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THE IMPORTANCE OF THE BODY IN INDIAN CULTURE and selected issues regarding its manifestation in art

The human body has been described, analysed and cultivated from different perspectives in the discourses and practices of various Hindu traditions, including rituals, ascetic movements, medical and legal traditions, philosophical systems, devotional (bhakti), tantric, drama, dance and erotic movements, as well as martial arts.

In some of these, the body was exalted as a means of transportation towards liberation or enlightenment, and even the body itself could attain immortality or at least extreme longevity. In others, it was denigrated, as something that restricts or obstructs the soul, and it must free itself from this through meditation and rituals, for example.

Most traditions have understood the universe in cyclical terms as periods of creation and destruction endlessly repeating. In this cyclical process, the soul is believed to be reincarnated in different bodies – animal and human – according to its action (karma). In this way, a being's body type is limited or determined by its past actions. The body is therefore the result of an earlier action in a previous life. A human being, as an embryo, arises from the combination of the father's seed and the mother's blood which, due to individual karma, is penetrated by the spirit (atman) together with the subtle body. When a person dies, his or her soul and the

subtle body passes to the next womb, depending on the karma. Wandering in a circle of samsara, the Self, or self-existent essence of individuals works persistently to be reborn in human form, for only in this form may it consciously work on itself and gain ultimate liberation. For only human beings have the means needed to obtain moksha: subtle breath, reason and the ability to consciously transform themselves. That is why people have a duty to shape their spiritual nature. Otherwise, one can wait a long time in the circle of samsara for an equally favourable situation.

The body is also of central sociological importance; one's body type is a feature that determines the endogamous social group or caste to which it belongs. Thus, caste is a property of the body with which we are born, although according to some tantric and devotional traditions, caste is uprooted during initiation (diksa) and also during formal austerity (sannyasa).

The vast majority of traditions assume the integrity of the physical and subtle body. For instance, according to sankhya – one of the oldest philosophical systems in India – the human physical body consists of these five elements (mahbhuta), while the subtle body consists of the intellect (buddhi or mahat), ego (ahamkara), mind (manas), five sense faculties (buddhindriya), five action faculties (karmendriya) and five subtle elements (tanmatra).

The human body is also seen as an integral part of the cosmic, divine and social body. It adopts various modalities to mediate transactions between them, such as the ritual body (characteristic of Vedic thought), the ascetic body (Upanishadic philosophy), and the purity body (Dharmashstra)¹⁾.

The idea of a ritual body appears in the Vedas and Brahmanas. In this context, the concept of the sacrificial act of Purusha – the proto-human, presented in the Tenth Hymn of Rygveda – is fundamental. As a result of the self-sacrifice of his gigantic body, the world and society were thought to have been created: the sky from his head, the earth from his legs, the corners of the world from his ears, air from his naval, the Sun from his eyes, the Moon from his spirit, the wind from his breath. The various varnas are also derived from the body parts of Purusha: Brahmins from his mouth, Kshatriyas from his arms, Vaishyas from his hips, and Shudras from his feet. The whole world was created by this cosmic act of self-sacrifice.

¹⁾ Holdrege (1998: 349–371).

Purusha was praised as the creator of sacrifice itself, the first performer of sacrifice, the first act of sacrifice, and the first sacrificial offering. Sacrifice was therefore an important part of philosophical and religious considerations during this period and the most important religious practice. Reflections on the body were also incorporated into philosophical thought on sacrifice. The ritual body then takes precedence because it mediates the link between the divine body and its many manifestations. However, sacrifice is presented only as a means of mediating the connections between the macrocosmic and microcosmic manifestations of the divine body, as well as a tool for creating these multiple bodies. Therefore, sacrifice became the equivalent of Purusha, linking the divine body with its other counterparts – cosmic, human and social. The ritual body, as a body constituted by the sacrificial ritual, and so has many meanings in sacrificial discourse – it included the divine body which is animated, the cosmic body which is renewed, the human body self which is reconstructed, and the social body which is constructed through sacrifice. So the body had enormous power – by transforming into a ritual body, it was able to recreate the structure of the entire cosmos²).

During the Upanishadic period, knowledge was emphasised over sacrificial activities. Here arises a concept that man contains the divine within, an unchanging element (Atman), equivalent to the soul of the universe, or Brahman. All human activities should aim towards self-transformation, and thus towards reality, to achieve the transcendental goal of freedom from the samsaric cycle, and liberation, or moksha. This objective may be achieved by overcoming attachment to the mind-body complex and attaining the ultimate reality which is Brahman-Atman. This victory takes place by means of asceticism. In contrast to the ritual body – that is, the means of reviving the connections between the divine body, the cosmic body, the social body and the human body – the ascetic body is constituted as a means of overcoming attachment to all forms of incarnation. Cultivating the ascetic body is to minimise interaction with the cosmic body, which is seen as an area of samsara. The ascetic, striving to free himself from the entanglements of worldly life and from the crushing burden of embodied forms, must also give up attachment to the divine body which encompasses the body of the cosmos. The construction of the ascetic body also involves the 'deconstruction' of the social body. The ascetic body is

²) Holdrege (1998: 349–357).

defined in direct opposition to the social body established by the norms of dharma because the realm of worldly dharma is seen as inseparable from samsaric existence. Practices that constitute the ascetic body include meditation techniques and various mental disciplines, breathing exercises, and physical austerities to control the mind, senses, and bodily appetites. The general term that is sometimes used for this range of ascetic practice is *tapas* (literally 'warmth'), which refers to the spiritual 'warmth' generated by such practices and which incinerates ignorance and attachments, thus leading towards the ultimate goal of the ascetic path: the actualisation of Brahman-Atman. Therefore, the ascetic body uses its own attributes to transcend its own corporeality. So, the body is, on the one hand, a prison of ignorance, and, on the other hand, a tool to overcome it³⁾.

A different approach to the body is presented in the dharmasastras, where the question of ritual purity is extremely important. A purity body played a central role as a procedural body that mediates the transactions between the divine, cosmic and social bodies. The ideology of purity served, in particular, to legitimise the varna system. In Manusmriti it is emphasised that God made 4 classes of people out of His own body: the Brahmins from the mouth, the Kshatriyas from the arms, the Vaishyas from the hips and legs, and the Shudras from the feet. Everything born outside this system is therefore considered to be non-divine and so unclean. It is also believed that the human body above the navel is cleaner than the parts below. The mouth is considered to be the cleanest, and so the Brahmins are the highest in the hierarchy of purity. Along with Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, who are of proportionately lower status, they are counted among those who are double born. The feet are considered to be the lowest level of the body and ritually unclean. From them, servants, considered to be single born, are thought to have sprung, destined to serve the other varnas.

The purity hierarchy is applied not only to the social body, but also the cosmic body, which is the manifestation of the divine body. Entire classes of various creatures – gods, people, animals, plants, minerals, etc. – are divided into categories of pure or impure (e.g., a cow is considered pure, but a pig impure), or their degree of purity is differentiated (e.g., gold is purer than copper, silk purer than cotton).

³⁾ Holdrege (1998: 357–363).

The human body is also related to purity and impurity. As mentioned above, the upper parts of the body are purer than the lower parts. Natural human processes and activities, such as eating, sleeping, excretion, sexual intercourse, menstruation, and even basic events such as birth or death, were thought to contaminate. Various body secretions, such as urine, faeces, sweat, saliva, semen, mucus, earwax and menstrual blood were also thus perceived.

The purity of a person depends not only on varna, but also age and gender. In the ideal schema of four stages of life prescribed for male members of the three higher vanas,

a man goes through 4 phases in life (master of the house, apprentice, hermit and itinerant ascetic), each purer than the preceding one. In the context of gender, men are perceived to be purer than women. Male semen is believed to be more important than the female uterus, and it has the greatest effect on offspring. Women, too, being more connected with the polluting aspects through their biology (childbirth, menstruation), are considered almost permanently impure and endowed them with the status of Shudra, thus excluding activities that require purity, such as studying the Vedas or performing brahminical rituals.

The Dharmashastras attach great importance to avoiding contamination and to restore purity to the body. However, due to the fact that it itself contains polluting substances, a perfectly pure body is an ideal that is virtually unattainable, but to which approximation should be sought.

The construction of the body of purity therefore involves highly selective transactions with the cosmic body and the social body in order to maintain the smooth functioning of the social and cosmic order, as opposed to the cultivation of the ascetic body which involves the renunciation of the cosmic body and the social body in order to achieve liberation from *samsara*⁴.

The body gained great significance in tantra, unprecedented in the history of Indian spirituality. Of course, health and strength, as well as an interest in cosmic, and therefore sacred, physiology, had been valued much earlier. But it was tantrism that drew the most far-reaching consequences from the concept that holiness can only be achieved in a 'divine body'. In this system, this is not an obstacle preventing *moksha*; on the contrary, it is its most perfect tool. Since liberation is attainable in this lifetime, the

⁴ Holdrege (1998: 363–369).

body must be kept in a perfect condition for as long as possible. Sometimes it is even believed that without a completely healthy body it is impossible to achieve the highest level of happiness. At least two orientations may be distinguished in this praise of the human body and its capabilities. The first is importance given to all life lived, and this is an attitude common to all tantric schools. However, the second is the need to refine the body in such a way as to transform it into a 'divine body' and it is primarily characteristic of Hathayoga.

In tantrism, some theories developed regarding the subtle human body. The body – both a physical body and a 'subtle' body at the same time – was thought to be constituted by a number of nadis (literally channels, vessels, veins or arteries, but also 'nerves') and chakras (literally: circles, rings, but generally translated as 'centres'): life energy in the form of 'breaths' circulates through the nadis, while the cosmic and divine energy is latent in the chakras.

Nadis are numerous, perhaps amounting to 300,000, 200,000, 80,000, but most commonly thought to number 72,000⁵⁾. Seventy-two of them are of particular importance. Not all have their own names and most texts name ten. The most important of all nadis and those that play a central role in all yogic techniques are ida, pingala, and sushumna. The ida nadi, or female channel, is on the left side of a person, while the pingala nadi – the male channel – is on the right. Both have openings in the relevant nostril. It is emphasised that the nadi on the left is the 'moon' because of its gentle nature, whereas the right side is the 'sun' because of its strong nature. Therefore, female energy has 'lunar' properties that are calming and cooling; the male is 'solar' – 'hot and stimulating. In the middle, a central channel – Sushumna – runs along the spine, consisting of layers of subtle energy containing the three qualities of sattva, rajas and tamas. The outer layer represents tamas because it is dormant. Within the outer layer is the Nadi Vajra, which is rajasic in nature. Inside is the Chitrini Nadi, equated with sattva. This channel connects the 7 major chakras in sequence and generates the mystical kundalini energy.

According to Hindu tradition, there are seven important chakras. The first one, muladhara (mula – root) is located at the base of the spine, between the anus and the sex organs. It is related to the coherence of matter, inertia, the birth of sounds, fragrance, and the gods Indra, Brahma,

⁵⁾ Eliade (1969: 237).

Shakti etc. It is believed that there lies dormant Kundalini – described simultaneously in the form of a serpent, goddess and ‘power’. The second – Swadhisthana – is located in the lower abdomen, associated with the water element, prana breath, sense of taste, the hand, etc. Manipura is located around the loins, level with the navel, and is associated with the fire element, the sun, rajas, samana breath, sense of sight, etc. Anahata is in the heart area, the centre of prana, associated with the air element, sense of touch, ability to move, the blood system, etc. Visuddha, in the area of the neck, at the junction of the spine with the medulla, is associated with the ether (Akasia), sound, and skin. The Ajna chakra is located between the eyebrows and is considered the eye of intuition and intellect. Its associated sense organ is the brain. Sahasrara, on the top of the head, is represented as an inverted lotus with a thousand petals (sahasra – a thousand), also called brahmasthāna, brahmarandhra, nirvanachakra etc. This is the ultimate union of Siva and Shakti, the goal of the tantric path; this is where the Kundalini emerges after passing through the six lower chakras. It should be noted that sahasrara no longer belongs to the body, but to the transcendent level, and this explains the doctrine of the „six chakras”, as it is generally described.

The idea of a divine body, yet understood in a slightly different way, is also visible in ritual possession. The body could also be a place possessed by a deity or other spirits. This idea is very common in Indian culture, evidenced in texts from Vedic times and present to this day. Most often, it was divine beings who would enter the human body. Belief in such phenomena is found in numerous literary sources (e.g., in the Mahabharata the goddess Kali enters the body of Nala), in spiritual practices (e.g., in bhakti, when the believer comes to such a close relationship with the deity that they merge into one), or in possession rituals practiced to this day such as Teyyam, where a deity enters the performer’s body during a special ceremony. The deity is most often invoked and invited inside. (Fig 1) This action makes the body analogous to the icon in the temple. Possessions can also be performed by evil entities that need to be eliminated by appropriate means. Some diseases are even explained by demonic possession, and there are proper measures that are recommended for exorcism. In this case, the human body becomes a demonic body⁶).

⁶ See, for example Smith 2009.

The idea of possessing someone's body for various purposes is also present in the Indian tradition. This was practiced by some tantricians, for example, who by taking control over human corpses took possession of the beings living there. A famous example of similar practices is the action taken by the philosopher Shankara, who possessed the body of the deceased King Amaruka in order to gain a broader knowledge of the body and sensual life without defiling his pure brahminical body additionally trained by ascetic practices. When the king died, the sage instructed his disciple to look after his own body, while he took over the body of the deceased with his yogic power. Such actions could be dangerous, because even the great sage himself, after some time in the body of the king, began to lose awareness of his own existence. Only his student was able to come to the rescue, who, having arrived at the court, sang him a hymn that Shankara himself once composed, and only then did he remember who he really was⁷⁾.

Various meanings and magical properties were assigned to the body and its parts. The head, as previously mentioned, was considered the most important part of the body, the centre of a person, the location of all the senses and the mind. It was also believed that the Sahasrara chakra is at the top – an energy centre, a gateway to the Universe, a place of connection with divine energy.

In the area of the head, particular magical meaning was attributed to the eyes. They were thought to have enormous power. This is especially evident in the belief in the so-called 'evil eye'. A malicious person could cause misfortune with his or her gaze, up to and including death. To prevent this, various types of magic are performed; charms are worn and special makeup is applied (contouring the eyes, especially on children, with black kajal and painting black dots on the face or behind the ears).

The sight and eye metaphor for divine insight into the true nature of reality is common in many Indian religious traditions. For this reason, the eyes were extremely important. In this respect three main concepts are important: a sacred gaze, darshana and devotional eye. A sacred gaze is the manner in which a way of seeing invests an image, a viewer, or an act of viewing with spiritual significance⁸⁾. A very important element of communing with God is darshana (Sanskrit 'sight'). It means seeing God, looking at his image or some

⁷⁾ Blofeld (2021: 121).

⁸⁾ Morgan (2005: 3).

form in which He reveals Himself. As the name suggests, such an object must be seen, so the visual relationship is essential here. Moreover, it is sometimes believed that the most profound religious experience occurs when a follower exchanges his gaze with God, connecting with him through this act of mutual eye contact. The devotional eye takes the icon enshrined in the temple as the living presence of God, sees through its translucency brief glimpses into the fullness of his Being, and then occasionally turns back on itself to observe the paradoxical quality of this transcendence within immanence⁹⁾.

For this reason, among others, a crucial element in creating divine images was making their eyes visible. It was even believed that this was one of the forms of invoking the god to his image, which was associated with a kind of consecration called *akshymneshana* – eye opening. This ceremony was held a few days before the installation and was preceded by various ritual activities. During the main part, the priest dresses the craftsman in robes, rings and other ornaments, who then washes the priest's feet, drains water from his hands, takes a golden vessel, paintbrush, puts paint into a vessel and worships it. He then stands on the right side of the image with his face facing north and recites a hymn to the earth. Focused on the god, he then paints his eyelashes and eyelids, red, white and black circles and the lens. They all represent the five elements (earth, water, fire, space, air) and the god himself. In this way, he paints both eyes while reciting the appropriate hymns. For images that are not painted, including portable and smaller ones, the craftsman should mark the eyes (with all parts mentioned) with a gold needle. After these activities, the image is cleansed by bathing, offering gifts and placing it on a pedestal in the temple¹⁰⁾.

Particular importance is also attributed to the eyes in *Shvetambara Jainism*. (Fig. 2) In Jainism, *ananta-darshana* or 'infinite perception' is one of the four characteristics of the *siddha*, the enlightened and liberated soul. Two eyes are considered to be like infinite knowledge and infinite perception. This is also embodied in the eyes of the *Jina* himself. Jain monk *Shantisuri* wrote in his *Ceyavandana Mahabhasa* (12 century, verse 328), 'I bow to those eyes, clear-sighted, eyes of stainless scripture and knowledge, a gift to the mass of beings in the darkness of illusion¹¹⁾'. He referred to the eyes of the *Jina*

⁹⁾ Davis (1997: 43).

¹⁰⁾ Staszczuk (2007: 55–56).

¹¹⁾ Cort (2015: 45).

himself, through an act of devotion in which the worshiper imagines himself to be in the presence of the now-absent Jina¹²⁾. The eyes enable a visual interaction between worshiper and Jina, through which the Jina's mercy is showered upon the devoted worshiper: 'I place the pair of eyes, like gems and jewels, on the face of my Lord. They are like enlightened knowledge and enlightened vision. O Lord, have mercy on me,' wrote Sakalachandra¹³⁾. In the Jain sculpture created for religious purposes, the eyes are heavily emphasised, and sometimes special, highly intricate, overlays are sometimes added. These treatments make the eyes the dominant element of the image, especially when the sculpture is made of white material and devoid of other colours. Moreover, bestowing such eyes upon the image was considered to be a deeply religious act. Jaina authors linked the physical offering of the external eyes to the spiritual realisation of insight into the true nature of the world¹⁴⁾. The eyes certainly enable darshana in a powerful manner. Many Shvetambara temples intentionally shun the use of electric lights due to the violence that electricity entails. As a result, often the only illumination in the inner sanctum of a temple comes from a single-wick lamp. This is sufficient to create a powerful reflection in the external eyes of an icon even when viewed from long distance. This is a highly desirable trait for the performance of darshana, for it enables the devotional gaze¹⁵⁾.

Another important part of the body is the navel. In the Indian tradition, it is perceived as the centre of creative and vegetative energy. Vedic literature often states that the navel is the realm of immortality, and Satapatha Brahman (v, 7, 1, 9) indicates that 'beneath the navel is the seed, the power of procreation¹⁶⁾'. In Hinduism, one may often encounter the image of a reclining Vishnu from whose navel springs a lotus – a symbol of creation, upon which Brahma, the god of creation, sits. (Fig. 3) A frequent motif in early art is the image of Yaksha – vegetation spirits, guardians of procreative energies – from whose naval plants grow. The navel is therefore the divine centre, as well as of the earth and the whole universe. In tantra, it is even considered the centre of consciousness and as such is extremely important for spiritual

¹²⁾ Cort (2015: 45–46).

¹³⁾ Cort (2015: 57).

¹⁴⁾ Cort (2015: 57).

¹⁵⁾ Cort (2015: 57).

¹⁶⁾ Coomaraswamy (1929: 218–219).

practices¹⁷⁾. A belief prevails that the subtle body is connected to a person's centre via the energy of the navel. If there is an exit from the body, then the connection of the subtle body with the physical body is maintained through this connection. Should this be broken, the relationship between them is also lost. So the navel is the centre of life energy, or prana. Even after death, it is believed that the soul remains in the navel for 6 minutes. So, this area is full of creative and transformational power. Because the navel is so important, it plays a special role in women – life-givers. It is believed that a woman should have a deep, beautifully shaped navel, which guarantees her high fertility and good character. In works of art, especially early Kushan sculpture, this type of navel was very often displayed and emphasised. (Fig. 4)

The hands are another important part of the body. In Sanskrit they are called *hasta*, which is sometimes translated as 'the part of the body through which we experience'. In India, a complicated system of ritual hand gestures (*mudra*) has developed, which is used, inter alia, in dance, theatre and art. In Indian art, two of the most common are the *abhayamudra* (right hand held upright, palm facing outwards towards the viewer, meaning blessing), and *varadamudra* (like the *abhayamudra*, but palm uppermost and fingers pointing downwards) – a gesture of granting grace and fulfilling the requests of the follower. Through the appropriate *mudras*, the energy flow is also altered.

It was also believed that the hands could accumulate magic power – healing, strength and protection. It is believed that a handprint may contain some of this strength. From this belief derives the custom of putting handprints on a house in order to protect it from evil influences. This belief is also especially present in some statues of *sati* – widows burned on funeral pyres with their deceased husbands. The simplest form of commemorative monuments are walls on which the hand of a woman or women who committed suicide is imprinted. (Fig. 5) It was believed that it is in the hands that the greatest power of the *sati* is accumulated¹⁸⁾. It is often mentioned that women are able to start a fire from their hands. One traveler reports that a woman who decided to burn with her husband to prove that she wanted to become a *sati* of her own free will, ignited the wood with her own hand¹⁹⁾. Those who attended the rite repeatedly mentioned that the pyre caught fire all by itself,

¹⁷⁾ See, for example: Benard (2000: 88–89).

¹⁸⁾ Noble, Sankhyan (1994: 345).

¹⁹⁾ Altekar (1962: 136).

ignited by her hands. Some even believe a true *sati* ignites from her own fire²⁰). It is believed that a *sati* blesses young married women who ask for fertility in a special way.

Hands need to be washed frequently. It is imperative to do so before puja and meals. The absence of such ablutions could offend God. By sitting down to a meal without first washing the hands, disrespect would be shown to the goddess, the provider of food (Annapurna), which could lead to her being insulted. It was also believed that clean body ensure better absorption of vitamins.

The feet are also an important part of the body. The Sanskrit word *pada* is sometimes translated as a place of contact with the earth, which is a source of nourishment for the body. It was believed that walking barefoot fills a person with the energy of the earth. A footprint was thought to hold a person's energy. Many magical rituals derived from this belief, such as love spells in which a man performs rituals over a woman's footprints in order to win her love. It was also possible to stop a fugitive by sticking a thorn into an imprint of his feet. The power of the feet was also used to harm someone – for example, a commander could be removed from the battlefield if sand containing his footprint was blown away by the wind. This action could destroy him and win the battle. It was also possible to provoke pain and illness – e.g., a magician would make an image of a human figure and hammers a nail in the place of the foot, which caused such pain that the victim could not move. No medicine would help, but only the removal of the nail or magic to reverse the spells²¹).

Holy persons were thought to accumulate special energy in their feet. It was believed that touching them would cause this extraordinary energy to flow²²). From this belief sprang the gesture of touching the feet of divine images and people of higher standing in the social hierarchy (Charan Sparsh). It is a sign of great respect. It is sometimes believed that touching the feet of the elderly causes an energy exchange – the person being touched places their hands on the head of the person touching. This creates a closed energy circuit (hands-feet) that allows a full flow of energy and increases cosmic

²⁰) Hardgrove (1999: 747).

²¹) De Laurence (1915: 405–406).

²²) Bakker (1991: 26–27).

energy. The fingers and hands become energy 'receptors' and the feet of the other person become the energy 'provider'.

In Indian art, there are three main types of depictions of feet: the footprint of divine or enlightened figures, mainly Vishnu and Buddha, and *sati* – a woman who has self-immolated on a pyre along with her husband's body. (Fig. 6) The footprints of deities symbolise a specific 'accessibility' to the god, his presence, goodness and openness to worshipers. In the case of a *sati*'s feet, they are a symbol of her final contact with the world, as well as her constant presence. Footprints of deities are also occasionally made during festivals. One of them is Diwali – the festival of light. The faithful often make footprints leading to their homes, which mark the way of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity. They believe that the goddess visits their homes, bringing good luck and prosperity.

On the other hand, feet were considered ritually to be the lowest part of the body and the point of contact with pollutants on earth. For this reason, it was traditionally advisable to wash them before entering home and temple. It was even believed that bad energy could penetrate through dirt on the feet. Foot, as well as hand, washing was also recommended before puja and meals. This should also be performed before going to bed, to guarantee a healthy sleep and no nightmares. Washing feet is also a sign of respect. Traditionally, the feet of the images of deities are regularly washed. It was sometimes customary in the temples to wash the feet of the brahmins; it also happened that the ladies of the house washed the feet of arriving guests.

Due to direct contact with ground dirt and the fact that they are worn on the feet, shoes are considered particularly unclean. It is absolutely necessary to remove them before entering temple and home. It is sometimes considered offensive to point a shoe directly towards someone you are talking to. In this context, it is worth recalling some curious images of Kalighat from the turn of the 20th century. (Fig. 7) They show a husband beating his wife (or vice versa) on the head with his shoe. This was one of the harshest punishments, because in addition to the aspect of obvious physical violence, it also had a strong significance in terms of pollution – the most defiled garment from the hierarchically lowest part of the body defiled the most sacred part of man, the head, at its point of connection with the divine energy of the universe. So there could be no greater insult.

The feet and hands, as places where power accumulates and which contact the outside world, could also be the target of energetic attacks. To prevent the intrusion of bad energies or the loss of one's own power, the hands should

be placed together and the left foot put on top of your right one. This would energetically close the body and ensure safety²³).

Hair, especially female, was also of particular importance. Both length and style constitute an important cultural and religious code. First of all, it reveals the status of a woman and her ritual cleanliness or uncleanness. As with ornaments and makeup, it often indicates marital status.

Traditionally, hair ought to be long and thick. It is sometimes believed that the longer a woman's hair, the more sexually attractive she is. In Indian culture, already in the oldest and most sacred Vedic texts, hair is also juxtaposed with symbolism of fertility, and mythological stories abound with such content (for example, Vishnu putting his hair into the womb of Devaki to make her pregnant and give birth to his avatars). Traditionally, widows would have their heads shaved to discard her attributes of femininity and make her no longer desired by men. Lack of hair meant celibacy and an ascetic state.

To this day, in traditional societies haircutting is virtually unacceptable, and women who do so (mainly educated, in the larger cities) show their 'modernness'. Those who did decide to take such a step often recall that it provoked tremendous shock and disbelief in their communities. The ideal is never to cut one's hair, and if one does so, the reason behind it may be illness, sacrifice to a deity, or other important circumstances²⁴.

The connection of hair with sexuality and intimacy is also visible in the activities performed with it. Traditionally, women's hair is exclusively cared for by close women from the community, or possibly for female hairdressers (traditionally barbers' wives). Many hair rituals have sexual connotations. Women's hair parting rituals deserve special attention. It is most often performed during a wedding ceremony, but also sometimes just before the birth of a child. Parting the hair during a wedding probably refers to rituals during which a naked woman would plough a field, thus ensuring its fertility²⁵). Parting is also a symbolic opening of a woman's sexuality, even more emphasised by applying red dye there during the wedding, or pouring oil on the head of a pregnant woman²⁶). Therefore, the parting symbolises the vagina. Women's hair is very closely related to the sexual aspect, especially

²³) De Laurence (1915: 531).

²⁴) Hershman (1974: 280).

²⁵) Iyer (1925: 191).

²⁶) Leach (1958: 155).

the vagina and menstrual blood²⁷). These relationships are especially evident in the practice of wearing loose hair during menstruation, which, like all female sexuality in the brahminical tradition, also has a polluting aspect²⁸). This was even mentioned as early as in the *Mahabharata*, where Princess Draupadi is described in this way – her uncleanness in this state is emphasised by the lack of tied hair (Fig. 8). Traditionally, after the end of menstruation, a woman should perform ritual ablutions, including washing and pinning her hair. Other polluting states in a woman's life are also considered to be the period right after the birth of a child or after sexual intercourse, when this rule also applies. The return to cleanliness occurs, inter alia, by washing and tying the hair. Indeed, hair and nails are sometimes perceived as impure in themselves, because they are traditionally considered lifeless products of the skin, and because they are not intended to absorb water and therefore cannot be completely cleaned²⁹). To enter a state of cleanliness in some communities, the first step is to get rid of the hair completely, bathe, and refrain from sexual intercourse³⁰).

It is believed that a married woman should wear her hair tied as this indicates being under control. As previously mentioned, the lawmaking texts, including the most important one – the *Manusmṛiti* – clearly and emphatically state that a woman should always be under control, especially in marriage. Bracelets, tied hair – these are all symbols of binding female power, a shakti, which, when uncontrolled, can become dangerous and destructive. Loose hair is a sign of being out of control. Hair worn in this fashion, according to traditional iconography, was reserved primarily for goddesses. The most important of these is Kali, who is depicted with a storm of loose black hair, often looking as if ravaged by the wind³¹) (Fig. 9). Kali is omnipotent Shakti, killing the most dangerous demons, walking on the chest of her husband Shiva, who is passive in this relationship, devoid of energy. Loose hair is a sign of power that can be dangerous. An early medieval text for ascetics,

²⁷) Hershman (1974: 282).

²⁸) See, for example, Erndl (1993: 165).

²⁹) Olivelle (1998: 28).

³⁰) Leach (1958: 156).

³¹) The most prominent researcher of the traditions and iconography of the goddess Kali – David R. Kinsley, in his publications on her, emphasises that he has never seen her image with her hair tied back, see: Kinsley (1998: 83).

for example, warns not to seek alms from a woman with loose hair³²⁾ – clearly indicating that such a woman evokes fear. A woman out of control is dangerous, but also free. So, loose hair is also a symbol of freedom³³⁾.

Loose hair is also a sign of a state of ritual impurity. What is interesting in this aspect is one mythological story describing the rise of the goddess Durga (Fig. 10) When the world was threatened by the demon Mahisha and only she could defeat him, the gods joined forces to create her, sacrificing individual parts of their bodies and powers. The goddess received her hair from Yama – the god of death³⁴⁾. Death is characterised as one of the greatest polluting potentials in Indian culture. After the death of loved ones, women traditionally wear their hair loose. If the deceased was the woman's husband, sometimes she cannot even wash it until the end of her mourning.

Loose hair could also indicate a state of humiliation and a desire for revenge. Here, too, one might mention the story of Draupadi, who chose not to tie her hair until the hurt inflicted upon her was avenged. In this story, two aspects stand out – humiliation, but also her willingness to fight, which is automatically associated with dangerous goddesses, including Kali. It is also worth mentioning that this is how Indian nationalists described their colonised country. One of them, D.L. Roy wrote: 'Bengal, my mother, my muse, my country, Why is your face so sad, hair uncombed?'³⁵⁾. Thus, the anthropomorphic form of the country took the form of a sad, humiliated and ritually unclean woman, tainted by the enemy. Her condition may also indicate a readiness to fight for freedom and honor.

Hair is also credited with magical significance. It is believed to contain the power and energy of the person it belongs or belonged to and is used during tantric rituals³⁶⁾ or black magic in order to harm someone. One example would be to make an image of a man with a double face on the front and back, immerse it in the aroma of sulphur and then put it in a brass box with the hair of the person whom the magician wants to hurt³⁷⁾. Hair is made into special, powerful jewellery³⁸⁾, and also placed in special amulets, along with

³²⁾ Olivelle (1998: 16).

³³⁾ Olson (2007: 290).

³⁴⁾ Kinsley (1988: 97).

³⁵⁾ Bagchi (2010: 179).

³⁶⁾ See, for example, Törzsök (2016: 42).

³⁷⁾ De Laurence (1915: 196).

³⁸⁾ Untracht (1997: 58).

other magical items, designed to protect and boost the energy of the wearer. In some magical activities, women also wear their hair loose³⁹).

Of course, this short review does not exhaust the whole issue. For example, the broad topic of human reproductive organs – female (yoni) and male (linga) – or female breasts, as they constitute separate, wider issues related mainly to the symbolism of fertility and creation. It is a similar story regarding how the body is viewed according to Indian medical systems, which requires a separate study. However, the points discussed here clearly demonstrate how important the body is in Indian culture and how it is perceived in various dimensions. This is directly reflected in a variety of objects of visual art. So, when analysing works of art, it is advisable to use a highly interdisciplinary approach, including an analysis of corporeality, because only this will enable a more profound understanding of how they function in the context of Indian culture.

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³⁹) See, for example, Iyer (1925: 191).

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1. Teyyam, Kerala, India, 2017, photo: Dorota Kamińska-Jones.



2. Parshvanatha Tirthankara idol in a Murtipujak Svetambara Mysuru Jain temple, photo: Sarah Welch.



3. Vishnu rests on the serpent Ananta while Brahma appears within a lotus flower emerging from Vishnu's navel, Guler, Himachal Pradesh, India, between 1775 and 1800, Walters Art Museum, W.906.



4. Yakshini, 3rd century BCE – 2nd century CE Patna Museum, Patna, photo: Shivam Setu.



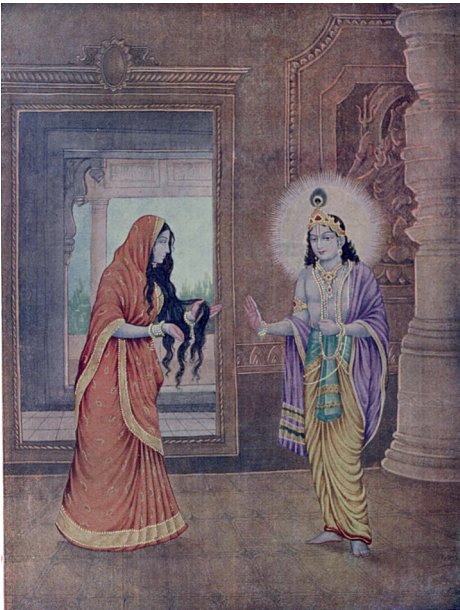
5. Handprints of sati, Fort Mehrangarh, Jodhpur, photo: Dorota Kamińska-Jones.



6. Footprint of sati, Fort Mehrangarh, Jodhpur, photo: Dorota Kamińska-Jones.



7. Domestic violence: a husband holding his wife by the hair about to strike her with a shoe, Kalighat painting, end of 19th/beginning of the 20th century, Wellcome Library no. 268691.



8. Draupadi telling the story of her unfolded hair to Krishna, Illustration of Hindi Gita Press Mahabharata, around the middle of the 20th century.

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9. Kali, end of 19th/beginning of the 20th century, Ravi Varma Press, Wellcome Library no. 26616i.



10. Durga slaying the buffalo demon – Mahishasura and Kali, 19th century, North India, Wellcome Library no. 577822i.

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