

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION<sup>Review</sup>

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## *Books*

### **Making Economic Sense of Religion**

By Kavita N. Ramdas

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us the ability to treat, with rigor, the question of institutional design at different levels, rather than assuming that one economic model holds the solution to all our problems. Answering the hard questions, about not just power, scale, and strategy, but also about how systems—and not just projects—relate to the underlying mobilizing and organizing force of culture and politics, is essential to the political project of advancing a serious shared vision of a transformed economy.

Despite Schneider's showcasing of diverse cooperative projects, his account ultimately

fails to reckon with the strategies for change appropriate for the world we *have* (rather than for the world we *want*). Is the platform cooperative and its promise of a business model for the 21st century the seed of an answer to our systemic issues? Or is it a small marginal phenomenon tolerated in the cracks of the current system but incapable of changing its underlying logic? The most frustrating moments of *Everything* are these—the ones where Schneider meets the hardest questions and falls back on rhetorical equivocation to avoid answering them. ■

## Making Economic Sense of Religion

Sriya Iyer reveals how faith has driven India's increasingly powerful economy.

REVIEW BY KAVITA N. RAMDAS

**W**hat does religion have to do with economics, and vice versa? While these may seem disparate concerns, their deep historical connection drives Sriya Iyer's inquiry in *The Economics of Religion in India*, which endeavors to expand the study of religion through economic analysis and delves into the changing demographics of India's religious pluralism in relation to its global economic ascent.

The colonizing powers of Europe incorporated the Christian church's "civilizing mission" to justify the capture of lands that did not belong to them, the subjugation and oppression of people whose cultures and languages were foreign to them, and the exploitation of resources to fatten their coffers. An almighty sanction was invoked by the conquerors to legitimize the genocide of indigenous peoples across the New World; promote slavery in the United States, the Americas, and around the globe; and motivate the Opium Wars, which the British East India Company used to seize Chinese markets while forcing

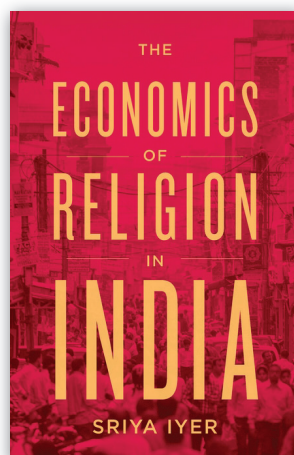
Indian peasants to grow poppies instead of life-sustaining rice or vegetables.

Iyer wrote the book to "encourage economists to bring their insights and methods to bear on the study of religion," which she believes would be beneficial for developing countries, such as India, that are character-

ized by their religious pluralism. Iyer, for example, uses statistical analyses of newspaper reporting on what India refers to as "communal riots"—conflicts between two different religious communities that lead to life and property loss and damage—in order to reveal their causes. She finds a strong correlation between such turmoil and state-election years; these riots are instigated by political parties hoping to rile up the Hindu base and target Muslims, who are concentrated in urban areas. These findings are further interrogated in Iyer's unique survey of religious organizations in seven of India's 29 states seeking to understand better how different religious communities have responded to economic shifts as India transformed its economy. The survey also allows her to test her hypothesis that religions increase their provision of services as a rational response to perceived economic inequality and competition. The fascinating responses to the questions explain how rapid economic liberalization in India after 1991 compelled religious organizations of every stripe to offer increased levels of services to address growing inequality.

Iyer points to economic data to discredit the Hindu Nationalists' scare tactics about Muslims having too many children and thereby fundamentally changing India's demographics. She shows that high fertility rates are closely correlated with low education and income levels rather than with religious beliefs. The impressive work of the 2007 Rajinder Sachar Committee, which reported on the impoverished living conditions of Muslims in India, clarifies the many disadvantages the Muslim community has experienced in India since independence, including being vulnerable targets of hate crimes.

These startling findings justify the use of economic analysis to understand religion. However, Iyer's argument is weakened by its reliance on reductive connections, two of which are the tendency to equate religion in India with Hinduism and to use myopic and elitist descriptions and definitions of Hinduism. Hinduism and India are not synonymous, despite the best efforts of the current



THE ECONOMICS OF RELIGION IN INDIA

By Sriya Iyer  
304 pages, The Belknap Press of  
Harvard University Press, 2018

## BOOKS

right-wing Hindu nationalist government to thus identify them in public consciousness. By failing to clarify this, she often looks specifically at the relationship between economics and Hinduism rather than between economics and religion. Iyer invokes the abundance of academic research by economists focused almost exclusively on Christianity and Islam to justify this equation of religion with Hinduism. This makes little sense for a book on India, which she herself argues is defined by complex religious plurality within a quickly growing and increasingly powerful economy. An example of this internal confusion is that the book has a whole chapter focusing on the madrasa system, an Islamic educational institution serving the Muslim minority in India, while one might have expected a book focused on Hinduism to include a thorough review of Hindu nationalist schools and educational programs that have sprung up across India over the past decades.

As an immigrant from India who has lived in the United States for 30 years, I am under no illusion about how difficult it is to try to explain the pluralism of Indian religious traditions, the amoeba-like pluralism of Hinduism itself, or the complexity of Indian politics to international audiences, especially to an American one, unfamiliar with non-Abrahamic religious traditions. Yet, if a book asserts that it seeks to explain Hinduism, then it must acknowledge the decades-long efforts by Dalit (“untouchables”) and Adivasi (indigenous people also called Forest Dwellers) activists who have pointed out that any narrative about Hinduism must acknowledge the implicit bias inherent in most upper-caste Hindu depictions of that religion. Iyer’s overview of Hinduism and fundamental tenets of Hindu practice essentializes and generalizes from the narrow perspective of an upper-caste Indian Hindu.

The numerous generalizations made about Hindu beliefs simply do not hold true for the vast majority of India’s lower castes. Iyer does not once mention one of the most important critics of Hinduism, B. R. Ambedkar, a Dalit intellectual and constitutional scholar who drafted India’s con-

stitution and wrote the powerful book *Annihilation of Caste*, which shows how Hinduism is rooted in the entrenched hierarchy of the caste system, which legitimizes the oppression and subjugation of those at the bottom. Iyer’s oversight reflects the broader silencing and dismissal of Ambedkar by leading Indians, including Gandhi himself, who refuse to engage with his blistering critique because either they insist that the caste system represents the genius of Indian society or they pretend that it is fading into irrelevance.

A book based in research about the economics of religion in India in the 21st century that fails to directly address the endemic eco-

*Fail[ing] to directly address the ... structural injustices of the caste system represents the kind of blind privilege [of] the upper castes.*

nomics challenges and structural injustices of the caste system also represents the kind of blind privilege held by the upper castes. Iyer’s lyrical description of the Hindu scriptures and her generalizations about Hindu beliefs, as well as her memories of singing Christian hymns in private schools in India alongside Muslim, Christian, Jain, and Sikh girls, are very familiar to me, as a woman also born into a privileged upper-caste family. The perspective of high-ranking castes about what Hinduism is and how it manifests across India is dominant in Iyer’s book; in reality, they comprise a tiny fraction of the total population of India—which Iyer even acknowledges in Chapter 6. There is, for example, no attempt to clarify practices like vegetarianism, which Iyer describes as Hindu but which is a predominately upper-caste practice. Most Dalits and Adivasis eat and enjoy meat of all kinds, including beef.

Ambedkar was closer to the truth when he argued on behalf of the “untouchables” that “Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors.” The statistics of modern-day India are a testament to this claim: According to 2016 data provided by the National Crime Records

Bureau, crimes against Dalits by non-Dalits have increased by 746 percent over a 10-year period. In 2012, the same year of the horrific gang rape of a non-Dalit woman on a bus in Delhi, when urban middle-class Indians poured into the streets to protest her ordeal, 1,574 Dalit women across India were raped. There were no public marches in India’s streets for those women, and it is most likely a highly underreported figure because Dalit women are terrified into silence and fear by upper castes.

Caste is also dispiritingly tied to basic economic statistics in India. In a nation of 1.2 billion people, close to 700 million live in

extreme poverty—a great majority of them members of the lowest castes of India. A majority of Hindu texts legitimize making lower castes pay exorbitant interest rates—the Manusmriti, an ancient Hindu legal scripture, declares that the lowest caste (Shudra) and the Dalit communities should be charged 60 percent or more in annual interest on loans. This practice, in turn, has contributed to the high levels of modern-day slavery in India because the texts demand “bodily interest” when cash is unavailable, which means that people from lower castes are expected to toil for the moneylender or landlord from generation to generation to repay debts. As even Iyer mentions, decades after independence, upper-caste Hindus continue to dominate institutions of higher education in India. In a recent list of Forbes billionaires, more than 55 Indians were mentioned—the wealth of the top 10 outstrips the 45 below them. Of these 10, seven come from a particular caste of traders—Vaishyas—and the remaining 45 are a mix of other upper castes of India, as well as a few Muslims and Parsees (both represent minority religions in India). There is not a single Dalit or Adivasi on the list.

*The Economics of Religion in India* is both timely and highly relevant in its study of the forces at play in India that expose the inextricable connections between economics and religion. Just take the July 2018 *New York Times Magazine* feature on billionaire Baba Ramdev, a religious leader and a successful businessman whose company, Patanjali Ayurved, had sales of \$1.6 billion in the 2018 fiscal year despite his hateful statements against Muslims in India, including his threat to “behead hundreds of thousands,” as a case in point. In seeking to understand the dynamics around economics and religion at a time when Hindu fun-

damentalism is on the rise, however, Iyer’s book leaves one wishing for greater nuance and perspective on the actual forces of history behind current trends. Instead, she sometimes presents opinion as fact, such as her assertion that “Hindu fundamentalism is a reaction to secularization by the British Empire and the Congress Movement and to the threat from other religions such as Islam and Christianity and to Western values represented by the British Empire.” In her effort to talk about economics, Iyer risks minimizing the complex reasons behind certain developments, such as the emergence of Hindu fundamentalism. It is dangerous to

blame it on broad, brief, and, at least in her book, unexamined reasons—going all the way back to the British Empire, the Independence Movement led by the Congress, and perceived threats from Islam and Christianity and Western values.

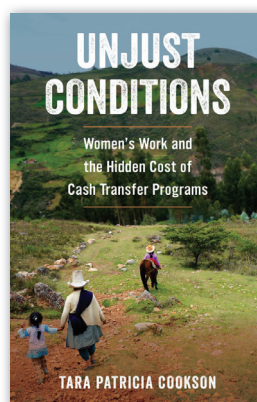
Iyer’s book provokes readers into asking the many questions that she leaves unanswered or unaddressed, which will likely catalyze further research in this field. This productive potential might make a difference in the future of all pluralist societies—not just those in the so-called developing world, but increasingly right here in the United States. ■

## DIGITAL BOOKSHELF

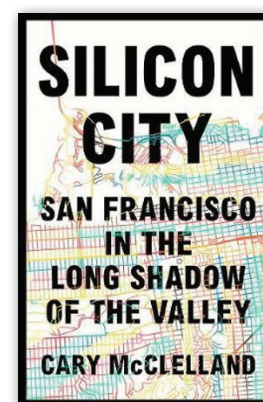
A trio of new books highlighted online discuss critical issues and cross-sector advancements that can inspire social change, from the hidden cost of women’s work, to how businesses can market for green consumption, to how tech has changed one of America’s greatest cities. Read excerpts of these books at [ssir.org/book\\_excerpts](https://ssir.org/book_excerpts).



Today’s savvy consumers don’t want just a green product—they want a total package that covers all their environmental concerns, from health benefits to savings. Magali A. Delmas and David Colgan’s *The Green Bundle: Pairing the Market with the Planet* offers marketing lessons and advice on communication techniques that can help business managers reach their market potential while also addressing sustainability issues (Stanford Business Books, 2018).



Tara Patricia Cookson’s *Unjust Conditions: Women’s Work and the Hidden Cost of Cash Transfer Programs* reveals how the work done in conditional cash transfers (CCT) programs is largely done by women and, consequently, greatly undervalued and undercompensated. Addressing gender inequality in the service sector means considering how certain kinds of labor, particularly the work of caregiving, disproportionately affects women worldwide (University of California Press, 2018).



Documentary filmmaker Cary McClelland’s *Silicon City: San Francisco in the Long Shadow of the Valley* chronicles the rapid metamorphosis of San Francisco through dozens of interviews with its diverse inhabitants, from venture capitalists to local activists. Part social history, part case study, *Silicon City* documents the effects of gentrification and the tech takeover on the city’s identity and social fabric, rich in activist roots (W. W. Norton, 2018).