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## Opening temple doors to all

A new year resolution for Hinduism

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A recent report of a study conducted across 1,655 villages in the Indian state of Gujarat, representing 98,000 Dalits, revealed the shocking fact that 97 per cent of them feel that they are unwelcome at Hindu temples, religious gatherings and public discourses on scripture. Researchers did not find a single village that was free from the practice of untouchability. ("No temple entry for Dalits in Gujarat," Times of India, December 7, 2009). Such exclusion is neither infrequent nor limited to Gujarat. The BBC News ("Fury over south India temple ban," October 15, 2009) reported an incident of stone throwing to protest Dalits entering a temple near Vedaranyam in the state of Tamil Nadu.

Last month the High Court of Chennai issued an order, against the wishes of temple trustees, that a temple procession pass through a Dalit community in the Villipuram District. Dalit (oppressed) is the name preferred by those who have been relegated to the lowest rungs of the caste ladder and regarded as untouchable by members of upper castes. Dalits constitute around 20 per cent of the Indian population.

Although the exclusion of Dalits from places of Hindu worship ought to be a matter of deep concern and distress, there is hardly a ripple of protest in the sea of Hindu complacency.

Shutting the doors of Hindu temples to Dalits stands in bewildering contrast to the anxiety in other religious traditions about dwindling numbers and the expenditure of considerable resources to attract the faithful. It should not surprise that those debarred from Hindu sanctums enter, in significant numbers, the open and inviting doors of others. Those in India and outside who are vociferous opponents of religious conversion must understand and acknowledge the Dalit experience of the Hindu tradition as oppressive and negating their dignity and self-worth.

Conversion is a challenge for Hindus to consider the relationship between religious practice and systemic oppression. Exclusion from temples is only one manifestation of such oppression. It troubles deeply also that, with notable exceptions, the principal voices of protest over exclusion are not those of Hindu leaders. In the case of anti-Dalit violence in the town of Vedaranyam, referred to above, the protests were led by supporters of the Communist Party of India–Marxist. In other cases, secular-minded human rights activists are at the forefront of the agitation on behalf of the Dalits. Earlier this year, Navin Pillay, UN Commissioner for Human Rights, condemned caste as negating the human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination and called for a UN convention to outlaw discrimination based on caste.

The response of silence from Hindus may be interpreted as support for barring Dalits from places of worship. Even more importantly, indifference gives validation to the wrong impression that the Hindu tradition has no theological ground or core for challenging the human inequality that is at the root of the Dalit ostracisation and oppression. The assumptions of human inequality that explain the continuing persistence of untouchability need an urgent, vigorous and unambiguous theological repudiation originating from the non-negotiable heart of the Hindu tradition. Although Hinduism is admittedly diverse, its major traditions are unanimous in affirming the equal existence of God in every being. “God,” the Bhagavadgita proclaims, “lives in the heart of all beings.” This core theological teaching must become the basis for the assertion of the equal dignity and worth of every human being and the motivation for challenging and transforming the oppressive structures of caste that, in reality, deny and violate the luminous presence of God in all.

Although every unjust expression of caste needs to be denounced, the shutting of temple doors to people pleading for the opportunity to worship challenges, in a special way, the meaning and legitimacy of Hinduism as a religious tradition. For this reason, Hindus must commit themselves with tireless determination to the work of welcoming Dalits into every Hindu place of worship. Such work must be seen as fundamental to Hindu identity and the meaning of belonging to the community of Hindus. While we must commend and support Hindu leaders and movements working already for the wellbeing of Dalits and their equality and dignity, we must recognise also that many Hindu leaders may not be at the forefront of such a religiously inspired movement. They are the beneficiaries of the privileges of caste and immune to the pain of those who live at the margins. All Hindus who understand the contradiction between teachings centred on God’s embodiment in every human being and the exclusion of people from places of worship must embrace this cause.

Hindus settled outside of India who enjoy the privileges of living in free societies and the protection of the law against unequal and unjust treatment, have special obligations in this matter. They need to lift their voices in protest against practices in the name of Hinduism that denigrate human beings. They must ensure that Hindu leaders, and especially those who travel often to the West and who are the recipients of their donations and reverence, hear their voices. They must make clear the unacceptability of religious discrimination and demand that leaders renounce silence and indifference and become active advocates for change. Every Hindu leader must be challenged to take a stand in this matter. The Constitution of India specifies: “The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth.” Constitutional and legal measures, as

necessary as these are, have not and will not eliminate all forms of discrimination based on caste inequality.

Legal measures can never cause the joyous embrace of all that follows from awakening to God's presence in each heart. Religious vision and wisdom can be the source of such transformed relationships. Hinduism needs an unequivocal theological proclamation that complements constitutional law by repudiating caste injustice and that commits Hindus to the equal worth of all human beings. Opening the doors of all Hindu temples to Dalits is an important step, an urgent religious matter and an opportunity for the Hindu tradition, in our time, to define itself. Let this be our collective Hindu resolution in 2010.

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