

**FAIRTRADE
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Fair Trade Story-3



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Executive Secretary, MESH

I am a nurse by profession and was working in a leprosy colony in India in Guntur District A.P. in the early 1980's trying to treat men and women with the wonderful leprosy treatment newly available at that time. One of the women we were looking after was taking the medicines but not doing very well and I was puzzled until someone told me that she was taking the medicines but had no money for food. There was no work for the people then and so her husband had gone begging far away with a group of other men and she thought she would beg each day in the local town and get by until he came home, that was what they usually did. It made me realise that it was silly to try and treat her if she had no food to eat. I then became more and more involved in finding employment for the women in the colony so that they at least could be home based and safe even if their men needed to go begging still.

There was a *novar* weaving unit started in the colony by The Salvation Army but people were afraid to buy the bed tapes from a leprosy colony so marketing was problem. We decided to make the *novar* wider and dye them in bright colours and make bags for export. I knew about Traidcraft from friends in Britain and they were my first real contact with The Fair Trade Movement. They visited and bought whatever we could make for several years until we could grow and reach more customers. Panchu in SIPA was my early guide to Fair Trade in India and I was active in SIPA's work for a number of years that is an association of which I have very fond memories.

MESH (Maximising Employment to Serve the Handicapped) has been doing Fair Trade since its inception but after I arrived we formalised it my becoming a member of Fair Trade Forum and WFTO. The thing with MESH is that at its core is a goal to provide employment for people affected by leprosy and people with disabilities. **We are motivated by Christian values which certainly match those of the Fair Trade movement especially in the context of justice, caring and equity.** Set up and run by women the organisation has always had a heart for women and we find ways to ensure they are empowered by anything we do. We try and provide opportunities for artisans to learn new things and build their capacity through training programmes, workshops, design input and exposure visits and we are always glad to share with anyone details of what we do and how we operate because we believe that openness is a good way forward.

I worked alongside Panchu and others in the 80's on a code of ethics for Fair Trade which we presented to IFAT and which in some ways is similar to the principles under which we all work now. After coming to MESH I asked my colleague Mathew to "do the Fair Trade work". It interests me that Mathew also tries to get the artisans to see that the general principles of Fair Trade are good principles for life. We also conducted a project amongst MESH suppliers using the Fair Wage Guide, it was very good to have some kind of tool (albeit not a very popular one) to try out and share with suppliers. I think that we need more such tools and are always ready to try them out. We have also taken the FTF I brand for our shop and whilst we need to promote it more ourselves we believe in it and also in the message it carries.

There are changes in India but they need to be faster and the scope has to be much wider. If we are not managing to convey the messages to the educated people we interact with on a regular basis then it is nothing like a movement yet! Then I once heard a young Indian man complain that Fair Trade was some kind of neo-colonial import and was not relevant in India. I think he is wrong and what we need to do is find a way to indigenise the message and get it everywhere. That takes commitment, imagination and money. In FTF-I I think there is commitment again now and with the new younger people involved, we can hope for imagination and then money will naturally follow. But to be an effective movement we need us all to be talking Fair Trade everywhere and all the time.

