

2023: A good year for IREF!

After two difficult Covid years (2020-21), we were encouraged to hear that the work of IREF(India) has started to flourish once again.

- 110 baptisms took place in 2023! For the past few years, the average was just under 50 a year;
- 950 students are now being educated through IREF, up from 590 in 2020;
- 73 teachers are now being employed by IREF, a 28% increase in two years;
- a new school roof was installed in 2023;
- over one million meals were served during 2023!
- many village churches were refurbished in 2023, and the Repalle church too;
- 12 pastors conferences were held, with an average of 600 pastors at each;
- a new parents' pavilion is being constructed, to enable parents to spend time with their children when visiting the IREF campus.

A transformed life

Hem Sagar arrived at IREF in 2021 as a troublemaker. His parents tried to enrol him in different schools, but Hem Sagar skipped classes and roamed around the town. The family heard about IREF's emphasis on discipline from a friend whose daughter had similar issues. The daughter went to IREF and came back a disciplined, respectful child.

Hem Sagar has done well at IREF. The teachers have helped him gain a vision and plan for his life. When the team sat down with Hem Sagar, he said, "I have discovered that I would like to be an engineer. Now I have something to study toward. My career aspirations have provided a purpose for my education."



Most people from Hem Sagar's home village of Devarapalli work at a pickle-making factory, earning the equivalent of \$2-\$3 per day. His father does heavy manual labour work, transporting sand from rivers to construction sights. Hem Sagar now understands that his father does not have many options due to a lack of education.

While most schools focus only on the education, IREF focuses on the whole child. The desire is for children to learn proper hygiene, self-discipline, and effective study habits. Through encouraging teachers and a good learning environment, Hem Sagar is excited for

what the future holds.

IREF: a caste-free environment

Although attitudes toward the caste system are changing in many of India's cities, a person's caste still plays a huge role in their life. India's caste system, which has existed for 3,000 years, has thousands of levels which are nearly impossible to ascend. A person's caste determines the kind of work they should do; those from the lower castes, especially the Dalits (untouchables), experience great discrimination and prejudice.

Within IREF, the caste system is challenged every day, whether in its schools or churches. Students, pastors, and congregations are all told that there is no caste system within IREF. As Christians, we are all part of one Body, the Body of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ shows no favouritism and has drawn people from all sorts of backgrounds to himself. He said, "Whoever comes to me, I will never drive away!"



With a system that is 3,000 years old, it takes hard work and intentionality to overcome it; but we pray for a change in the hearts of students, pastors, and Christians everywhere to recognise its inherent evil. Every day, we see God changing the caste system that divides India, when we see students from a wide variety of caste backgrounds building friendships, trust, and respect amongst each other.

Good education for two young boys

Narashimha and Pavan Kumar come from Markapuram, an impoverished rural village with no electricity or water and minimal education. People pick chili peppers for a living, and village women walk miles each day to fetch water.



Yet, in this poverty-stricken village, word of an affordable boarding school spread. Many in the village

have now broken the cycle of generational poverty by receiving an IREF education!

When Narashimha and Pavan's mother heard about IREF, she made the difficult decision to send them far from their home. Their village is twelve hours from the IREF campus, so their mother is unable to see them apart from in the Christmas and summer holidays.

"Their mother cares for them deeply," Dee Rebba testifies. *"She is different from other field workers in that she sees the 'big picture' of what education can do. She misses them dearly and calls the campus often. But she knows her boys are cared for safely and are receiving a good education."*

Currently, five children from Markapuram village study at IREF. Pavan wants to be a doctor and Narashimha wants to be a manager in the chili fields. Both boys have one thing in common: they want to be able to provide financially for their mother.

Trouble in Manipur

In the far northeast of India lies the state of Manipur. Last summer, it was in the news as persecution against Christians reached new heights. Over 180 Christians were killed and around 65,000 were displaced from their homes.

Angry mobs of Hindu neighbours destroyed churches and the homes of our brother and sister believers. Many Christians in Manipur felt that what happened to them was part of an intentional, systematic genocide of Christians in India, starting with them.

IREF heard about the atrocities in Manipur almost as soon as they began. Reports of pastors and their families being terrorised in the streets, videos of Christians being beaten, churches being burned, and whole families fleeing into the hills and forests emerged. It sparked widespread heartbreak and anger.

What happened in Manipur is indicative of a greater movement in India, as Hindu nationalists grasp after political power. We don't know what the future holds for Christians, but we can be hopeful. As reports of violence and death in Manipur spread, so did stories of great faith. Even in the face of incredible pain and trauma, videos of Christians worshipping the Lord and encouraging each other emerged, as they hid in forests.

Last summer, Mungbee, a pastor from Manipur travelled to IREF. He and his wife and their two children had fled to a military camp, where they lived for five days. They have no home to return to and no church to lead. Everything is destroyed.



Mungbee with IREF's Pastor Lawrence

Whilst at IREF, he shared his story with the students and IREF's leadership team. Because of the Lord's faithfulness and your generosity, IREF was able to partner with Mungbee through a one-off gift that helped provide food, shelter, and safety for Mungbee's family and congregation.

IREF hopes to be able to continue to support the Church throughout India. Please pray for Mungbee, his family, and his church; pray that Christians in and around Manipur will be encouraged and protected.

Two new IREF(UK) trustees

We are delighted to share with you that Lyndsey Clarke and Nick Beacher have agreed to serve as trustees for IREF(UK). Both have experience of being part of IREF(UK)'s Medical Teams in recent years.

We would like to record our thanks to Yvonne Baulk who stood down as one of our IREF(UK) trustees towards the end of last year after several years of valuable service.

Some Prayer Points:

- Give thanks for all that the Lord accomplished through IREF in 2023.
- Give thanks for a good visit from the IREF(USA) Medical Team this month.
- Pray for those who lead the work of IREF in Repalle: Emmanuel and Dee Rebba, and their sons, Josh and John.
- Give thanks for the hope being given to every IREF student.
- Pray for Christians in India facing persecution
- Pray for the IREF(UK) trustees as we meet next month.

Thank you for your ongoing prayers and support, which are much appreciated. We are keen to increase our UK support for IREF; so please share this newsletter with as many as possible!

David Hunt [Chairman of IREF(UK)]