



Students Today, Leaders Tomorrow: Building India's Next Generation of Evaluators

Stories of Change
India



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When R. Sai Shiva Jayanth began his PhD, he did not set out to shape national policy. As a fourth-year doctoral student at the Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode, he was studying how smartphones were changing the lives of Indian farmers when he realized that his methodological toolkit was not strong enough to support the conclusions he hoped to draw.

“Things were not as clear as I wanted them to be,” he recalled. *“I needed to learn more.”* That realization marked the beginning of a journey that would later extend far beyond academia.

Through the [Research for Impact Fellowship](#) (RFI), Jayanth went on to contribute directly to shaping India's National Monitoring and Evaluation Policy Framework—illustrating how investment in early-career researchers can strengthen evaluation systems and influence public decision-making at scale.

RFI was designed by the [Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results](#)

[for South Asia](#) (CLEAR-SA), a core implementing partner of the [Global Evaluation Initiative](#) (GEI), and its host institution, [J-PAL South Asia](#). The Fellowship is part of GEI's broader effort to strengthen national evaluation systems by building local researcher capacity and a pipeline of scholars who can generate rigorous, policy-relevant evidence grounded in local realities.

Bridging a Critical Gap in India's Evidence Ecosystem

India's universities produce hundreds of thousands of PhD graduates each year, yet few receive formal training in stringent monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Doctoral candidates in the social sciences often face limited funding, uneven exposure to global research practice, and scarce opportunities for mentorship. Research support remains concentrated in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, leaving many social-science researchers without the institutional scaffolding needed to connect scholarships with public decision-making.

For India to strengthen its national and subnational evaluation systems, it needs a cadre of skilled evaluators able to generate reliable, policy-relevant evidence grounded in local realities. Recognizing this gap, CLEAR–SA launched RFI in 2018 to equip PhD students with the theoretical, practical, and ethical foundations of impact evaluation—helping bridge the divide between the demand for evidence-informed policy and the capacity to produce it.

RFI at a glance

Since 2018, 578 PhD students from universities across India have participated in the [Research for Impact Fellowship](#). Seventy-six Fellows have received scholarships totaling more than INR 600,000 (about US\$7,000), helping reduce financial barriers to high-quality evaluation training. Half of all Fellows are women, and participants come from disciplines including economics, public administration, political science, and development studies. Most continue in academia or are completing their doctoral studies, contributing to a growing body of evaluation research grounded in Indian policy contexts.

Laying Strong Technical Foundations

Doctoral training shapes future researchers, policy advisers, and academics—yet few programs in India integrate practical evaluation methods into their curricula. RFI focuses on early-career scholars because experiences during PhD studies strongly influence professional aspirations and confidence.

CLEAR–SA offers scholarships to shortlisted applicants for the [MITx course *Designing and Running Randomized Evaluations*](#), which introduces learners to impact evaluation design, causal inference, and data-driven decision-making. Fellows who complete the 14-week online module and pass the proctored exam advance to a second stage of in-person capacity building. There, they receive hands-on training from CLEAR–SA experts, drawing on J-PAL’s flagship courses such as [Evaluating Social Programs](#) and [Measurement and Survey Design](#).

“RFI influenced the direction of my research,” said Shreya, a 2022 Fellow. *“I am now conducting a randomized controlled trial with my supervisor and have the confidence to take ownership of complex research projects.”*

For Yatin, a member of the inaugural 2018 cohort, the Fellowship opened doors he had not anticipated. “Attending RFI training in Delhi allowed me to interact in person with officials at the Development Monitoring and Evaluation Office (DMEO), NITI Aayog for the first time and initiate a collaboration with them,” he said. That connection proved consequential. Yatin went on to work closely with DMEO to design a study on evaluation capacities in India’s State Evaluation Offices. His research on the history of India’s evaluation system was cited in drafts of the National Monitoring and Evaluation Policy Framework, and he became the only member outside DMEO to serve on the core drafting group for that framework.

Learning by Doing: From the Desk to the Field

In its second stage, RFI places Fellows on ongoing J-PAL South Asia research projects for a minimum of two months, exposing them to each phase of an evaluation—from

questionnaire design and field protocols to data collection and quality assurance — across sectors such as education, labor, environment, and health.

For Shraddha, a 2023 Fellow, the experience was transformative. *“The most valuable part was seeing how primary research actually happens — how many things you have to consider,”* she said. *“Even designing a questionnaire requires a deep understanding of the community you’re studying. Otherwise, small gaps between your assumptions and reality can completely change your results.”*

Mentorship, Networks, and Collaboration

RFI embeds mentorship and peer learning throughout the Fellowship, connecting participants with CLEAR–SA staff, J-PAL researchers, and one another through virtual and in-person engagement. These interactions help early-career scholars situate their work within wider research and policy conversations.

“When I met people from other colleges, I realized their work was often more defined, nuanced, and specific than mine,” Yatin reflected. *“I understood that I needed to expand my network and learn from what was happening beyond my own institute.”*

Many Fellows continue collaborating with principal investigators, co-authoring research, and participating in J-PAL events—forming an informal but increasingly influential community of practice for India’s emerging evaluators.

A New Generation Shaping India’s Evidence Landscape

The change that RFI is driving is generational—and its effects are already extending beyond academia. Yatin’s

trajectory illustrates how early exposure to rigorous evaluation and professional networks can open pathways into India’s national evaluation architecture. What began as a short training experience evolved into sustained collaboration with DMEO and NITI Aayog, contributions to national research on evaluation capacity, and direct involvement in drafting India’s National Monitoring and Evaluation Policy Framework.

Jayanth’s path has taken a different but equally significant direction. Now an Assistant Professor of Public Policy at the [Indian Institute of Management Visakhapatnam](#), he teaches a course on field experiments and randomized evaluations to PhD students, drawing directly on J-PAL resources and his own RFI experience. The course attracts students from across management disciplines, well beyond economics and public policy. His research on whether text messages can encourage farmers to adopt smartphones in agriculture has been cited on the World Bank’s [Development Impact blog](#).

“I think RFI is a very novel initiative because it empowers fresh PhDs or people early in their careers,” said Jayanth. *“It gave me the clarity and confidence to turn ideas into evidence.”*

Each Fellow who goes on to teach, advise, or conduct rigorous research extends the impact of the Research for Impact Fellowship beyond any single institution. Together, they form a growing pipeline of evaluators embedding evidence-informed thinking across India’s research and policy communities—helping ensure that evaluation capacity is locally rooted, professionally sustained, and integral to how public programs are designed and improved.