

Interview With Dr. Anand Mohan

(transcript of enclosed tape)

Q: I need to know about the custom prevalent among the Dravidian Hindus mostly in Southern India in the Madras region, where on certain occasions they cut off their hair and bring it to the temple. Are you familiar with such a custom?

A: They don't cut off the hair and bring it to the temple; they usually cut it at the temple itself, and offer the hair.

Q: They offer the hair?

A: Yes.

Q: They offer the hair to whom? Do they offer it to the god or to the priest or what?

A: Well, they don't really offer it to anybody in that sense. I mean, the offering, the redeeming, they offer a vow to do away with something they consider most precious, most valuable, and if they have beautiful hair, if that is the most valuable thing they have, so they take a vow that if whatever happens, they will give away this most prized possession. So you just go there and get rid of the hair. It's not a question of offering it physically in a tangible way to somebody or the other.

Q: I see. And the cutting of the hair is not a way of worshipping the god or something like that?

A: No, no, it's just the redeeming of a pledge.

Q: I see. And the cutting of the hair is not a way of worshipping the god or something like that?

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Q: I see. And the cutting off of the hair - does that have to be done in the temple?

A: Ah, well, usually they go to the temple, you know, there is a large amount of land around the temple.

Q: So they go to the temples and cut off the hair there?

A: Yes.

Q: And does the hair get cut off by the priest or by the barber?

A: No, by the barber.

Q: There are barbers in the temples?

A: Right, not in the temples, outside the temples.

Q: You mean the temple owns a barbershop on its grounds?

A: No, its not a barber shop, it's just, you cut.

Q: You cut outside the temple. What do they do with the hair?

A: Ah, the hair is then cleaned, and then exported to America.

Q: Really?

A: Sure, what do you think?

Q: I don't know, but...

A: They all come as wigs.

Q: And what about when a child gets his first haircut?

A: Same thing.

Q: Same thing. It's also not a sacrifice.

A: Ah, well, I can't get the thrust of your [questions].

Q: You see, I'm doing research about the Hindu religion, about their customs, and I must know if the Hindus believe that they sacrifice their hair to the god, or they offer it up to the god, and I want to know about the cutting of the hair, if the cutting is a way they worship the god, because . . .

A: No, no, no, no.

Q: There are certain religions that would cut their hair, and the cutting of the hair itself was an act of worship to the god, such as bowing down or slaughtering an animal.

A: No, nothing like that.

Q: Nothing like that.

A: Somebody else may come and throw in a diamond earring in an offer, or a gold bangle, or a gold chain. There are numerous ways which you can offer what you consider very valuable [to] a person. But for somebody whose most precious thing is long, silken hair, that's what they offer.

Q: Let's take the gold and the diamonds. Where does that go?

A: There's a huge collection of boxes, or deposits.

Q: The temple keeps it?

A: Well, the temple keeps it, invests it, uses it as money, you know.

Q: And probably the money that the hair is sold for also goes to the temple.

A: It also goes to the temple, yes.

Q: So in other words, this is a way of donating money to the temple.

A: In effect, yes.

Q: But it's not like an offering to a god in the sense of a sacrifice, like in the Bible they made sacrifices, you know, where they would take an animal and slaughter it on an alter.

A: No, no, no, no.

Q: They don't put the hair on any sort of an alter?

A: No, no, no.

Q: They just give it to the priest and the priest sends it to the importer.

A: Right. In fact, barberry is considered unclean. That's why it's done outside in the precinct of the temple . . . not in the temple, but on the temple grounds. And then, one goes and has a bath to cleanse yourself.

Q: It's like a ritual bath?

A: Yeah, well, it's a regular bath, it's nothing. Then after you take your bath and you are clean then you can go inside the temple.

Q: And they just give the hair to the priest? Do they say any prayers?

A: No, they don't give it to the priest. It's all collected outside the temple.

Q: So the hair never goes into the temple?

A: Never, never.

Q: Let me ask you something. Why do the priests get the money for this? Why can't the people themselves sell it? Is there any law . . .?

A: No, the priests don't sell it!

Q: The priests don't sell it?

A: No. The priests have no function in the administrative office of the temple. The trustees do that.

Q: The trustees sell it. Is there any law that the profits for the hair have to accrue to the benefit of the temple?

A: Well, insofar as they are offered within the temple precinct on the temple grounds, on temple property . . .

Q: But is there any law that it has to be offered within the temple property?

A: No, no, there is no law at all. Nothing like it.

Q: Why would the people agree to give the money to the temple as opposed to taking it themselves?

A: Well, what's the point of it then? You aren't giving it away; you are making a profit out of it then. What is the sanctity of saying, "Well, if this happens, I'll offer my hair," and then you want to profit from that!

Q: Okay, then why can't they just cut it off and throw it in the garbage?

A: Well, because you say you are offering to the presiding deity at that particular temple, so there's no point in throwing it in the garbage!

Q: I see. They do offer it to accrue to the benefit of the temple.

A: Of course, but in the olden days nobody did that. Okay, a hundred years ago or a couple of hundred years ago you would just throw it in the garbage.

Q: They used to throw it in the garbage.

A: Of course. That's because it had no use. Then some smart Americans must have gotten there and said, "Ah, there's a lot of money!"

Q: The temples used to throw it in the garbage.

A: Yes.

Q: Then some smart Americans started importing it. Because I do know there are some exporters in Bombay and Madras that export temple hair.

A: Of course! I am not kidding - it's a fact! They have made beautiful expensive wigs. And they are exported to the United States.

Q: And do the people who offer up the hair know where it eventually ends up?

A: No.

Q: They don't know?

A: They just come there . . .

Q: So in other words the exporters know, and the people in America know, but the ones giving the hair don't know where their hair is going.

A: They don't have to. Their function is done when they are leaving the pledge. They are not interested . . .

Q: So they think that the hair is going to go into the garbage.

A: No, they don't think of anything! They just kept their vow and they gave their pledge, that's it.