Avani is a voluntary organization that has been working in the Kumaon region of the Indian Himalayas for the past thirteen years. Avani began its journey as the Kumaon chapter of the Barefoot College, Tilonia, Rajasthan in 1997 and was registered as Avani in 1999. The work of Avani has focused on the creation of livelihood opportunities through preservation of traditional craft, dissemination of appropriate technology and farm-based activities.

The context of our work is the fragile Himalayan eco-system, unstable mountain ranges and the inaccessibility of villages from roads, which therefore are out of reach of most government schemes. Our focus is on impoverished rural youth migrating in search of livelihoods to the plains.

The participation of the community, respect for traditional knowledge, conservation and fair trade practices have been the cornerstones of our work. Our main purpose has been to create a choice for rural youth for local employment that allows them to live in their homesteads rather than migrate to the plains for very meager incomes.

Presently, the entire team at Avani is comprised of local people who have grown with the organization and now handle core responsibilities within it. During the course of our work over the past thirteen years, we have taken care to invest in training local human resources who have had the initiative and the desire to learn with or without formal degrees.

Avani works in ninety villages and hamlets, offering different programs that address issues related to rural life. Most of these villages are located from thirty minutes to three hours (walking) from the nearest road. Some of our areas of intervention include:

### Preservation of traditional craft
- Hand-spinning
- Hand-weaving
- Natural dyeing
- Knitting
- Kumkum-making*

### Dissemination of appropriate technology
- Solar energy (both thermal and photovoltaics)
- Rainwater harvesting
- Wastewater recycling
- Pine needle gasification

### Farm-based activities
- Cultivation of wild silks from eri, muga and oak tussar
- Collection and cultivation of natural dye materials; extraction of dye pigments

### Women’s and Children’s Health
During the course of our work, we have facilitated the setting up of two rural enterprises
- Hand-made naturally-dyed silk and wool textiles
- Manufacture of Solar Equipment (lanterns, water heaters, driers, etc.)

Both businesses are now self-reliant. The textile business has now been handed over to a collective of artisans that has been registered as the Kumaon Earthcraft Self-Reliant Cooperative. This cooperative has taken over the entire business. The enterprise supports between 400 to 500 artisans, allowing spinners to earn a supplementary income and providing an alternative livelihood to weavers. The collection and cultivation of dye materials has led to the protection and planting of traditional trees which previously had no economic value.

Our philosophy of work has been to create self-reliance through creativity and honest effort. We believe that any income-generating activity can only be successful if it can generate income on its own and does not continue to rely on outside inputs for long periods of time. Of course, it is essential to have support initially when setting up an activity in a remote rural area where there is no infrastructure and one is rediscovering the wheel at every stage. But as time progresses, we need to build in systems that ensure efficient

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* Kumkum is a traditional recipe made in the hills with turmeric where the fermentation process turns it red and it is used in religious ceremonies as a red mark on the forehead. This traditional product has been replaced by chemical powder that uses mercury and is carcinogenic. We are reintroducing organic Kumkum into the marketplace.
1. URGE LOCAL MARKETS TO STOCK FAIR TRADE PRODUCTS

There are now dozens of certified fair trade products on the market, ranging from coffee and tea to soap, fresh fruit and wine! Next time you are buying groceries, be sure to let the manager know that you want more fair trade products – and make suggestions. Fair World Project has sample letters, talking points and materials to help you out.

2. GO BEHIND THE LABEL AND VOTE WITH YOUR POCKETBOOK

Every time you are in your natural food store, coop or supermarket, you are voting with your pocketbook. Be sure to look for fair trade products and labels, and read the ingredient list to assess which of a product’s ingredients are in fact fair trade. Now more than ever, with almost a dozen fair trade labels, it is important to look for fair trade products that truly support farmers and workers. Want to know more about fair trade standards and certification? Visit our website for more information.

3. ENCOURAGE YOUR FAVORITE ORGANIC BRANDS TO GO FAIR TRADE

The organic food, apparel and body care market reached $27 billion dollars in 2009. Unfortunately, very few of the organic products in the marketplace are certified fair trade. In fact, at many organic farms and factories, at home and abroad, workers and farmers are not paid fair wages and prices for their work or harvest. You can change that! Contact your favorite food, body care and apparel companies and tell them that fair trade and organic should go together.

4. URGE YOUR CITY, STATE, OR SCHOOL DISTRICT AND OTHER INSTITUTIONS TO PURCHASE ONLY CERTIFIED FAIR TRADE PRODUCTS

Every year, institutions from municipal and state governments to universities, hospitals and school districts spend billions of dollars purchasing commodities and products, ranging from coffee and tea, to uniforms and soap. $8 billion was spent last year on institutional coffee purchases alone! Put your tax dollars to work and make a real impact in the lives of farmers and workers around the world. Go to www.fairworldproject.org to download form letters you can customize to your local elected officials and decision makers in your community to adopt fair trade purchasing practices.

5. LEARN MORE. TAKE ACTION. GET INVOLVED

The Fair World Project website (www.fairworldproject.org) is a fantastic resource for all things fair trade. At the FWP website you can:

- Learn more about fair trade
- Send a letter to your elected officials and local institutions, urging them to support fair trade purchasing policies
- Access useful resources, like letter writing templates and other materials to use in your community
- Spread the word!
functioning of the enterprise. We also need to invest a lot in team building and training of rural youth who have stakes in the area and will strengthen the foundation of a rural enterprise.

At Avani, we have also endeavored to take into account the environmental impact of the introduction of any small-scale industry in a rural area. There are issues of energy, water and soil that will impact the area for a long time if the first step is not conscious. We use only clean energy (solar or pine needle gasification) in the production and processing of our textiles. We harvest rainwater that is used for natural dyeing and other activities and is then recycled for irrigation. We use only natural dyes that do not adversely affect the soil.

The sustainability of the enterprise has seen a reestablishment of the rural youth’s faith in the fact that opportunities for employment can be created locally. This has led to the donation of land by local residents in four of our villages for the establishment of village centers that house the looms and also coordinate all the other programs in nearby villages. These centers have become the hub of activity in those villages, and we are slowly strengthening the ownership of the artisans in this business. Ninety-eight percent of the participants in this enterprise are women. The program now stands largely on its own and only needs support for expansion or capital investments. All the operating costs of the enterprise are sustained by the enterprise. Wages are determined in consultation with the artisans and are revised every few years. The spinners and knitters work from home, while only the weavers need to go to the nearest Avani center to do their work. This system fulfills our first condition of not displacing artisans from their homesteads, but rather allowing them to bring work to their homes. It definitely increases our production costs, but it also increases the artisans’ quality of life—which, for us, is the bottom line.

Our aim has been to contribute to the Himalayas that we love and to leave the Earth a little more beautiful than we found it. In fact, Avani means “the Earth” in Sanskrit.