

## Hindu Religious Sacrifice Helps Temples, Beauty Industry Profit

January 24, 2014

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What lengths will hair manufacturers go to in order to obtain real human hair?

As hair extensions once again surge in popularity, there have been renewed calls to educate the public on where a lot of this hair comes from. Though some hair extensions come from animals and others are synthetic, a lot of the higher-end hair extensions from companies such as Great Lengths, actually come from temples in India.

According to the documentary "[Hair India](#)," Hindu pilgrims have donated their hair at holy temples throughout Southern India for centuries in an attempt to purify themselves and repay debt to their gods.

As legend has it, Vishnu — an avatar of God and the Preserver of the World — took out a loan in order to pay for his wedding. But Vishnu's loan was so large that it would take him thousands of years to pay off his debt. Now many devout Hindus help pay off Vishnu's debt by offering the only thing they have: their hair.

Known most commonly as "temple hair," these real human-hair extensions are available in many salons in Europe and the U.S., where they cost about [\\$5,000](#) each time they are put in. Despite the high price, many have opted to use these extensions since real extensions look and feel better than synthetic hair.

Though most extensions made from actual human hair comes from China, Indian hair is [more valuable](#) since it is "naturally silkier and has never been treated with artificial dyes." In many cases, the hair has never been subjected to anything more abrasive than coconut oil and herbal soap, and has sometimes never been cut before.

But what's particularly upsetting to many is that the temples reap millions of dollars in profit from the pilgrims religious sacrifice, while the donors, many of whom are poor, never see so much as one cent for their hair.

### Rich vs poor

Temple officials have [defended](#) their decision to sell the hair, arguing that the hair would otherwise be thrown away, but the money the temple earns from the hair sales can be used to fund orphanages and hospitals.

"For example, we financed children's education by building schools. We distributed approximately 30,000 free meals every day for the poor and needy, and we have built hospitals to cure those who, otherwise, could never afford such expensive treatments," [said](#) a director at the Tirumala Temple.

While the director may have a point, it doesn't explain why poor women are shaving their heads more often than wealthier women, who [donate three strands](#) instead.

"For poor rural women, their hair is their only vanity," [said](#) Mayoor Balsara, chief executive of India's largest exporter of human hair, Sona Devi Trading Company. "They have saved up to make a once-in-a-

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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.”

Punari Aruna, 40, donated her hair after ending her 30-hour pilgrimage to the temple. Accompanied by 25 of her relatives, Aruna [said](#) this was her fifth time donating her hair, because “Offering your hair to the god is a symbolic gesture of surrendering one’s ego and a way of giving thanks for your blessings.”

But some people who have learned of this hair trade have begun to [exploit](#) impoverished and devout Hindus outside of the temples, by collecting hair from people’s personal hairbrushes and convincing men to force their wives to shave their heads for \$10.

[Tirumala Venkateswara](#), for example, attracts tens of thousands of pilgrims each day, making it the temple with the most hair donations in India. The temple features 18 shaving halls, but there are so many people waiting to donate their hair that women and young girls can wait for up to five hours to donate.

At the temple, some 650 barbers sit in lines on the concrete floor and tie the women’s hair into ponytails before cutting it off. Once the large portions of hair are removed, the barbers use a razor to shave each pilgrim’s head, before dousing their head with water to wash away any blood.

### **From sacrifice to hair extension**

On average, each woman donates about [10 oz of hair](#), which goes for about \$350. Baskets filled with hair are collected every six hours and stored in a vast warehouse where it is piled knee deep.

It’s [estimated](#) that each year India exports an estimated 2,000 tons of temple hair a year. The best – or longest – hair will sell for about \$580 per pound. The hair is sold in yearly auctions that take place in March or April.

According to Balsara, one ton of hair is equal to donations from about 3,000 women. Since the shaving ceremony and sale of hair is not limited to one holy site, and 85 percent of the people in India are Hindu, those companies that export India’s human hair don’t foresee a shortage of temple hair anytime soon.

All of the hair goes to the highest bidder — it’s that simple. And if it’s not purchased by a hair extension or wig manufacturer, Indian hair is used to stuff mattresses, create oil filters or extracted for the amino acids.

Great Lengths, which is based in Rome, regularly buys temple hair and markets the hair as “[ethical](#)” since they know where it came from. When the company gets the hair, it is washed by hand in giant baths, then pulled through long beds of spikes by hand to smooth it before being tied into neat bundles of 200 strands each.

Once it’s smooth, the hair is packed into cardboard boxes and shipped to Nepi, Italy, where the pigment is removed by soaking the hair in a solution for up to 20 days.

The company sells its hair extensions to salons all over the world, including in India, which some say is rather [ironic](#), as India’s poorest donate their hair to the gods, the only item of value they have, so those in India’s high society can have long, luscious locks.

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