Tonsure Capitalism: An Assessment with Reference to Human Hair Trade in India

Kavya Sanjaya

Abstract: This paper is an attempt to study and understand the nature of human hair trade in India. The human hair trade has expanded very rapidly in the country. The main source for trade is tonsured hair from Lord Venkateswara Temple at Tirupati and Palani Murugan Temple. A Large number of pilgrims visits this temple and offers their hair as part of religious ceremony. This act is known as Tonsuring. The tonsured hair is then collected by the temple authorities, who later place it for auction. This auctioned hair is exported by different companies to various countries. The existence of this trade plays a two-faced role in the economy. On one side, India being one of the largest exporters in this trade brings foreign exchange earnings and on the other side, the entire trade takes advantage of those who are disadvantaged. The main objectives of this study include analysing the export trend of human hair, to understand the challenges faced by the industry and assessing the negative impact caused.

Keywords: human hair trade, tonsuring, foreign exchange earnings, auction

Introduction

Synnot observed that “hair is the most powerful symbol of individual and group identity”. In age-old fairy tales such as Rapunzel, hair has carried a strong metaphorical meaning. Nowadays, middle class consumers spend a lot on the beautification and maintenance of their hair. This is not just because many of us are concerned about the importance of physical appearance, but also because good hair enhances our confidence, self-esteem and personality. For both men and women, hair has been synonymous with beauty. The importance of hair can be divided into two main sub-headings:

(i) Biological importance:
Hair is one of the important distinguishing characteristic of mammals. It act as a protective layer.

(ii) Physical importance:
Hair enhances confidence, self-esteem as well as provides better personality.

An important query that arises at this point is about the fate of this important aspect of our body once it falls of and is no longer a part of the body. It is then considered as waste. Its fate remains confined to municipal wastes, sewages etc. causing eutrophication of the water bodies. However, this notion has changed and the concentration of human hair has decreased ever since traders realized about the high demand for hair especially Indian hair, in the foreign markets.

Human hair had got a variety of uses. It could be broadly classified under two heads;

![uses of human hair]

Figure 1&2

Another question that needs to be answered at this point is regarding the reasons for the huge demand of Indian hair. This demand is due to both the quality and quantity of human hair. As far as the question of quality is concerned, Indian hair is famous all over the world for its natural form, being free from chemical treatments such as heating, colouring etc. this kind of hair is known as Remy hair ,has got a huge demand in the foreign markets. Regarding the quantity, the major source of human hair are two temples in South India- Palani Murugan Temple at Palani and Lord Venkateswara Temple at Tirupati. People from all lifestyles offer their hair, as per religious tradition, to presiding deities of the temples. The temple authorities then auction this hair. Nowadays, e-auctioning has become a faster and easier making money through this offered hair. These are the reasons why...
behind India as one of the major exporters of human hair in the world.

**Objectives**

1) To enquire about the sources of human hair in India.
2) To observe the different varieties and pricing trend in the human hair business.
3) To understand the export trend and the challenges faced by the industry.
4) To look into the negative impacts of this trade.

2. Sources of Human Hair

**Temple Hair:** Temple hair is one of the finest and most diverse varieties of hair. Pilgrims sacrifice their hair as an offering to the deity when their prayers are answered. This act of shaving their head is known as tonsuring. This custom of tonsuring is very popular in the Palani and Tirupati temples. Here, the tonsured hair is collected, washed, dried and then categorized into different bundles. These bundles priced according to the length of the hair. They are then set for auctioning. Income from the sales is the one of the major source of revenue for these temples. Since 2013, the temple in Tirupati has been earning Rs 200cr every year in e-auctions of hair donated by the devotees. The entire process, right from cutting of hair to the auctioning, also acts as a source of employment for many people. Approximately 650 barbers are employed in each temple. The employees of these include women too.

**Saloons:** Saloons also have a large share in this export. However hair from salons is not of high quality because it includes dyed, coloured and burnt hair. These are mainly chemically treated hair which is known as non-Remy hair. Even though these are not of high quality as compared to temple hair, it has a huge demand in Chinese market. The Chinese buyers and manufacturers make wigs from this non-Remy and sell it to the American and African markets.

**Villages:** The third source is the hair collected from villages. These include mainly hair from combs. The hair from villages is usually better quality than salon hair but inferior to temple hair. Agents collect village hair. Usually, hair is exchanged for money, sweets, toys.

3. Distribution

Exports from India are mainly from Chennai and Hyderabad region. The high concentration of exports from these regions is mainly due to the temples in these areas. Statistics shows that 40% of exports are from Chennai air, which is the highest in India followed by Hyderabad contributing 24%.
Govt. of India Enterprise). The longer the length of the hair, the higher is the bid for it. During 2012, TTD sold 89.413 tons of the first category of human hair and about 188.491 tons of other categories of human hair.

Table - 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SNO</th>
<th>VARIETY</th>
<th>NATURE SIZE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>FIRSTBLACK MORE</td>
<td>THAN 30 INCHES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>VARIETY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>SECOND BLACK</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16-30 VARIETYINCHES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>THIRD VARIETY</td>
<td>BLACK 10-15 INCHES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>FOURTH VARIETY</td>
<td>BLACK 5-8 INCHES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>FIFTH VARIETY</td>
<td>BLACK LESS THAN 5 INCHES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>SIXTH VARIETY</td>
<td>GREY HAIR/ANY SIZE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total export value is about 1,168,485,962 US dollars. Most of the raw hair demanded from India is used to make hair extensions and hair wigs which are used by the celebrities, performers and hair stylists all over the world. Celebrities have shown an increased demand for Indian Hair to supplement their own. The most important feature of Indian hair is that it would be natural form, which is free from chemical treatments. Remy hair or natural hair is a lot better in quality and durability than the other variety, known as non-Remy hair. Every year, hair worth about $136 million is shipped from India to the factories in China. Chinese hair is mixed with Indian hair to make wigs and hair extension for Western markets. Statistics shows that the volume of hair traded has been increasing ever since 1980's as the number of devotees has increased along with the population of the country. Exporters also buy hair from salons and agents. In the village of Bhagyanagar, Karnataka, about 2,000 families depend on the hair they collect from garbage dumps. It provides employment to a large number of people, including women. There are around 600 barbers in each of the temple, agents who collect from villages, people in charge of washing, drying and sorting.

4. Human hair market

Human hair (HS code: 05010010- human hair) is an exportable item in India. High demand for Indian hair can be traced to the earlier explained two factors, namely- Quality of the hair and the quantity of the hair. The export from in India is a huge business since 60's. In 1970's Japanese founded synthetic hair which was cheaper than the original human hair. An advantage with this form of hair was that it could be manufactured in lengths and qualities as per the consumer demands. This decreased the demand for Indian hair in the world market. Then again, in the first half of the 1980's, the demand for Indian hair saw an upsurge, owing to the fine quality. The top five importers of Indian hair are China, Brazil, Hong Kong, Italy and the US.

The table shows the top five importers and their statistics in USD million.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SNO</th>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>2010-11</th>
<th>2011-12</th>
<th>2012-13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>CHINA</td>
<td>80.37</td>
<td>88.26</td>
<td>97.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>BRAZIL</td>
<td>17.71</td>
<td>26.72</td>
<td>23.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>HONG KONG</td>
<td>15.32</td>
<td>14.69</td>
<td>16.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>ITALY</td>
<td>17.66</td>
<td>17.63</td>
<td>11.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>9.48</td>
<td>10.80</td>
<td>13.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry Of Commerce and Industry

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIETY</th>
<th>QTY OF HAIR (KG)</th>
<th>PRICE FIXED PER KG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FIRST VARIETY</td>
<td>1300</td>
<td>25,503/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECOND VARIETY</td>
<td>2600</td>
<td>20,026/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THIRD VARIETY</td>
<td>51,300</td>
<td>6,177/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOURTH VARIETY</td>
<td>9,600</td>
<td>5,184/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIFTH VARIETY</td>
<td>1,94,000</td>
<td>35/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GREY HAIR</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>8,958/-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams
Therefore, undoubtedly the hair trade provides employment to a large number of people in India.

![Figure 5](image)

This chart shows the path to the international market. Hair is been collected by the three sources - saloons, temples and agents and then it is placed for e-auctioning and thereby reaching the world market.

![Figure 6](image)

5. Tonsuring and Myths

The origin of tonsuring can be traced back to the early English settlers in Britain. Back then, this practice had no connection with religion. However, today, it is a religious custom in India followed by many religions, especially Hindus. According to the Vedas, a child should do tonsuring in the first or third year. In Jainism, believers pluck hair from the head without using a blade whereas in Islam, people go through it during Hajj. Buddhists also follow this custom to becoming monks. Though tonsuring has got religious connotations, it is important for believers to know that tonsuring can cause bacterial infections and other serious diseases such as Hepatitis B if the blades are not properly sterilized.

6. Challenges faced

1) Lack of awareness that the waste hair can be exported:

In many parts of the country, hair is wasted and can be found in municipal and sewage waste. Lack of awareness among people and the saloon operators is the root cause of this issue. The government of India should create awareness program in the villages and throughout the country. Proper collection channels should be arranged in order to reduce the wastage.

2) A Large amount of hair is smuggled out illegally.

Human hair is smuggled across India’s land borders there by affecting foreign exchange earnings. A considerable number of Indians depends on collection, processing and sale of the human hair. Smuggling of hair is having negative effects on this. The industry has requested the government to take necessary action against this illegal activity.

3) Crave for fashion decreases the quality of hair.

As compared to earlier period, the quality of hair has been deteriorated in recent times. Due to the new fashion concepts in the market, Indians (especially in cities) try different styles of colouring, straightening; cutting etc. This is leading to the slow depletion of the earlier monopoly of Indian hair in the Remy hair export market.

7. Dark side of the industry

Positive and negative externalities are two sides of the same coin. Neither of them can exist without the other. In a similar manner, hair trade has also got its own set of disadvantages. Hair trade, on one hand brings in export earnings and on the other hand, exploits common people. Majority of the high quality hair that is exported comes from villages (agents) and temples. Agents tour villages to collect such hair. Rural women have been known to sell their hair in order to earn some money to meet their basic needs. This practice is
very common in areas where a huge chunk of the population is below the poverty line. Agents pay nominal amounts to these poor women. This amount is nothing when compared to the inflated price at which it is sold out. The entire trade practice proves the theory behind every capitalistic enterprise that is, taking the advantage of the disadvantaged. The difference in the price could be termed as price discrimination. The time and care taken to grow the hair are undervalued. Several incidents have been reported, wherein, husbands have forced their wives to sell hair. Slum dwelling children are often tricked into shaving their hair in exchange for toys, sweets etc.

Another negative side of this trade is seen in temples in South India, where pilgrims from various parts of the country travel long distances and stand in long queues for hours just to tonsure their hair. Believers offer their hair once their prayers are answered. These prayers might have been for a child, to get cured of illness, for a good harvest etc. When these prayers are answered, they tonsure their hair as an offering to the God. The poor believers are unaware of trading practices and are also not paid for their hair. They are under the belief that their hair would be offered to God. Nut, what really happens to the tonsured hair? The hair is bought by the highest bidding firm in the e-auction. This is shatters the unfathomable faith that devotees have towards the deities in these temples.

Another paradoxical situation is that rich women remove hair from their body by waxing and demand hair from poor Indian women. A lot of people are thus exploited and cheated in this industry. The hair they offer to God becomes an extra layer of hair for celebrities. Insecurities of the rich are balanced because of the poor conditions of the Indian rural masses. The entire trade highlights the negative aspects of capitalism.

8. Recommendations

The hair business has grown rapidly across the world and India has emerged as one of the leading exporters of raw human hair in the world. The benefits of this trade can be increased further through a rigorous regulation and procedures. The recommendations are as follows,

1) Ensuring of systematic collection of hair from temples, salons and villages.
2) Efficient processing and grading should be done.
3) Opening up of new and efficient industries in this field.
4) Workers should be given special attention and proper care as they are more prone to the dust pollution.
5) Reasonable prices should be fixed for the people who sell their hair.
6) New markets and potential customers should be identified in the foreign market.

9. Conclusion

Hair that is thrown away is a waste but hair that is collected is money. Today, hair is much more than a symbol. It has taken the form of a big business. From India to several other countries, the human hair trade has spread across the globe it gives foreign exchange earnings to the country and employment opportunities to a large number of people. But on the other side, it exploits the disadvantaged. Fair pricing should be offered to the people who tonsure their hair. It is important that adequate steps are taken for the provision of justified returns to the primary sellers of hair in one of the largest noiseless industry of the world.

References