

Beyond Leadership: Affective Affinities and the *Eka Nari Sanghathan*

Bhavya Chitranshi

Fellow in Action Research

Centre for Development Practice, Ambedkar University Delhi

This paper wishes to raise few questions and engage critically with methods and practices that seem to have become paradigmatic in the developmental approach towards collectivizing women. One such discourse that has overtime become a norm in developmental work is leadership in women. We often engage in discussions regarding leadership roles and models that may be required to collectivize women and sustain collective action but we rarely focus on the processes of collectivization and the nature of the collective itself. Several works in development have rethought leadership in relation to groups and this has helped us distinguish from traditional forms of leadership, especially those that take recourse in dictatorship and skewed variations of power. However, perhaps what is missing still is our focus on the other end of the spectrum, on the forms of inter and intra-group dynamics, inequalities in group settings and power laden relationships that emerge through benevolent and democratic forms of leadership.

This paper drawing upon reflections around the forging and the strengthening of a single women's collective, named *Eka Nari Sanghathan*, ENS along with 40 *Kondh adivasi* single women farmers in the Rayagada district of Odisha, looks critically at the question of leadership in the context of women's collectivities. The collaborative action research work in Rayagada in the last 5 years has been grappling with questions concerning leadership roles,

collective processes, politics of representation, development communication and organizational structure alongside highlighting issues of singleness among women and engaging in praxis of transformation. This ongoing work of collectivization urges us to look for frameworks and practices beyond that of individual(ized) leadership. It wishes to explore whether shifting the focus of collective organizing from ‘person based leadership’ to ‘subjective affective affinities’, can offer us a way forward?

This work with *Kondh adivasi* single women in Emaliguda village of Rayagada district began in 2013 as part of MPhil in Development Practice at Ambedkar University Delhi. I was immersed in the village for a period of one year where I lived with a separated single woman, Arnalu Miniaka (who I call Aiya; Aiya in Kuvi means mother). As I immersed myself into the everyday life of the village spending time mostly with women, bathing, cooking, eating, working in the fields and sleeping together at night, my relationship with some of the women strengthened over time. We often engaged in the affective exchange of our memories and lived experience of singleness that seemed to connect us all. Finding resonance in each other’s stories and drawing strength from each other’s experiences, women in Emaliguda, for the first time, according to Barkini Pedenti (member, *ENS*), “began making time for themselves”. They delved deeper into their lives and articulated and analysed their condition of singleness as both an experience of pain, loneliness and exclusion as also a condition of resistance and negotiation. Eventually, the collective creation of a new ‘time-space’ in the women’s lives led to the forging of the *Eka Nari Sanghathan*, a single women’s collective in 2013.

The *Sanghathan* in Emaliguda and 5 other villages at present builds upon the affective everyday or what Stewart (2007) calls as “ordinary affects” in order to co-create possibilities for alternative-affective *becomings*. As a result of singleness due to familial/social othering, the *Sanghathan* was forged as a space of companionship and sense of security for women who have been either abandoned by their families or are treated as burdens and liabilities. In the words of Debi Pedenti (member, *ENS*), “attending to each other’s pain, providing each other emotional and financial support, and looking after one another in times of difficulty, despair and illness, we also laugh, sing and work together creating moments of joy and happiness every time we meet”.

However, the *Sanghathan* functions not only as a support group but also as a *transformative space* that has been engaging and (re)thinking critical questions related to development, well-being, solidarity, rights, feminist consciousness and politics. The initial discussions around singleness as a gendered condition, issues beyond singlehood and instances of singleness among married women have been stepping stones in the work of the *Sanghathan*. Eventually, issues related to different forms of gender discrimination, sexual division of labour, women's health, alcoholism leading to abuse, marital/sexual violence, masculinity, body, and sexuality have been surfacing and women have been sensitively engaging, reflecting and acting towards co-creating mechanisms of negotiation and affirmation that can take us to non-violent ways of doing transformative gender work.

This work with single women, unlike women-centric developmental interventions, refrains itself from assumptions such as women's lived experiences are more or less the same or that women are already collectivized by the virtue of homogeneity of their experiences. The illusory bonds of unity among women in development seem to eclipse all existing and possible forms of differences, inequalities and power differentials among women. The *Sanghathan* tries to depart from this kind of homogenising 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.

Our work on singleness and the *Sanghathan*¹ revisits the familiar idiom of "representation" and "leadership" and resists formation of 'woman leaders' as it sees the very idea of 'leadership' (privileging and placing power and responsibilities in the hands of a few) as patriarchal. Processes of leadership and representation in collectives not only continue to keep the power dynamics in place, these also often ignore the challenges and difficulties faced by the leaders in order to insure smooth functioning of the group. Thus, shifting the focus from individual women leaders or leadership roles and qualities, the *Sanghathan* tries to work through intra group dynamics, existing relationships, internal/external motives, desires, and states of being and becoming that can take us to creative-affective subjectivities. All the members of the *Sanghathan* form the core of decision making and facilitation among

¹ I say here our work on the *Sanghathan* because we do not assume the *Sanghathan* to be a fixed/given collective. It is a contingent-emergent process of affective being and becoming. The idea or the practice of collectivizing changes with every action or activity that the *Sanghathan* engages in.

themselves without placing the burden on the shoulders of a chosen few. Processes of mitigating power relations among the group members are undertaken and different roles and responsibilities are fulfilled by taking turns that are decided through consensus. The *Sanghathan* thus has *no elected/selected 'leaders'*. Embedded in the *adivasi* value systems and ethical dynamics, the *Sanghathan* continuously works towards arriving at a common and a non-hierarchized space (Chitranshi 2018).

This paper, thus asks, is there a difference between processes that are led by leadership and those premised upon affective-subjective engagement? What happens when a group of women encounter difference, antagonism, envy, love, friendship and desire rather than assuming homogeneity of experiences and bonds of solidarity by the virtue of being women? What happens when collective engagement goes beyond 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*?

To bring the discussion in perspective, I would like to highlight an ongoing process of collective farming that began last year with 35 women from the *Sanghathan* coming together to collectively cultivate paddy by leasing three acres of land. With the help of my colleague Ashutosh (who has joined us last year) and in collaboration with Dr. Debal Deb and Dulalda (from Basudha: cintdis.org/basudha/), we cultivated indigenous seed varieties using ecologically sensitive and traditional methods and techniques. The aim of this collective endeavour has been threefold: (a) engaging in ecologically sensitive ways of farming ensuring ethical relationship between human and other than human forms, as opposed to chemical farming methods and techniques that rely on capitalist market and lead to environmental degradation including impacts on human body and health; (b) understanding and exploring collective forms of labouring, appropriation and distribution in order to re-create new processes and practices; and (c) reorienting from individualised/self-interested subjectivities in capitalism (that are slowly overtaking *adivasi* life) towards cultivation of common and ethical subject positions through collective action, creation, exchange and sharing. In so called developing and modern times when the farmers are being encouraged to produce and appropriate on an individual basis, keeping self-interest in mind and are being

lured into relying heavily on capitalist, market-based inorganic and chemical farming this experiment of alternative collective farming finds relevance.

With respect to collective labouring, beginning from the work of preparing the land, sowing the seeds, transplanting the crop, regulating water in the field, harvesting and thrashing of paddy, packaging of the produce and preserving of seeds for the next year, all the work was done collectively. The work was mostly distributed among the members according to age, with younger women taking up more laborious tasks and older women engaging in less strenuous tasks. However, each and every one, irrespective of their age (varying from 35-80 years), participated and contributed to the labouring process except Daima Pedenti (member, ENS) who unfortunately had met with an accident a few days before the work began.

There were many hurdles and challenges that we faced in the process. The unpredictability and delay in monsoon led to lack of irrigation in the initial days followed by delay in ploughing and sowing. The bridge that connected Emaliguda and Pujariguda (the village where the land we were cultivating is) got washed away in the flash flood that hit us just before the sowing process began. As a result, the women had to walk for about 8 or 10 kilometres to reach the field. They also performed all the heavy work that usually men do in the agricultural lands. Except ploughing that was done with the use of a tractor, all other “masculine” jobs from breaking and building the boundary of the land, spraying organic pesticides, carrying loads of harvested paddy over their heads, and thrashing the produce, was all done by women.

There were times when the *Sanghathan* members broke into heated arguments and disagreements with regards to methods of farming or sharing of labouring activities. For example, as women were also at the same time occupied with the cultivation of family lands, the responsibility of looking after the common land and the crop would fall on the shoulders of few. However, soon such crisis situations would be brought to notice in the weekly meetings and solutions would be arrived at. In this case, it was finally decided that all the women would pair up to pay regular visits as and when they would find time. In spite of these momentary disagreements and conflicts, the collective spirit of the *Sanghathan* kept us going and we managed to work through all kinds of constraints, ranging from financial to physical, psychological and environmental.

The women walked long distances to reach the land, lifted heavy weights, performed back breaking work all day, stood without shade whether it rained down or the sun scorched above and still they sang in harmony as they worked, laughed their hearts out during the small *pika* (local rolled tobacco) break, ate together under the mangrove and walked back home in joy after completing the work day after day. Their bond strengthened as they laboured, walked, sang, smoked and ate together. Their happiness was beyond measure on the days all of them would come and finish day-long work in just a couple of hours. They would often say, “when we work together, the work feels so easy. It becomes difficult both physically and psychologically when we have no one to share it with”.

Not only the performance of labour, even appropriation of produce was a collective process. Everyone including Daima (who could not participate this year given health reasons) was allotted the same share of produce as was distributed to those who had laboured through the process. In the enactment of what can be called a postcapitalist practice, the *Sanghathan* witnessed a shared collectivity. The appropriation took place on a shared/communitic basis rather than women’s individual ability to perform labour. Apart from distribution for self-consumption, the rice was sold to generate common surplus for the *Sanghathan* catering to social needs of the *Sanghathan* members in the future.

To celebrate this collective journey the women from the *Sanghathan* organized a *bhoji* (feast) on the 2nd January, 2018. Next to the river under the mangrove we (including people from outside who have been supporting the work and are our loyal customers) met, cooked food, sang, danced, played, and ate together the rice we had cultivated. This year (2018-19) the process of collective farming has begun in full swing again with the use of preserved indigenous seeds from last year. Without any identified, trained, individual leaders leading this process, the *Sanghathan* as an affective-collective engagement of body-beings has been able to make this endeavour possible. One does not, in fact cannot assure replication of this same practice in the same manner year after year, because as we know matters of relational collective affect are erratic and contingent-emergent, however one believes that creation and strengthening of collective intensities and affective relationalities can perhaps take us deeper in transformative gender praxis than relying on existing models of leadership in development.

References

Chitranshi, B. (2018). *The story retold: Singleness and the Sanghathan*. In News Reach. National Resource Centre for Rural Livelihoods, PRADAN. Vol. 18 No. 1, Jan-Feb 2018.

Seigworth, G. & Gregg, M. (2010). An Inventory of Shimmers. In M. Gregg & G. Seigworth (eds.) *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 1-25.

Stewart, K. (2007). *Ordinary Affects*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.