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Judy Resnick  
213 Dane Hall  
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Dear Judy,

Thank you for your letter of inquiry on the South Indian tonsure practices. They are not, strictly speaking, called "Dravidian Hindus". Most are Vaisnavas, those who worship Visnu in one form or another.

There are several major pilgrimage shrines in India where tonsure is part of the personal preparation for worship. The primary such shrine is Tirupati in Southern Andhra Pradesh. It is a hilltop shrine and has a flourishing and very clear, well-organized support structure. On festival days 20-30,000 pilgrims come to Tirupati.

There are "hair offering" centers at Tirupati, as it is a common vow to undergo complete tonsure before worship at the temple. These large barbershops are in the bazaar, not in the temple, and are run by barbers not priests. Hair is never presented in the temple precincts at all: Indeed it would be highly impure to do so, and the point of tonsure in Hindu culture, as in many others, is to purify oneself completely before presenting oneself in devotion to the Lord.

The first haircut of a child is often a complete tonsure and is usually done at a religious center if at all possible. Tonsure also accompanies life cycle rites, such as the initiation of an adolescent into sacred learning (the counterpart to bar mitzvah) and death rites. The widespread tonsure of men, women, and children -- indeed the whole family -- is practiced only at major pilgrimage centers such as Tirupati, Palni, Simhachalam, etc.


The hair which has been cut off has no religious value whatsoever. It is the tonsured, purified person who enters the temple, not the hair. At Tirupati, where there is so



much discarded hair, the hair is sold for wigs, which is the concern, as you know, of Orthodox Jews. I have spoken with several rabbis about this issue and assured them that the rite of tonsure is a totally "secular" rite, so to speak, like bathing and putting on fresh clothes, before entering the temple for the worship of God.

I hope I have answered your questions. Please feel free to call if you have further questions.

Sincerely,



Diana Eck, Professor of  
Comparative Religion and  
Indian Studies

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