Palaash Bhargava

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Education

Ph.D in Economics, Columbia University 2019 – 2025

M.A in Economics, Delhi School of Economics 2014 – 2016

B.A. (Honors) in Economics, Kirori Mal College, University of Delhi 2011 – 2014

Research Fields

Applied Microeconomics (Development and Labour), Economics of Education, Social Networks

Academic Employment

Senior Research Fellow, Max Planck Insitute for Research on Collective Goods 2026 –

Postdoctoral Scholar, Department of Economics, University of Chicago 2025 – 2026

Visiting Postdoctoral Scholar, Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab, University of Chicago 2025 – 2026

Assistant Instructor of Economics, New York University Abu Dhabi 2017 – 2019

Assistant Instructor of Mathematics, New York University Shanghai 2018

Research

Publications

A Cross-verified Database of Notable People (3500 BC - 2018 AD), Nature Sci Data, June 9; 9(1):290
(with Morgane Laouenan, Olivier Gergaud, Jean-Benoît Eyméoud, Guillaume Plique and Etienne Wasmer)

Coverage: DailyMail UK, NY Post, Metro UK, +175 others

Altmetric score: 1301, Article Access count: 387,000

Abstract: A new strand of literature aims at building the most comprehensive and accurate database of notable individuals. We collect a massive amount of data from various editions of Wikipedia and Wikidata. Using deduplication techniques over these partially overlapping sources, we cross-verify each retrieved information. For some variables, Wikipedia adds 15% more information when missing in Wikidata. We find very few errors in the part of the database that contains the most documented individuals but nontrivial error rates in the bottom of the notability distribution, due to sparse information and classification errors or ambiguity. Our strategy results in a cross-verified database of 2.29 million individuals (an elite of 1/43,000 of human being having ever lived), including a third who are not present in the English edition of Wikipedia. Data collection is driven by specific social science questions on gender, economic growth, urban and cultural development. We document an Anglo-Saxon bias present in the English edition of Wikipedia, and document when it matters and when not.

Working Papers

Popularity, Social Networks and Student Outcomes: Trade-offs in Resolving Social Isolation through Deskmate Assignments

Coverage: WorldBank Development Impact Blog

Abstract: Social connections matter for educational, non-cognitive and long run labour market outcomes. Using a sample of 12,842 students from India, I first show that relatively isolated students face a host of socio-emotional and academic disadvantages. I then implement a two-tier randomized deskmate matching intervention, aimed at improving the outcomes of these isolated students. The results reveal a notable trade-off. Within the classroom, matching isolated students with each other improves their social connections with peers, interactions with teachers and social / non-cognitive skills. However, at the classroom level, this comes at the cost of broader classroom level negative externalities. Specifically, deskmate plans which pair a majority of isolated students with the most popular deskmates improve the overall social integration and academic performance of isolated students, but have no impact on their social and non-cognitive skills. To explain these patterns, I build a model of network formation in which returns to social effort are shaped by both endogenously determined peer interactions and independent sociological mechanisms such as negative social comparisons and proximity effects. Consistent with the empirical findings, the model shows that outcomes for isolated students, in equilibrium, depend on both their immediate deskmate and the overall composition of matches—where the negative externalities of matching more isolated students with each other emerge after a particular threshold. Optimal matching strategies must therefore weigh direct versus group-level impacts, which may move in opposite directions, giving rise to equity-efficiency trade-offs.

A Family Affair: The Effects of College on Parent and Student Finances *(with Sandra Black, Jeff Denning, Robert Fairlie and Oded Gurantz)*

Abstract: Paying for college is often a family affair, with both parents and students contributing. We study the effects of college on family finances using administrative data on the universe of federal aid applicants in California linked to credit records. We provide the first comprehensive analysis of how both students and their parents use debt with college attendance and how prices affect those decisions. We start by using an event-study framework to explore how parents' use of debt and credit outcomes change after their child first submits a federal aid application for college enrollment. While total debt does not change, higher-income parents shift balances from other debt to educational loans. We find that lower-income parents take out more education loans, experience less delinquency on non-educational debt, and see their credit scores rise. We then use discontinuities in eligibility for generous financial aid to test how an exogenous change in the price of college affects parental debt and financial health. We find that parents finance increases in the price of college through educational loans as well as home equity loans. Higher prices increase parental delinquency on debt. The findings highlight an important channel by which college and its rising cost may spill over into the broader financial health of families and economy.

Ancestral Origins of Attention to Environmental Issues *(with César Barilla)*

Abstract: How does the climatic experience of previous generations affect today's attention to environmental questions? Using self-reported beliefs and environmental themes in folklore, we show empirically that the realized intensity of deviations from typical climate conditions in ancestral generations influences how much descendants care about the environment. The effect exhibits a U-shape where more stable and more unstable ancestral climates lead to higher attention today, with a dip for intermediate realizations. We propose a theoretical framework where the value of costly attention to environmental conditions depends on the perceived stability of the environment, prior beliefs about which are shaped through cultural transmission by the experience of ethnic ancestors. The U-shape is rationalized by a double purpose of learning about the environment: optimal utilization of typical conditions and protection against extreme events.

Homophily of Behavioral Traits is Strong in Social Networks, but Depends on Demographics and Increases Segregation *(with Daniel Chen, Matthias Sutter and Camille Terrier)*

Reject and resubmit, Nature Communications

Abstract: Social networks are a key factor for success in life, but they are also strongly segmented by gender, ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics. We present novel evidence on an understudied source of homophily:

behavioral traits (such as prosociality, risk aversion, or cooperation). Using unique data from incentivized experiments with more than 3,000 French high-school students, we find high levels of homophily across all behavioral traits that we study. Notably, the extent of homophily depends on demographic similarities, particularly gender. As a result, the demographic-based segregation of networks is furtheramplified by a behavioral-based segregation, which exacerbates the differences related to gender or socio-economic status. We discuss policy implications of this exacerbation.

Learning from Peers, at Scale: Experimental Evidence from a Peer Tutoring Intervention in Bihar *(with Dashleen Kaur, Nikhil Kumar, Madhavi Jha and Tarang Tripathi)*

(Phase 2 On Field)

Abstract: Altering classroom environments and leveraging peer networks show promise as some of the most cost-effective interventions targeting inputs in the education production function. Yet, the extent to which findings from prior small-scale studies generalize to typical education systems remains unclear. We evaluate this question through a peer tutoring intervention in government primary schools in Bhagalpur, Bihar, conducted with minimal external support and embedded within the noisy infrastructure characteristic of developing-country settings. The program involved 14,077 students in grades 3–5 across 176 schools, where high-performing students led daily small-group remedial math sessions. We find significant gains in math proficiency and reductions in math anxiety among learners. Classroom social networks became tighter and leaders became more central, suggesting broader effects on the learning environment. These results demonstrate that structured peer tutoring can be both effective and scalable, offering a viable pathway to improving foundational learning at scale in low-resource contexts.

Selected Works in Progress

Trajectories of notable individuals: A cross verified database of locations *(with Minda Belete, Morgane Laouenan, Olivier Gergaud and Etienne Wasmer)*

(Final Data Verification in Process)

Historical elite social networks and the escape from the Malthusian trap

(Data Construction in Process)

Percolation of Wildfire related Credit Shocks through Family Networks *(with Shreya Chandra)*

(Data Construction in Process)

TeachAIde – Improving teacher agency and student outcomes through hypercontextualized generative AI chatbots *(with Tushar Kundu, Chandraditya Raj and Tarang Tripathi)*

(Second Round of Pilot and Scoping Ongoing)

Increasing Parent and Teacher Investments to Improve Student Outcomes - A Kingdom wide reform in Saudi Arabia *(with Faisal Kattan, John List and Karen Ye)*

(Pilot and Scoping Ongoing)

Improving Organ Donation rates in Saudi Arabia using Religious Messaging and Simplified Choice Architecture *(with Faisal Kattan, John List and Mike Price)*

(Pilot and Scoping Ongoing)

Can AI reduce Obesity Rates in Saudi Arabia using just In-time Personalized Nudges trained on High Frequency Calorie Diaries? *(with Faisal Kattan, John List, Vitor Melo and Mike Price)*

(Pilot and Scoping Ongoing)

Using Family, Network and Individual nudges to reduce Social Media Use amongst Adolescents and Improve Mental Health Outcomes *(with Faisal Kattan, John List, Vitor Melo and Lena Song)*

(Pilot and Scoping Ongoing)

Awards and Honors

Dissertation Fellowship, Columbia University 2024 – 2025

Dean's Fellowship, Columbia University 2019 – 2024

PER Economics Department Fellowship, Columbia University 2019 – 2024

PER Summer Research Fellowship, Columbia University 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024

California Policy Lab, Graduate Fellowship *(with Shreya Chandra)* 2023

Winner, Vickrey Award for the best 3rd year paper, Columbia University 2022

Runners up, Wueller Teaching Award for PhD courses, Columbia University 2021

Runners up, Harriss Award for the best 2nd year paper, Columbia University 2021

EXIM Bank Scholarship, Delhi School of Economics 2015 – 2016

Sri Bodhiswar Rai Scholarship, Delhi School of Economics 2014 – 2015

Research Grants

Program for Economic Research at Columbia University Experimental Grant ($20,700) 2022-2024

The Weiss Fund at University of Chicago ($25,325) 2023-2026

Center for Development and Economic Policy, Columbia University ($10,000) 2023-2026

Center for Effective Global Action - PEP Initiative ($9,200 *in conjunction with InvolveEDU*) 2024

The Agency Fund ($350,000 *in conjunction with InvolveEDU*) 2024-2026

Schmidt Sciences - *Proposal Development Grant* ($10,000) 2025

Other Employment

Research Director and Trustee, Aawaaz Foundation 2025 –

Analyst, Investment Banking Division, Nomura Services Pvt. Ltd. 2016 – 2017

Referee Service

Journal of Political Economy, JPE Microeconomics, AER Insights, Economic Journal, Journal of Public Economics, Economics of Education Review, Economic Modelling

Teaching Experience

Economic Growth and Development, Instructor (Undergraduate level), Columbia University 2022, 2023

PhD Math Camp Primary Instructor, Department of Economics, Columbia University 2020, 2021

Teaching Assistant, Department of Economics, Columbia University 2022 – 2023

Intermediate Microeconomics (Undergraduate level), Spring 2023; Math Methods (Graduate level), Fall 2020

Recitation and Lab Instructor (Undergraduate level), NYU Abu Dhabi 2017 – 2019

Markets, Spring 2019; 5000 Years of Notable lives, Fall 2018; Economic Dynamics, Fall 2018; Intermediate Micro-Economics, Fall 2017, Spring 2018; Calculus with Applications in Economics, Fall 2017, Spring 2018, Summer 2018, Fall 2018, Spring 2019, Summer 2019

Recitation Instructor (Undergraduate level), NYU Shanghai 2018

Integral Calculus, January 2018

Conferences and Seminars (*) Scheduled

2025: ISI Winter School*, Development Innovation Lab (UChicago)*, CEPR Labour Symposium*, NEUDC*, Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab (UChicago), MPI-NHH FAIR Workshop, Advances in Field Experiments, World Congress of the Econometric Society, Junior Applied Microeconomics Workshop (University of Milan), Workshop on Networks and Development, AEFP Education Working Group, MZW Text as Data Workshop, Network Science and Economics Conference (Stanford), Lakes Development Workshop, Midwest International Economic Development Consortium, Danish Historical Political Economy Workshop, Peking HSBC Business School, JILAEE (U Chicago + UCEMA), Max Planck Institute, INSEAD Singapore, Public University of Navarre, New Economic School, Ohio State University, NYU Abu Dhabi

2024: North East Universities Development Consortium (NEUDC), Southern Economic Association (SEA) Annual Meeting, Interdisciplinary PhD Workshop in Sustainable Development (Columbia University)

2023: NBER Innovation Research Bootcamp

2022: Network Science in Management (IIM Ahmedabad), Young Scholars Matchmaking Workshop (CEPR - PEDL and NYU Abu Dhabi)

2021 and before: Regional and Urban Economics Workshop - "Urban Economics and History" (Paris School of Economics), Development Graduate Summer School (Paris School of Economics), The Frontiers of Network Science (NYU Abu Dhabi), 10^{th} South Asian Economics' Students' Meet (Lahore University of Management Sciences)

Languages known

English (Fluent), Hindi (Native), Oriya (Intermediate), French (Beginner)

Software

Python, STATA, R, MATLAB, Mathematica, LaTeX, SQL

References

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