

# Hair

Embedded within India's most ancient text, the *R̥gveda*, there is a hymn portraying a conversation of a young girl, Apālā, with the god Indra. She makes this request:

Indra, make these three surfaces grow forth –  
the head of my Papa, the field, and this on my  
belly. That field of ours, this body of mine,  
and my Papa's head – make all these hairy.  
(*R̥V.* 8.91; trans. Brereton & Jamison; for an  
examination of this text, see Schmidt, 1987;  
Vajracharya, 1988)

We have in this ancient text a clear link among grass or grain in a field, the hair on a man's head, and the pubic hair of a pubescent girl. Here we have a clear and unambiguous connection between hair and fertility and/or → sexuality, a connection that I will explore further during the course of this study.

In most human societies known to us, hair – especially hair on the head – has been used in a variety of contexts, both religious and non-religious, to communicate an array of socially recognized meanings and to locate individuals and groups employing a particular form of hair manipulation within specific social and religious institutions and roles. My aim in this paper is to present a broad survey of hair within the Hindu traditions of India, although I will have occasion to comment on parallels in other traditions, such as the Buddhist and Jain.

## Practices

In India symbolic manipulations of hair appear as variations of three central themes:

1. the groomed control of hair;
2. shaving the hair of the head (in the case of adult males, this may involve also the shaving of the beard); and
3. the neglect of hair resulting in either loose unkempt hair or dirty matted hair, often accompanied by the neglect of nails and, in the case of males, of the beard.

Without denying the possibility of personal meanings (Obeyesekere, 1981) – which, after all, are only to be expected, given the dialectic

nature of cultural products – all these types of hair manipulation, I hope to show, communicate deeply social, and socially understood, meanings, placing the individual whose hair is so manipulated in different relationships both to the broader society and to the segment of that society to which that individual belongs.

Groomed and controlled hair is the hallmark of people, in a special way of adult males and females, with publicly recognized roles within society (Hallpike, 1969). The “controlled social hair” of such individuals, especially of married males, is the point of reference of most – although not necessarily of all – other hair manipulations from which they derive their meaning and significance. The control of hair may be achieved by various means. The hair of an adult female, especially a married woman, is long but oiled and groomed and restrained by a knot, by one or several braids, or by some other means; some women may even cover their hair, especially when they appear in public. The distinctive ways in which hair is worn by adult males and females clearly symbolize their different → gender roles. Even though short hair appears to be distinctive of the male in modern South Asia, the picture is less clear in ancient and medieval periods. Both males and females are depicted in Indian art and sculpture, for example, with long hair but with distinctive coiffures (Padma, 1991). What is common to both genders is that their hair is groomed and controlled, and this seems to signal the individual's full participation within society and social structures.

The groomed control of hair is especially demanded when people present themselves in public. Thus, when a person appears in public with loose and uncontrolled hair, it carries a variety of publicly recognized meanings and messages. Loose hair, especially of women, is a sign of domestic informality and even of sexual intimacy. In sculpture, for example, erotic couples are depicted with loose and flowing hair (Padma, 1991, 266–267). In iconography disheveled and flying hair may indicate the demonic and the female outside of male control, as in representations of → Kālī (Marglin, 1985). It may also signal liminal and dangerous status. Mendicants, for example, are warned not to beg

from a *muktakeśinī* (a woman with loose hair), a term that could indicate either that there is sexual intimacy or, as we shall presently see, that she is having her monthly period. In warrior ethic, a soldier is warned against killing an opponent who has let his hair down (*muktakeśin*), evidently a sign that he has surrendered the role of soldier. What is clear, however, is that males and in a special way females are not expected to present themselves in public with loose and ungroomed hair. If they do, their actions carry publicly recognized meanings – they are making a public statement about their social status.

Loose and especially disheveled hair is associated in a special way with temporary ritual separations from society. The most common instance of such a separation is that of women during their menstrual period, when the hair is left unbraided and unwashed. As P. Hershman (1974, 278), in his detailed study of hair among the Punjabis, has shown, the expression “I have to wash my head” is used euphemistically by even contemporary women to indicate the onset of their menstrual period. Their ritual separation makes them untouchables; no social intercourse with them is permitted, including touching. Menstruating women do not cook or even sit with the rest of the household to eat. Loose and disheveled hair of women, but sometimes also of men, is also a sign of mourning, another ritually impure state when normal ritual activities and social relations are suspended. Loose hair on all these occasions of ritual separation tells the world, “I cannot be approached.”

The liminal status of a person with loose hair is exemplified in two interesting stories relating to a vow of vengeance. → Draupadī, the wife of the Pāṇḍava brothers in the → *Mahābhārata*, left her hair loose after she was insulted in public by the Kauravas until their final defeat and death (Hiltebeitel, 1981). Her hair was, in fact, already loose when the outrage occurred, because she was then having her period. Cāṇakya, the prime minister of Candragupta Maurya, provides the other example. Viśākhadatta, in his Sanskrit play *Mudrārākṣasa* (1.9), depicts him as keeping his Brahmanical topknot untied until he had fulfilled his vow of placing Candragupta securely on the throne after vanquishing completely the dynasty of the Nandas. In both these cases, the vow of vengeance suspends the normal social roles of Draupadī and Cāṇakya until the completion of their vows.

A deeper and often a more permanent separation from social roles is signaled by the total shaving of the head. It is done by a bewildering variety of people in a wide array of contexts. For heuristic purposes, I distinguish different types of social separation signaled by shaving, in terms of both duration and the type of separation involved.

The most common temporary separation occurs in initiation ceremonies. Since A. van Gennep’s groundbreaking work *Les rites de passage* (1909), initiation rites are commonly recognized as having three moments: separation, liminality, and integration. The initiate is first ritually separated from society and from his or her social role and rank and left in an ill-defined marginal state. The initiatory rite concludes with the reintegration of the initiate into his or her new status within society. In South Asian traditions, almost every initiatory separation is accompanied and signaled by the ritual shaving of the initiate. When a young boy undergoes vedic initiation (*upanayana*; see → *saṃskāras*), when a sacrificer is consecrated (*dīkṣā*) prior to his performing a vedic sacrifice, when a king is anointed (*abhiṣeka*) – at all these initiatory rites, the subject is first shaved. Indeed, these ceremonies are presented expressly as new births of the individuals (Gonda, 1965, 331). Many explicit statements and symbolic enactments of the initiates’ return to the womb to become an embryo again are found in these ceremonies. Shaving reduces the individual to the state of an embryo or an infant – the asexual and hairless condition.

Initiatory shaving, especially the shaving of the boy at his vedic initiation and of the sacrificer at his consecration, appears to have been paradigmatic and to have influenced the ritual articulation of most ritual separations in South Asian societies.

Social intercourse is forbidden with people who are tainted with ritual pollution. Such people are ritually separated during the period of → impurity. Some of these temporary periods of separation, such as those created by the death of a close relative, can also be marked by shaving. A son, for example, is expected to shave his head at the death of his father or mother. A more permanent ritual separation from society occurs in the case of a widow (see → widowhood). The social position of a widow has undergone repeated changes in Indian history. There is at least one period when the ritually impure, inauspicious,

and unmarriageable state of a widow was signaled by the shaving of her head. The permanence of this condition, moreover, required that she keep her head permanently shaven, and in this and other customs, a widow often resembled an ascetic.

Major crimes, such as murder, were punished by death, but when capital punishment was not meted out, as when the criminal happened to be a Brahman, the criminal was shaved and lived the life of a beggar outside of society.

The best-known ritual shaving associated with permanent separation from society is, of course, that of the Hindu *saṃnyāsin* or renouncer, the Buddhist and Jain monk, and their female counterparts. A central feature of the rites of initiation into the ascetic life in all these traditions is the removal of head and, where applicable, facial hair. Throughout their life, these ascetics keep their head and face clear of hair by periodic shaving. Even though, as I will argue, the central social meaning of ascetic shaving, just as the shaving of students, sacrificers, and widows, is that of separation from society, sexual symbolism is not lacking. Not only ascetics but also all people ritually shaven are forbidden to engage in sex. For most this is a temporary condition required by a rite of passage or necessitated by ritual pollution, but for the ascetic (and often also for the widow), it is permanent, and therein lies the difference between ascetic and other forms of ritual shaving. Shaving for the ascetic indicates his or her removal from socially sanctioned sexual structures, and, *a fortiori*, also from other types of social structures and roles. In the Indian context, this implies – at least theoretically and theologically – loss of → caste, inability to own property, and lack of legal standing in a court of law for most purposes (Olivelle, 1984, 140–151).

Elements of the ascetic initiatory ritual also indicate that shaving symbolizes the return to the sexually and socially undifferentiated status of an infant. During the Hindu ritual, for example, the shaven ascetic takes off all his clothes. The naked renouncer is significantly called *jātarūpadhara*, which literally means “one who bears the form one had at birth.” The ascetic is not just naked; he is reduced to the condition in which he was born, to the state of a newborn infant. Shaving is part of the symbolic complex that signifies his return to “the form he had at birth.” The absence of hair, just as much as nakedness, takes the initiate back to the prepubertal state of infancy.

The sexual symbolism of hair also helps explain some interesting features of ascetic behavior toward hair. It is well known that Jain monks at their initiation and periodically throughout their life remove their head hairs by tearing them by the roots. That this custom was not limited to the Jains is demonstrated by its presence in a somewhat abbreviated form in the Hindu ritual of ascetic initiation. Here the ascetic’s hair is first shaved, but five or seven hairs at the crown are left uncut. At the conclusion of the rite, the ascetic plucks these few hairs from the roots. Although one may attribute these practices to the common ascetic propensity to bodily torture and pain (see → *tapas*), this literal eradication of hair, especially viewed in the light of the broader grammar of ascetic bodily symbols, can be seen as a symbolic and ritual uprooting of sexual drives and attachments.

That shaving is the opposite of sexual engagement is also brought out in the head-shaving rites of Hindu ascetics during the annual liturgical cycle. They are not allowed to shave any time they may want. Rather the prescribed time for shaving is at the junctures between the five Indian seasons: spring, summer, rains, autumn, and winter. The Sanskrit term for season is *ṛtu*, the same term that is used to indicate the monthly menstrual cycle of a woman. Brahmanical law and ethics require a husband to engage in sexual intercourse with his wife in her *ṛtu*, that is, soon after the end of her period when a new “season,” a new fertile period, begins for his wife (*MaSm.* 3.45). I think it is not farfetched to see a correspondence between the husband approaching his wife at the beginning of her fertile season (*ṛtugamana*) and the ascetic shaving his head at the beginning of each calendrical season (*ṛtuvapana*). The *ṛtugamana* is thus transformed into *ṛtuvapana*. This shaving appears to symbolize an ascetic’s renunciation of sex precisely at the time – at least in a terminological sense – when the ethics of society requires a married man to engage in it. Significantly, it is this very need for periodic shaving that is denied in the case of the Buddha. According to a Jātaka account, the Buddha cut his hair with his sword to the length of two fingerbreadths. His hair remained the same length for the rest of his life, signifying, it would seem, the total extinguishing (*nirvāṇa*) of his sexual fires (see Zimmer, 1962, 160; Warren, 1962, 66).

A closer examination of the three institutions involving either permanent or extended periods

of separation from society marked by shaving the hair of the head – the vedic student, the widow, and the world renouncer – indicates their structural similarity. Indeed, the Brahmanical legal literature frequently brackets these three institutions together because many legal provisions are common to all three. They share similar characteristics: all are shaven-headed, all are forbidden to have sexual relations, all receive their food from others, all are expected not to adorn themselves or to participate in amusements, and all have a marginal legal status – they do not own property, for example, and are not permitted to enter into contracts or to take part in legal proceedings, such as being a witness or a surety in a court of law. They lead a penitential life, sleeping on the floor, not chewing betel, not anointing their bodies, and eating little. Students are reduced to the level of servants of their teachers. Both students and ascetics move out of their homes and are reduced to the status of beggars; neither is affected by pollution at the death of a relative.

Finally, we have a unique manipulation of hair by refusing to manipulate it at all – that is, the utter neglect of hair. The most common instance of neglected hair is the so-called matted hair (*jaṭā*) associated with forest hermits (*vānaprastha*; see → *āśrama*). At least in its early history, neglected and matted hair symbolized ideally and typically an individual's physical separation from society and civilized living, even though there are instances when the *jaṭā* is recommended for other individuals separated from social living but not necessarily from social geography, such as vedic students.

To understand the symbolism of matted hair, it is necessary to locate it within the larger grammar of the symbols associated with physical withdrawal from society in ancient India. Besides long and matted hair, bodily symbols of forest living included a long and uncut beard in the case of males, long and uncut nails, eating only uncultivated forest produce, clothes of tree bark or animal skin, and frequently also bodily uncleanness. People with matted hair are required to live in the forest or wilderness; they are repeatedly admonished “not to step on plowed land,” the prime symbol of civilized geography. They are often said to imitate the habits of wild animals. One can decipher from this symbolic grammar the following statement: a matted-hair individual withdraws from all culturally mediated products and institutions and from all culturally demar-

cated geographical areas and returns to the state of nature, the condition of the wild, to the way of life of animals. Not grooming the hair, not controlling it in any way, and letting it grow naturally into a wild and matted condition – all this appear to symbolize a person's total and absolute withdrawal from social structures and controls and from human culture as such.

In Indian history, we can identify at least three distinct types of matted-hair people who have withdrawn or have been forced to withdraw from society. First, there are the forest hermits called *vaikhānasa* or *vānaprastha*, and second, the aged. Old people, especially old kings, both within the Hindu institution of the four orders of life (→ *āśramas*) and outside that structure, were expected to leave their family and society and assume a forest mode of life. These two classes – the hermits and the retirees – are often collapsed into a single category in Indian legal literature (→ *dharmasāstra*). The third class consists of political exiles. The epic heroes of the *Mahābhārata* and the → *Rāmāyaṇa*, the five Pāṇḍava brothers and → Rāma, for example, are all sent into political exile. Significantly, political exiles assume the bodily symbols and the mode of life of forest hermits, just as criminals assume the lifestyle of shaven ascetics.

In concluding this overview of hair manipulation, I want to examine briefly some instances of long hair that do not fit into the scheme that I have outlined. The first example is the Sikh male (for extensive studies of hair among the Sikhs, see Uberoi, 1967; Hershman, 1974). He is not permitted to cut any of his hair – head hair or beard – from birth until death. An adult Sikh male is distinguished by his long hair and beard. He is, however, married and part of the social fabric. To understand the hair symbolism of Sikh males, we have to locate it within the historical context – North India between the 15th and the 18th century – that gave birth to the Sikh tradition. Coming from the background of devotional religion (→ *bhakti*) and saints (→ Sants) of northern India, the early Sikh *gurūs* deliberately drew a contrast between the Sikh bodily symbols and those of both the traditional Hindu renouncer with his shaven head and the Muslim with his circumcised penis. The Sikh holy man, by contrast, has long hair, is married, and is uncircumcised. There is a structural inversion between Hindu renouncers and Sikhs. The Sikh householder, the representative of a new form of holiness, stands in

structural opposition to two Hindu institutions: the ordinary householder, because the Sikh is a holy man, and the renouncer, because the Sikh affirms holiness within marriage and society. This dual opposition is symbolized, on the one hand, by the Sikh long hair and, on the other, by the turban that encloses and controls the hair and by the well-groomed and waxed beard. An interesting historical point is that the Sikh long hair is itself a symbol borrowed from another and by then obsolete form of separation from society, the uncut hair and beard of the forest hermit. Yet, as part of the social fabric, the uncut hair of the Sikh is not neglected; it is washed, oiled, combed, and enclosed within a turban – a traditional way of hair control in India. As J.P.S. Uberoi (1967, 96) has pointed out, the symbolism of the five central emblems expresses power and its control. As the comb controls the power of the hair, the steel bangle controls the power of the sword, and the underwear (*kach*) controls the power of the uncircumcised penis.

## Meanings

It would be equally naive to limit scholarly investigations to the meanings assigned to rites by the actors themselves or by the native tradition, as it is to ignore the meanings and interpretations offered by that tradition. Both the rites and the indigenous interpretations of the rites constitute the data that the scholar must take into account. One aspect of hair that stands out clearly in native exegesis is its impurity. Most ancient Indian sources require that people throw away any food contaminated by hair. Hair in this sense is equal to excrement. A significant and informative contradiction within the native tradition occurs, however, when what is said to be equivalent to feces is offered ceremonially to gods and goddesses (Hershman, 1974). This happens especially when young children are shaved for the first time. How can the same substance be regarded as excrement in one ritual setting and as a substance fit for the gods in another?

The sexual symbolism of hair that I discuss below may provide one clue. If at some level of its symbolic complex hair represents the fertile sexuality of its owner, then we can see how it can be at the same time both a sacred offering and excrement. Indeed, sexual fluids, especially

male semen, are at one time said to be the most refined part of the body and of food, even the carrier of personality from one birth to the next, and at other times bracketed with urine and feces as impure substances. A common way to indicate the depravity of a particular act, for example, is to say that if a man does it “he, in fact, offers to his ancestors semen, urine and excrement” (see e.g. Varada’s *Yatilingasamarthana* [Olivelle, vol. II, 1987, 43]).

Another element of the native exegesis of hair is its frequent connection in both myth and ritual to grass and plants, emphasizing thereby its relationship to fertility. We have seen this connection in the rgvedic prayer of the young girl Apālā. The connection between hair and grass/plants is well established in the vedic literature (Gonda, 1985). The *Taittirīyasaṃhitā* (7.5.25.1) states quite simply that “vegetation is hair.” Another text records the myth that the hair that fell from the creator god Prajāpati’s body turned into vegetation (*ŚBr.* 7.4.2.11). Other myths connect the creation of grasses and plants to the hair of → Viṣṇu incarnate as a boar (Gonda, 1985, 63–64). This correlation is brought out nicely in the following upanishadic verse:

As a spider spins out a thread, then draws it in;  
as plants sprout out from the earth;  
as on body and head hair grows from a  
living man;  
So from the imperishable all things here spring.  
(*MuU.* 1.1.7)

There is no single and unique meaning to be discovered within this vast range of hair rituals. Nevertheless, a set of related symbols of a society – in this case the ritual manipulations of hair – cannot exist in total isolation from one another. Just as a word in a language, so a symbol operates within a broader grammar within which alone it becomes meaningful. And just as it is heuristically profitable to search for the root meaning or the etymology of a linguistic symbol, not because it will exhaust the meanings available in actual usage but because such a meaning permits us to discover the relationships among those operational meanings and thereby further our understanding of those very meanings, so also is it useful to search for a root meaning, or a cluster of such meanings, of a symbol such as hair. Such a root meaning will not exhaust the multiplicity and the variety of operational meanings, but it may

allow a deeper understanding of those meanings and their interrelationships and of the enormous power of this ubiquitous symbol.

As a fiction, the root meaning is neither true nor false but more or less adequate or useful. The adequacy and usefulness of the root meaning that we ascribe to a symbol can be validated only by comparing it with the actual and operational meanings available through ethnographic and historical study. This may appear to be a vicious circle, the root meaning being abstracted from operational meanings and the root meaning in turn validating the operational meanings. Just as in philology, however, this circle can be converted from a vicious to a hermeneutical circle (Obeyesekere, 1990, 93). The concrete uses of a symbol yield its root meaning; the root meaning will reveal further levels of meaning of the symbol; as more operational meanings from the same culture (and from other cultures, if one is engaged in a cross-cultural study) are analyzed, they will help us further refine the root meaning.

I posit that the root meaning from which most, though not necessarily all, operational meanings of hair is derived is a multifaceted complex consisting of sexual maturity, drive, potency, and fertility. For the sake of brevity, I shall henceforth refer to the root meaning simply as sexual maturity. The adequacy of this root meaning can only be gauged by examining how the operational meanings can be derived from or related to it and how it enhances our understanding of those operational meanings (Obeyesekere, 1990). The root meaning of hair as such, however, does not occur in actual ritual or social settings. A basic symbolic remove intervenes between the root and operational meanings. This symbolic remove consists in the transformation of the root meaning of sexual maturity into its operational meanings relating to the status and role of an adult within the structures of society.

Hair in ritual has no inherent or absolute meaning; its meaning or meanings are derived always from its relationship or opposition to other ritual functions of hair existing within the same society. Thus, in order to understand the meaning of shaving the head or letting the hair fall loose and uncontrolled, we must locate them in relationship to those in society who do not shave their head or who keep their hair braided or under control. I believe that the most significant and central person with reference to whom most other hair rituals within the South Asian social context, and prob-

ably in most other societies, derive their meaning is the adult male, and to a lesser degree the adult female living within society. Thus we arrive at our first principle: control of hair by cutting, grooming, braiding, enclosing in a turban, or other means indicates an individual's participation in social structures within a publicly defined role and that individual's submission to social control. Such a submission assigns the subject clear social roles and grants him or her rights and privileges. A variation of this meaning is when hair is left loose and ungroomed, signaling a temporary state of removal from such public roles.

We have seen that the most significant and widespread ritual use of hair in India is shaving, most frequently the shaving of the head and face but sometimes also of the entire body. If we return to our root meaning of hair as sexual maturity, removal of hair would mean the denial or suspension of sexual maturity. The shaven individual is ritually reduced to the level of an infant – that is, to a sexually, and therefore socially, undifferentiated status. Thus we arrive at our second principle: shaving the head amounts to the ritual separation of an individual from society either for a temporary period or permanently.

Variant forms of ritual separation from society are expressed not through shaving but through lack of control of hair. Related to such lack of control over hair is the third type of ritual use of hair in India: the neglect of hair associated with the physical separation of an individual from society. When an individual is ritually separated from society, he or she continues to live within the geographical boundaries of society and often in close relationship with people in society, whereas in physical separation, the rite of separation culminates in the individual's departure from the social geography into the uncivilized realm of the forest or the wilderness. In India this type of separation is symbolized by long and uncontrolled hair that is left unkempt and unattended. The meaning of matted hair must be seen in its relation to the controlled hair of the adult within society. The total lack of hair control and the resultant long, ugly, and matted hair (accompanied by long nails) indicates an individual's utter separation from civilized structures and controls and his or her integration into the uncivilized realm of the wild and the beast. The third principle, therefore, is the following: matted hair indicates an individual's physical separation from society and civilized structures.

Once a particular social meaning has been assigned to a form of hair manipulation within a specific institutional or ritual setting – shaving as ascetic separation, for example – that same symbol may acquire new meanings for the participants, meanings that may go beyond, and thereby transform the earlier meaning. Thus ascetic shaving has acquired the meaning of “belonging” to a particular community as opposed to separation from society, in a way similar to that of the Sikh hair. In this way, hair becomes a symbol that demarcates new boundaries – the monastic community or the Sikh community. Its new conventional meanings may thus hide to a large degree some of the basic meanings that I have attempted to uncover. In the new conventional settings, a particular type of hair manipulation may become a “condensed symbol” – that is, a symbol so powerful that it encapsulates all the diverse aspects of the symbolized, which under normal circumstances would require separate symbolic expressions.

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