

Eklavya India Foundation — The First Door Nobody Opens for You

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Education

Published: May 2026 · Last reviewed: —

There is a particular kind of educational failure that never shows up in dropout statistics: the student who stays in school, passes every exam, reaches the gate of a good university — and then stops. Not because she failed. Because no one she has ever met has been to university. Because the application portal is in English she cannot navigate. Because the scholarship she qualifies for requires forms she doesn't know exist. Because the distance between her village in Chandrapur and a campus in Pune is not measured in kilometres.

This is the problem Eklavya India Foundation was built to solve. Not access to school. Access to what happens after school — the knowledge, mentorship, and institutional navigation that children from educated families receive automatically, and that first-generation learners from Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Nomadic and De-Notified Tribe, and Other Backward Community backgrounds have historically had to discover entirely on their own.

Who They Are

Eklavya India Foundation was established in 2017. Their constituency is first-generation university students from historically marginalised communities — Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Nomadic and De-notified Tribes, and OBCs — representing over a billion people in India or twelve percent of the world's population.

Their model is deceptively simple in description: awareness, exposure, mentoring, coaching, and relatable role models. In practice, it is the systematic dismantling of every invisible barrier that sits between a first-generation student and a world-class education.

The Four-Day Workshop and What It Actually Does

Eklavya's flagship intervention is the PG Workshop — a three or four-day intensive that brings first-generation college students together to understand pathways they didn't know existed. Sumit Vilas Kakade, now pursuing an MSc in Urban Economics and Infrastructure Development at IHS Bangalore, describes what happened when he attended in 2024: it helped him understand higher education pathways, fellowships, and preparation for entrance exams and interviews — and most importantly, gave him the confidence to aim higher. "What once felt uncertain became a clear path," he says.

The distinction Eklavya is making is precise. The problem is not that students from marginalised communities lack ability. The problem is that they lack information — about fellowships that pay full fees, about prestigious programmes with no tuition, about preparation strategies for exams that their peers from urban middle-class families have been preparing for since Class IX. Eklavya compresses what might take years of costly network access into four days of structured immersion.

Puja Maske, now pursuing a Master's in Environment Policy Management at the University of Bristol, is the first woman from her village to travel to cities for education. She learned about Eklavya's foreign education programme through social media. At the bootcamp she met mentors studying at premier universities abroad who inspired and boosted her confidence. She now holds a scholarship to Bristol worth ten times her family's annual income.

This story — first woman in the village → Eklavya bootcamp → University of Bristol scholarship — is the model working as designed. The scholarship is the visible

outcome. The transformation is the invisible one: a young woman from a nomadic tribe community in Yavatmal who now mentors the next generation of girls in her community toward higher education.

The Numbers That Matter

Since 2017, Eklavya India Foundation has facilitated over USD 7 million in scholarships to students from marginalised communities — from governments, trusts, and global institutions. This is not Eklavya's money. It is money that existed in scholarship programmes and institutional fellowships, waiting to be claimed by students who never found it.

That gap — between scholarships that exist and students who access them — is Eklavya's specific focus. Their model creates the bridge. The USD 7 million figure represents claims successfully made, not programmes created. The leverage is enormous: Eklavya's relatively modest operating costs unlock scholarship value many multiples larger.

The Role Models Infrastructure

Eklavya's less visible but arguably most important innovation is the deliberate construction of a role model ecosystem. Their mentors are not professionals parachuted in from outside the community. They are alumni of the same kind of first-generation journey — SC/ST/NT-DNT/OBC students who reached top universities in India and abroad and who return to guide the cohort behind them.

This design choice reflects a specific understanding of how aspiration works. A girl from a shepherd family in Sonurli village in Chandrapur's Korapna taluka does not automatically believe she can attend a global university because someone with a PhD tells her it's possible. She believes it when someone who looks like her, who comes from a family that sounds like hers, who faced the same doubts and the same information gaps, tells her it's possible and shows her exactly how.

The mentor's lived experience is not an accessory to the programme. It is the programme's most essential component.

Why This Matters for Odisha

Odisha has 62 Scheduled Tribe communities. It has significant SC and OBC populations across all 30 districts. It has thousands of students each year who clear board examinations and JEE mains and NEET — and who then collide with the invisible barriers that Eklavya was built to dismantle.

The Government of India's EMRS (Eklavya Model Residential Schools) programme — now reaching 128,538 tribal students across 405 operational schools — provides residential secondary education. Approximately 600 EMRS students cracked IIT-JEE and NEET in 2024. These are students who are academically competitive. What they need, after EMRS, is exactly what Eklavya India Foundation provides: the pathway guidance and mentorship that converts academic ability into institutional access.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: eklavyaindia.org | **For partnerships and programme expansion:** contact via website

Key evidence:

- Eklavya India Foundation programme documentation and student testimonials — eklavyaindia.org
- EMRS data: Ministry of Tribal Affairs, PIB 2024 — 405 operational schools, 128,538 students
- IMPRI Analysis: Eklavya Model Residential Schools, February 2026 — impriindia.com

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