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First-generation lawyers: how to build a career without connections

Many of India's law students are the first in their families to enter the profession. Practical advice on finding mentors, work and confidence.

The legal profession in India has long had a reputation for running in families. That is changing. A large share of today's law students are the first in their families to enter the profession. They arrive with ability and determination, and without the chamber, the clients and the advice that others inherit.

The real obstacles

- No senior at home to explain how courts and offices work.
- Internships and first jobs often filled through personal reference.
- Low or no pay in the first years of litigation.
- English, the language of the higher courts, may be a second or third language.
- Living costs in a city away from home.
- A quiet sense of not belonging.

What you can do

Master the basics. Know procedure, evidence and drafting better than your peers. Competence is the one advantage nobody can deny you.

Write well. Read good judgments daily and practise plain, accurate writing. Publish short notes and case comments.

Intern widely, from the first year. District courts, legal aid and small offices welcome willing students.

Find mentors on purpose. Teachers, alumni, lawyers you interned with, speakers at seminars. Ask specific questions and respect their time.

Use the court. Sit in courtrooms and watch good advocates. It is free.

Work on language steadily. Fluency comes with reading and practice. Skill in an Indian language is an asset in trial courts.

Consider a salaried start. A firm, a company or a legal aid body can provide income and training before independent practice.

Use institutional routes. Judicial service examinations, law clerkships, public prosecutor posts and legal aid panels are open by merit.

Build a reputation for reliability. Be the junior who is prepared and on time.

What the profession owes you

- Fair stipends, so that the early years are survivable.
- Open, advertised internships and recruitment.
- Mentoring programmes that reach beyond the metros.
- Scholarships for those who need them.
- Respect.

What firms gain

First-generation lawyers bring persistence, an understanding of ordinary clients and loyalty to those who gave them a start. Firms that recruit only from familiar circles overlook much of the country's talent.

A role for the industry

The Association of Indian Law Firms counts the training of young lawyers and scholarships among its initiatives, so that a student's start in the profession depends on ability and effort.

A last word

Many of India's most respected judges and advocates were the first lawyers in their families. The profession remembers those who earn their place. Begin where you are, and keep going.

Association of Indian Law Firms · November 2026
Read online: https://indianlawfirmsassociation.com/first-generation-lawyers-india-guide/

Keywords: first generation lawyers India, law career without connections, young lawyers India, starting legal practice
Published by the Association of Indian Law Firms. General information only; not legal advice.