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Economy and Politics **RSS**

Newest in the story of developmental economics

J-PAL carries out randomized studies to test policies that could improve public health education, governance

Anupama Chandrasekaran

Chennai: Neelima Khetan, 48, and Angela Ambroz, 26, come from opposite sides of the globe and had never met each other until that evening in Patna. Inside a dimly lit banquet hall at a four-star hotel in the Bihar capital, they are both part of a chattering group of civil servants, social workers, executives from donor organizations and academicians from prestigious UK and US varsities.

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Crucial support: (from left) Rachel Glennerster, Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo of J-PAL use randomized studies to identify and test policies that carries out randomized studies could improve living conditions. A.P. Dube / Mint

Despite never encountering each other, the two are key characters in the newest story in developmental economics —penned by Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo and Rachel Glennerster, directors of the seven-year-old Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, or J-PAL.

Affiliated with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, or MIT, the lab

J-PAL is using the method to ladder down the ivory tower of developmental economics and offer groundbreaking solutions to issues such as increasing teacher attendance in schools and boosting immunization levels among rural children.

"Initially, when we were out there, people thought of us as a wacky organization with wacky ideas and, often, we got treated exactly as such," Banerjee told *Mint* at a Patna dinner, a day ahead of J-PAL's first conference in India to highlight its work and partnerships.

Yet, J-PAL's work has perked the interest of economists who place the focus of development projects on evaluating the process by which they are carried out. An example is conducting checks to see if free textbooks offered by the government are reaching the students or not, rather than confirm if the textbooks are key to higher test scores.

Khetan's Seva Mandir, which focuses on education, health and women's empowerment in rural Rajasthan, was the first non-governmental organization (NGO) that Banerjee, a Harvard-educated economist and famed theorist, started working with in 1996.

Banerjee's first task: evaluating the impact of an additional teacher in Seva Mandir's single-teacher schools. Contrary to expectations, the study revealed no significant

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improvement in student performance on increasing the teacher count. So the NGO rolled back its programme.

This data-intensive experiment, conducted more than a decade ago, formed the basis of further efforts by Banerjee and Duflo, his star student from MIT.

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