



## Story of the Month: September 2010

### The Leader of the future

The blue and red pattern of the brocade carpet looked rugged and torn at places. It was so old, it could no longer attract attention towards itself let alone be conspicuous like it once was. But her tranquil eyes were fixed at it as if still admiring it's jaded beauty.

Everyone around her looked attentively, not towards her but towards the whiteboard where the speaker was briefing the audience about new possibilities for community mobilization. The spotlight moved from the speaker towards the person sitting at the other end of the conference room, directly opposite her. All eyes turned towards this new person who was the financial wizard. Some figures were announced, some pages flipped, faint sounds of scribbling could be heard but her eyes were fixed on the carpet. Between the volleys of figures being exchanged, I wondered if she heard the figures. I wondered if the figures meant anything at all to her. More figures announced, more sounds of scribbling heard and the spotlight was eventually restored on the speaker; all eyes moved from the person to the speaker and so did hers. In an unflinching yet surreptitious manner she turned her gaze towards the person who had just read out the figures and then slyly back towards the carpet.

From what I had heard about Ms. *Tulsi Tamta* what I couldn't comprehend was how a woman who hadn't had the opportunity to continue her education after primary school was now the Secretary of a Self-Reliant Cooperative comprising of hundreds of members. As I sat there in the conference room wondering about its possibility, I looked towards her and had a feeling that there was something unmistakably right about her.

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I hadn't informed her I wanted to write an article on her. Unannounced, the following day, I dashed off to the Input-Output center that was being managed by her in tandem with another. I glanced towards the store and found her keeping herself busy; arranging items, glancing at them and then rearranging them. I parked my motorcycle, entered the store and am greeted with her wide grin. During the interchange of smiles, I felt that a verbal greeting in the form of 'Namaste' was subsumed within gestural greetings.

I kept aside my belongings, sat down on a chair and announced my intention for coming there; to write about her. She became elated and there was the familiar grin again. I started with the foremost question in my mind - of her life before she became a part of this cooperative federation. A seemingly simple question, yet one that required introspection and required some insight into the internal





transformation that she had undergone. I wasn't sure if I had posed the question in an appropriate manner to gain an insight into her life.

*"Pehle mei ghar se kahi nahi jaati thi. Sirf ghar se jungle aur jungle se ghar. Pehle ghar pe mehmaan bhi aate the to badi mushkil ho jaati thi. Mei kaise saamne jaati hoon, kaise khilaati hoon. Pehle to jab mehmaan aate the to mei chip jaati thi"* ("Earlier I never used to go out anywhere from my home. Just from the home to the forest and back home. I also couldn't face the guests. It used to bother me a lot and I would hide away from them.)

Honestly, I had not expected such a candid reply. But more than what this reply conveyed, was a clear signal to me to stop trying to find insights into this transformation from being a shy person loath to interact with strangers to becoming a senior member in the federation.

My subsequent questions to her were about life these days, about the changes she has undergone and the problems if at all she faced due to her being illiterate. In her candid, outspoken tone she continued.

*"These days whenever guests come over I sit with them and talk with them. These days apart from a regular dhoti, I wear Sari and Salwar Suit. When need be, I take my children on my own to Almora, Deenapani. I have also been on tours to Dehradun and Himachal. These days I am able to stop a public vehicle. Earlier, I could never do any of these. I never was able to stop a vehicle and get into it. I was afraid to do so. I have changed a lot. I studied upto class 5, and never got see any books after that and was married. But my husband, for some reason, believed me and knew that I could read and write. I still don't know how to perform mathematical calculations, but I tell my customers to do so and help me out. During my free time in the shop, I sit and study. My husband also helps me out. Since I can't write well enough to maintain notes, I try and remember the important things that need to be done. People still wonder why I need to work when my husband earns enough. They think perhaps it's because of the 1,000 Rs. that I am paid by the Federation at the end of the month. But you know it, it's too less. It becomes difficult at times to explain to them the whole concept of a federation and a cooperative and to tell them how the federation belongs to them. I had never imagined I would ever leave my 'Home to Jungle and Jungle to Home' routine to be empowered so much one day. But having reached this platform, I think it's just the beginning."*

I was spellbound and speechless. I was struck with this question – was the story of Tulsi Devi about her destiny or about her power to change destiny.

Whichever it may be, there was one thing that I was completely sure about.

Watching her was like watching an 18 year old sit by the shore of a sea and gaze at its open waters thinking that someday she will swim through it and be on the other side.

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Note: Ms. Tulsi Tamta is the present Secretary of Shri Mahadev Swayat Sehkarita Devaldhar, Bageshwar which is registered as a Self-Reliant Cooperative.

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