

## Article

# The Freedom of Religious Institutions and Human Flourishing in India: A Present and Future Research Agenda

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I explore how India's complex regime of control and management of religious institutions and communities—ironically, particularly Hindu institutions—influences the capacity of these institutions to promote various dimensions of human flourishing and socio-economic uplift among the most marginalized. In addition, I provide an overview of India's highly varied landscape when it comes to the freedom of religious institutions from state control, and in particular discuss how some minority religious institutions experience fewer government constraints on some aspects of their freedom to self-identify and self-govern, especially when compared to some majority institutions, such as Hindu temples. Although some minority institutions still face constraints on certain aspects of their operations, the freedom they have to manage their internal affairs can, at times, translate into greater agility and the ability to innovate and flourish in the context of 21st-century India.

**Keywords:** culture; religion; institutions; economy; human flourishing; religion institution; education; pandemic; COVID-19



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## 1. Introduction

Rajesh washes himself and wears a black *lungi* (waistcloth) and settles his neck chain that he received from a *guruswami*—an experienced pilgrim and senior man who has performed the pilgrimage to Sabrimala many times. As soon he put on his neck chain in mid-November, Rajesh began his mandatory *vratham*—a 41-day period of mandatory votive abstinence where he stopped eating meat and having sexual intercourse with his wife or any woman, slept on the floor with only a mat and thin sheet for covering, and stopped drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes. He is now known to people in his slum in Bangalore as a *swami* (holy man), and is regarded as an incarnation of the male deity Ayappan himself, and is expected to be treated as such. Rajesh spends the day working as an autorikshaw driver but in the evening, meets up with other male *swamis* for devotional singing and prayers. After 41 days, Rajesh packs his cloth pouch and begins his 65 kilometer trek up to Sannidhanam or Ayappan's temple on the banks of the Pamba river. Following a ritual bath, Rajesh waits in line with millions of *swamis* to receive *darshan* (auspicious sighting) of Ayappan and offer his gifts of money and ghee. After his meeting with the deity, the mandatory period of *vrattam* ends as an elated Rajesh removes his neck chain, changes into this t-shirt and trousers, and joins throngs of male pilgrims heading back home to become husbands, brothers, sons, and householders once again.

Hindu men, from the earliest beginnings thousands of years ago, have undertaken the journey to Sabarimala to pay their respects and receive the blessings of the celibate male deity, Ayappan. This pilgrimage has always been a gender-specific ritual activity undertaken only by communities of male pilgrims, and women of child-bearing age for centuries were barred from participation. On 28 September 2018, the Supreme Court of India ruled that a ban on entry for women of a certain age at the Sabarimala temple was unconstitutional. Chief Justice Dipak Misra, in his landmark ruling, stated that the Constitution cannot and should not become an “instrument for the perpetuation of patriarchy.”<sup>1</sup> Indian society, in his view, must move away from what he called a “patriarchal

mindset” that derogates the “status of women in the social and religious milieu.”<sup>2</sup> The Court maintained that “sometimes in the name of essential and integral facet of the faith such practices (in this case, exclusion of women) are zealously propagated.”

The Sabarimala temple controversy is but one of the many ways India exhibits a fascinating and yet too frequently ignored relationship between the state, a complex regulatory regime, and the freedom of Hindu temples and other religious institutions. In what follows, I explore how India’s complex regime of control and management of religious institutions and communities—ironically, particularly Hindu institutions—influences the capacity of these institutions to promote various dimensions of human flourishing and socio-economic uplift among the most marginalized. In addition, I provide an overview of India’s highly varied landscape when it comes to the freedom of religious institutions from state control, and in particular discuss how some minority religious institutions enjoy relatively few government constraints on some aspects of their freedom to self-identify and self-govern, especially when compared to some majority institutions, such as Hindu temples. This greater freedom, in turn, translates into greater agility and ability to innovate and flourish in the context of 21st-century India.

## 2. State Management of Temples and the Impact on the Functioning of Religious Institutions

Is there an implied patriarchy in the centuries-old belief that only men can undertake the arduous task of remaining “pure” for the 41 days of *vrattam* (penance) prior to the pilgrimage? As Mr. Raju Ramachandran, the lead lawyer for the *Sabarimala* petitioners, claimed in his opening arguments, “Does the practice of excluding women of child-bearing age impinge upon the dignity of women and denude their right to worship? Perhaps, it does. But one must ask a more important, indeed a more foundational question, and that is: Is it the responsibility of the Supreme Court of India to determine what constitutes the essential part of religion? Do Indian judges have the right to identify which theological doctrines and practices within any given religious tradition (including Hinduism) are ‘essential,’ regardless of what the community itself might say, in order to justify and expand the state’s regulatory reach and power over any doctrines and practices it deems non-essential? In the damning judgment of distinguished Indian jurists Rajeev Dhavan and Fali Nariman, ‘Few religious pontiffs possess this kind of authority.’”<sup>3</sup>

Before one can assess the impact of the Indian Supreme Court’s majority decision in the recent *Sabarimala* case on the religious freedom of a majority religious community to regulate and manage its own religious affairs, it is necessary to say something about the nature and extent of the Court’s role as social mediator and adjudicator since independence. What should be the Court’s role in social reform with particular reference to the conflict between the temple-entry powers of the state and a religion’s (or denomination’s) right to control admission to its premises? How does the state’s view of Hinduism as an “attractive, progressive, and dynamic”<sup>4</sup> faith that needs to be separated from the mire of superstition and ignorance affect a religious community’s ability to define and shape its own teachings and religious identity?

There have been extensive comments on these issues in recent years, and any detailed discussions of the arguments and evidence advanced is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>5</sup> Suffice to say that as a result of the work of legal scholars like Marc Galanter and Faizan Mustafa and political theorists like Pratap Mehta, it is now possible to understand the crucial role of the Constitution and pieces of legislation like the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Act of 1951 in the reform and control of Hindu religious institutions and communities before and after Indian independence. In fact, Marc Galanter finds that in crucial respects the “Constitution is a charter for the reform of Hinduism,” whether or not its adherents wish for the reform.<sup>6</sup> Although Articles 25–28 protect the religious freedom of individuals and institutions, they also provide significant scope for state-sponsored social reform.

Especially well documented by Galanter<sup>7</sup> and other legal scholars is the intense disagreement between Indian jurists who regard certain exclusionary practices such as untouchability, which may stand in the way of creating an integrated Hindu community by denying entry to certain groups, and others who might support the primacy of religious claims of groups and institutions. In the landmark *Yagnapurshadji* case,<sup>8</sup> Justice P.B. Gajendragadkar, a man who is described as “a militant advocate of a reformist brand of secularism,”<sup>9</sup> argued that an individual’s rights conferred by the Constitution to enter a Satsangi temple prevailed over the claims by the religious community that they were not Hindus and therefore not governed by the state’s laws of mandatory temple-entry. Gajendragadkar maintained that the rights of individuals conferred by the state under the temple-entry power trumped the Satsangi denomination’s claim to exclude outsiders even though this exclusion was seen—by the community—as a part of their constitutional right to freedom of religion. In a strongly worded judgement, the Justice asserted that the appellant’s religious beliefs regarding the entry of the non-Satsangi Harijans (untouchables) into their temples was founded not only on superstition and ignorance, but also—here ascribing to himself the role of a Hindu *pandit* (theologian)—that their claim was based on a “complete misunderstanding of the true teachings Gita.”<sup>10</sup>

Even in situations where allegations concern direct attacks on the dignity of individuals and the social inequities that appear to be embedded within the religion itself, the Constitution provides “textual justification to give social reform overriding priority.”<sup>11</sup> We see the pace of regulatory overreach and social reformation quicken. It came to a head in the recent *Sabarimala* case when Justice Chandrachud stated that the non-entry of women into the temple of a celibate deity, Ayappan, was tantamount to a form of untouchability under Article 17 of the Constitution. In her spirited dissent, Justice Indu Malhotra pointed out that the practice of untouchability in India was meant to refer to outcastes or Dalits and never to women as a class and has a particular vileness associated with it. Furthermore, she argued that to compare the rights of Dalits with reference to the entry to temples and women in her view was “wholly misconceived and unsustainable.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Chandrachud’s judgment makes it more likely for the state to intervene any time it encounters a cultural practice that it deems unequal or discriminatory. Although agreeing with the Court’s decision to allow women of childbearing age to enter the temple, Pratap Mehta says that the reasoning by which the conclusion was reached “is a recipe for whole scale statism, in the name of social reform.”<sup>13</sup> “It is not an exaggeration to say that Hinduism has been nationalized [*sic*] through the agency of the state,” continues Pratap Mehta. “The state now runs tens of thousands of religious institutions. If you look at the case law, it is hard to argue that temples are autonomous creatures outside the state in the way in which churches might be in the US.”<sup>14</sup>

Quite apart from the tremendous anxiety and turbulence caused by the restrictive regulatory oversight and social controls of the Hindu community but also of some Muslim, Christian, and other minority religious communities, the constitutional mandate has imposed another serious and more insidious constraint on traditional religious communities and institutions in India. State intervention by rulings that seek to shape religion by promulgating public standards and by defining the field in which these standards operate have gradually set in motion an enforced reformulation of Indian religious practices and customs under the auspices of national and international development agencies in the name of human flourishing and progress.

In a recent Danish Institute for Human Rights report<sup>15</sup> entitled “promoting freedom of religion or belief and gender equality in the context of the sustainable development goals” and in the section on access to justice, education, and health, the authors raise an important issue, which is that in some cases women who speak out to claim their rights might face resistance and exclusion if they defy dominant norms and values. The authors, with no discussion about the intrinsic religious value of the practice or set of beliefs that may have led to the ban on women of childbearing years from entering the sanctum of a celibate deity, at once claimed that the ban was unconstitutional and a violation of a woman’s freedom of

religion or belief. It is clear that over the coming years we will see the Westernized ruling elite in India collaborate more with development practitioners to actively reformulate religious institutions and communities in the name of human development and progress. Unfortunately, although associated with human freedom, human rights as promoted by Western institutions that seek to filter and refine traditional religious practices and beliefs too often appear to offer an all-or-nothing cultural package that Indians are bound to accept in every sector of society regardless of their own indigenous cultural and religious traditions.

### 3. State Regulation of Temples during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Sadly, the wholesale nationalization and state control of majority religious institutions in India has seriously complicated the relationship between Hindu religious institutions and their adherents during times of hardship, such as during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Strict government regulations placed limits on what and how Hindu temples and religious institutions could intervene to help their congregants during one of the world's harshest and longest COVID-19-related lockdowns in the world, which took place between March and June 2020.

In a recent study, a series of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were conducted in early 2021 with low-income individuals from majority and minority religious communities in two South Indian states<sup>16</sup>. The focus group discussions and interviews were to assess the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic on their lives. All 96 individuals that participated in the focus group discussions belonged to Dalit and low-income backgrounds and were daily-wage laborers that lost their ability to earn a living during the lockdown. Considering that most of these individuals did not or could not earn any money to feed their families for over two months, we found that most of the Christian and Muslim individuals who participated in our study received at least some help in the form of food or money from their religious community or institutions. In *Sait Palya*, a large Muslim-dominated slum in Bangalore, the local mosque prepared food for poor families and distributed it once a day for over three months between February and April 2020. Over the course of the study, it became clear that no Hindu men and women in our study living in either Tamil Nadu or Bangalore received any help from their local temples. The following short exchange between the group facilitator and one of the Dalit Hindu men in the study illustrates a young man's frustration at being locked out of the temple premises during the pandemic:

- Facilitator: What help did you get from your religious community? You said you went to the Mariamma temple on the main road.
- Respondent: I didn't get any help from the temple.
- Facilitator: What do you mean? . . .
- Respondent: Listen, all the temples were closed no? The gates were shut. There was a lock on the gate, sir. It was our festival so I just removed my footwear and bowed down to God before the closed gates and left. That's all.
- Facilitator: Removed your footwear. That's all? What about any help? Did you get food rations? Milk? Rice?
- Respondent: Look, the gates were shut. We were not allowed to go in to worship. How could we get food? Even when we were bowing down before God the police came and beat us. The police came and warned us that if we stood in front of the temple they will arrest us. We left.

Clearly, the regulatory and arbitral role of the Court and the numerous statutes over the years have imposed significant limitations on the self-governance of Hindu institutions. There is a deliberate abandonment of part of the Hindu community to stringent government regulation such that even small religious institutions like the local temple in a north Bangalore slum were unable to risk opening up to provide food and other assistance to their community when they most needed it. In sharp contrast, numerous Christian and

Muslim respondents talked about getting help from their local Catholic parish, mosque, or even from the small Pentecostal church in the slum.

In early 2020 the state government of Tamil Nadu issued a circular asking temples to contribute to COVID-19 relief. The letter from the state-run Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Department ordered all the Hindu temples in Tamil Nadu to contribute at least INR 10 crore (USD 800,000) towards the state's COVID-19 expenses. The circular triggered a political storm and 47 temples filed a petition with Madras High court alleging the government was misusing temple funds. The state government immediately withdrew the circular. This event in Tamil Nadu, at the height of current COVID-19 pandemic, prompted the Rashtriya Swamyamsevak Sangh (RSS), a leading national right-wing Hindu organization, to ask whether the state government's request for funds from temple coffers was a "jizya tax,"<sup>17</sup> a form of tax imposed by Muslim rulers on non-Muslim subjects. In their publication, the RSS claimed that numerous temples around Tamil Nadu were directed to give hundreds of thousands of rupees while thousands of *poojaris* (priests) "are solely dependent on the offerings of their devotees. With the corona pandemic and lockdown, they are now left in the lurch and facing starvation."<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, despite severe criticisms from the central government and the state police, the largest temple in south India, the Balaji Temple in Tirupati in the state of Andhra Pradesh, stayed open for most of 2020 and during the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The temple finally shut down for a few weeks in March 2020 and then gradually reopened in June of the same year where thousands of devotees returned just as the second wave of the pandemic struck the country. As COVID-19 cases began to rise in the surrounding cities, the state-controlled temple management board, the Tirumala Tirupai Devasthanams (TTD), which runs the temple complex, offered to screen thousands of devotees every day. In a statement to the local media, the CEO of the temple added, "Lord Balaji is there to take care of us. He will guide us through this crisis like he did always."<sup>19</sup> As soon as the temple reopened in June 2020, 15 priests tested positive for COVID-19, which prompted the head priest to request the temple close its doors until the virus abated. The TTD held an emergency meeting and turned down the request for a temporary suspension of *darshan* (*divine viewings of the deity*) for devotees.<sup>20</sup>

A few months later, in April 2021, the Andhra Pradesh state government imposed a partial state-wide lockdown at the height of the second wave of COVID-19 but the TTD continued to permit an average of 15,000 to 20,000 pilgrims to enter the temple for daily *darshans*.<sup>21</sup> Although the TTD suspended "*Sarva Darshanam*," (free *darshan* of the deity), it continued to allow paid *darshans* for pilgrims willing to purchase tickets for INR 300 well into the month of June. Since the temple management board is controlled by the state government, any openings or closures of the temple buildings would need to be sanctioned by government officials. However, claiming not to have received "guidance" from the state government, the TTD kept Tirupati Temple open during many months between March 2020 and June 2021 even as India was in the grips of a devastating second wave of the virus and cities across the nation were facing fresh lockdowns.

Apart from the obvious concerns about the impact of stringent state controls on the health and wellbeing of the temple priests and staff at the height of the pandemic, the example of Tirupati Temple serves to highlight the concerns of many Hindus that the Court does not understand or fails to appeal to the intimate connection between the temple and the devotee and ignores the complexity and dynamics of Hindu temples as "divine powerhouses and no mere prayer halls."<sup>22</sup>

The recent controversies about the control of temples during the current COVID-19 pandemic, the allocation and distribution of temple offerings,<sup>23</sup> and the high-profile *Sabari-mala* ruling has drawn attention to the way in which India's constitutional framers have imposed uneven and unfair regulations on Hindu institutions, particularly in comparison to minority religious institutions. In the next few months, it is likely that the newly elected Chief Minister of the Tamil Nadu, Mr. M.K. Stalin, will head the state-level advisory committee that will manage the land and assets of hundreds of Hindu temples in the state.



To administer the internal workings of the religious institutions and to “get to know the nuances of temple management,” Mr. Stalin and his board of trustees need only be Hindus having “faith in God.”<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, the framers were worried that left to itself, religion, particularly Hinduism, would permit discriminatory and destructive religious practices that might constrain India’s powerful potential for economic and social uplift. However, does the Constitution empower secular state officials to initiate changes in temple policies and legitimize them in the name of Hinduism? Following his appointment as Tamil Nadu’s Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Minister in June 2021, Mr. Sekar Babu announced that women could be appointed as priests and perform pujas at over 35,000 temples in the state. Are there good religious grounds for opening up the performance of sacred Hindu rituals to women? Should the state reinterpret and reformulate Hindu practices? Is the inclusion of women priests an example of Hindus reforming their religious practices from within their own tradition? Why should the state intrude on Hindu religious practices and ignore the conventional and “patriarchal” practices of other religions—like male-only Catholic priests and Muslim imams? These are large and sweeping questions to which there may not always be simple or clear-cut answers. What happened in Sabarimala, and what is happening in Tamil Nadu, however, provides an opportunity to examine the risks of excessive state intervention in the affairs of Hindu majority institutions.

#### 4. Pujas in a Pandemic: Hindu Communities and Religious Innovation in the Time of COVID

The beginning of the lockdown in India during the month of March 2020 coincided with the most important religious festivals for religious communities across the country. One of the most important Hindu festivals, Ram Navami, the birthday of Lord Ram, fell on the second of April and right in the middle of the most stringent lockdowns in the world. Police and law enforcement patrolled the streets of major cities to arrest (and beat up) any individuals who might dare to attempt a visit to the local temple or shrine. Despite the strict stay-at-home orders by state governments, some high-ranking politicians<sup>25</sup> violated their own orders and participated in pujas and other religious ceremonies to mark this very auspicious and holy day. However, for the rest of the faithful, visits to temples and religious gatherings remained cancelled.

It was amid these circumstances that the once closed sanctums of most Hindu temples embraced online pujas, digital *darshans*, and numerous other religious services to accommodate a growing demand for religious services in India. Online pujas have always been an integral part of Hindu worship among the growing numbers of the tech-savvy Indian diaspora in the United Kingdom and the United States. The first and oldest commercial puja website, Sarnam.com, has offered online religious services since 1999. However, most of the interest and participation in online worship at Hindu temples flourished mainly among educated and middle-class Indians and the diaspora who tuned in to live webcasts of pujas at historic temples and on auspicious days. The government lockdown and the two-month-long closure of local temples, including shrines, across the country prompted temple management boards and state governments to offer online pujas at their own facilities.

In mid-May 2020, at the height of the pandemic and during a series of popular rituals, the state governments of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana began live-streaming pujas from their major temples. Karnataka started live-streaming from 50 of its most famous temples and promised to install webcams in the sanctums of other local and less important temples across the state. In addition, the state joined forces with an e-commerce company to develop an app called “PurePrayer” to help devotees across the state book pujas and *sevas* (services) at 52 prominent temples. The app, which is available on Android and iOS devices, allows individuals to book pujas online and does not charge any additional service or convenience fees. The app also allows individuals to order do-it-yourself puja kits to perform their own religious services at home. In a recent move to ensure transparency

and account for the millions of rupees now streaming in online from dedicated devotees for online pujas and customized *sevas*, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy launched an online temple management system that will be managed by Union Bank of India.

Among other innovations for online spirituality provision during the COVID-19 pandemic is a highly realistic virtual reality app called “VR Devotee” that is designed to deliver “a stunning experience on Smart Phones, TVs and VR (virtual reality) headset.”<sup>26</sup> Founded five years ago in 2016, the app approached numerous temples and religious institutions in India asking to allow them to live-stream pujas and religious services. Most of the temple management boards refused to entertain any idea of online service provision until the recent COVID-19 pandemic forced the most conservative temple officials and state government to concede by allowing the e-commerce app to allow high-tech cameras to share space with centuries-old deities across the country. In March 2020, VR Devotee saw a 40 percent increase in its user base, mainly for live streams. John Kuruvilla, one of the app’s founders, insists that app’s popularity stems from the unique indigenized religious experience of worship that is “not a clone of firm successful in Europe or the US, but something uniquely Indian.”<sup>27</sup> The app provides free live-streaming services but charges for other services that include customized online pujas and puja supplies.

Was, then, the technological innovation in Hindu spiritual service provision during the COVID-19 pandemic a breakthrough to modernity or a breakdown of tradition? Historian Meera Nanda asks if the recent innovation in apps and virtual reality temple worship experiences has encouraged India’s wealthy middle classes to withdraw from public worship into their luxurious “private enclaves.” “Why stand in lines, why suffer the sea of humanity at the temple doors” asks Meera Nanda, “when you can have your prayer done for you while you sit at home?”<sup>28</sup> Have some Indians responded to constitutionally mandated temple-entry for all castes by now excluding themselves from public forms of worship? Are Hindu institutions prepared to meet the challenge of preserving deep and devotional online worship without allowing this flourishing online faith to succumb to a political project? Is the increase in virtual Hindu worship a response by some Hindus to maintain their traditions even as the state increases its commitment to disrupting ritual power that has been monopolized by men, particularly Brahmins, over the centuries? These are some of the questions we will need to examine as increasing numbers of Hindus in India continue to practice their faith online and at a distance.

In the recent study on the impact of COVID-19 and religious communities in India, we spoke to groups of individuals from Hindu, Muslim, and Christian religious communities. During our discussion on worship with a group of Dalit Hindu men in Bangalore, we talked about online worship and some of the benefits they enjoyed from this new form of religious practice:

- Facilitator: As a family, you were at home together, were you able to talk about God or how God would help you?
- Respondent #1: Sitting at home we were surrounded by Gods. They were at home with us. We did not have to go or could not go to the temple. I sat with my wife and children and did puja.

Respondent#2: During the corona time, we believe that we got close to God. We saw puja online even though the temples are all closed during the COVID time and we were learning more about our God through this way. We learned to pray at home only and do puja in the house. After all these years we learned to do this at home

## 5. The Path to Flourishing in India: Sacred or Secular?

For Indians, the story of the role of religious institutions in human flourishing over the past century has been fraught with controversy, ranging across concepts such as freedom, poverty, conversion, caste, and religious identity. Since Indian independence, some intellectuals heir to Jawaharlal Nehru’s call for secular solutions to national problems have held religion in contempt, either because they assumed that religion was irrelevant

and would wither away, or because they believed that any interest in religion—which they believed to be both primitive and sectarian—could not undergird or bolster economic and social progress. Nevertheless, religion in India remains a powerful force in the lives of most of India's one billion inhabitants. Mahatma Gandhi, unlike Nehru, knew that religion was indeed capable of inspiring and sustaining monumental human endeavors.

Even so, Gandhi's unabashed acknowledgement and promotion of religious institutions and religious values in political and social life, in tandem with his radical conception of the importance and role of religion in the economic, social, and spiritual lives of people in India, are likely to unsettle many Indian scholars today. Unlike Gandhi, Nehru believed that for a poor and culturally diverse country like India, the only way to become a truly democratic nation was to be "socialist and secularist."<sup>29</sup> Writing in his *Discovery of India*, Nehru confesses that religion "did not attract" him because "it seemed to be closely associated with superstitious practices and dogmatic beliefs, and behind it lay a method of approach to life's problems which was certainly not that of science."<sup>30</sup> Nehru gave elegant expression to his strong conviction that religion and religious institutions were inimical to human progress and development in his writings and many speeches. Ainslee Embree suggests that it would not be "too far from the mark, to conclude that Nehru saw the social role of religion in wholly negative terms." Nehru's almost unshakable belief that religious institutions must be opposed persisted simply because he was convinced that these institutions had an inherent tendency to check human progress and would be a barrier and hindrance to social progress and human development in the newly independent India.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, Gandhi's devout Hinduism and his relentless striving for religious harmony stands in direct contrast to Nehru's conviction that religion was a hindrance to change and progress in human society.

Another area where Gandhi and Nehru differed in their approach to religion was with respect to politics. Nehru was not happy with what he regarded as Gandhi's "religious and sentimental approach to the political question."<sup>32</sup> Because of Gandhi's intense and enduring religious outlook, the freedom movement in Nehru's words "took on a revivalist character as far as the masses were concerned."<sup>33</sup> Gandhi, undeterred by Nehru's obstinate opposition to religion, remained committed to the view that religion was inextricably woven into the fabric of Indian life and therefore inseparable from politics. Writing in 1940, he is known to have famously said, "those who say that religion has nothing do with politics do not know what religion means."<sup>34</sup> Nehru, however, remained quietly confident that religion would remain a pervasive force only as long as the vast majority of Indians felt powerless in their ability to control the effects of nature and fearful due to the scarcity of resources to meet their daily needs. Nehru was confident that if the economic condition of the poor improved, they would denounce what he called backward and "flabby" beliefs. For Nehru, religion was not just unscientific but also socially and economically harmful, claiming that "religion, though it has undoubtedly brought comfort to innumerable human beings and stabilized society by its values, has checked the tendency to change and progress inherent in human society . . . instead of bringing enlightenment to them, it has often tried to keep them in the dark; instead of broadening their minds, it has frequently made them narrow-minded and intolerant of others . . ."<sup>35</sup>

Although the passages above might lead us to believe that Nehru found the very idea of religion repugnant and the role of religious institutions unessential and irrelevant, it is also possible, as some scholars very carefully suggest, that Nehru's distance from religion conveyed his wish for the Indian state to retain a neutral character for reasons of respect; taking sides in religious matters would fail to respect all citizens equally and lead to discrimination and chaos—like what we see in India today. Ainslee Embree notes that Nehru's commitment to secularism was most likely based on how he understood religion's function in society and the possible impact of a Hindu nation on non-Hindu religious communities, particularly minorities. Embree maintains that the overriding issue for Nehru was that groups that identify themselves in religious terms might not be representative of democratic institutions.<sup>36</sup>



As one surveys the evidence for and against the building of a secular state in India, it is evident that whatever Nehru's true intentions were in advocating for secular politics, it is clear that Indian secularism is not the same as its Western counterpart. Indeed, Hinduism, the religion of the majority in India, has a strong tradition of religious pluralism and tolerance of religious diversity. As Shri Radhakrishnan, India's vice president and the second president of India, said:

"When India is said to be a secular state, it does not mean that we as a people reject the reality of an unseen spirit or the relevance of religions to life or that we exalt irreligion. It does not mean that secularism itself becomes a positive religion or that the state assumes divine prerogatives. Though faith in the supreme spirit is the basic principle of the Indian tradition, our state will not identify itself with or be controlled by any particular religion."<sup>37</sup>

## 6. A Post-Nehruvian Context for the Study of Religious Institutions and Human Flourishing

This backdrop of debate around the role of religious institutions in Indian society and politics can help us understand how the official Nehruvian model of secularism has shaped post-independence and contemporary scholarship on a variety of issues, such as economic development, health, religious competition, religious change, and overall human flourishing. Academic and legal fields thoroughly lack the study of religion as a dynamic within them, to the detriment of thousands of students who crowd India's massive higher education system. This may be because although the University Grants Commission (UGC), which oversees the higher education system, may fund universities with explicit religious affiliations—including many Roman Catholic colleges—it does not fund the formal study of religion. In recent years, moreover, prominent professors of sociology who applied for funding to study the intersection between religion and caste were turned down because of the current government's concern about the misrepresentation of Hinduism by whom they consider to be anti-Hindu, secular academics in the social sciences.

The apparent lacuna of religious studies within academia and the glaring absence of a systematic examination of religion's role in the economic, social, or spiritual lives of Indians may be traced to two possible causes. First and most obvious is that this phenomenon was built according to a model of secularism that saw all religions, particularly Hinduism, as an anachronism of modern society. It has created a cadre of intellectuals who regard the process of secularizing India—including the academy and any activities seeking to provide economic and social uplift—as a means to modernize India. Religion, in their view, stood in the way of progress and robbed people of the scientific temperament needed to make India a modern, secular society. These accounts of a restrictive Nehruvian vision for post-independence India bring to mind the stern warning by Denis Goulet, the father of development ethics, who criticized this reductionist approach by calling development specialists "one-eyed giants: scientists lacking wisdom. They analyze, prescribe, and act *as if* man could live by bread alone, *as if* human destiny could be stripped to its material dimensions alone."<sup>38</sup>

Goulet and other development scholars urged policymakers to understand that societies are more human or more developed not when men and women "*have more*" but when they are enabled to "*be more*." However, social scientists and policymakers in India and across the developing world remained skeptical, and in some cases, even hostile to the very idea of religion's importance to human progress and thriving. Most of the architects of the newly independent India under the leadership of Nehru strongly believed that state-sponsored economic growth was the key to social development, which in turn would lead to a rational and liberal outlook of life that was free from the crippling backwardness caused by religiosity and other religious entanglements. Thus, unsurprisingly, the symbols of Nehru's modernizing mission were dams, factories, and power stations—which he sometimes described as the "temples" of new India.

The existence of a sizable and influential group of politically engaged and socially active religious minorities is another factor that has strengthened secularism at the expense

of active and robust religious engagement. In the fields of health, women's empowerment, or in any assessment of the religious impact of social exclusion, religious minorities—and those who work for their protection and support—are among the strongest advocates of secularism in public affairs. Their skepticism and fear of religion in the hands of the majority is so entrenched that they still refuse to include religious freedom as a fundamental right in their advocacy for equality and parity for religious minorities.

## 7. The Resurgence of Religion in Modern India

After decades of being relegated to the back rooms of political and social life, Hindus, particularly Hindu nationalists, have increasingly challenged the narrative that India should be a secular state. Thus, in India, the widespread resurgence of religion in the late 1980s and early 1990s involved both an increase in affective and deeply held Hindu beliefs and practices as well as the politicized and nationalist version of Hinduism or Hindutva.

Critical developments in the 1990s catalyzed the Indian population's commitment to religion. This commitment grew stronger and more resolute even as successive governments continued to pursue a secularist agenda. After operating on the fringes of the Indian polity since independence, the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) found its way into the mainstream in the 1990s. One of the lesser-known reasons for the BJP's dramatic rise to power was the airing of the televised serialization of the Hindu epic, *The Ramayana*, by the public broadcaster Doordarshan in January 1987. Every Sunday morning at 9:30, daily life for millions of Indians ground to a halt as people gathered in their homes or at a roadside television to watch the show. As Arvind Rajagopal, professor of media studies at NYU and author of the book *Politics After Television*, explains, "Trains would stop at stations, buses would stop, and passengers would disembark to find a roadside place with a TV—the crowds were so big, people would be unable to see or hear the TV but the point was about being present, being there."<sup>39</sup> Faithful Hindus watched the show with piety but the BJP, the rising right-wing Hindu nationalist party, made political use of the show and began to push for the restoration of *Ram Janmabhoomi*, or Ram's birthplace, which some Hindus claim to be the exact site in the city of Ayodhya on which the Mughal rulers built the Babri Masjid. The mosque was demolished in 1992 and triggered widespread Hindu–Muslim violence. A bitterly contested legal battle that spanned three decades came to an end last November when the Indian Supreme Court granted ownership of the disputed holy site to Hindus. Muslims were given five acres of land to build a mosque in the northern part of the city.

The success of the *Ramayana* serial in 1987 galvanized support for the Hindu nationalists, and in 1990 the current BJP president, Lal Krishna Advani, organized a month-long *yatra* (pilgrimage) to Hindu holy sites that rapidly developed a groundswell of support for the Hindu nationalist political cause. The *yatra* in 1990, coupled with the sustained campaign of the Sangh Hindu nationalist organizations and the subsequent attack on the Babri Masjid in 1992, saw a steady resurgence of "religion" in the form of renewed support for the BJP and the RSS<sup>40</sup> rapidly increasing across the country. Anthropologist Ursula Rao writes that beyond the screening of the *Ramayana* and later the *Mahabharata*, the Hindutva forces and the Ayodhya movement began to use religious iconography and make use of video stations to woo the viewer-devotee as a "voter reworked political culture" on the one hand, and brought about a new "virtual community of believers" on the other.<sup>41</sup>

## 8. Human Flourishing, Religious Institutions, and Religious Innovation in Hinduism

How, if at all, does the media shape radical religious beliefs? What motivates believers, either in India or among the diaspora, to join Hindu groups like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), or Bajrang Dal? Based on her field work in India, Purnima Mankekar, an Indian-American cultural anthropologist at UCLA, argues that Hindu devotional viewing does not necessarily translate into approval of or interest in aggressive Hindu nationalism. Not all Hindu websites or television shows are saturated with RSS propaganda.<sup>42</sup> Although the study of media and politics enjoys significant popularity within India and among Indian

scholars in the diaspora, the topic of religion remains marginal. Few scholars have begun to analyze the impact of new religious media products on devotion and worship.<sup>43</sup> Heniz Schiefinger's work lays some groundwork for thinking about Hinduism in digital spaces,<sup>44</sup> but there has been no systematic assessment or comparative study of the impact of online worship among the various religious traditions in India. A growing number of temples in India have active transmissions of images of the inner sanctum, including images of deities from hundreds of temples across the country, and in the past decade there has been a proliferation of websites offering online pujas,<sup>45</sup> called "epujas."

Much research of religion online has been largely devoted to Christianity in the West and, to some extent, to Islam. How might religious innovations like online pujas and online cremations, now more popular among Hindus in India<sup>46</sup> than among the diaspora, democratize worship? Historically, certain groups of individuals, such as women, have been restricted from Hindu temples. "Epujas" let them in. This is a fascinating potential area of study: the impact of technology on the nature of worship and on the role of religious innovations in fostering religious networks and competition. For this line of inquiry to happen, Hindu scholars in the West and in India need to work with Hindu groups like the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) and private companies like the Bangalore-based epuja.co.in. Then they could examine the impact of religious innovations like online pujas on the ability of Hinduism to reinvent itself and expand its influence among traditionally excluded groups like Dalits, women, and non-Indians. Other facets of this type of study could focus on the nature of devotional worship and examine whether online Hindu worship, which lacks the full sensual experience of temple rituals, still comprises a satisfying and wholesome ritual experience for Hindu worshippers. Is Hinduism suitable to cyberspace? How does it compare with other religions? How does the new connectivity amplify opportunities for religious innovation by breaking down barriers to Hinduism, which for millennia has excluded many groups?

## 9. The Post-1991 Role of Religious Institutions and Human Flourishing in India

Although the political ascendancy of Hindutva forces clearly became established by the late 1980s, another parallel development consolidated and strengthened the rise of religious actors and institutions in India. In 1991, after three decades of state-controlled economic development, the Indian government lifted numerous state controls on exports, production, and private companies to usher in a new era of privatization in the Indian economy. A newly deregulated economy saw increasing levels of inequality where poor, unskilled, and uneducated individuals struggled to support themselves. Although the state stepped aside, numerous religious groups—with improved opportunities to raise funds and create institutions—vied to provide key services for the growing numbers of poor and aspiring poor in India.

In her book *The Economics of Religion in India*, Sriya Iyer finds that in a time of economic liberalization, post-1991, religious organizations increased the levels of existing services and, in some cases, expanded their provision to include new services.<sup>47</sup> Iyer found that following the liberalization, competition between religious institutions increased all over the country, particularly in areas where state provision of social services was absent or inadequate. What was striking was that religious organizations said that they increased or improved services primarily to propagate their faith and, in some cases, to retain their adherents.

Every day over 40,000 to 50,000 devotees visit the most famous temple in India—the Tirupati Temple in Chittoor district in Andhra Pradesh. The Golden Temple in Amritsar, which is the holiest site for Sikhs, also welcomes over 30,000 people every single day. Religious institutions such as these generate significant revenue from religious activities. Following the economic liberalization of 1991, religious groups have put increasing resources into the provision of non-religious services. The most common of these are in education, healthcare, and food distribution. After the deregulation in the early 1990s and the removal of state involvement in many key social services, there was a spike in levels

of inequality and poverty in India. The plight of the uneducated poor worsened as prices rose and the cost of living increased and state provision either could not or did not keep up with the growing disparities in incomes and services. Simply put, religious organizations stepped into the role from which the state had withdrawn.

The competition among religious institutions in India is a clear example of the extensive impact of religion on public life at both the local and national level. Although there is a significant and urgent need for a rigorous and wide-ranging examination of the impact of religious institutions in India, there is also some concern that increased religious competition might result in increased intolerance. To explain what I mean here, I turn again to Sriya Iyer's work on the economics of religion in India, with its survey of religious institutions. Iyer's study is the only significant academic assessment to date on the nature and level of service provision by religious groups in India. It is a survey of over 500 religious institutions in which she raises a disturbing issue that the scholars interested in the intersection between religious institutions and the market might consider important to investigate, given the steady rise in restrictions on religious institutions in India. Iyer finds that a rise in inequality in India results in growing levels of religious radicalization. Applying a game-theoretic solution to the problem of competition between religious organizations providing similar non-religious services, Iyer contends that religious organizations are pushed towards "extremes in religiousness" to differentiate themselves from each other. She then goes on to argue that because religious organizations are in danger of becoming radicalized, policymakers need to increase the levels of state-sponsored, in her words "secular provision of services," as a way of "limiting the need for religious organizations to provide them."<sup>48</sup> Clearly, there is some need to investigate Iyer's claim that better state provision of services could minimize religious conflict in the future.

### 10. The "Halo Effect" of Religious Institutions in India

The current COVID-19 pandemic in India highlights the role of religious groups and institutions to meet the needs of the poor at a time when the government of India abruptly, and without warning, announced a nationwide lockdown on 24 March 2020. Unfortunately, the government's public distribution system was either inadequate or failed to reach millions of poor families because their baseline data failed to include (or in some cases deliberately excluded) numerous households. All at once, millions of daily wage laborers and migrant workers were left without the means to feed themselves or their families. Over the course of two months, numerous religious institutions took responsibility to feed, clothe, house, transport, and provide medical services to millions of households that did have access to any public distribution system. To date there has been no systematic assessment of the economic replacement value of the work of religious institutions and groups in India. For example, Professor Ram Cnaan and Partners for Sacred Places at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practices conducted a groundbreaking study to estimate the economic value of religious institutions' community ministries, including that of the Catholic Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Cnaan and his colleagues found that the economic value of the community services of the Archdiocese alone far exceeded that of the City of Philadelphia.<sup>49</sup> Yet, it is possible that some government agencies will likely increase their regulations and restrictions of Christian institutions in the post-COVID-19 period. Why is it important to quantify the loss of vital social services if restrictions on the religious freedom of Christian institutions increase?

On 6 March 2020, just before the current COVID-19 pandemic hit India, extremists beat up hospital staff and arrested workers at Sanjo Hospital in Mandya district, Karnataka State, about an hour's drive from Bangalore city. The extremists claimed that the Catholic hospital was trying to convert its patients by placing Bibles in their rooms. The Christian community in Mandya is very small, about 9000 out of a population of 1.8 million in the district. Religious hospitals like Sanjo hospital and Bangalore Baptist Hospital serve the majority Hindu community in Mandya and Bangalore. Yet Hindu nationalists have imposed stringent controls on foreign currency income for many religious nonprofits such

as these. This restriction poses a severe constraint on their work in India, and thus on the health and welfare of their constituents, most of whom are not Christians.

In line with its economically liberal agenda, the BJP government has steadily moved away from the Nehruvian state-building paradigm and adopted a “*Seva Bharti*” (roughly translated as “Serve India”) approach, which places the onus on private and social institutions to deliver key social services. In the absence of adequate state provision to meet the growing needs for basic social services in India, private institutions, including religious institutions, will need step in to meet the needs of those individuals and households who have suffered sharp declines in consumption, employment, and other forms of human flourishing. Yet, if restrictions on institutional religious freedom continue, this will have a chilling effect on medical, vocational, and educational services among the poor in India.

The unique reach of religious institutions into the heart of vulnerable communities is being seen (although not measured) during the current COVID-19 pandemic, where the ruling BJP government urged non-profit organizations and religious institutions to “cater to the poorer members of our community.” As restrictions on religious communities and institutions in India continue to rise, a worthy project might be one that quantifies the effects of such restrictions on the nature and types of services available to people. In other words, religious restrictions constrain the market not just in the case of religious goods and services, as sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark explain in detail,<sup>50</sup> but also for the provision of goods and services more generally to communities. A restriction on a religious institution or group thus becomes a loss to the wider community. It is difficult to exaggerate what the Indian economy might lose if religious communities and institutions are limited in or prohibited from providing services for Indians, particularly for the poor and those living on the margins of society.

Some other ideas for future research on the “replacement value” or the “economic halo effect” of religious institutions might include a comprehensive economic valuation of the contribution of religious communities and institutions for all religious traditions in India. Even with a study of the “halo effect” of Indian religious communities, we must be aware that it might not be easy to completely quantify the “true” value of the contributions of religious institutions since the “balance sheet” side of the valuation does not provide an estimate of the deeper and longer-term spiritual development that these institutions and communities provide before and beyond the evaluation. Nevertheless, such an assessment might provide a quantifiable and observable metric of the ways in which religious communities and institutions take immediate and tangible economic burdens off the state and local communities.

Further research might assess the “replacement value” of Sikh *langar* or community kitchens, which are trained to provide thousands of free meals to anyone visiting a Sikh house of worship (*Gurdwara*). Sikhism teaches the importance of “seva” or selfless service, and devotees are expected to donate their time and money to serve others. One might even consider a comparative study of Jainism and Sikhism, which are two under-studied religious traditions with a long and established history of religiously motivated giving.

Considering that significant numbers of non-Hindu institutions across India face increasing governmental restrictions and social hostility, we find that these institutions continued to function relatively effectively during the first and second waves of the current COVID-19 pandemic compared to Hindu institutions. For example, in April 2020, the West Bengal Imams Association asked Muslims in the state to donate their *Zakat* (mandatory form of almsgiving in Islam) directly to their local mosques. The imams suggested that the local mosques would distribute food and money to needy families in both Hindu and Muslim communities.<sup>51</sup> The Ketuapal Jama Masjid, one of the 3000 mosques in the state that collected *Zakat* from Muslims in their community, mainly assisted very poor Hindus who had lost their jobs and could not provide for their families during the three-month-long lockdown.

Unfortunately, most Hindu institutions in India are unable to respond to their communities with the agility and adaptability of non-Hindu organizations in the way the



*Keuapal Jama Masjid* cared for its local community. The question, then, of why non-Hindu institutions serve their congregants better than Hindu institutions is notoriously complex and involves delving into the complicated relationship of law with Hindu tradition, which is beyond the scope of this article. One possible reason for why non-Hindu institutions were better able to adapt to the changing conditions in the country is that, for the most part, churches and mosques are local decision-making institutions that benefit from a better and more complete understanding of the particular and changing needs of their communities. Hindu temples, on the other hand, are carefully regulated by the distant authorities who lack the flexibility and adaptability to address local concerns and needs of Hindus, particularly those Hindus who live on the margins of society. Another possible reason for why non-Hindu institutions accomplished more than Hindu institutions during the pandemic is that a devolution of authority to local religious institutions affirmed and expressed the freedom of mosques and churches to protect their communities during the pandemic, particularly when they felt abandoned by the state.

What enabled non-Hindu institutions to function during the pandemic? Why were mosques and churches more agile and adaptable to the needs of their communities during the crisis than temples? These are important questions that need to be studied because of the complex and multifaceted issues of institutional religious freedom and constitutional authority that underlie them.

## 11. Human Flourishing and Cultures of Philanthropy across Religious Communities

In India, religious institutions are entirely dependent on philanthropic contributions from individuals or corporations. Although newer forms of social investment such as venture philanthropy, mandatory corporate philanthropy, and giving circles have entered the philanthropic landscape in the West, Indian philanthropy is slow to change. In their latest report on the state of Indian philanthropy in 2019, Bain and Company stated that private giving has increased in India, driven primarily by mandatory corporate giving, commonly known as “corporate social responsibility” donations. Conspicuous due to its absence in an otherwise very detailed report is any mention of religious institutions or religious giving. Additionally, the newly established Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy, under the leadership of journalist and scholar Ingrid Srinath at Ashoka University, makes no mention of religious institutions and philanthropy on their organizational website, or in their active research portfolio.<sup>52</sup> Unfortunately, even Bain and Company’s series of annual reports on philanthropy in India also lacks any mention of the state of religious giving in India or the ability of religious institutions to access state or private philanthropic contributions.

Further research is also relevant and much needed in light of the increased burden of social service provision that many religious groups now bear following the economic and social fallout from the current COVID-19 pandemic. Some topics for investigation might include a study of the history and impact of modern Jain philanthropy, which has been in operation for decades in India. Another line of enquiry might be into the ways in which Sikh philanthropic giving differs in relation to other Indic religious traditions like Hinduism or Buddhism. Which factors drive philanthropy in India? This assessment would contribute to the very under-studied but deeply valuable question of how spiritual values, virtues, and ethics shape philanthropic giving in Indic religions and cultures.

## 12. 11: Religious Institutions, Mental Health, and Human Flourishing

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing.”<sup>53</sup> This truth is not new to India, which is among the very first civilizations where religion and medicine were intertwined and where the body’s healing process was not entirely physical but also a spiritual and emotional process. The healers of ancient India were trained to understand that physical ailments were, at least in part, due to divine or spiritual factors.<sup>54</sup> Curing a person involved a treatment of the mind, body, and soul. Over time, the more holistic notion of health gave way to a biomedical focus with a very narrow set of outcomes aimed at addressing a single specific

disease. However, human flourishing consists of a much broader range of states, including spiritual, mental, social, physical, and even economic outcomes. A person who is said to function well on all these levels might be said to be “flourishing.” However, most empirical studies on health in India and across the world focus mainly on a single disease and the diagnosis and alleviation of its symptoms. In his seminal work on religion, spirituality, and health, psychologist Harold Koenig, professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Duke Medical School, notes that religion and health have been interconnected since the beginning of recorded time. It is only in recent years that the separation has occurred, and this separation, in Koenig’s view, has taken place primarily in developed nations. Dr. Koenig’s work examines whether and how religion and spirituality influence both positive and negative mental health outcomes, where positive outcomes include marital stability, self-confidence about one’s future, and the ability to hold down a job or kick a substance abuse problem; and negative outcomes involve depression, suicide, anxiety, psychosis, substance abuse, delinquency/crime, marital instability, and borderline personality traits.<sup>55</sup>

Another significant recent work on this topic is Tyler VanderWeele’s expansive and holistic conception of human flourishing. Many empirical studies on wellbeing, both in social and biomedical sciences, tend to focus almost exclusively on very restricted and narrow outcomes, such as income or a single disease state. VanderWeele’s work seeks to broaden and expand our understanding of human flourishing to include a wide range of states and outcomes, including mental and physical health, happiness, life satisfaction, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships. In his recent work, *On the Promotion of Human Flourishing*, he presents four major pathways that are relatively common and have reasonably significant effects on human flourishing. These pathways are family, work, education, and religious community. His approach to understanding human flourishing as having broad outcomes rather than just specific disease outcomes is suited to interfaith work in India where multiple factors and pathways promote wellbeing. Although VanderWeele’s work is primarily focused on human flourishing in the West, particularly in the USA, his more recent work (completed in 2019) investigates human flourishing in five culturally distinct populations, in Sri Lanka, Mexico, the USA, Cambodia, and China. Moreover, VanderWeele’s methodology, while highly precise and carefully constructed, is also applicable across cultural settings and might easily be utilized in India.<sup>56</sup> Findings from a study in India might enrich our knowledge about the potential of religious determinants to influence human flourishing.

VanderWeele’s groundbreaking work on the causal associations between religion and health, including his recent work on non-Western religiosity and wellbeing, can be an effective guide for scholars who wish to apply his extremely rigorous but wholistic methodology to the Indian context. We suggest that VanderWeele’s methodology be applied to an extensive review of the impact of multi-faith religiosity on mental health in India. Although a great deal has been written about medical missions in India, almost no systematic work has been done on the impact of religion and religious institutions on mental health in India. Although the diversity of religious communities in India brings challenges for healthcare providers and institutions to deliver services, in many parts of the country, particularly in rural areas and among older generations, people are more open to spiritual or non-biomedical influences on disease. In many parts of India, treatment and medicines mix fluidly with religious beliefs and practices. For example, studies of psychiatry patients in India suggest that many of them attribute their symptoms to supernatural causes. Others may consider their symptoms to be some kind of punishment from God and refuse medical treatment.<sup>57</sup>

India, therefore, presents an ideal place to invest in research that will give social scientists and medical practitioners a fresh look at ways in which spirituality and religion positively (or negatively) influence mental health. Most of the literature on religion and mental health includes research on how Indian religious traditions might be incorporated into modern psychiatric practice. Research done by Dr. Ajit Avasthi, a leading Indian psychiatrist and the former president of the Indian Psychiatric Society, focuses mainly on

ways in which medical practitioners might need to adapt psychotherapeutic models of care to match their patients' particular religious and cultural backgrounds.<sup>58</sup>

Although many Indian scholars and medical practitioners in both secular and Christian medical institutions would be willing and eager to work on issues of religion and mental health, the most obvious institutional partner should be the Institute for Human Relations, Counseling, and Psychotherapy at the Christian Counseling Centre (CCC)<sup>59</sup> in Vellore, Tamil Nadu. Started 50 years ago in 1970, CCC was designed to provide counseling training that included both clinical and spiritual elements. As an ecumenical training institution, it operates psychotherapy trainings and counseling trainings for faith-based practitioners from all religious traditions. Drawing on its close academic connections with India's premier medical school, the Christian Medical College (CMC), CCC has trained over 40,000 individuals from a variety of religious traditions. Dr. B. J. Prashatham, who leads CCC, has worked for many decades on the correlation between religion and spirituality and suicide in India. His work includes detailed case studies of the impact of trauma on mental health, with special focus on suicide prevention.

A promising avenue of enquiry might be an interfaith study of the impact, if any, of religious affiliation—particularly religious service attendance—on suicidal behavior. India has the highest suicide rate in the Southeast Asian region, with a rate of 16.5 suicides per 100,000 people.<sup>60</sup> In addition, there might be a component of the study that educates and trains religious leaders from Christianity, Islam, and also from a variety of Indic religious traditions on the role of religion and spirituality in the prevention of suicides. Religious leaders and mental health experts can work together to better understand ways in which their own religious traditions might help prevent suicides in India, particularly among young people.

### 13. Human Flourishing, Pro-Developmental Outcomes, and the Religious Economy of Indian Islam

Within the context of the social consequences of religion, the issue of local expression of religiosity raises a number of fascinating issues. How do the poor in India manage to continue to practice their religion even as modernizing forces expect them to abandon practices that are regarded as “traditional” or “primitive”? How and why are these so-called “primitive” expressions of religiosity important for the wellbeing of these communities? What are the particular contributions of local sects and groups from minority and majority religious traditions to the economic environment in India? In many parts of India, Muslims are being told to stop visiting *dargahs*, which are the burial sites of revered Sufi saints or *Pirs*. For many poor Muslims on the subcontinent, access to *dargahs*, where recorded sayings of saints (*malfuzat*) are often chanted, has made Islam more accessible and provided the unlettered faithful with concrete manifestations of the Divine. Increasingly in India, contemporary puritans who are often trained in the ultra-orthodox Wahhabi theological schools and who traditionally come from wealthier middle classes oppose the practice of praying at *dargahs*.

There is tremendous potential to study whether and how local, deeply held, and personally appropriated forms and levels of religious commitment influence social and economic outcomes for the poor. Think of the Muslim who prays five times a day and fasts every year during Ramadan, versus the Muslim who identifies as Muslim by default, in effect because it is the tradition of his or her ancestors. Rebecca Shah has already done two waves of data collection in India to collect data on religious commitment and economic outcomes in India. Her survey of hundreds of Muslims in India and Sri Lanka found that religious intensity among Muslims is positively associated with pro-familial and pro-social outcomes.

Consider, for example, the Dawoodi Bohra community, a small sect within the larger Shia Muslim community. In one of the few comprehensive anthropological studies on the Bohras, Jonah Blank notes that this community's trading success is based to a great extent on their unique religious beliefs and practices.<sup>61</sup> In particular, unlike most traditional

Muslim communities in India, the Dawoodi Bohras have embraced technology and the benefits of India's post-1991 financial market deregulations to expand their influence around the world. Although the vast majority of Bohras reside in India, there are also significant numbers of Bohra communities in Pakistan, Yemen, the Gulf States, Egypt, and Kenya. Most orthodox Muslims regard Bohras as a liberal, reformist, and "Westernized," with progressive views about women, education, and trade.

Further study of the Bohra community would enable us to locate Indian Islam as a pluralizing force in India's religious economy. Here we have a distinctively Indian Muslim community that has grown socially, politically, and economically while protecting its own community boundaries. Despite the tremendous pressure by orthodox Muslims from the Middle East who have had significant influence in India over the past few decades, the Bohras have not permitted themselves to be absorbed into a single Muslim community that demands a singular formation of their religious beliefs and practices. Rather, the Bohra have remained an innovative, competitive, entrepreneurial religious community for decades.

Additionally, since the Bohras present an interesting study of the role of religion in the marketplace, we recommend that research on the religious roots of the Bohras' entrepreneurial success be conducted by scholars and scholar-practitioners of business ethics at free market-oriented think tanks or business schools in India. Such research might help us better understand the ways in which particular aspects of Ismaili Bohra religious beliefs influence their innovation and risk-taking. The late Asghar Ali Engineer, who was head of the Indian Institute for Islamic Studies and who founded the Centre for the Study of Society and Secularism (CSSS), also wrote extensively about the Dawoodi Bohra community.<sup>62</sup> However, aside from Jonah Blank (who now works at the Rand Corporation), and the late Dr. Engineer, there are few, if any, Indian or Western scholars who do any kind of sociological or ethnographic research on the Bohra community. A study that documents the social and economic contributions of business-oriented Muslims can only help the reputation and morale of a community that feels more beleaguered than ever in India.

#### 14. Religious Institutions, Religion, Human Flourishing, and Character Development

In 2016, scholars in India, along with the Hindu American Foundation (based in the US), called for the removal of Columbia University's Sheldon Pollock from the editorship of the Harvard University Press series on Indian classical texts. They charged that his writings "misrepresent our cultural heritage."<sup>63</sup> Last year, a small but very influential group of students at the Banaras Hindu University protested the appointment of Dr. Firoz Khan—a Muslim—as assistant professor in the Sanskrit *Vidya Dharam Vigyan* department. Dr. Khan resigned in December last year after talks with university leadership did not resolve some of the students' concerns about a non-Hindu teacher being allowed to teach in the Sanskrit faculty. Even as the study of classics in American universities dwindles, the situation in India has become extreme. Not only are there few serious scholars of ancient texts in India, but the politicization of the study of Hindu texts has also driven many non-Hindu scholars like Dr. Khan to resign from their jobs. To better examine and explore how religion might promote human flourishing in all its forms, we might consider studying our past. Unfortunately, Indians are losing interest in their past and are well on their way to losing their collective memory. However, how does one convince a people who are increasingly captivated by the thrill of technology and who are scornful about what they regard as the remote past to value the study of classics and restore their rich tradition of pluralism and religious tolerance and diversity?

Over the last couple of decades, there has been particularly intense and aggravated criticism of Indian and Western scholars who critique or question themes in ancient texts. They appear to challenge Indians' understanding of the "greatness of Indian civilization."<sup>64</sup> The endangerment of classical studies in India is deeper and more complex than just a loss to the wider academic community. If we lose our memory of the past, we risk losing a sense of ourselves. As the Bhagavad Gita puts it, "When memory is bewildered, the intellect

*is destroyed; and when the intellect is destroyed, one is ruined.*"<sup>65</sup> As Sheldon Pollock writes, "Sanskrit for example, offers at one and the same time a record of civilization and a record of parts of ancient Indian texts that offer at one and the same time a record of civilization and record of barbarism, of extraordinary inequality and other social poisons." Pollock warns that once Indians agree that things need to change, there will certainly be disagreement on how to overcome aspects of their unsavory past. Might future research enable open discussions between scholars of classical texts like Sheldon Pollack and Hindu theologians with a view to expanding our understanding of the ancient Hindu religious teachings on the one hand and building a familiarity with modern academic modes of enquiry on the other?

Anantanand Rambachan, a practicing Hindu and a professor of religion at St. Olaf College, argues that traditionally a Hindu theologian worked "from a place of commitment to a tradition." A Hindu theologian's commitment compels him to clarify and, when necessary, defend the fundamental religious teaching outlined in the holy scriptures. Professor Ramabachan goes on to explain that a Hindu theologian and a scholar of Hindu theologies differ in that whereas the former clarifies the meaning of that tradition in the face of critics and seeks to explain its coherence, the latter might not be motivated by a need or desire to affirm or explain its coherence or consistency.<sup>66</sup> A place where Hindu theologians and scholars of ancient Hindu theologies can engage in respectful and open dialogue could contribute a great deal to building a bridge between the Hindu community and scholars of the religion. It would enable Hindus to be self-critical and open to reasoned argument and discussion and foster a humble approach to their religious teachings and tradition.

As tensions continue to rise between Hindus and scholars of Hinduism, particularly in the West, there is an urgent need to build trust and prevent the alienation of Hindu communities in the diaspora and in India, and to foster support for the academic community. These conversations will build trust, encourage scholars to understand how the tradition can foster human flourishing and wellbeing, and foster humility and self-criticism in scholars, theologians, and the wider community. In the absence of reasoned, open, and critical discussions between theologians and scholars, the gap will be filled with individuals who are neither scholars nor theologians and whose opposition does a disservice to the plurality and profundity of Hindu scriptural traditions.

## 15. Conclusions

India is the world's largest democracy and an economic powerhouse. However, it is also home to stubborn poverty and some of the world's worst religious persecution, particularly with the rise of a nationalism that adversely affects devoutly religious individuals from both the majority and minority religious traditions. Might India's rich religious traditions and beliefs unleash a dynamism that could promote human progress, economic enterprise, and overall human flourishing? Any investigation into the positive potential of religion on human flourishing in India will require a steady and long-term investment in building capabilities and capacity in the country.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/163639357/> (accessed on 21 April 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., (p. 4).

<sup>3</sup> (Dhavan and Nariman 2000, p. 259).

<sup>4</sup> (Galanter 1998, p. 278).

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion of the institutional development of India's regulatory apparatus vis-à-vis Hinduism, see the article by Chad M. Bauman entitled "Litigating the Limits of Religion: Minority and Majority Concerns about Institutional Religious Liberty in India," in this issue.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 280.



- (Galanter 1998).
- Satri Yagnpurshadji And Others Vs. Muldas Brudardas Vaishya and Another*. Supreme Court of India. 14 January 1966. Chief Justice P Gajendragdkar. <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/145565/> (accessed on 17 April 2021).
- (Galanter 1998, p. 281).
- Ibid.*, para. 9.23.
- Dhavan. Religious freedom in India. p. 253.
- <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/163639357/paragraph14.3> (accessed on 21 April 2021).
- <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/sabrimala-gay-rights-adultery-supreme-court-constitution-liberty-without-statism-chandrachud-5380460/> (accessed on 15 April 2021).
- Ibid.*
- [https://www.humanrights.dk/sites/humanrights.dk/files/media/document/\\_%2019\\_02922-22%20freedom\\_of\\_religion\\_or\\_belief\\_gender\\_equality\\_and\\_the\\_sustainable\\_development\\_%20fd%20487747\\_1\\_1.PDF](https://www.humanrights.dk/sites/humanrights.dk/files/media/document/_%2019_02922-22%20freedom_of_religion_or_belief_gender_equality_and_the_sustainable_development_%20fd%20487747_1_1.PDF) (accessed on 15 April 2021).
- The research conducted in late 2020 and early 2021 was commissioned by a European government to assess the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable populations, including minority and Dalit communities in India. Due to the highly sensitive nature of the research, including increasing limitations on academic work on religion and religious behavior in India, neither the donor government nor the names of the researchers can be published. The study provided a crucial insight into the devastating impact of the pandemic on members of the marginalized Hindu majority community in the two sample sites in South India.
- <https://www.organiser.org/Encyc/2020/4/27/TN-Govt-Forces-Hindu-temples-to-contribute-to-CM-Relief-fund-but-showers-largesse-on-Muslims-during-Ramzan.html> (accessed on 21 April 2021).
- Ibid.* (accessed on 21 April 2021).
- <https://theprint.in/india/tirupati-temple-to-remain-open-despite-743-staff-members-testing-covid-positive/478679/> (accessed on 23 June 2021).
- <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/ttd-head-priest-seeks-temporary-closure-of-tirumala-temple-as-covid-19-cases-rise-demand-gets-rejected/story-D35BRP7bKVy9ec5lmTGAjN.html> (accessed on 22 June 2021).
- <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/tirumala-temple-stays-open-amid-curbs-101621191487518.html> (accessed on 23 June 2021).
- (Galanter 1971, pp. 467–87). *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/1398174](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1398174) (accessed on 24 June 2021).
- See Section 8 in this article for more information.
- <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/chief-minister-likely-to-head-advisory-panel-for-big-temples/article34920035.ece> (accessed on 22 June 2021).
- Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath televised his presence at the Ram temple grounds in Ayodhya and transferred the Ram Lalla idol to the new site. For more, see <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/up-chief-minister-adityanath-shifts-ram-idol-amid-lockdown/article31160225.ece> (accessed on 20 April 2021).
- [https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.kalpnik.vrdevotee&hl=en\\_IN&gl=US](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.kalpnik.vrdevotee&hl=en_IN&gl=US) (accessed on 15 April 2021).
- <https://www.canvas8.com/blog/2020/september/hindu-devotion-app.html> (accessed on 15 April 2021).
- <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/puja-in-the-time-of-pandemic/article32416394.ece> (accessed on 15 April 2021).
- (Madan 1991, p. 405).
- (Nehru 1959, p. 26).
- (Embree 1993, pp. 165–82).
- (Grewal 1989, p. 665).
- (Nehru 1959, p. 72).
- (Nehru 1959, p. 383).
- Ibid.*
- (Embree 1993, pp. 165–82).
- (Radhakrishnan 1955, p. 202).
- (Goulet 1974, p. 481).
- BBC interview with (Rajagopal 2001).
- Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh—a Hindu nationalist paramilitary organization.
- (Rao 2011, p. 90–105).
- (Mankekar 1999).
- A recent book, *Digital Hinduism*, edited by Xenia Zeiler, explores how Hinduism is expressed in the digital sphere and how Hindus utilize digital services for worship (Zeiler 2020).

- (Scheifinger 2008, pp. 233–49).
- Puja is a form of worship in which an individual experiences a moment of connection with the deity, usually through a visual interaction with the image of the god.
- (Steinberger 2018).
- (Iyer 2018).
- (Iyer 2018, p. 240).
- (Cnaan 2006).
- (Finke and Martin 2012, p. 65). See also (Finke and Scheitle 2014, pp. 177–90; Finke and Stark 1992).
- <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/imams-association-asks-to-distribute-zakat-fund-among-hindus-and-muslims-in-bengal/article31449325.ece> (accessed on 2 July 2021).
- (Sheth et al. 2019).
- (World Health Organization 2020, p. 1).
- (Saini 2016, p. 254).
- (Keonig 1999, p. 353).
- (VanderWeele 2017, pp. 8148–56).
- (Varma 1986, pp. 13–34; Kulhara et al. 2000, pp. 62–68; Rao and Begum 1993, pp. 40–42).
- (Avasthi et al. 2013, pp. 136–44).
- (Christian Counselling Centre Vellore 2020).
- (World Health Organization 2019, p. 30).
- (Blank 2003).
- See, e.g., (Engineer 1981, pp. 652–53).
- (Puri 2016).
- (Chari 2016).
- (Mukundananda 2014).
- (Rambachan 2014).

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