

Direct trade that benefits poor communities in India and the U.K.

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“Just Change” is becoming well known in fair trade and development circles around the world. It is an initiative which aims to establish an alternative and direct trading mechanism that will benefit poor communities. We have been successful in directly linking communities in India, the U.K., and encouraging them to trade amongst themselves. In our own way, we are standing globalisation on its head.

The origins of Just Change go back more than 20 years, and the development of the initiative is related to the struggle for survival of some of the poorest people in India. In 1985, a group of people founded the Action for Community Organisation, Rehabilitation and Development (ACCORD), with the aim of helping the *adivasis* –the indigenous people of the Gudalur valley in the Nilgiri mountains of Tamil Nadu, southern India–take control of their own lives. We wanted to support them in resisting being exploited by settlers, government departments and large tea plantations. To do this, we began a movement to reclaim ancestral lands. The *adivasi* people later planted tea on their newly reclaimed lands.



Photo: Author

Through growing and selling tea, *adivasi* women have gained more independence.

In the next few years, incomes began to trickle in from the newly planted tea, coffee and pepper, making a perceptible difference to the health and nutrition of the *adivasi* population. The mid 90s, however, saw a sudden drop in tea prices and with it, a drop in incomes. We were told that this was a result of the global market scenario. It was frustrating to watch all the gains of the previous years dissolve. Yet while all *adivasi* tea growers had their incomes reduced to less than half, we realised that tea prices for the consumer did not drop at all. It was obvious that someone somewhere was making a killing – but the farmers were being cheated as sellers, while consumers were being fleeced as buyers.

In the early 90s, a women’s co-op visited us, bringing with them beautiful handloom saris which they made themselves. They sold these to our team at half the price the saris were going for in Gudalur town. Our team pounced on the saris amazed and delighted at the good deal. The women weavers took back Gudalur tea which they considered a bargain. They sold this for a slight profit back home. Both the groups had gained considerably by the transaction and a few more exchanges took place. It reconfirmed the fact that the market was treating us unfairly, and set us thinking.

In 1995, more than 200 *adivasi* village leaders resolved to purchase a tea plantation as a community asset, to “stand on our own feet” as they said. Supporters from the U.K. and Germany helped to buy a 176 acre estate called Madhuvana, and plant tea on it. Finally in 1998, the Gudalur *adivasis* became the proud owners of a tea plantation. It was another milestone crossed. Now, Madhuvana has about 100 acres of tea planted. On average, about 20 000 kilos of tea leaf is produced every month.

With all this going on, we began an in-depth analysis of the problem in Gudalur. We realised that when the exploiter was the local landlord, we all could do something about it. But, when the exploiter was a faceless enemy such as the “global market” it was beyond our grasp. In such cases it was essential to work out a new strategy and build networks with communities in other parts of the world. We had succeeded in exchanging our tea for saris and sold our tea to our support groups in the U.K. and Germany. We now needed to formalise these efforts – to build a strong network of poor and deprived communities, and to use globalisation to our advantage.

A step beyond fair trade

Just Change emerged from the concept of fair trade. The slogan “Fair Trade not Aid” was new, exciting and one which we embraced wholeheartedly. We began our fight for a fair deal for *adivasi* tea planters and for the poor producers when we first sold our tea in Germany. On a visit to Germany, Bomman, an *adivasi* leader, was shocked to discover that our German friends had to travel far to buy our tea, and also that they paid more for it. “But they are our friends and supporters, they should pay less,” he protested. We soon realised that many unemployed people in Europe could not afford fair trade products. We also realised that we were depending on the goodwill of socially aware, middle class people, since they paid more for our tea in order to give the producers a break. Making people aware that fair trade could eliminate the need for aid was great. But there remained an element of benevolence. Wasn’t it slightly patronising? It didn’t change structures or trade relationships, or even question them. We decided we had to go one step further. Since poor people were being exploited in rich countries as well as poor, why not join the two communities through trade? That way, both groups would benefit. Then the solidarity would not be one-sided – it would be mutual. Forming a co-operative of poor consumers and producers created a global solidarity group that could tackle the negative impact of globalisation. Local communities, both in the U.K. and in India, adored the idea. In this way, Just Change was born.

Trading between communities

The concept became a reality when Gudalur *adivasis* traded their tea with various communities in Kerala and Orissa. This



Photo: Author

A Village Consumer Society in Calicut, being run by the Just Change India Producer Company.

was a phase in which we identified more products for trading between poor communities, realised the potential of the Just Change network and decided to bring more groups in.

The face to face contacts between the Kerala, Gudalur and Orissa groups produced a strong sense of solidarity and working together for one cause. Women's groups from Kerala began to send us a coconut based soap which was hugely popular. Orissa and Kerala loved our tea. The Just Change idea took off in Gudalur because we began to provide rice to people who found an enormous difference in price, quality and quantity. They discovered that for decades local traders had cheated them on both weight and price. So loyalty to Just Change and determination to succeed increased. As trading took place successfully, the Just Change identity emerged and, with it, confidence and trust in each other. We grew in experience and learnt much from outside advisers, who gave us new ideas and insights. We ironed out many problems and glitches and learnt from our mistakes.

On January 6, 2006, we took another giant step forward, when the Just Change India Producer Company was formally registered. We launched the company with *adivasis*, Orissa farmers and women's groups as the founding members and shareholders. We often confound ourselves and others by the sheer audacity of our ideas! But we try to break the mould, so the inauguration of our producer company happened under a tree. Community leaders lit lamps – no ribbon cutting. There was joyful singing and dancing, the cultural expression of our communities. The shareholders' focus was not on profits or dividends, but on benefits to producers and consumers – on justice!

The U.K. connection

The Just Change story also became inextricably linked and woven in with events in the United Kingdom. In the summer of 1994, ACCORD was invited to the U.K. by the Charities Advisory Trust and the Directory of Social Change to write a report on "Poverty in the U.K. from a southern perspective." ACCORD was struck by the fact that unemployed people living on welfare on housing estates were paying unnecessarily high prices for the endless cups of tea they drank. What if we could connect the two groups? They would pay less and we would get more. The idea seemed brilliant.

A number of experimental exchanges took place, at first with little success. However, with a volunteer who became the face of Just Change U.K., the idea moved along. A group of young people in Manchester started to sell tea to local community groups and through alternative shops. Other shops around the country started to buy our tea. We also relied on various supporters in the U.K. to keep us going. In 2001, an *adivasi* group came to the U.K., and met friends and supporters of Just Change in Hawick, Manchester, Gloucester and London. One of the strengths of Just Change U.K. lies in the volunteer groups – many of them young people who have spent a summer with us in Mysore, taking part in our programme, "Development from the inside". In 2006 we were able to set up a Board for Just Change U.K. We have also had articles published and the resulting publicity has helped to strengthen our networks. For example, the BBC publicised a blind taste test where Just Change tea came out tops, winning over the most popular local brands.

Nevertheless, Just Change was still not linking up with poor communities in the U.K. Then in March 2006 we met the Marsh Farm group. They are a group of 3000 people living on a housing estate near Luton, in southern England. They have formed a collective to work on community regeneration. There was an instant synergy and connection between people from Marsh Farm and the *adivasis*, as each told their stories of struggle for survival and justice. This seemed like the breakthrough we had been looking for since 1994. In May 2007, we formally launched Just Change U.K. amongst the Marsh Farm Sunday market traders. Just Change supporters from around the U.K. arrived, and the launch was lively. A visiting *adivasi* group played drums, flutes and danced, attracting a lot of attention. We hope the tea will now take off in a big way from Marsh Farm. We also hope to find funding for a person to devote a few days a week to support Just Change in the U.K.

Towards the future

The New Internationalist and Amnesty International sell Just Change tea and soap through their catalogues. Both have done pretty well and we couldn't get more global than that! It is a great feeling to be fighting the war on our terms on their (global market) turf and to see the tide turning. While we need the volumes of tea to increase considerably in order to make a real difference economically, it is an enormously satisfying feeling to note the progress being made slowly but surely, as the idea and message spread, with all corners of the world responding to the concept of creating a just economic order. May the struggle continue. ■

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