



Hair: 'It's just thrown away but it's gold'



Zeeshan Ali has been a drag artist for 10 years and has taken his show all over India. Central to his performance is a collection of around 45 wigs.

When I started my career the accessibility of the wigs was extremely difficult in India. Most of them were to be sourced from abroad or I used to make wigs sourced from whatever was available to me like wool, fabric," he says. But things are different now. "The trend is changing. Wigs are no longer just meant for drag or movie artists, but many straight women wear wigs to look different. It's no longer just a hair accessory but a style statement."

Indian hair has always been in demand for wig-making. The nation is the world's biggest exporter of human hair, supplying 85% of global demand. Kolachi Venkatesh, based in Avadi, Chennai, has been collecting hair for 20 years. He started at the bottom of the industry as a picker - collecting hair from households and rescuing it from the rubbish.

"My parents were hair pickers and then I started doing the same," he says. Hair collected by pickers from homes, salons and barbershops is called non-Remy hair. A diligent collector might gather 1–5 kilograms of hair in a day, earning anywhere from 59 cents to \$6 per day. This income level is often below minimum wage standards, particularly in rural areas," says Mr Venkatesh, who has 50 pickers working for him.

"While our work contributes to a billion-dollar global market our earnings remain meagre. Intermediaries control prices."