

**Letter of Recommendation: A. Nilesh Fernando**

November 24, 2014

Dear Colleague,

I am delighted to write in support of A. Nilesh Fernando for a faculty position at your institution. Nilesh is an applied micro-economist who has interests in development, labor and agriculture/resource economics. I have been advising Nilesh for the past few years and recommend him strongly to all economics departments (outside of the top five), public policy and business schools. Nilesh is a creative, smart, motivated, well-trained, and thoughtful scholar who would make a great colleague.

Nilesh has been quite prolific in graduate school with around ten ongoing projects several of which are in draft form. In my letter I will describe his main projects, starting with his job market paper, including some of the ongoing projects since they will provide a sense of Nilesh's portfolio in the coming years.

Nilesh's job market paper, *Shackled to the Soil: The Long-Term Effects of Inherited Land on Labor Mobility and Consumption*, is a very nice piece of work that takes on two very important questions – the impact of (inherited land) assets on subsequent welfare and understanding occupational and physical mobility in rural developing country settings. The obvious challenge in addressing these questions is an empirical one. Nilesh uses (Hindu) inheritance laws (only sons inherit land) to construct an instrument (number of male siblings conditional on sibling size). While one may be concerned that sex composition is endogenous, Nilesh does a careful job of showing that during the period of his study, sex selective abortion was not prevalent in India and there appears to be no difference between households (of a given family size) that vary in the sex-composition of their children. Nilesh then examines the long term impact of inheriting land and documents that while the asset receipt does indeed raise consumption, it also makes it more likely that the individual stays in agriculture and in rural areas. He argues that this is because individuals that inherit land – in the presence of labor and land market frictions, and social obligations – are "tied" to land and this may prevent longer term mobility and attenuate the effect of receiving the asset. More starkly, Nilesh then goes on to document cases where this tie in is quite severe – where land markets are particularly poor or cultural restrictions very binding (first born sons) - such that despite inheriting an asset, the individual has strictly lower consumption (than if they had not inherited land). These results are important in that they raise a cautionary note about how one views assets in emerging economies and underlies the importance of complementary reforms in land and labor markets that can allow the poor to fully leverage their resources. In ongoing work, *Political Participation and Wealth: Evidence from Rural India* Nilesh is collaborating with two fellow students to build upon his job market paper

and examine the impact of inherited land on political participation and how this varies based on whether there are political reservations for the landless.

Nilesh also has a series of papers with Shawn Cole (HBS) that build on his interest in agriculture. In *"Value of Advice: Evidence from Mobile Phone-Based Agricultural Extension"*, Nilesh and Shawn examine the extent to which agricultural productivity is lower due to poorly-informed decision making (partly due to mixed incentives of agricultural agents/inputs providers in selling their own services and products) and management practices of the individual farmers. They look at the impact of (experimentally) introducing a novel mobile-phone based agricultural consulting service to farmers in India (think an "agricultural help line"). The results are impressive. Not only do they find substantial demand for the services, (treated) farmers change their input decisions and as a result yields increase from 10 to 28%. This paper is a very nice piece of work on an important topic and touches on a range of themes from innovation and agricultural productivity to managerial capital and information technology. I expect it to publish in a top general interest journal. Nilesh also has two follow-ups to this paper with Shawn and other coauthors. In ongoing work (*"Learning or Herding? Testing Between Theories of Technology Adoption with a Cluster Randomized Experiment"*) with Shawn and Hee Kwon Seo (Chicago GSB), they are extending the work to better capture spillover effects and complementarities between training and information provision and distinguish between different underlying mechanisms that lead to the observed changes in their first paper. They also have a methodological piece (*"Experiences from Mobile Phone-Based Data Collection: Evidence from a Randomized Experiment"* with Shawn and Laura Litvine, UCL) that shows phone based surveying compares quite favorably in terms of sample attrition and response bias as compared to (more costly) in-person interviewing.

Nilesh also has some related projects with collaborators that are in their preliminary/baseline stages. In *"Contract Farming among Marginal Farmers: A randomized evaluation of RUDI Multi-trade Company"*, Nilesh is working with fellow graduate students at MIT in order to better understand whether agency issues can contribute farmers not producing higher quality. Specially, they are introducing advance purchase agreements that pre-specify quality to a randomly selected set of farmers and intend to compare this to investment and production decisions under business as usual (i.e. where middle-men pay farmers prices that are below spot market and not quality graded). In *"Mental Health and Poverty: Farmer Suicides in post-Green Revolution India"*, Nilesh is working with Supreet Kaur (Colombia) to examine a health channel behind the large and growing problem of farmer suicides in India. They conjecture that these tragedies may be the cause of (negative) health externalities as a result of intensive usage of chemical fertilizers and seek evidence in the field for the epidemiological literature that points to such mechanisms.

In addition to these papers, Nilesh is broadly interested in labor market issues. In a paper with a fellow graduate student, *"Can Diversity Reduce Implicit Bias? Evidence from the Composition of Umpiring Panels in Cricket Matches"*, they examine bias in real-time sports decision-making. Having compiled data on all international cricket matches played over the last 130 years, the paper finds that while discretionary decisions are affected by the umpire being from your home country, the same is not true of non-discretionary decisions suggesting there is an element of bias here. Their estimated effects are substantial - the bias is four times as large when the visiting team is from a different country and race and can lead to a 10% difference in winning probability. In ongoing work (*Better Nouveau than not Riche at all: Evidence on the Returns to Status Signaling*), Nilesh is also exploring whether conspicuous consumption can act as credible signal for the poor in India to allow them better access to formal employment networks. Finally, Nilesh is starting work on a project that looks at the longer term impact of early life adversity

whereby an child may have to become a (primary) bread-winner in the field. While negative in the short-run, the long-run implications of these shocks are less clear.

Nilesh is likely going to be a prolific scholar with important work that is conceptually well motivated and empirically solid (drawing on a range of techniques). He is also an incredibly nice person who is sincere in his interests and pursues them with an admirable dedication. While soft-spoken, Nilesh is also a good teacher and I have seen him interact well with students both at the graduate and executive education levels. I expect to see Nilesh do well and look forward to having him as a colleague. If you have any further questions please do not hesitate to email or call me directly.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Asim Ijaz Khwaja'. The signature is stylized and cursive, with the first name 'Asim' written in a smaller font to the left of the main signature.

Asim Ijaz Khwaja