

Indian Women and Human Hair: Culture, Industry, and Livelihood |

Keertana Panyam

BFA, Design History and Practice

Parsons School of Design

India's knowledge systems have long mythologized the Hindu woman's traditional femininity as unrivaled, indispensable, and everlasting. For centuries, Indian women have been esteemed for their everlasting black hair, long and thick, braided neatly down their back. Two of India's most famous epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, contain frequent motifs of the braid. In these stories the neglect of the hair was a marker of grief or instability.¹ In the same vein, a well groomed mane signaled a fertile and healthy woman, ready for marriage. Traditionally, women were expected to comb, oil, and braid their hair before putting flowers in it. Deviation from this ritual, including wearing the hair short or loose, was associated with Western values, such as a lack of maternal instincts, and framed in opposition to Indian tradition.² Once guaranteed by Ayurvedic knowledge, this beauty is now equally promised by advertisements for shampoos, oils, and treatments. These beauty standards contextualized the advent of liberalization in 1990s India, when more women were entering the public workforce and seeking financial independence.³ The working woman's hair was tied to both her social and economic mobility.

Concurrently, India is widely known to be one of the world's largest exporters of human hair. In 2025, India's human hair exports approximated \$700 million dollars (USD), with major

Commented [2]: A shaved head was a marker of social seclusion for women who were recently widowed. For many women, it was unthinkable to give away one's hair; beliefs about subjecting oneself to the

¹ Rajendralala Mitra, *Dressing and Hairstyling in Ancient India* (Cosmo Publications, 2007), 59.

² Ritta Högbäck, *Global Hair, Inequality and Women's Worth* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2026), 41.

³ Anita Anand, *The Beauty Game* (Penguin Books India, 2002), 37.

markets in China, the USA, and Vietnam.⁴ Within the beauty market, Indian women's hair is glorified for its thickness, texture, and length, making them ideal for wigs and hair pieces. Many hair companies claim their hair is ethically sourced from temples, particularly in the holy site of Tirupati, where hair is donated in mass in religious ceremonies. This narrative separates the hair from the process of its extraction, while obscuring the true source of the hair. Companies capitalize on the momentum of globalization to suggest that local devotional practices have become intertwined with modern hair technologies. While companies might boast about the morality of their operation, their advertising lacks transparency as to what that procedure looks like, thereby decentralizing hair donors from the process of hair production. This, in turn, transforms a community-driven social practice into a material commodity, and reduces women into a source of capital investment in the form of their bodies. This research project began by considering the cultural significance of a woman's hair and asking what it means to "ethically source" full, long, and healthy hair for the global hair industry. How often do women in India participate in this industry and willingly give up decades-worth of hair?

Rather than a purely economic inquiry, my research follows the sociological tradition of using everyday practices and phenomena to interrogate large-scale institutions. My preliminary research led to an array of literature that evaluates facets of the global hair trade within political or religious economies. The demand for temple donated hair far exceeds what temples can supply, but hair companies intentionally obscure the significance of other forms of hair collection. Waste hair picking, which makes up closer to 70% of the Indian hair export, is the process of collecting, detangling, and sorting strands of hair that come from peoples' combs, shower drains, and waste bins.⁵ Primarily performed by women who live in precarious and exploitative conditions, this labor

⁴ Department of Commerce (India). "Value of human hair and related products exported from India from financial year 2015 to 2025 (in million U.S. dollars)." Chart. *Statista*, June 3, 2025.

⁵ Priti Salian, "The Hard Labor That Fuels the Hair Trade," *Sapiens*, January 19, 2022.

is obscured and undervalued by the industry. This line of inquiry served as an entry point for my travel research, as it reflected my own suspicions about the nature of “ethically sourced” temple hair. The two locations I chose to further conduct this research were Hyderabad and Bengaluru, which are peripheral to major centers of human hair export, while simultaneously having their own localized hair collection practices. Through interviews, literature reviews, and archival research, I was able to further investigate the roles that Indian women play in the globalized hair industry, as well as their motives for doing so. Within the overarching theme of human hair, subtopics that I engaged with in my research include waste management, gendered differences within hair collection, and critiques of the political economy of temples. My travel research brought me closer to the micro-industries within India’s hair export, particularly Hyderabad’s wig-making industry and Bengaluru’s hair-collection industry.

In my interviews with women who had previously donated or considered donating hair, several of them affirmed longstanding suspicions about giving away hair; one interviewee recalled that in South Indian tradition, it is a bad omen to give one’s hair to anyone, a belief perpetuated by her mother, who insisted that “people will do black magic with your hair.” Simultaneously, the women I interviewed rejected the possibility of ever receiving money for their hair, and remained skeptical that temples could sell donors’ hair without their knowledge. They felt that giving hair should be devoid of personal motives and done only in favor of a deeper, altruistic purpose. Commodifying the hair effectively cheapened it, posing an ethical dilemma for unsuspecting donors.

In Hyderabad, I interviewed wig makers and hair donors to further my understanding of who donates hair and why. One organization, Hyderabad Hair Donations (NPO), detailed their entire process, from cutting the hair and creating the wig, to donating the wigs to cancer patients free of cost. This organization remains extremely transparent with their donors and recipients,

creating thorough documentation throughout the hair's journey. They cite this accountability as the reason for people's willingness to donate their hair. They found that women were more likely to donate their hair if they felt confident about where their hair was going. The organization's practices were a stark contrast to the fate of temple donated hair, where the donors themselves are ignorant to the hair trade they unwillingly took part in.

However, not all temple donated hair qualifies for the commercial hair market. In an interview with a hair tonsurer at a Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) temple in Bengaluru, I learned about the network of temples which manage the vast majority of temple donated hair. People mostly come to local TTD temples when they are unable to get a ticket in Tirumala, but all of them are managed under the same, autonomous TTD administrative body. People's main motive to go to Tirumala isn't getting their hair tonsured, as that can be done anywhere, but to embark on the religious pilgrimage at the site. However, much of the hair that gets donated in religious ceremonies is not long enough to create the bundles or wigs that are exported out of the country; wig makers generally cite ten inches to be the absolute minimum length of hair necessary to create a wig, preferring twelve inches or more. According to this TTD tonsurer, a lot of the shorter hair acquired by the temples, often from the scalps of men and children, goes to farms for composting or manure.

While in Bengaluru, I met with a waste management activist who had recently spoken about the experience of collecting her own hair as a means of supporting independent hair pickers. I learned that the most expensive waste we generate is hair, while the people who manage it profit very little from it, despite contributing to an unsuspectingly large portion of the country's hair export. Traditionally, hair collectors would go door-to-door to collect hair in exchange for steel vessels, though these vessels are mostly aluminum now. The livelihoods of

these communities depend on selling the hair they collect to hair wholesalers. Waste collectors, frequently women, usually collect very little hair in a day's worth of work and frequently have to carry out their work in extreme heat with small children on their backs. Men were more likely to take on less labor intensive and more lucrative roles, like packaging or managing transactions with wholesalers.⁶ A Bengaluru organization called Hasiru Dala advocates for these hair pickers, highlighting the value of giving women in this field the agency to manage these practices themselves, in ways that allow them to support their livelihoods and families on their own terms.

The ICI student fellowship enabled me to travel and arrange field visits with a variety of experts who were able to shed light on my research questions, including wig makers, non-profit directors creating wigs for cancer patients, temple hair tonsurers, waste management activists, and women who both donate and collect hair. My field research didn't offer any concrete or simple answers to my challenging questions, but instead allowed me to challenge the culturally ingrained practice of religious hair donation. Through this study, I learned that hair collection and donation processes are taxing and laborious, as well as largely hidden to the public, undertaken by women who power tradition, culture, and industry. I am grateful to the India China Institute for granting me the opportunity to conduct this research.

⁶ Tarlo, Emma, *Entanglement: The Secret Lives of Hair*. (Oneworld Publications, 2016).

Bibliography

- Anand, Anita. *The Beauty Game*. India: Penguin Books India, 2002.
- Department of Commerce (India). "Value of human hair and related products exported from India from financial year 2015 to 2025 (in million U.S. dollars)." Chart. Statista, June 3, 2025.
- Edwards, Eiluned. "Hair, Devotion and Trade in India." In *Hair: Styling, Culture and Fashion*, 149–166. Edited by Geraldine Biddle-Perry and Sarah Cheang. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008.
- Högbäck, Ritta. *Global Hair, Inequality and Women's Worth*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2026.
- Kamińska-Jones, Dorota. *Indian Women's Beauty Secrets or Traditional Cosmetology*. New Delhi: Dev Publishers, 2025.
- Kataria, Suraj. "Illegal human hair trafficking in India: a dark side of a global industry." *Trends in Organized Crime*, August 7, 2025.
- Mitchell, Karen. "About Us." *True Hair Co*. New York, 2025.
trueindianhair.com/about-us.
- Mitra, Rajendralala. *Dressing and Hairstyling in Ancient India*. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 2007.
- Salian, Priti. "The Hard Labor That Fuels the Hair Trade," *Sapiens*. January 19, 2022. sapiens.org/culture/human-hair-pickers.
- Tarlo, Emma. *Entanglement: The Secret Lives of Hair*. New York: Oneworld Publications, 2016.

Commented [3]: 173 words