**Commentary**

**From Hair in India to Hair India**

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**ABSTRACT**

In all cultures, human hair and hairdo have been a powerful metaphor. Tracing back the importance and significance of human hair to the dawn of civilization on the Indian subcontinent, we find that all the Vedic gods are depicted as having uncut hair in mythological stories as well as in legendary pictures. The same is true of the Hindu avatars, and the epic heroes of the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata. Finally, there are a number of hair peculiarities in India pertinent to the creed and religious practices of the Hindu, the Jain, and the Sikh.

**IN HINDUISM**

The “Laws of Manu” (Manusmriti) represents the most important and earliest metrical work of the Dharmaśāstra

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textual tradition of Hinduism. The text presents itself as a discourse given by Manu, the progenitor of humankind, to a group of seers, who beseech him to convey to them the “law of all the social classes.” According to Hindu tradition, the Manusmriti records the words of Brahma.

According to the Manusmriti, catching hold of the hair in any way is forbidden even in a fight. It is mentioned that as a good and just “I should immediately punish anyone who, out of wickedness, dishonors someone by snatching and dragging him by his hair,” and the punishment would be to cut off both his hands. The reason was that the uncut hair has always been considered as giving great prestige to its possessor. Therefore, handling of the hair, either by a hairdresser or by a clinical trichologist, is to be considered as a special prerogative.

At the same time, hair has long been used in India to convey a message [Table 1]: Unbound unruly hair represents wild nature, and well-oiled and combed hair represents the culture. Shiva has thick matted hair. Shiva’s dreadlocks represent the potent power of his mind that enables him to catch and bind the unruly and wild river goddess Ganga. Krishna has curly hair. The Goddesses Lakshmi (consort of Vishnu), Saraswati (consort of Brahma), and Durga (or Shakti, the concept, or personification, of divine feminine creative power, sometimes referred to as “The Great Divine Mother”) have loose, unbound hair. Kali’s (the fierce aspect of the goddess Durga) hair is unbound, while Parvati’s (the gentle and nurturing aspect of Hindu goddess Shakti) hair is well bound.

In the Ramayana, the last jewel of Sita (consort of Rama) is the hairpin that she gives Hanuman (the monkey deity) to convey to Rama that her honor, and his reputation, stand in a precarious position.

Shaving the head is associated with asceticism: Brahmans shaved their head, but left a tuft (a Choti or Sikha) in the crown of the head, protects the memory. It is also believed that the shaving of the hair stimulates the proper growth of the brain and nerves, whereas a tuft at the crown of the head, protects the memory.

Table 1: Metaphorical use of hair(1)

| Type of hair          | Meaning                  |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Unbound hair          | Untamed senses           |
| Tied hair             | Tamed senses             |
| Matted hair           | Absolutely controlled senses |
| Plaited hair          | Young virgin             |
| Parted hair           | Deflowered woman         |
| Unshaved head         | Householder              |
| Partially shaved head | Part-hermit, part-householder |
| Fully shaved head     | Hermit                   |

Sanyasa is the life stage of renunciation within the Hindu philosophy of four age-based life stages known as Ashramas, with the first three being Brahmacharya (Bachelor student), Grihastha (householder), and Vanaprastha (forest dweller, retired). Sanyasa is a form of asceticism, that is marked by renunciation of material desires and prejudices, represented by a state of disinterest and detachment from material life, and has the purpose of spending one’s life in peaceful, love-inspired, and simple spiritual life. An individual in Sanyasa is known as Sannyasin in Hinduism, which in many ways parallel the Sadhu traditions of Jain monasticism and the monk or nun of Christianity. A Sannyasin shaves his head completely. The shaving of the head (Mundana) removes him from all external beauties, and indicates that he is no more of the world. He will not have to take care about dressing his hair with scented oils, etc., and the time he would have otherwise spent in drying, combing, and dressing his hair, he now spends in prayers and meditation. He now dwells in the Self, which is Beauty of beauties.

Hindus practice a variety of rituals from birth to death, that are collectively known as Samskaras, meaning “rites of purification.” These are believed to make the body pure and fit for worship. In Hindu tradition, the hair from birth is associated with undesirable traits from past lives. Thus, on the occasion of the Mundan ceremony, the child is shaven to signify freedom from the past and moving into the future. It is also believed that the shaving of the hair stimulates the proper growth of the brain and nerves, whereas a tuft at the crown of the head, protects the memory.

A boy’s first haircut, usually in his 1st or 3rd year, is known as Choula, and represents yet another such Samskara.
It is considered an event of great auspiciousness. Conventionally, a Hindu girl never has her hair cut after the first haircut, which generally happens at the age of 11 months. Therefore, the first haircut for the girl is very important because that is the only time they do. However, some Hindus practice a tonsure ceremony for girls as well. While complete tonsure is common, some Hindus prefer to leave some hair on the head, distinguishing this rite from the inauspicious tonsure that occurs on the death of a parent. Those who practice complete tonsure generally ritually offer the hair to their family deity. Many travel to temples such as the famed Tirumala Venkateswara Temple to perform this ritual.

At the Hindu temple of Tirumala Venkateswara located in Tirupathi on the coastal state of Andhra Pradesh in Southern India, every day, thousands of Indian women offer their hair as a token to the presiding deity, Lord Venkateswara (a form of Vishnu). At the same time, it is starting place and principal provider for an astonishing industry of trade in human hair. There are eighteen vast shaving halls, and the crowds are so large that women and girls wait queue for up to 5 h. Six hundred and fifty barbers sit in lines on the concrete floor, nimbly tying up into ponytails the hair, and shaving the heads of the women seated in front of them with few expert sweeps of a razor. The average woman's head yields about 300 g of hair. Baskets filled with hair are collected every 6 h and stored in piles in a vast warehouse. The hair, strong and healthy, has never been dyed or subjected to anything more abrasive than the traditional herbal soaps and coconut oil.

Mayoor Balsara, CEO of India’s largest exporter of human hair, Sona Devi Trading Company, says: “For poor rural women, their hair is their only vanity. They have saved up to make a once-in-a-lifetime journey. Thousands have made an oath to their gods – they may have asked to be blessed with a child or for a good harvest. Should their wish be fulfilled, they offer their most precious possession as a sign of gratitude. Offering your hair to the god is a symbolic gesture of surrendering one’s ego, and a way of giving thanks for your blessings.” The hair is transported in fiber sacks by truck to Bangalore. “We buy hair in metric tons,” Mr. Balsara explains, “a ton represents 3000 women.” In his factories, the hair is washed by hand in giant baths, and then laboriously pulled through long beds of spikes by hand to smooth it before being tied into neat bundles of 200 strands each. Finally, the hair is packed into cardboard boxes and flown to Nepi, Italy, where the pigment is removed, a process that involves soaking of the hair in rows of small white baths for up to 20 days. India exports an estimated 2000 tons of hair a year, and ships it around the world. “Temple hair,” as it is known, finds its way to hundreds of British salons, where it is sold in the form of real hair extensions. Great Lengths International, a leading manufacturer, supplies 1’300 salons in Britain alone. The advantage of human hair is obvious: It both looks and feels better than synthetic additions. Moreover, the quality of Indian hair is known to be extraordinarily good. In comparison, European hair is too thin in diameter for the process, while Chinese hair, is too thick and rigid for use with European clients.

**IN SIKHISM**

In Sikh religion, the hair holds a high level of sanctity. Negligence in any other code of conduct may be condoned, but a Sikh who suffers his hair becomes an apostate. The Sikh form of wearing uncut hair with a turban and an unshaven beard is the product of history over the years of social and religious development.

In Sikh philosophy, the keeping of uncut hair (Kesh) means that the Sikh lives in and resigns himself to the Will of God. Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of the Sikhism, taught that the appearance of the Sikh should essentially be that which God Almighty has given him according to His Will: A woman’s beauty lies in her smooth skin and rounded face while a man’s beard signifies his masculinity, strength and virility. Additionally, Guru Nanak declared that with a turban on, the human form becomes complete in all respects. The sanctity of keeping uncut hair with a turban (Keski) on has been observed by all Sikh Gurus (from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh).

The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh (1666–1708), the founder of the Khalsa (the collective body of all initiated Sikhs), gave the command that the 5 K’s (1). Kesh: Uncut hair; (2). Kangha: A wooden comb; (3). Kara: A metal bracelet; (4). Kachera: A specific style of cotton undergarments; (5). Kirpan: A strapped curved sword) are a must. These are a mode of discipline signifying the wearer’s belongingness to the Khalsa. The five K’s are a test of a Sikh’s firmness and strength of his faith. They foster a sense of unity. They make a Sikh look like the Guru himself and inspire him to follow the Guru’s command.

To keep Kesh intact and tidy and to maintain its sanctity, the turban is a necessity. Since the turban had acquired a social and political status, the Guru wanted the Sikhs to be equal with the highest prince of the land. The turban hitherto reserved for the higher castes were given to the Sikhs, and in this way, the ages-old monopoly of the ruling classes was
overcome. Ultimately, the turban is deemed to give the Sikh dignity, consecration, and majestic humility. Consequently, the turban is mentioned in many of common sayings and proverbs. To mention only a few: “To knock the turban off” is an act of great insult; “To justify the wearing of a turban” is to act rightly, wisely, and in a socially acceptable way; and “To sullify the turban” means to act unlawfully and in a socially unacceptable way.

IN JAINISM

Jainism belongs to the Sramana traditions (an Indian religious movement parallel to but separate from the historical Vedic religion) and belongs to the oldest Indian religions. It is transtheistic (i.e., neither theistic nor atheistic) and prescribes a path of nonviolence. Practitioners believe nonviolence and self-control are the means to liberation. The three main principles of Jainism are nonviolence, nonabsolutism (i.e., open-mindedness), and nonpossessiveness. Asceticism is thus a major focus of Jainism.

Because life is to be considered sacred and in every living thing, Jains avoid killing any living creature, even down to nits in the hair. Therefore, most Jains’ hair will taper off at the end not having ever been trimmed.

After receiving initiation (Diksha), Jain Sadhus pluck their hair at least once a year on the occasion of the Hair Plucking Ceremony (Kesh Lochan). The custom has been designated as a form of culture-bound trichotillomania by American psychiatrists.[3] The Sadhus pluck their hair on face and scalp, or they get the hair plucked by others (by proxy). It is considered as a kind of austerity where one bears the pain of plucking hair calmly. Jains believe that plucking hair teaches them to endure pain. This is done mostly in front of the lay community. The ritual is also performed to motivate followers to take the path of renunciation of worldly things. First, they rub ashes on their head, then they pluck out the hair in bunches. In case an individual is too old and weak for this, he asks somebody to pull out his hair. Nowadays, these tasks are performed by the temple administrators with great pomp. The hair is collected in cups and is auctioned to devotees for high sums.

A PERSONAL VIEW ON SHIVA NATARAJA AND THE HAIR CYCLE

Shiva Nataraja is a depiction of the Hindu God Shiva as the cosmic dancer who performs his divine dance to destroy a weary universe and make preparations for the god Brahma to start the process of creation. As a symbol, Shiva Nataraja is a brilliant invention. It combines in a single image Shiva’s roles as creator, preserver, and destroyer of the universe and conveys the Indian conception of the never-ending cycle of time. It is seen as the image of his rhythmic play which is the source of all movement within the universe.

The Nataraja sect originated in the state of Tamil Nadu in southern India. Archeometallurgical studies made on South Indian bronzes combined with iconographic and literary research provide the evidence that the Nataraja bronze was a Pallava innovation (7th to mid-9th century). The largest Nataraja statue is found in Neyveli, in Tamil Nadu. The image of “the Lord (Shiva) as the Cosmic Dancer” is shown at the Chidambaram temple in an anthropomorphic form rather than in the usual nonanthropomorphic form of the lingam.

In 2004, a 2 meter statue of the dancing Shiva was unveiled at the European Center for Research in Particle Physics (CERN) in Geneva. The statue was presented to CERN by the Indian government to celebrate the research center’s long association with India. A special plaque next to the Shiva statue explains the significance of the metaphor of Shiva’s cosmic dance with quotations from Austrian-born American physicist Fritjof Capra: “Hundreds of years ago, Indian artists created visual images of dancing Shivas in a beautiful series of bronzes. In our time, physicists have used the most advanced technology to portray the patterns of the cosmic dance. The metaphor of the cosmic dance thus unifies ancient mythology, religious art, and modern physics.”

In my personal opinion, the same principle manifests in the hair cycle, in which perpetual cycles of growth (anagen), regression (catagen), and resting (telogen) underly the growth and shedding of hair [Figure 1a]. As the Lord of Dance, Shiva Nataraja performs the dance in which everything is created, maintained, and dissolved. The stoic face of Shiva represents his neutrality, thus being in balance. The snake swirling around his waist is kundalini, the divine force thought to reside within everything (control of hair cycling occurs within the hair follicle itself). The dwarf on which Nataraja dances is the demon Apasmara (Muyalaka, as known in Tamil), which symbolizes Shiva’s victory over ignorance [Figure 1b].

THE HAIR RESEARCH SOCIETY OF INDIA

The Hair Research Society of India, was founded in June 2004 by a group of dedicated and astute dermatologists.
under the leadership of Professor Patrick Yesudian and Doctor S. Murugusundram as Secretary, as a nonprofit organization dedicated to research and education in the science of hair (www.inhrs.org). It consists of clinical dermatologists, and basic scientists involved in the study of hair biology, clinical hair disorders, and their management.

India accounts for 10% of all expenditure on research and development in Asia, and the number of scientific publications grew by 45% over the past 5 years. Notably, the HRSI reached milestones in the journey of academic pursuit with the launch of the International Journal of Trichology in 2009 (www.ijtrichology.com), which is indexed with PubMed and gaining on impact factor, and with the establishment of the Hair India conference in 2010.\(^{[1-12]}\)

Considering the abundant clinical material available in India, the HRSI has a great potential to understand and explore the science of hair. As a journey of thousand miles starts with a small step, the society has grown significantly in the past years with a strong academic foundation and continuing medical education. Members of the society take active participation by giving lectures, presenting case reports, and sharing expert opinions, which enables the exchange of new ideas in clinical and experimental research on hair, both nationally and internationally.

Ultimately, the society aims at saving the public from being taken for a ride by quackery, and at creating the awareness that the science of hair represents a subspecialty of Dermatology since the hair is an appendage of the skin. Therefore, only dermatologists have the qualifications to act and to practice as “Dermato-trichologists,” a term recently proposed by Patrick Yesudian,\(^{[13,14]}\) in contrast to the term trichologist that has become associated with laity and cosmetics rather than with medical professionalism.\(^{[15-17]}\)

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Conflicts of interest

The author has been invited speaker on the occasions of Hair India 2012 and 2014, and has given lectures for Cipla Ltd., Dr. Reddy’s Laboratories Ltd., and Abbott Healthcare India in major cities throughout the subcontinent of India. The Center for Dermatology and Hair Diseases Professor Trüeb offers doctors-in-training as dermatologists international traineeships in dermato-trichology.

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