

The First in the Family: First-Generation College Students from SC/ST Communities in Odisha

She is the first person in her family to sit in a college classroom. Her father farms two acres in Kandhamal; her mother never completed primary school. When she was admitted to a degree college in Phulbani after scoring 73 percent in her Class 12 board exams, the village gathere...

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She is not an anomaly. She is a pattern.

Across Odisha's colleges, a specific kind of dropout happens in silence. It is not the loud withdrawal of a student who fails exams repeatedly and is asked to leave. It is the gradual fade of a first-generation college student from a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe family — a student who passed the entrance threshold, enrolled with hope, and was then overwhelmed by a convergence of challenges that no scheme fully addresses and no single person in the system was assigned to manage.

First-generation college students from SC and ST communities in Odisha represent one of the most important investment opportunities in the state's human capital. They are the leading edge of social mobility — the students whose success or failure will determine whether the constitutional promise of equal opportunity in education is being converted into actual change, or whether it remains a set of numbers in a scholarship disbursement report.

This Convergence Note examines who these students are, what they face when they reach higher education, what the scheme architecture provides, and what NGO and CSR programmes can do that actually makes a difference.

Who Is a First-Generation College Student?

The definition matters for programme design. A first-generation college student is typically defined as a student whose parents have not completed a college-level education — neither parent holds a degree. In the context of SC/ST communities in Odisha, this frequently means:

- Parents whose own education stopped at primary or middle school level, often because their district had no high school within walking distance when they were growing up.

- Families where the concept of "college" is understood as important but abstract — where there is no family knowledge of what college involves, what it costs, what documents are needed, how the academic calendar works, or what comes after graduation.
- Students who may be the first in not just their immediate family but their entire extended clan, hamlet, or village to attempt higher education.

The experience of being first is not just a biographical detail. It is a structural condition that shapes every aspect of the student's relationship with the higher education system. They arrive at college without the social capital that students from educated families carry unconsciously: knowledge of how to speak to professors, how to navigate administrative processes, how to access hostel facilities, how to apply for schemes, how to respond when they fall behind in coursework. The anthropological literature on first-generation college students — which is substantial and growing in the Indian context — describes this as a form of "cultural mismatch" between the norms of the institution and the norms of the student's home community.

The Odisha Context: Progress and Its Unfinished Business

Odisha has made genuine progress in secondary and higher secondary school enrollment over the past decade. UDISE+ data for 2021–22 shows improved female enrollment in Classes 9–12, and the state's Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in higher education has risen. The opening of new degree colleges in tribal-majority districts — Koraput, Rayagada, Nabarangpur, Malkangiri — has brought the physical access barrier down substantially compared to what existed twenty years ago.

What has not been solved is the transition and retention problem.

Getting an SC/ST student through Class 12 is hard. Getting them into a degree college is harder. Keeping them there until graduation is hardest of all. The dropout rate among SC/ST college students in Odisha, while not tracked with the precision applied to school-level dropout, is understood to be significantly higher than the state average — with dropouts concentrated in the first two years of a three-year undergraduate programme, and disproportionately affecting students who have migrated from home districts to colleges in larger towns.

The dropout drivers are compound and simultaneous:

Financial pressure. Even with scholarship support, a first-generation student faces costs that the scholarship may not fully cover: transport, food, hostel fees at private hostels (government hostel capacity is limited), stationery, mobile phone data for online resources, and examination fees for competitive exams they want to appear in. The family at home has typically been

managing on marginal agricultural income. The student is expected to remit some portion of scholarship money back to the family during emergencies — a norm that is entirely understandable within its own logic and entirely at odds with the student's ability to sustain college.

Academic unpreparedness. The quality of education in government schools in tribal districts is variable and in many cases insufficient preparation for college-level coursework. A student who scored 73 percent in a Koraput district government school has frequently been taught by teachers who were themselves underprepared, in classrooms that were under-resourced, in a medium of instruction (Odia or sometimes English) that may not be the student's most fluent language. At college, the pace is faster, self-direction is expected, and there is often no remedial support.

Identity and belonging. The first-generation college student navigates a social environment that was not designed for them. College culture in Odisha's larger towns is shaped by students from urban, educated families. The idioms of social interaction, the reference points of cultural conversation, the codes of dress and manner — these can make a student from a remote tribal district feel profoundly out of place. This experience of not belonging is not trivial; research consistently finds it to be a major predictor of dropout, independent of financial and academic factors.

Family pull. A sibling's illness, a parent's hospitalisation, a sister's marriage that requires the student's presence and contribution — any of these can interrupt an academic year. For a student who is already on the margin of academic and financial viability, a single-semester interruption frequently becomes a permanent dropout.

The Scholarship Architecture: What Exists

Odisha has one of the more comprehensive scholarship ecosystems in India for SC/ST students in higher education. The layers are:

Post-Matric Scholarship (Central + State)

The central Post-Matric Scholarship for SC students (administered by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment) and for ST students (Ministry of Tribal Affairs) is the bedrock. Under Odisha's state portal (scholarship.odisha.gov.in, also known as the PRERANA portal), students apply for post-matric scholarships covering tuition fees, non-refundable charges, and maintenance allowances.

Key provisions:

- SC students: Family income limit of Rs 2.5 lakh per annum. Covers tuition, hostel, and

maintenance.

- ST students: Similar structure, administered through the ST & SC Development Department.
- Annual amounts range from Rs 15,000 to Rs 1,20,000+ depending on course level (UG, PG, professional, doctoral) and residential status.

The scheme is theoretically comprehensive. The implementation has well-documented gaps:

- **Disbursement delays.** Scholarships are frequently disbursed months after the academic year begins, requiring students to borrow or withdraw from college to return home in the interim.
- **Documentation barriers.** Caste certificate, domicile certificate, income certificate, bank account in the student's name (not a parent's), and Aadhaar linkage are all required. Any missing or expired document creates a rejection that the student may not understand how to resolve.
- **Institute verification bottlenecks.** The scheme requires institute-level verification before disbursement. Colleges with weak administrative capacity, or colleges where the scholarship section is understaffed, create delays at the institutional level that students cannot control.

National Fellowship for SC/ST (UGC)

For SC students pursuing MPhil or PhD programmes, the UGC National Fellowship for SC (formerly known as Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship) provides a fellowship equivalent to the UGC junior research fellowship, with a maintenance allowance and contingency grant. The National Fellowship for ST operates similarly. These fellowships are competitive and meaningful for postgraduate research students, but they reach only the small proportion of first-generation students who have already navigated UG and are pursuing advanced degrees.

DR Ambedkar Pre-Matric and Post-Matric Scholarships

The Ministry of Social Justice administers DR Ambedkar scholarships specifically for SC students in specific course categories. These supplement the main post-matric scheme.

Odisha State Scholarship Portal — Additional Schemes

The Odisha scholarship ecosystem includes several state-specific schemes beyond the central Post-Matric:

- **Prerana Scholarship:** For students with 50%+ marks in previous exams, SC/ST/OBC/General categories, family income below thresholds.
- **Banishree Scholarship (2024–25 last date: 31 December 2024):** For students with disabilities.

- **KALIA Scholarship:** For children of KALIA Yojana beneficiary farmers pursuing technical/vocational courses.
- **Fakir Mohan Scholarship:** For students pursuing Odia Honours at UG and MA (Odia) levels.

Eklavya/Ashram Schools and Residential Scholarships

For tribal students who were educated in Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) or government tribal residential schools and are now transitioning to college, the continuation of support through the post-matric pathway is theoretically seamless. In practice, many EMRS-educated students find that the institutional support they received within the residential school system disappears entirely when they enter mainstream college.

The Hostel Problem: Where First-Generation Students Lose the Battle

If there is a single intervention point that would have the highest impact on first-generation SC/ST student retention in Odisha's colleges, it is hostel access.

Government hostels for SC and ST students exist at the district headquarters level and in some taluk towns. They are administered by the ST & SC Development Department. Their capacity is limited. In a district like Koraput or Nabarangpur, where new degree colleges have opened and enrollment has increased, hostel capacity has not grown proportionally. Students who cannot get a government hostel seat — which may house 100 students when the district's college population has grown to 800 — must either rent privately in town (expensive and often unsafe, particularly for women), commute daily (possible only from nearby villages, impossible from remote hamlets), or live with relatives whose circumstances may not be conducive to studying.

Private hostel costs in Odisha's smaller college towns range from Rs 2,000 to Rs 4,000 per month. For a student whose scholarship maintenance allowance is Rs 1,200 per month for day-scholars or Rs 1,500 for hostellers, this gap is unbridgeable without family support — and for many first-generation students, family support is not available.

The 2024–25 post-matric scholarship scheme revisions have increased amounts in some categories. But the gap between what hostels in smaller college towns cost and what scholarships provide remains significant.

Beyond Scholarship: What First-Generation Students

Actually Need

The scholarship is necessary but not sufficient. First-generation students report a set of needs that financial support alone does not address:

Academic mentoring. A senior student or faculty mentor who helps navigate coursework, explains examination patterns, provides notes when the student falls behind, and offers frank advice about whether a particular course or college is the right match. First-generation students are unlikely to seek help proactively, partly because they have no model for what seeking academic help looks like and partly because many feel that admitting difficulty is admitting failure.

Career counselling. For a student from an SC family in Bolangir, "what do I do after graduation" is not a question with obvious answers the way it might be for a student whose uncle works in the district collector's office. Career counselling — practical, specific, and grounded in what is actually achievable — is almost entirely absent in Odisha's government degree colleges outside the major urban centres.

Competitive exam preparation. A significant proportion of SC/ST college students in Odisha are attempting competitive examinations — for government jobs (OPSC, OSSSC), for banking, for central government recruitment (UPSC, SSC). The SEED scheme's coaching component (see below) and state-run coaching centres exist, but access is geographically concentrated in Bhubaneswar and Cuttack.

Mental health support. The combination of financial anxiety, academic pressure, identity stress, family expectations, and the isolation of being far from home produces a mental health burden that most students carry silently. A 2023 study from AIIMS Bhubaneswar on reproductive health education among adolescent girls noted the importance of addressing the intersecting vulnerabilities of young Odia students in urban settings; the same intersectionality applies to first-generation college students.

What NGOs Can Do: A Convergence Model

The most effective NGO interventions for first-generation SC/ST college students follow a model that has been documented in the Indian and international literature:

Pre-enrollment bridging. The period between Class 12 result and college enrollment is where many students fall through. They don't know how to apply, which college is the right choice, what documents to get ready, or how the admission process works. A two-week pre-enrollment orientation camp — covering admission processes, scholarship applications, hostel procedures, and basic academic expectations — substantially reduces early-semester dropout.

Mentorship by near-peers. Students who are two or three years ahead in the same college or the same course are the most credible and accessible mentors for first-generation students. A structured peer mentorship programme — where senior SC/ST students are trained and supported to mentor incoming first-generation students — is low-cost and high-impact. It works because the mentor shares the student's background and can speak to their specific experience.

Scholarship facilitation. An NGO caseworker who is embedded in a college or visits regularly can facilitate scholarship applications, track disbursement status, escalate delays, and help students whose applications have been rejected due to documentation issues. This is essentially paperwork support — but paperwork is what stands between many students and the money they are entitled to.

Hostel facilitation. Working with government hostel wardens to fill vacancies with eligible students who were not aware of the application process, and partnering with low-cost private hostels to negotiate group rates or subsidy arrangements for scholarship students.

For CSR: The Investment Case

First-generation SC/ST college graduates represent one of the highest-multiplier human investments available to CSR programmes in Odisha. A student who completes their degree — and goes on to a government job, a teaching position, a business, or any stable livelihood — becomes:

- The first member of their family in formal employment, changing the family's economic trajectory permanently.
- A model for siblings and younger community members, increasing the probability that the next generation also pursues higher education.
- An economic contributor to their village or district, particularly for those who enter government service in rural postings.

The investment required is not large relative to the outcome. Supplementing a scholarship with a monthly Rs 1,500 living stipend, providing academic mentoring, and facilitating competitive exam preparation are together a CSR programme of modest budget and substantial impact.

The best-designed CSR programmes in this space include: Tata Education Trust's scholarship and mentoring programmes, Reliance Foundation's scholarship programme for meritorious students from underprivileged backgrounds, and L&T's education CSR in tribal areas. Odisha-specific CSR from companies operating in the state — NALCO, NTPC, SAIL's Rourkela Steel Plant, JSW, L&T Construction — have a particularly compelling case for investing in the first-generation higher education space, given the communities whose labour and land their operations depend

on.

Schemes at a Glance

Scheme	Coverage	Nodal Department
Post-Matric Scholarship (Central) SC	Class 11 to PhD, income < Rs 2.5L	Social Justice & Empowerment
Post-Matric Scholarship (Central) ST	Class 11 to PhD	Tribal Affairs Ministry
National Fellowship SC (UGC)	MPhil/PhD for SC students	UGC / Education Ministry
National Fellowship ST (UGC)	MPhil/PhD for ST students	UGC / Education Ministry
SEED Scheme — Coaching Component	Free coaching for DNT/NT; applicable for similar communities	Social Justice & Empowerment
Odisha State Scholarship Portal	Multiple state schemes; Prerana, KALIA, Banishree	ST & SC Development Dept, Odisha
PM-JANMAN Education Component	PVTG student residential schooling and continuation	Tribal Affairs Ministry
Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS)	Pre-college residential education for tribal students	Tribal Affairs Ministry
National Means-cum-Merit Scholarship	Students from Class 9 upward, income < Rs 3.5L	Education Ministry
PM Yasasvi (OBC/EBC scholarship)	Class 9–12, OBC/EBC students	Social Justice & Empowerment

The Silence of the Dropout

When a student who was the first in their family to reach college drops out, the silence of that exit contains a specific kind of social loss. It is not just a student leaving a college. It is a family's belief that the system could work for them, quietly deflating. It is a younger sibling who watched their parent's joy at the admission and is now watching a return without a degree, and drawing their own conclusions about whether to try.

This is not inevitable. The dropout is not a product of the student's inability. It is a product of a system that was built by people who did not experience what first-generation higher education involves, and that has not yet been adequately adapted to serve the students who are now, for the first time in their family's history, trying to use it.

The adaptation is not expensive. It is detailed, sustained, and grounded in understanding what the student actually needs. That understanding is what NGO programmes in this space, properly funded by CSR, can provide.

Sources: Odisha State Scholarship Portal (scholarship.odisha.gov.in); Ministry of Social Justice — Post-Matric Scholarship scheme documentation; Ministry of Tribal Affairs — ST Post-Matric

Scholarship guidelines; UGC National Fellowship for SC/ST; UDISE + 2021–22 state data; NIPFP research on tribal education in Odisha; AIIMS Bhubaneswar — reproductive health study (2023); Odisha ST & SC Development Department guidelines; PM-JANMAN scheme framework.

This article is part of the JaBaSu Convergence Notes series. For scheme primers, compliance guides, and sector spotlights, visit jabasu.org/knowledge-commons.

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