political community, the opponent should be considered not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated. We will fight against his ideas but we will not question his right to defend them. The category of the enemy does not disappear but is displaced, it remains pertinent with respect to those who do not accept the democratic rules of the game and who thereby exclude themselves from the political community. This agonistic pluralism is constitutive of modern democracy and, rather than seeing it as a threat, we should realize that it represents the very condition of existence of such democracy.

(Mouffe, 2005)

Thus, only when the adversary in its 'othering' is not only accepted but rendered indispensable for the existence of a politics of the 'we', the politics of pluralism emerges as being democratic. Mouffe emphasises that there can be convergence between various democratic struggles only when a new common sense is generated based on the principle of democratic equivalence. This new common sense is required for transforming the identity of various groups so that the convergence between the groups is not only limited to just an allegiance of the varied interests, but rather, a true convergence, based on democratic equivalence, of varied demands made by various groups. She distinguishes this relational pluralism from the postmodern conception of the fragmentation of the social, and of identity, wherein there is no acknowledgment of the existence of the relational matrix of contingent identities between those fragments. Hence, Mouffe's formulation of the politics of radical pluralism problematises essentialism, 'either of the totality or of the elements- and affirms that neither the totality nor the fragments possess any kind of fixed identity, prior to the contingent and pragmatic form of their articulation.' (Mouffe, 2005).

She maintains that radical plural democracy, since it premises on the permanence of antagonism and conflict, runs a risk that these conflicts and antagonisms may never be resolved. In other words, there

has to be an awareness that a pluralist democracy may never lead to a full realisation of harmony, 'since the very moment of its realisation would see its disintegration. It should be conceived as a good that only exists as good so long as it cannot be reached. Such a democracy will therefore always be a democracy to come, as conflict and antagonism are at the same time its condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of its full realisation.' (Mouffe, 2005).

Thus, Mouffe is mainly arguing for a re-articulation of politico-ethical values through (post)modern political philosophy, values that emerge in the course of collective action and through being and belonging in common, a new conception of radical citizenship that respects both pluralism, inter-dependence and individual liberty. According to Mouffe:

One task of a modern democratic political philosophy, as I see it, is to provide us with a language to articulate individual liberty with political liberty so as to construe new subject positions and create different citizens' identities. Moreover, political philosophy in a modern democratic society should not be a search for foundations but the elaboration of a language providing us with metaphoric re-descriptions of our social relations. It could help us to defend democracy by deepening and extending the range of democratic practices through the creation of new subject positions within a democratic matrix, a revalorisation of the political understood as collective participation in a public sphere where interests are confronted, conflicts resolved, divisions exposed, confrontations staged, and in that way- as Machiavelli was the first to recognize- liberty secured.

(Mouffe, 2005)

This formulation of the political with its emphasis on relationality and pluralism highlights that once the political is re-imagined in the way it is done above, political transformation which is constituted by the experience and structure of emotions, relationality, ethics, love, friendship, adverseness, antagonism, conflict, common identification and 'othering', political principles and values that speak of persuasion rather than conversion (see Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics,* (2007)), cannot be arrived at in separation from social transformation and transformation of the self. The three stances of traditional political thought that we have critiqued and revisited above (i.e. the centrist understanding of power, the identitarian understanding of the political subject, and unexamined universalism, have shown in their redefining that unless there is a transformation at the level of the social and the self, transformation of the political remains incomplete and one-sided.)

This over determined nature of transformation raises a question to the historical assumption that political transformation precedes the long drawn social transformation and only when political transformation is achieved, there can be scope for transforming the social. Moreover, transformation of self was never rendered important or even necessary for political transformation. However, the discussion above highlights the necessity of transforming simultaneously the site of the political, the social and the self. 'Scholars like John Dewey (1927, 1939) and, more recently, Chantal Mouffe (1992) and Avigail I Eisenberg (1995) argue for a more positive interpretation of human liberty and the process of democratisation as an avenue for greater self-realisation and self-development of individual capacities through participation in social life of the community.' (Bystydzienski and Sekhon, 1999).

This formulation of the political, provides a model that challenges dichotomised ways of thinking about political participation and social mobilisation, focusing on transformation of the self and on the complexity of relationships, in which, real lives are embedded and on the need to recognise 'beings in relationships' as political actors. Thus, through transformation of self, there is a need to socialise political transformation (i.e. have a social face to transformations that happens at the state level) and politicise social transformation (i.e. have a political face to transformations that happen at the level of NGOs and non-state social actors). This sction research, through the journey of the Sanghathan, has attempted to constantly bring the three (including economic transformation) into a trialogue with each other, and from there, made an attempt at developing a philosophy of transformative praxis. Two questions that have been engaged with and still remain open through this work are:

a) What are/can be community/local/cultural frames for transformative politics?

b) Does a collective bring in transformation or does transformation create a collective (a being-in-common)?

Wither transformation?

The journey in/of the Sanghathan, helped me understand and raise the theoretical concerns and questions discussed above. These processes in the Sanghathan began developing as early as the aspect of singleness among women was being researched. The objective of the research conducted in Emaliguda village along with the single women, was to build a nuanced understanding of the lives of single women in the rural, to produce knowledge around the ways of their survival (economically as well as socially), to establish links between singleness and poverty, violence, discrimination, and marginalisation (even between single women). It was an attempt in the direction towards understanding the nature of various socio-economic and cultural problems related to singleness of women by exploring the depth of the lived experiences of singleness among women and simultaneously constructing a counter discourse of singleness as experienced by the women themselves.

The process of research led to the larger discussions and explorations in the single women's meetings. Moreover, many single women voluntarily shared their life stories in order to highlight their struggles and challenges and to depict their condition in general. A larger epistemological framework of feminist standpoint theory was deployed since, feminist standpoint epistemology is a unique philosophy of knowledge building that challenges us to see and understand the world through the eyes and experiences of oppressed women, and apply the vision and knowledge of oppressed women to social activism and social change (Brooks, 2007). According to this theory, women are given the central position and their experiences are treated as the starting point to build knowledge. Sandra Harding in *Whose science? Whose knowledge?* (1991) has theorised this as a situated knowledge perspective. Moreover, Well-being Ranking,[15] a participatory research appraisal method, was conducted in order to

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[15] Well–Being-ranking as a participatory research methodology helps to develop a shared understanding of the meaning and factors of well-being and categorise the households according to their relative well being status. The well shows that it is concerned with values and assessment. Being suggests the importance not only of economic security and physical health, but also of subjective states of mind and social relationships.

gain further insight into lives of single women and to understand what well-being meant to single women. This was also done to bring to our awareness, as to who were the women who were facing most severe of the hardships and are living in the state of perpetual unwell being and hitherto generate a discussion as how and what can be done to bring about a change in the condition.

The questions, narratives and well-being ranking were all explored through focused group discussions and semi-structured group interviews. It was a conscious attempt on my part to conduct group discussions and group interviews as methodologies to be used in this research work because I wanted to ensure the experiences that were shared, facts stated, data generated and the analysis that discussions would bring to the surface, as a result of this research, should not cease to be available only to me as a researcher or something to be published for the academic world out there. But, instead, my aim was also to leave all this behind, with the single women, as the property of the single women's' collective. Moreover, simultaneously it was an experiment towards laying the foundation of relational politics, in other words, for a kind of connectedness that could develop between these women, emerging from sharing and sheltering their shared experiences and identification of being single.

Hence, throughout the process of research, it was made sure the explorations and discussions were held in large groups so that women come to know about each other, can slowly and steadily open up with each other, and find strength in collective sharing and empathise with each other. The choice of this methodology was premised on the fact that relationships, emotions, feeling of togetherness, and empathy are indispensable for politics, and hence this process was thought of as an attempt towards forging newer forms of relationships, at the same time, developing and strengthening the existing relationships amongst single women in the village. This research hence was not research alone, it was research geared towards action. The process of this research marked a beginning of our journey of transformative action that was being envisioned all along, hence expanding this process towards becoming action (in) research.

Furthermore, during the process, I realised this was no more within the bounds of being called just research because for single women it was slowly becoming a process of revisiting their experiences they had buried deep down. This process led to the opening up of internal silenced spaces that had come to be obscured in their everydayness. Through these interviews and group discussions women were examining their lives on their own and articulating their concerns and issues. The status of their singleness, which over the period of time, single women had come to understand as normal and natural, was being questioned and opened up for inquiry. I was told that before this, they had been a part of many surveys and interviews[16], but this was the first time they were being asked about them, the struggles they had faced in life and their survival against their loneliness and aloneness. Since our

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[16] This was in reference to the nature of surveys and questionnaires (usually national surveys and surveys conducted for social science researches) which are aimed towards generating data for a purpose that has very little to do with the people upon whom research is being done, where people are rendered objects of research and they become source of information that necessarily does not even concern them (e.g. census data collection, general data collected about the village and people in the village).

engagement had deepened and my relationship with these women had strengthened, this process impacted me to a great extent. I felt grateful since they shared their life openly with me, but at the same time I could empathise with them and found myself experiencing a strange mix of emotions, that of sadness, anger and anxiety that arose as a result of coming face to face with such intense suffering that these women have undergone in their lives. Hence this process, at many points, was very painful and disturbing, for both single women and myself.

This entire process of exploration with single women highlighted that the various forms of discriminations, oppressions, exploitation and violence perpetuated by the larger hetero-patriarchal world upon single women, ranged from social ostracisation of rendering them alone for life to subjecting them to numerous kinds of taboos, restrictions, and controls, making them economically vulnerable and deprived of their rights over food, wages, family property and land, and through invibilising them, keeps their specific issues and concerns outside the domain of the political and development discourse.

These socio-economic and political 'wrongs' that have in ways more than one 'wronged' the lives of single women in Emaliguda, reflected how the problems these women face in the everydayness, not only persists at the level of the society but also in the overall imagination of the state wherein, there is complete overlooking of the fact that there are also women amongst women who are perhaps outside the ambit of the so called dominant institutions of family and marriage. It appears as if there is an invisibilisation of sorts of single women and their concerns from the government policies and provisions as well. Their issues hardly surface in government documents or agendas. 'They (single women) are estimated at 40 million but continue to be invisible to the government. Women who have been abandoned, deserted, never-married continue to be excluded in the census and government welfare programs.' (*timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/...single-women.../45116952.cms*).

The political subject

The articulation and collective analysis of singleness among women (the experience and way of being of a single woman), that emphasised on the condition of singleness than the identity of singlehood (the identity of a woman or a state of being which is marked largely by the physical absence of a male legitimate sexual partner, necessarily a husband), enabled us to deepen our insight towards two important aspects related to single women. Firstly, it led to the questioning and exploration around whether the category single women is fixed at all (as it is rendered by the common discourse). In other words, given the already existing heterogeneity among single women, we were struggling with the question that do only those women who clearly qualify as never-married, separated and widowed single women form what could be called single women'? If yes, then how were we to explain the condition of those women who shared similar experiences as those of never-married, separated or widowed women since their husbands have migrated for long periods of time leaving them behind all alone? Or those women whose husbands are in jail? Or those women whose husbands are critically ill? and so on. Is physical absence of a husband, a sole criterion for recognising women as single?

These questions suggested the moment our focus shifted from singlehood to singleness, the already defined and fixed category called single women, fell flat on its face. When singleness became our frame

of reference, it no more mattered whether the women who shared common experience in terms of the condition in which they are living, (the condition of singleness), were leading their lives in the physical absence or presence of a husband. As we proceeded, these explorations sharpened with more and more married women joining the discussions and sharing their condition of singleness in the so called physical presence of a husband. Experiences of Kundo didi and Paro didi [17]who are both married and live with their critically unwell husbands, offered important interventions and strengthened discussions around cracking the fixity of the larger undifferentiated category single women.

Secondly, this movement from singlehood to singleness marked a political moment for us. The articulation of single women's' experiences and condition of singleness made us revisit our own self-perception around who are single women. When understood as a socio-legal constructed identity (singlehood) suffering in the absence of a male protector and provider, the single woman is perceived as a passive, helpless victim in need of support from various institutions. She is rendered a mere beneficiary and/or recipient of developmental interventions (either through state or larger development agencies) that claim to enhance her well-being without taking into consideration her condition and way of being and primarily focusing only on her identity and state of being.

However, with the continuous insight and collective articulation and analysis of struggles involved in lives of single women, issues concerning them, their lower and ignored socio-political and economic status, challenges they faced and strategies of survival adopted, negotiations made and coping up mechanisms devised as a result of having to live the condition of singleness, all together, not only generated a feeling of sadness in the group but simultaneously led to building of anger. With a realisation that my experience of oppression, being a single woman, does not belong to me alone, but is an experience shared by many others, that I might be single but I am not alone, generated a need to stand together for oneself and the others, to be able to raise our voice, visibilise ourselves, bring our issues to the surface and change our position socially and politically. This intense process helped establish an active political subject position of single women who were now becoming aware of their political potential and envisioning transformation that required them to take charge of ushering larger change as agents and actors of transformation and not as mere beneficiaries. This political moment marked the beginning of the constitution of single women in Emaliguda as contingent-emergent agents of transformation.

Solidarities: becoming of Eka Nari Sanghathan

 The sharing of the lived experiences of single women, whether widowed, separated, never-married, married yet single brought to the surface that where on the one hand these experiences are quite distinct and specific to the status of singlehood of women, while on the other hand, there are many convergences and similarities in the condition(s) of their singleness. Thus, while retaining the complexity and inevitability of heterogeneity among single women, our attempt, at the same time, was to explore similarities and commonalities that could bring single women together to transform for themselves, the

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[17]   Kundo didi and Paro didi joined the Sanghathan meetings much later and with their involvement in the Sanghathan, we all could revisit our understanding of single women. This process has been documented in the chapter on 'beginning and becoming of the Sanghathan'.

kind of life they have been living. These developments gave way to the idea of forging a Sanghathan. Our imagination of a Sanghathan and the meaning we attach to it lies in the term Sanghathan itself. When we break down the term Sanghathan as San(gha)than, it is seen as a coming together of friends, wherein Ghathan in Hindi implies coming together in order to build, construct and organise and Sanghas means friends in Oriya. Thus San(gha)than for us was building up a space where friends would come together, to be with one another and be there for one another. Sanghathan in this sense meant for us a way of relating with each other, the significant other who is also Eka Nari (Single Woman) like oneself. This marked for us a beginning of politics of relationality that premised on the connectedness among the Sanghas given the nature of our interconnected and interwoven lives.

Moreover, another way in which we understand and imagine our Sanghathan, and this is primarily drawing upon how Sanghathan has been conceptualized by Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan (ENSS), [18]Rajasthan, is that that a Sanghathan entails a form of a collective struggle, (Sangha)thit (Sangha)rsha, wherein along with generating an understanding of peoples' oppressions, constructive collective action[19] (Ghathan) is undertaken towards challenging power structures and working together towards enhancing well-being. A Sanghathan in this sense becomes a journey of collective-constructive action in collective struggle and collective struggle in collective-constructive action. Thus, when understood as a whole, Sanghathan for us meant a platform, a space, a journey and a relationship that shelters a collective of friends in struggle and action.

This re-imagined form of organisation, thus premises on horizontality of beings in a communicative-relational and emergent-contingent common, wherein although there is space for difference, contradiction and antagonism. However, continuous conscious efforts are undertaken towards lessening hierarchised gradients that exist and emerge in the process. Thus, a sense of ownership, ethos and responsibility on behalf of the members is an important feature of the Sanghathan. The Sanghathan culture involves keeping meetings simple and economical so that the members do not have to depend on external agencies but can themselves bear the costs. This self-dependence and self-sufficiency ensures sustainability of Sanghathan, a culture that can carry itself for long. Moreover, participation and decision making come from the members themselves and Sanghathan becomes not only a support system for the members but also a weapon to fight for their rightful position in the society.

Thus, based on the above conceptualisation and vision, a Sanghathan was forged by single women in Emaliguda in order to create a space where they could come together, share their concerns, open up their lives to one another, become a part of each others' sorrow and happiness, call each other their own, and take upon themselves the responsibility of transforming their lives for the larger well-being.

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[18]   'Sangathan is a Hindi word, meaning organisation and it carries the connotation that struggle will be a part of the work of the organisation, along with constructive action. Simply struggling against others will not in itself bring about a better or a new situation, some constructive action or collective learning, planning and working together is also necessary.' (Shrivastava and Chaudhary, 2011)

[19]   According to Charles Tilly, 'Collective action itself is a broad but simple concept, it includes all the ways in which people join their efforts in pursuit of common ends.' (Tilly, 1977)

The Sanghathan came into being in August 2013 and was named Eka Nari Sanghathan by the 40 members who gave life to it. They decided to meet once every month in order to share, discuss and analyze their lives, so they can collectively highlight their issues and understand various forms of oppressions faced by them. Given the nature of the open ended and semi-structured meetings and discussions, flexible yet organised format, the members could engage with one another more intensively and this openness and flexibility helped them evolve as a collective.

In about five months the Sanghathan emerged as that space where the single women of the village could open up, cry with other women, share their feelings, and get to know each other better. As we progressed, the Sanghathan led to the claiming of time and space by the forty single women in Emaliguda. This newly founded time and space curvature in women's lives belonged entirely to these women who never before had a chance to sit together and talk about themselves. In Barkini didi's words:

There are a lot of problems single women like us have to face in the absence of familial relationships. Before we began sitting together to discuss these problems, we did not know much about each other's lives. We had never thought about our problems collectively because we hardly have time for ourselves. We work from the beginning of the day till the end. Where was the time before to think over our problems? But, after sitting together for the meetings, we have started paying at least some attention to ourselves and to the problems we face.

The Sanghathan brought all these women together in one place and each one of them listened to the other and empathised with each other, (was it a kind of politics sensitive to pluralism (of perspectives) as also to multitplicity (of shifting subject positions)?). And now as they were slowly coming to know about each other's lives and the problems they face through the collective and public articulation and analysis of their oppression and issues concerning them, these processes helped them plan the course of further action and needed interventions. They began discussing about inaccessibility and unavailability of government schemes and provisions for single women and the importance of having saving bank accounts in their individual names in order to have a secured future.

A few of the Sanghathan members took initiative and filled in pension forms for old and widow single women. As Palli Sabha was approaching, a list of not only widow and old but also unmarried and separated single women above the age of 40 years was submitted in the Panchayat office along with demands for separate job cards, ration cars and Indira Awas Yojana for women living alone in the village. Having known the condition of each member in the Sanghathan, the members decided to demand provisions first and foremost for those women who were most in need. This was one of the many moments that strongly reflected the presence of ethics in the politics of the Sanghathan members. For a lot of women this was the first time that they were coming to know about Palli Sabha and Gram Sabha and their right to participate and raise their concerns and demands in these official public gatherings.

A large number of women met the Sarpanch, village level worker and social extension officer and articulated their problems and demands. An application notifying all the issues faced by single women and the demands they were making from the government, enclosed with the list for pensions, job card,

ration card and IAY, was submitted to the collector. This exposure brought in a lot of courage and confidence in the Sanghathan. Along with this, the Sanghathan members also helped each other to open saving bank accounts in the nearby bank, and every member now owns a bank account in her name. This ownership of a personal bank account has given these women a sense of independence and an assurance they can now claim a portion of the income they earn and will not have to depend upon anyone, now and in the future.

Apart from this, the Sanghathan also worked towards sensitising the village community towards the problems and oppressions faced by single women thereby beginning a dialogue with the community and to further engage with people on this issue. In this regard the Sanghathan members met the youth club of the village and decided to work together towards not only bettering lives of single women but also for overall village development.

In this manner the collective journey of the single women in Emaliguda that began with emotions, connectedness and relationships, expanded its way through women's networks and interwoven lives, brought them together based on collective reflexive articulation and analysis of their experience, creating a space to stand together for one another, bringing private concerns out to the public space to be discussed collectively, finding strength in solidarity and formulating political subjectivity, in order to begin to establish social and political relevance of their issues and concerns.

Can the journey of the Sanghathan be seen as transformation? The journey of the Sanghathan was indeed a continuous process of moving beyond and across, partially, at least, if not fully:

- The existing boundaries of knowledge of the self and the world around us, including the relation between self and the world.
- The structures and the relationships that the women were/are embedded in.
- The fear, the hesitation, and the control that was/is imposed.
- The crypt, the burial ground, of their sorrows and pain.

With the Sanghas coming together and forging solidarities, sharing their lives with one another and the larger society, securing their future financially, and attempting to work along with the state and Emaliguda village as a whole, these revolutionary (i.e. changing thoroughly) processes led to a movement into another state, and ushered in formations of a new kind. A new space of one's own (Sanghathan) emerged, friendships blossomed, albeit with their inherent contradictions of class, caste, past experience, subjectivities were at least partially (re)constituted, awareness of the rights and claims of citizen subjects and knowledge of oppression were enhanced, fears, hesitations and controls (to a large extent) were surpassed. Thus, this entire journey, in a way, was an experience of transcending without transgressing, of altering and preserving, of Badlav (change) instead of Badla (revenge), and of persuasion rather than conversion in its simple sense.

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