



Merry Christmas...

It's confirmed then, the 29th April will be an English holiday to celebrate William and Kate's wedding. I guess you have to be a future King to be able to get one of those. Of course it's already being touted as the wedding of the century and the media are in a frenzy trying to discover new ways and angles to cover the story between now and then. For everyone but the poorest of the poor the news anywhere in the world is inescapable.

And then, there's this holiday coming up that we've always celebrated. Not a royal wedding, a birth. And, if you think about it, it's a wonder there's a celebration at all. Even though his birth was predicted, and even expected, nobody could have anticipated the way in which he entered our world. What kind of King turns up as an illegitimate baby born to refugee parents and spends his first few nights sharing bed space with animals? We easily remember the wise men's gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh and forget his parent's poverty was such that they could only afford turtle doves for the customary sacrifice instead of a lamb. This King clearly entered society from the bottom.

So, we pause to celebrate the birth of Jesus, a slave King with very different kind of news. It's not about a wedding but there will be a feast. There will be guests of honour but won't be who we naturally think they will be. The media won't blink an eyelid because the whole Jesus King thing doesn't really appear to make sense and to be honest this kind of news doesn't sell so well anyway. This King's news is aimed at the whole market but has a focus on those who are at the bottom. This King has good news for the poor. He's on about release for those who are held captive and claims that the blind will get to see. His message is that for the oppressed in our world there will freedom. And for everyone, except maybe the rich, this news is powerful and inescapable.

May you all have a Merry Christmas celebrating the birth of a King like no other, a servant bearing good news for the poor.

Freedom!

Kerry





Another Payrise

The women received another pay rise at the end of November which saw their take-home pay increase by more than 10%. Needless to say this was well received.

Freeset also made a small but significant philosophical change to the pay structure by paying a higher salary to 5 women who carry greater responsibilities. There was some heated discussion about this decision with a few who were very unhappy with the change. Previously all the women were paid the same across the board. It is ironic, because this change means that we now have a more consistent (and equitable) pay structure.

In this culture they are quite happy for men in positions of responsibility to be paid more, but they don't feel this should extend to the women as well. Change can be a challenge – even when it is positive change!

Happy Birthday Freeset!

September 17 was a day off work for everyone and a time to celebrate Freeset's ninth birthday! The ladies showed up in their finest saris and gave thanks for nine years of freedom. They had a ball letting their hair down and dancing to the catchy beat of Bollywood tunes. They finished off the day's celebrations with a take-home meal.





In her own words...

Samhita's story

Before I started at Freeset I had many problems. Sometimes I didn't eat and I worried about my baby's future and her study.

I don't have as many problems now I'm working at Freeset. My family is good, the Freeset family is good. Kerry and Annie are always alongside us and help if we have problems.

At work my first responsibility is to teach the new girls what they have to do. Some girls are good sewers, others aren't – so I get the good sewers to help the others. We need good sewing so we can make beautiful bags.

There are many kinds of jobs here – sewing, packing cartons, printing, marking. My job is

to help the women understand the quality we need - if the printing is not right, if the sewing is not right, if the strap isn't good enough then we can't use it. I want more girls to learn how to sew, to learn about the machines and to be able to recognize if the bobbin tension isn't right in their sewing and make the adjustments to fix it.

We are growing - now we have a new building used for making T-shirts. When visitors come, we hope they will help us sell more products. We want our company to grow, so more girls can find freedom - those girls who still wait in line.

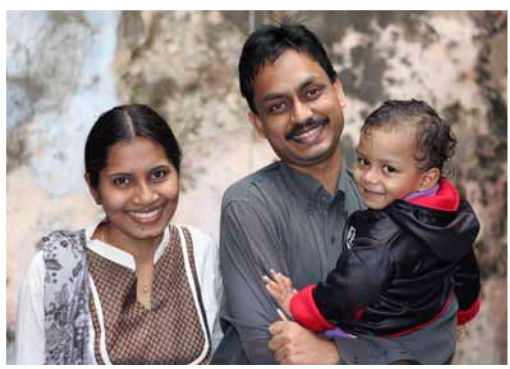
Mostly we are happy and have fun at work. Our ladies are good. Our family is good. Our work is beautiful.

* Name has been changed



Management Staff profile:

Ranjit Paik



Ranjit joined Freeset earlier this year. Hailing from the State of Odisha (formerly known as Orissa, just south of West Bengal) he is an Indian national who brings with him valuable local knowledge and understanding. He is accompanied by his wife Deepika and 2 year old son Kenneth.

As HR manager for the business, he helps find and recruit new staff. Through the Freeset Trust, he also fills the role of a capacity building consultant. This encompasses development work with children and issues related to human trafficking including the Murshidabad research mentioned below.

Ranjit wants to help women leave the sex trade and find freedom. He sees Freeset helping women discover that they are human beings and that they have a meaningful identity. He wants to see Freeset impact the wider community both economically and educationally. He enjoys working with the expat management team as well as the marginalized community and says that seeing women empowered is a very positive thing.

A big thanks to all our Volunteers!

Now that the weather is cooling down in Kolkata, individual volunteers and teams are heading back to help Freeset! Some of the work planned is still on hold waiting for permits to be granted, but there's still plenty for volunteers to do! We really are grateful for all the help volunteers are able to provide.

Recent team from Auckland, New Zealand



Many volunteers getting work done



Clean Drinking Water

Thanks to the generosity of Wilson Street Baptist Church and Waugh Infrastructure Management Limited in Timaru, New Zealand, Freeset is now able to provide clean, filtered drinking water to all staff.

The quality of water available in Kolkata is very poor and illnesses caused by contaminated drinking water are rampant, so clean water for the Freeset community is much appreciated.

Taps are strategically located all around Freeset's two buildings so the women can conveniently fill their water bottles and even take some home for their families. It has been a major infrastructure project (the planning began at least two years ago) and phase two of the project is to make the filtered water available to the local community as well. We have encountered a few problems making this happen, but are working through the issues so that it will happen. As the saying goes, good things take time!



BEFORE: Community water



AFTER: Clean filtered water



Team from New Zealand

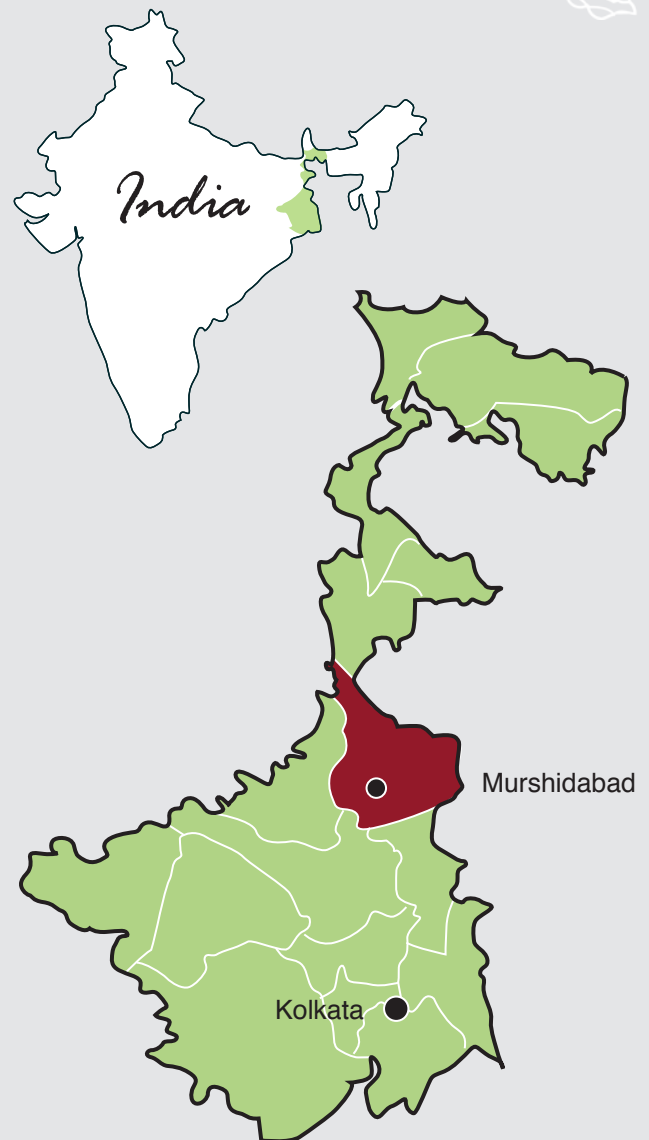
Getting to the Source

It's great that businesses like Freeset and Sari Bari offer freedom and hope to women in red light areas such as Sonagachhi. The obvious question is, how did these women end up in Sonagachhi in the first place? Women are trafficked from all over India, Bangladesh and Nepal, however there is one district in West Bengal that contributes thousands of women. A recent poll determined that 25% of the women working at Freeset are from an area 200 km north of Kolkata called Murshidabad. We want to know more about this district that contributes so many women to India's sex trade.

Murshidabad is said to have one of the lowest rural standards of living in India. We understand there are villages so affected by poverty that a sizable chunk of their economy is based on the trafficking of young girls. It appears mothers and fathers are so poor they are prepared to sacrifice a member of their family so the rest of the family can eat. How can this be? Does this really happen? Freeset is investigating further and has commissioned a study to research these questions.

We want to determine if something can be done to stem the flow of girls from Murshidabad. We want to know if it is possible to start businesses in the area - to offer families an economic solution to what appears to be an economic problem. We figure, why wait until girls are stolen or sold? Wouldn't it be better to stop the problem at the top of the cliff rather than just picking up the pieces of shattered lives at the bottom.

The study has already begun and is being conducted by an organisation called ASK who bring many years experience to the task. Funding has been provided by a generous donation from a women's group in Australia.



State of West Bengal



Farewell...

Alistair & Lily Crow

Freeset is saying a sad farewell to Alistair and Lily Crow. They've been part of the business for the past six years. Lily has managed the nursery for children aged five and under while their mothers are at work. She has developed the nursery into a place where the children are not only looked after but loved, nurtured, and prepared for school. Alistair has administrated the affairs of the Freeset Trust, Mukti Budgeting Services, and provided some legal advice to Freeset as a whole. He has researched and prepared countless applications, forms, and documents in his time in Kolkata.

Together Alistair and Lily have spent many hours researching educational opportunities in the area and have helped enroll many at-risk children in local schools. They also helped coordinate the Mukti Network, bringing together organizations in the city with common goals to provide support and network resources.

Amazingly enough, Alistair and Lily have been working at Freeset as part of their 'retirement'! "These six years have been the most stretching experience of our lives – eventful and challenging. Living and working with this local community has been rewarding but oftentimes heart-rending," they said when asked about their time in Kolkata. They will return to the UK at the end of January to spend more time with their children and new and on-the-way grandchildren.



Getting amongst the community during Holi - the festival of color

Lily with the nursery kids



Christmas Time

There's still time to buy Christmas gifts from Freeset's distributors! What better way to celebrate the joy of Christmas than to share a Freeset bag with friends and family.

Go to www.freesetglobal.com and click on 'Contact Us' to find a distributor near you.



We want to hear from you!

Do you have a photo with a Freeset bag or Tee?
Please send your pictures to: letters@freesetglobal.com
The lovely ladies of Freeset enjoy seeing their products around the world! And we might just put it online or in our next newsletter as well.

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