



UNIVERSITY OF
FLORIDA

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
Department of Religion

107 Anderson Hall
PO Box 117410
Gainesville, FL 32611-7410
(352) 392-1625
Fax (352) 392-7395

Short Statement Prepared at the Request of Rabbi Glick. Monday, 17 May 2004

Professional Background: From the Departmental web page

Vasudha Narayanan is a Professor of Religion at the University of Florida and a past President of the American Academy of Religion (2001-2002). She was educated at the Universities of Madras and Bombay in India, and at Harvard University. Her fields of interest are the Sri Vaishnava tradition; Hindu traditions in India, Cambodia, America; Hinduism and the environment; and gender issues.

She is the author and editor of six books and over eighty articles, chapters, and encyclopedia entries. Her research has been supported by grants and fellowships from several organizations including the American Council of Learned Societies (2004-2005); National Endowment for the Humanities (1987, 1989-90, and 1998-99); the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation (1991-92), the Smithsonian, the American Institute for Indian Studies, and the Social Science Research Council. She was the president of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies from 1996-1998. Her book *Understanding Hinduism* will be published by Oxford University Press in 2004 and *The Hindu Traditions in the United States: Temple Space, Domestic Space, and Cyberspace* will be published by Columbia University Press in 2005. She is currently working on Hindu temples and Vaishnava traditions in Cambodia.

Previous publications include: *The Vernacular Veda: Revelation, Recitation, and Ritual* (1994); *The Way and the Goal: Expressions of Devotion in the Early Srivaishnava Tradition* (1987); (with John Carman) *The Tamil Veda: Pillai's Interpretation of the Tiruvaymoli* (1989); "The Hindu Tradition" in *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*, ed. by Willard Oxtoby (1996; rev. 2001); "One Tree is Equal to Ten Sons: Some Hindu Responses to the Problems of Ecology, Population and Consumption" in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 65/2 (June 1997); "Brimming with Bhakti, Embodiments of Sakti: Deities, Devotees, Performers, Reformers and other Women of Power in the Hindu tradition" in *Feminism in World Religions*, ed. by Katherine Young (1998), 25-77; "Water, Wood, and Wisdom: Ecological Perspectives from the Hindu Traditions," *Daedalus*, 130/4 (Fall 2001); "Vaishnava Traditions in Cambodia," in *Festschrift for Dennis Hudson, Journal of Vaishnava Studies*, 1/1 (September 2002); and her 2002 American Academy of Religion presidential address "Embodied Cosmologies: Sights of Piety, Sites of Power," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 71/3 (Fall 2003).

For more information, see Vasudha Narayanan's Web page.

Personal Background (Supplied at Rabbi Glick's request)

I am a Hindu woman born into the Sri Vaishnava community (a sectarian division that was established around the 11th century) of the Brahmin (priestly caste). The caste is mentioned for identification and description purposes only and not to claim privilege of any sort, whether social, educational, cultural, or sacerdotal. The community is mentioned because (1) it is also my area of expertise in my professional career and also because (2) the temple in Tirupati (which is being discussed here) is a "Sri Vaishnava" temple. My family was orthodox and orthoprax; what we would call "observant" in this country. Our family kept very strict dietary regulations in India. Although my immediate family, here in this country, is vegetarian we have relaxed some dietary regulations here.

I am 50 years old and was born and raised in Chennai (south India), Bangalore, and Bombay. I came to the United States in 1975 as a graduate student in Harvard University. While at Harvard, my parents suggested and "arranged" for me to meet a man from Chicago. He was also of the same Hindu sub-community etc., and we were married in India in 1977. We lived in Chicago till 1982 and have been in Florida since then.

We have two boys, Desika (b. 1980 in Chicago), and Ramanujan (b. 1985 in Gainesville). We had a "tonsure" for both of them in Tirupati in south India. Desika's tonsure was done in 1981, when he was 11 months old and Ramanujan's in 1987 when he was about 20 months.



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FAX TRANSMITTAL MESSAGE

TO: Rabbi Glick

FROM: Vasudha Narayanan

SUBJECT: Tonsure

DATE: 17 May 04 PAGE NO(S): cover + 6

This short statement is about hair cutting and "tonsure." I am writing it keeping in mind textual regulations and practice. It is very, very important to remember two things while writing about Hinduism: there is a *great diversity of beliefs and practices*, and second, while we have hundreds, in fact, thousands of texts, *local practices and customs are as important, and in some cases more important than the Sanskrit texts themselves*. In many cases, local practices "trump" the texts and commentaries.

And a final caveat to keep in mind. Many Hindu communities have *strict rules of ritual purity and pollution*. Menstruation, death, etc. render one into a state of ritual pollution. Ritual purifying baths have to be taken before worship. The act of cutting one's hair or even shaving falls in this category of ritual pollution. Physically bathing or cleansing oneself before worship at home or in temples is very important.

Sanskrit Texts: The act of shaving a child's hair was called *caula*, *cuda karma*, or *mundan* in Sanskrit. It was supposed to be a domestic ritual. It is one of the 30 plus rituals a human being goes through. Examples of other rituals are: pre-natal rites, naming a child, piercing a child's ears, giving of first solid food, cutting of hair, beginning of education, ceremony to start studying scriptures (only for men of the high castes), wedding, funeral etc. Most of these are *domestic* rituals. The word used for "ritual" is the Sanskrit *sanskara*—literally, "to make perfect." It is not a "sacrament" in some Christian senses of the word. In other words, it is not a ritual whereby we are invoking divine grace.

In many communities and families, the first shaving of a child's head may be done at homes. When I say "homes," I mean that the social ceremony may be inside the home, the actual

act of cutting the hair should be done outside the house itself. In some communities there is a belief that the cutting of the hair protects a child's health.

In the past, hair was not even cut within a house. When it is supposed to be done for upanayanam (sacred thread ceremony for young boys which in the past gave them the authority to study sacred texts), it is only figuratively done inside the house. The young boy is then taken outside the house to have a lock of hair cut.

Sometime in the last fifteen hundred years or so—probably later, than earlier—the act of tonsure in a pilgrimage town became increasingly popular. So—the act of shaving your head at your home was historically earlier than doing it in a temple town or one's ancestral village.

Practices

Tonsure or cutting hair is done near any temple or in one's ancestral town. The act of cutting hair, nails, etc. is physically/ ritually polluting and therefore cannot be done inside a temple premise. The hair cutting and tonsure is done outside the temples and the person who is tonsured has (absolutely has to have) a purifying bath before going into the temple to worship. Men and women practice this ritual, though in northern India, women from many communities do not shave their heads. Only widows were supposed to shave their heads and this was considered to be an inauspicious act.

In Tirumala-Tirupati, the largest temple in India, there are hundreds of barbers. They shave a person's hair in a huge pavilion well outside the temple premises. The shorn hair is then taken by the barber to various commercial centers, I believe, to have it all sorted out by length and texture.

Personal Observations—given at the request of Rabbi Glisk: I have seen the tonsure done

for my younger sister when she was a baby, and years later, we did it for my two sons in Tirupati. For my sister (in early 1963) and my younger son (in 1987), the barber came to the little cottage/guest house where we were staying and cut the kid's hair. When my older son was 11 months old, we took him to Tirupati on a day's trip in a tourist bus. My husband's uncle held him while his hair was cut. His hair was shaved by one of the barbers outside a large pavilion which is well outside the temple precinct. This is the pavilion where hundreds of people get it done. It was large, noisy, the atmosphere was like a bazaar with people chattering, the barbers talking about the crowds, local politics, money etc. We gave the child a quick bath after the tonsure and then took him to the temple.

Reasons

Tonsure is done for any number of reasons. Traditionally, it was supposed to protect children. Older men and women also shave their heads. One may do it simply because it is the practice of one's family to do it in X, Y, and Z villages. I know someone in Florida who does it every time he goes to India—for no reason. One may say that if one passes an exam, gets a job, or whatever, as an act of penance, s/he would shave off her/his head. One may do it to learn humility. (Women dedicating themselves as nuns in the Jain religion have a special ritual by which they pluck their hair to know the pain experienced by various beings in the universe).

A question that is asked is: do you mentally offer this to God? This is a vague question and I will try to provide some answers. It is NOT an offering to God, in the way in which one may offer food or flowers or incense. As I mentioned several times earlier, since hair is polluting, one can never offer it to God. So it is offering in only in the sense of offering one's ego and pride

Second, one can look at the larger issue of offering and dedication. There are many pious and faithful people in the world who have dedicated their entire lives to God and think of all their actions as an offering to God. Thus, when I eat out in a restaurant, I do not know if the Chef there has dedicated all his / her actions to God. Is the food that I eat in a local fast food place then considered to be consecrated food because the short-order cook has committed himself/herself to God and everything s/he does, including the cooking is an act of offering to the deity?

Religious or Ethnic Reason?

Some Muslim families in south India practice tonsure. Hindus and Muslims tonsure their heads at various shrines of Muslim pirs and saints. Muslims –as well as many Hindus –tend to think of it as a Tamil (ethnic, not religious). Actually, it is also a Muslim custom– but Tamil Muslims think of it as a local custom.

Conclusion – the act of tonsure was considered to be a ritual like naming a child or piercing the year. It was in later centuries that it came to be associated with temple towns and/or ancestral villages. People do it for all kinds of reasons but mostly because it is “tradition.” One can do it as a penance or lesson in humility, to give up what is most attractive about one’s appearance. The cutting of hair is done well outside any temple precinct because the act of cutting one’s hair and the discarded hair itself is ritually polluting. Thus, it cannot and ought not be offered to the deity in the sense that one offers flowers or incense.

Please feel free to contact me if you would like further information.