

Black Gold

The Business of Hair

By: Shahnee Zaver

So the story goes in the Brothers Grimm tale of Rapunzel, the witch takes her into the wild and chops off her hair eventually doing away with the long golden locks. If she had thought to sell this fine hair spun like gold, she may have profited a handsome sum. Such is the case today with the tresses of thousands of women, men and children across India. Often referred to as 'black gold' or 'Remy' they, unlike Rapunzel offer their hair voluntarily as a sign of faith and devotion throughout various temples across the country. The hair is then taken on its own journey where it is bought, sold and dispersed throughout Asia, Europe and the United States.



Since ancient times Indian woman have loved to grow their hair long and would spend hours washing and drying their manes over scented incense sticks. But with the passing of time and emerging trends, dictated in large part by the West, it has meant two things. Women are not as attached to their hair length as they once were and thus going for increasingly shorter styles and there is a soaring demand abroad for hair extensions.

High in the granite hills above the town of Tirupati, some 20,000 Indians flock to the ancient temple of Sri Venkateswara in Chittoor district of the Southern state of Andhra Pradesh on a daily basis. They come to pay their respects to Lord Venkateswara, a reincarnation of the god Vishnu often embarking on long journeys from their cities, towns and villages. The purpose of their visit is a ritual called tonsuring, the shaving of one's head. This signifies an offering of devotion and gratitude to Vishnu. It is believed that if one gives up their hair, the god will grant them any wish they desire.

It used to be that the hair acquired by the temples was used to stuff mattresses or discarded and burned. But since the rise of globalization and the trend for wigs and now hair extensions this ritual has turned Tirumala into one of the richest pilgrimage sites in the world.

The world of buying and selling hair is a lucrative one. Since the popularity of hair extensions, created in large part by Hollywood, Westerners are now asking specifically for "temple hair," for one reason -- it is some of the best hair out there. Temple hair is the highest quality hair one can buy and coveted by hair merchants and

wig-producers for its strength and beauty. At the temple most of the young women who arrive for tonsuring have healthy, gleaming waist length hair that has only been treated with coconut oil and hasn't been cut since their childhood or in some cases not at all. The process after the tonsuring involves sorting and cleaning the hair and then stripping it of color. It is then re-colored in one of 56 available shades and then stitched into extensions or bonded to a woman's natural hair. Extensions made with temple hair can last up to six months. And with such hair comes a hefty price tag. Hair extensions past the shoulders can run upwards of \$4000 USD. Hair from men and children because of its length is usually used to coat linings and to extract the protein L-Cystein used for products from baby food to doughnuts.

Jaswanth Soundarapandian, the regional director of the government's council on hair export, says that \$82 million worth of hair was exported to the United States during the 2004-05 fiscal year and that amount has been rising exponentially ever since due to the demand.

On yearly basis 9 million devotees across India pay obeisance to its deity. The hair is collected, stored and auctioned off. Tirupati sells over 6 million pounds on a yearly basis and the volume increases as the number of devotees rises with the growing population.

There are thousands of temples across India that practice this ritual and the use of the money is diverse. Some use it purely for profit and others disburse it to local charities and villages.

Interesting how one act of humility and a surrendering of the ego can directly satisfy another's need for external beauty.