This dissertation evaluates the role of historical agrarian institutions in wage bargaining between large landowners and landless workers in the Indian countryside. The colonial land revenue system in India led to severe economic inequality and concentration of political power in certain parts of the country and this power imbalance continues to be relevant even seven decades after the colonial system was officially abolished. My research shows that these historic institutions determine the success of public employment programs in changing labor market outcomes in rural India.

1 Is India’s Employment Guarantee Program Successfully Challenging Her Historical Inequalities?

India’s largest public employment program, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), has been her flagship rural poverty alleviation program since 2006. By providing 100 days of guaranteed employment to every rural household, it aims to challenge the hegemony of the landed elite as major employers in the countryside and raise market wages which have long been depressed. This paper analyzes the impact of NREGA on rural wages, and how it is conditioned and complicated by historical inequalities in agricultural landownership which have persisted since the colonial period. I find that in the lean season of agriculture, the program is highly successful in raising wages by generating more public employment in districts not characterized by historically high levels of socio-economic inequality. In these districts, the increase in public employment is attributable in part to women’s participation in the program. High inequality in landownership adversely impacts the bargaining power of workers and the enforcement of their entitlements under the program. In districts where land is concentrated in the hands of few large landowners, the programs impact on wages and employment is greatly attenuated compared to those that have a more equitable land distribution. Further, I estimate the differences in access to NREGA employment for different social groups and find that marginalized social groups like Scheduled Castes (SC), Other Backward Castes (OBC) and women are at a greater disadvantage in landlord districts. In districts where economic and political power are concentrated in the lands of large landowners, they may benefit from limiting the supply of public employment to prevent it from becoming a credible alternative to private employment. I find that landlord districts are characterized by higher excess demand for participation in NREGA. The erratic and inadequate nature of public employment generation is insufficient to dent the wage-setting power of landlords and consequently the impact of NREGA on the bargaining power of workers is stymied in these districts.

2 Understanding the Role of Tied-labor Contracts in Wage Negotiations post-NREGA: Evidence from Uttar Pradesh

There is considerable district and block level variation in the implementation of NREGA. Traditionally factors like poor administrative capacity, complex procedural requirements and corruption are cited as reasons for poor implementation of the scheme in the poorest regions of the country. However, the differences in bargaining power of different social groups, based on landownership, caste and gender are also crucial determinants in the wage-setting process. Interlinked factor markets and
the ensuing tied-labor contracts create conditions whereby some groups may not be able to leverage NREGA employment to negotiate a higher wage in the private labor market. NREGA cannot have a transformative impact on rural labor markets if local elite continue to exert their economic and political power to keep wages depressed using their wage-setting power. This paper aims to test this hypothesis using primary data collected from a random sample of 950 NREGA households from the Halia Block of Mirzapur district in eastern Uttar Pradesh. This is one of the poorest regions of the country and is historically known to have a high prevalence of tied-wage contracts. I employ the differences-in-difference framework to assess the impact of NREGA on private wages for those engaged in some form of labor tying arrangement using non-experimental matching on observables. I find that marginalized communities who own little arable land and depend upon their employers for periodic loans are unable to bargain for a higher market wage from employers even when they work for a similar number of days in NREGA.

## 3 Farmer Suicides in India: Trends, Patterns and Causes (with Deepankar Basu and Debarshi Das)

Between 1995 and 2014, more than 300,000 farmers and agricultural laborers committed suicide in India. In this paper, we use the corrected estimates of farmer suicides normalized by the population of farmers, or suicide mortality ratio (SMR) and observe an important fact about the suicides trend. The SMR for India increased between 1995 and 2004, and has declined since then. The main conclusion that emerges from an analysis of national-level data is that the problem of farmer suicides is not an all-India phenomenon. Hence, we turn to an analysis of state-level patterns. While Kerala and Maharashtra are the worst affected states, the other states that have SMR above one for male farmers include Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. Additionally, several other states have been witnessing a rising trend of farmer suicides. Thus, it is best to analyze the phenomenon of farmer suicides as affecting these states, and not as a countrywide phenomenon, taking account of state-specific factors like cropping patterns, the extent of irrigation, accessibility of rural credit from formal institutions and the provisions of crop insurance.