

Opening Vedic Temples to Everyone

By Stephen Knapp (Sri Nandanandana dasa)

It has always been an issue of why Hindus in India often proclaim to be of a great and high philosophy, recognizing the spiritual nature of one and all regardless of background, yet cannot display such a philosophy in their own actions. How is it that Hindus complain of their decreasing numbers when they do not even welcome everyone to be a Hindu, or to enter their temples? This is especially outlined in the article below, which addresses how Indian Dalits are often treated with much bias to the point of not being allowed to enter Hindu temples in India.

As for me, I have been treated the same way in various temples. However, I have visited so many temples across India that for every temple that did not allow me to enter, there were twenty others that did. Of those that did not, some changed their attitude when I presented a letter from Swami Dayananda Sarasvati stating that I was a dedicated follower of Sanatana Dharma and should be treated as such. Then at times, with his recommendation, I was let in and treated very nicely. In some temples, however, it doesn't matter. You are still not getting in if your skin is the wrong color or you are of the wrong class.

Nonetheless, it disturbs me when other Hindus, whether they be of low caste, class, or of the wrong color (in my case just by being white-skinned) they are not allowed in the temple. When so many other religions, whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, etc, are willing to open their doors to anyone, discriminating amongst those who can enter and those who cannot enter Hindu temples seems to me to be a sure prescription to a slow extinction of the Vedic culture. If anyone cannot enter the Hindus temples, or participate in the Vedic traditions with others, then why should they not join or convert to other religions or spiritual paths, thus continuing to decrease the numbers and support to the general Hindu society?

If temples want to be sure that those who enter are sincere, then they may have papers that people in question can sign that say they are either appreciative of Hinduism or follow and respect the Hindu tenets. They do this successfully in places like Tirupati or Dwaraka, and those who will not sign such papers can then be asked to leave. Furthermore, it would be good if the acharyas and gurus would go out and greet the villagers and welcome them to participate in the rituals, traditions, festivals, and temple activities. Of course, I have already written about this in my book "[Crimes Against India and the Need to Protects its Ancient Vedic Tradition](#)," along with other articles such as "[Creating a Spiritual Revolution in India](#)" and "[Vedic Temples: Making Them More Effective](#)," and others.

This is something that should be corrected, or the Hindus that remain may become the few who are left to manage their temples, which will be gradually taken away by government acquisition, lack of support from followers, or left to deteriorate because of neglect. And this may not take so many generations before this becomes increasingly evident, if it has not become so already.

I am constantly surprised by how many Hindus feel that the Vedic tradition is an eternal path, so why worry? Why do anything? Is this their excuse to be apathetic? If it is, then they are doing a damn good job for finding the ways to do nothing at all. And in their eyes, anyone who does worry or tries to help protect the Vedic tradition in some way or other is simply illogical. This is not the prescription that Lord Krishna gave to Arjun in the Bhagavad-gita, who told him to stand up and fight.

Anyone who knows me and hears how I speak about the Vedic culture often says that I had to be an Indian Hindu in a previous life. Nonetheless, when I write an article that raises my red flag about how Hindus should be more open or inclusive to those who would sincerely like to participate, and more determined to protect their own culture, I feel fortunate that many agree, but still amazed at how many feel there is no need to listen to me [after all, what do I know?], primarily because I'm white-skinned. However, the concerns I raise are still supported by others, as found, for example, in the article below.]

Let us all open the doors of temples to everyone so they can feel included and welcome to remain within the fold of followers of Vedic Dharma. Why should anyone feel they have to leave? This is the way we can increase our numbers, our influence, strength, and support. There is nothing bad in that. It is our duty to preserve, protect, promote, and help perpetuate the true Dharma for the benefit of everyone, including ourselves and future generations of our families.

Therefore, I must thank all those who have emailed me encouraging me in this issue. I must also agree with and thank such organizations like the RSS and VHP who give little if any regard toward one's caste or class, and who work to bring back those Indians, many of which were Hindus, who had converted to Christianity, Islam or Buddhism, to participate in a more welcoming religion, and welcome them back to Hinduism or the Vedic traditions. I give my regards to the acharyas of the past, such as Sri Ramanujacharya and Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and others who threw out the considerations of caste and recognized individuals by their love for Sanatana-dharma and the Vedic culture. I also give my regards to those of today, such as Kamal Kumar Swami and many other spiritual teachers who extend their hands of welcome to the simple villagers, dalits, or anyone to come and feel there is a place in the Hindu and Vedic fold for them participate and be a part of this Dharmic family. I feel respect and give my heartfelt thanks to those organizations such as the Swadhyaya Movement, the Hare Krishna Movement, Mother Amritanandamayi Ma, to Mother Karunamayi, and others who have also welcomed and accepted many devotees

regardless of their background or what class they are coming from, and who also make temples wherein everyone can participate and be welcome with open arms to be a part of the Dharmic family if they are sincere. And I take much joy and pleasure to see all of these people come together and find happiness in their spiritual development by being allowed to participate in some aspect of this tradition.

It is like the Kumbha Mela when differences in whoever is bathing in the Ganga are oblivious and have no meaning, but only the focus of purifying ourselves in sanctity of the Ganga is all that matters. This is what is possible and what we need to do in order to increase the means to protect, preserve, and promote the genuine understanding of the Vedic tradition.

This to me proves that there is light at the end of the tunnel, and things are changing. But we need to bring this issue out in the open more and those who feel the same can work together to accelerate the changes that need to take place.

It is also no loss to allow others to participate in the Vedic traditions, including being allowed into the temples to participate in various ways. If Hinduism is said to be inclusive, then let us see it by example. This does not mean we enter the sanctums where the priests perform their rites, but they can certainly guide us in the rituals and sanctifications and puja to the Deity that many of those who follow Hinduism feel they want or need to do. What is the difficulty?

Hari OM,
Stephen Knapp (Sri Nandanandana dasa)

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 recognize 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 centered 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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Some of the Encouraging Feedback I Received After Posting this Article

I received many letters after sending out this article, many of which were encouraging, while a few remained discouraging. In those of the latter kind, it was noticeable how much certain Hindus try to justify what can only be called a continuation of the bigotry toward lower castes that is not a true characteristic of the Vedic philosophy, but a reflection of social problems that remain a part of

Indian society, or a problem in any society for that matter. Still, the letters that follow provide some encouragement for me, and those who think alike, to continue in trying to improve the way Sanatana-dharma can be approached and welcome everyone who is sincere in following it. Therefore, ALL Hindus and followers of Vedic Dharma MUST fight against caste oppression – especially that of barring entrance of minority castes into temples. Great Hindu saints since the time of Adi Shankaracharya, Ramanuja, Madhava, Sri Chaitanya, and many others did so, and we must do so as well.

* * *

Dear Stephen: Namaste and I totally agree with your sentiments. Hindus need to open up and be more inclusive of humanity. Some can accept the sacredness of a cow but fail to see the humanity in another human being. Something has to be very wrong here. And you are right that sometimes there are Hindus who feel that they have a birthright to knowledge about Hindu dharma when they are know very little about the dharma nor do they even propagate it. I guess the more we speak about this the more likely is change likely to come.
Cheers and Namaste

Indrani R., PhD
Senior Research Fellow (Ramlila/Ramdilla)
The University of Trinidad & Tobago
Barataria
Trinidad, W.I.

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Swamiji:

Please allow me address you as such for I have been a beneficiary of your wisdom every since you have added my name in your mailing list. This article, I especially like and wish to send for publication in one of our newspapers. I am now the community editor of "Hi India". Before this, if you remember I was associated with India Post and later my name also appeared as the Community News Editor" for Desi Talk in Chicago, now taken over by Dr. Sudhir Parikh of New York.

You know Hindus are a strange group, most of them are still hooded under secularism they cannot understand. For them secularism is admitting sacred as everything Non-Hindu and each act of a Hindu pride is anti-secularism. Especially shivering under their shoes at the name of Muslims! Over a millenia of living under threat and rape of their civilization as they merely remained witnesses for merciless onslaught.

I really wanted to discuss with you about this and some other issues, requiring wide support of Hindus. I will be in touch a little later.

Please confirm if it is ok to publish some of your writings, if they are not published anywhere,

Surendra

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I fully agree with Stephen ji.

In January 2008, I took my daughter and son-in-law (who is an American Jew) to Kashi Vishwanath temple in Benaras and Vishnu Temple in Gaya. My son-in-law was not allowed to enter these temples; and then my daughter also did not go inside without him. They traveled 11,000 miles from Seattle and my son-in-law is a far better Hindu than 99% Hindus. I cried and felt sorry for ourselves.

I did go inside but found pure business and begging like behavior of Pandas. I could not enjoy anything. In most temples, Pandas are using Hindu idols to beg money.

At that time, I understood why we became slaves and why most Hindus do not know about Vedic System of knowledge because it was kept to themselves by a select few privileged individuals.

This is so unfortunate.

I put the idea of a radio broadcast before VHP, they were ready but with a different agenda which does not include spreading Vedic Values.

I've been in a few Hindu Organizations with very good people. But the emphasis is not on spreading our Vedic knowledge outside Hindus.

You arrange a talk by a learned Swami ji from Gurukulam, give free meal and broadcast the talk. Even then only a handful people will show up.

Last year Pujya Swami ji gave talks in NJ, most of the hall was empty.

So for Hindus learning Vedic knowledge is not important and not a priority.

On the other hand, if there is Mata ki Chowki, there might be 1000 uninvited people.

If you go to Delhi and see a line of people, it is the line of Sai Baba's devotees.

Western world is spending a lot of resources, time and effort to learn Vedic values but Hindus have very little value for them.

We have what we deserve.

Thank you for raising an important issue.

Regards,
Naresh

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Namaste Stephen,

Please accept any errors in my letter and I hope you will read it. It reflects what the article says and what I have been trying to get Hindus on the internet to think about. This is the year of change.

First of all I want to add something to the title of the article.

Opening temple doors to all is not an issue for the Government but all the Hindu Gurus.

You write

1] It has always been an issue of why Hindus often proclaim to be of a great and high philosophy, recognizing the spiritual nature of one and all regardless of background, yet cannot display such a philosophy in their own actions.

The answer to this is simple and you already know it. Hindu philosophy is truly great but the people do not follow it or often misinterpret it. For example everyone knows it is wrong to tell a lie. Should always tell the Truth seek the Truth. But how many people honestly tell the truth 100 percent of the time? May be none.

Basically the principle is the same for all other teachings and as I said you already knew that.

Now if you are talking of hypocrites then they are so because they want some name fame or other glory. Again I don't need to tell you anymore since you already know the answers.

And I realise that you are not asking questions but wanting us to think about the points made and seek solutions.

2] How is it that Hindus complain of their decreasing numbers when they do not even welcome everyone to be a Hindu, or to enter their temples?

This is due to ignorance and age old tradition that was corrupted back some thousands of years ago. Yet the next question would be then why is it after knowing the right from wrong they still do not change?

Perhaps they don't know the right from wrong and are waiting for some great Guru to tell them the right way.

Unfortunately many of our Gurus are far too busy teaching religion and blaming the Government instead of doing something about it themselves. In the past we had great gurus who dedicated

and sacrificed their lives to save our Dharma eg Ved Vyas, Buddha then Sankracharya, Guru Nanak, even Jesus, Chankya, Vivekanada, Gandhi, Prabhupada, to name a few.

Today there are far too many people pointing fingers and not doing anything about it. The Hindus have left it all to the Law makers and politicians.

So why cant these preachers Gurus Swamis and like make efforts to visit these temples and villages and meet the owners and priests and teach them the right way to be a Hindu. Since when does God hold bias about who prays to Him. Teach them this and let us stop lamenting about this plight.

We need someone to tell our Gurus that they must follow examples of past great achrays, swamis and gurus.

I hope you are the man who will remind them their duty and bring about an end to this caste system.

Only respected religious leaders can do this.

They must travel the length and breath of India to do this.

Its no good being lazy or holding big lectures in tents or some high pedestal for name sake of being on TV.

They must TRAVEL to the heart of the problem.

They must SPEAK to the priests and temple owners.

My suggestion to you is to PLEASE help me pass this message to all our Gurus and Swamis of India. You are a man in contact with many and I don't have any.

I will write to all the Gurus I know of from the internet but I know my suggestions will fall on deaf ears as they have in the past. For some strange reason they don't want to dirty their hands and are only concerned about those who come to them!

Its time to make them SEE.

CHANGE their ways.

Is this possible Stephen?

You also write

3] As for me, I have been treated the same way in various temples. However, I have visited so many temples across India that for every temple that did not allow me to enter, there were ten others that did. Of those that did not some changed their attitude when I presented a letter from Swami Dayananda Sarasvati stating that I was a dedicated follower of Sanatana Dharma and should be treated as such. Then at times, with his recommendation, I was let in and treated very nicely. In some temples, however, it doesn't matter. You are still not getting in if your skin is the wrong color or you are of the wrong class.

I was very saddened to read of your experience. How can these people pray to God knowing they have refused a worshipper. This is perhaps one reason why Hinduism does not seem to spread outside of India.

Now if some temples are listening to Swami Dayananda Sarasvati then there is hope. Swami Dayananda Sarasvati himself MUST visit these temples and change their attitudes. Its what our great saints of the past had done. So the Gurus of today must do the same.

4] I feel fortunate that many agree, but still amazed at how many feel there is no need to listen to me [after all, what do I know?], primarily because I'm white-skinned. However, the concerns I raise are still supported by others, as found, for example, in the article below.

I read a story just now which helped me in my dilemma similar to yours. I'll tell you in very short.

A man once saw a boy throwing star fishes into the ocean. There were hundreds of them washed up on the mile long shore. The man came up to the boy and said don't waste your time throwing them into the ocean it makes no difference. Just look at the hundreds and hundreds around you. The boy picked one up and threw it into the ocean and said "It made a difference to that one".

Sometimes we are fighting against all odds but our little effort does make a difference so Stephen please do not be disheartened and let us carry on the Dhrama of teaching righteousness. Don't give up.

5] What we now need to concentrate on is seeking SOLUTIONS to all the problems we face. No more shall we be disheartened. Let up raise the issue to all but above all asking everyone to come up with a SOLUTION. No matter how petty it may be, but if it works for a little while or for a few people then it is worth doing.

So please next time when you send out an email please ask how Hindus can join in over the internet and seek a solution.

I have mentioned one solution above. Ask our gurus to visit temples directly. Even if it means they have to go together in great numbers, Vishnu Gurus and Shiva Gurus. Hand in hand. Let them become another Shankracharya or Guru Nanak or Chankya or Vivekanada.

6] If Exclusion from temples is one reason for conversion. Then let us educate, make them understand or fight to get them included in to the temple.

7] The article gives some important actions that individual Hindus can take sitting on their computers. We are terrible at supporting petitions or protesting. So I was pleased to read some practical SOLUTIONS for all Hindus across the world. I will post these on the forums.

- 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.

Hare Krishna

Mr Kiran Parmar

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Dear Sir,

With ref to your mail, it is indeed shocking to find the Non-Entry policy perpetuated by few sections of HINDU Community. I wish to apologise for the conduct of fellow brethren.

In the world full of selfish personnel, these will happen due to the selfish agenda followed by a section of community, but if you look at the reformers of HINDU religion, there are innumerable personnel, who have contributed for sanitizing the community of the old dogmas, these will erase slowly and steadily, it is Saint RAMANUJA, who advocated spreading the knowledge of his master to large section of community irrespective of Caste, Creed and Beliefs followed by then social fabric. He gave the ASHTAKSHARI MANTRAM by climbing a top the temple tower at SRIVILLIPUTTUR (Tamil Nadu), South India was a pioneer . You must also read about the ALWARS, who were the pillars of Vaishavaism, who are from different sections of Society, and they are the founders of Vaishavism Pholosphy.

But for these, Hinduism would have still remained as dogmatic religion. Only few like minded personnel should strive relentlessly to change the mind-set of HINDUs.

Regards,

Ananth

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Dear All,

I do not wish to participate in a debate about Hindu Temples but there is a distinction between vedic practices and the practices adopted at Hindu Temples.

Vedas are meant for the entire human race, vedas are not exclusively written for Hindus or for Indians. In fact none of the Vedas, upvedas or vedangas have the word "Hindu" mentioned anywhere in the script. While Hindu Temples practice Hindu Religion and have their own rules just like Christian Churches and Mosques have their own rules etc, Vedas teach us to practice "Dharma" which is universal. Everyone is allowed to study vedas, whether he/ she is born in a low caste, or is a christian or Muslim. Many Christian Universities are frequently using Upanishads in their own curriculum. and are inclined to use Yoga and Meditation in their practice and teachings.

In real Vedic Temples everyone is welcome, there are no restrictions. I wish Hindu Temples would welcome everyone. It will be a disservice to others if temple doors are closed. We have seen the consequences of shutting temple doors for Harijans etc. in India. Arya Samajis do not have the means or the desire or the time from their internal conflicts to reach out to our own brothers and sisters to share with them about our Great Dharma Most of our people and the rest of the World is deprived of the vedic knowledge because of our inaction.

I have no complaint against the Hindu Temples, they never said that they will welcome everyone, I am greatly disappointed with the Arya Samaj who did not fulfill their obligation to the Great Maharishi Swami Dayanand Saraswati and did not follow the path of their own leaders who built Arya Samaj Mandirs, D.A.V. Schools and Colleges and Gurukuls. If the present trend continues, I tend to agree with Stephen Knapp that more and more people will convert to Christianity and Muslim religion. I think unless Arya Samaj steps forward with an action plan, this trend will continue. Arya Samajis must follow the path shown by its great leaders instead of celebrating their "Jayantis" , anniversaries and organize Mahasammelans every week which does absolutely nothing to embrace and unite the entire human race under one umbrella of the vedic Dharma.

Regards,

Ved

Prof. Dr. Ved S.

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Verse 18, Chapter V, Bhagavad gita... " The humble sages, by virtue of true knowledge, see with equal knowledge a learned and gentle brahmana, a cow, an elephant, a dog and dog eater (outcaste)." I love such enlightened Person- Lord Krishna

" What is the use of knowing all the Scriptures of the world , when the person doesn't know about the Divine love and the presence of Divinity in all the beings".

By the by, Ramdass need not go to Temple, since his divine love and the divinity within him had merged with the latent divinity present in the Universe. His divinity was equal to the divinity of a temple.

I totally agree with your points , Mr. Stephen.

Warm Regards,
Anand

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Namaste Shrimaan,

I do apologize for misunderstanding your message. I am totally with you on that. In fact, I don't know what others & the rest of the Hindus do, & frankly, I don't care. I do what I think is the right thing, I do not visit any temple that discriminates between Hindus based on any criteria. The only reason for a Hindu to be barred from a Hindu temple is when s/he comes in with illegal, immoral, anti-social or anti-national intent, i.e, when it is an adharmi coming not for prayer or worship, which is the purpose of the temple. Any one who comes in to do pooja, must be allowed.

Please accept my humble apology.

Namaste.

Poonam