



SIGN IN CREATE ACCOUNT

+ ENGLISH



Video

TV

News

Tech

Rec Room



ILLUSTRATION: SADEWA KRISTIANTO

Belief

# Why Some Indian Women

# Are Terrified of Chopping off Their Dreadlocks, Even Though They Can't Move Their Necks

A religious superstition is prohibiting some women in Maharashtra from cutting their matted hair, even if they're lice-infested and weighing them down in ways more than one.



By [Reshmi Chakraborty](#).

---

October 23, 2019, 9:31pm [f Share](#) [t Tweet](#) [s Snap](#)

---

In a small village two hours from Pune, Savitha Uttam Thorat, 50, has set out *haldi-kumkum* and some cowrie shell beads in front of three women who act as de facto village gurus (religious heads). The village—Varvandi—sits on the edge of the Pune-Solapur highway in Maharashtra, has two-wheelers parked outside most homes and women who work in the city and commute independently.

Despite the semblance of modernity, Thorat bears the burden of an age-old superstitious practice that makes the haircut she is about to have somewhat contentious.



---

For the last nine years, Thorat has had a *jata* or dreadlocks in her hair, which she has been forbidden from chopping off. All in the name of a superstition that believes naturally matted hair braided or tangled together is a boon from Goddess Yellamma, a Hindu deity. It's a common belief among many in the southern part of Maharashtra and North Karnataka, who think dreadlocks are a sign of the goddess' possession, and cutting or cleaning it—even if lice-infested and dirty—will bring misfortune. As a result, many women end up living with a *jata* for years—with hair often weighing several kilograms, leading to the women being unable to move their necks, developing infections and fevers, and mental health issues.





SAVITHA THORAT HAS HAD MATTED HAIR SINCE ALMOST A DECADE, THAT SHE WAS NOT ALLOWED TO CUT OFF BECAUSE OF THE BELIEF THAT IT'S A BOON FROM GODDESS YELLAMMA.

Nandini Jadhav, an activist and district chief of Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti (MANS) and its state chief Milind Deshmukh have been fighting this practice since the last four years. “She is our sister. How can we see her suffer like this in god’s name?” Jadhav asks the women gathered in the kitchen, explaining that the haircut won’t invite divine wrath on Thorat and the village. Just good hygiene.

The superstitious belief and its religious stamp of approval make it a favourite playing field for self-proclaimed faith healers and godmen who exploit the women and their families financially, forcing them to do pujas and rituals that often cost a lot.

Thorat herself believe initially the *jata* was a boon from the Goddess. “Why else would it form overnight, I thought,” she tells VICE. As the knots grew bigger, Thorat, who works in a local hotel and stays with her daughter’s

family was scared to cut it off, even if she was financially drained. “I have spent more than Rs 1 lakh and taken loans to do the rituals, visited Yellamma temple in Saundatti (North Karnataka), and done everything required and advised by Godmen.”

---

ADVERTISEMENT



---

What changed her mind, we ask. “It became inconvenient for me to sleep, lie down, move my head. I thought no Goddess would want me to suffer so much.” It was also the counselling by Jadhav, who has managed to cut the dreadlocks of more than 130 women in Maharashtra, that worked. Jadhav showed her photos and videos of these women and assured her that nothing catastrophic had befallen them.

As Jadhav puts on gloves and gets ready to relieve Thorat of an almost decade-long burden in 30 minutes, a mixed crowd gathers around. Jadhav doesn't mind the audience. She believes it's these people who become ambassadors of dreadlock removal when they see that no harm has befallen post the haircuts.

## **A Tangle Of Superstition**

There is no exact explanation of the medical reason behind *jata* formation. The dominant theory is lack of proper hygiene, says Dr Govind Dhaske,

researcher and author of *Jata Removal Movement: Unfolding the 'Gender' in Politico-Religious Society*. “The problem occurs when it is deified at an early stage.”

While dreadlocks may be a cultural or fashion statement for some, it's far from that for the almost 400 affected women in Maharashtra, says Dr Dhaske. He isn't quite sure why it holds a connection to the deity but adds that in India, “matted hair has always held religious, shamanic, ritualistic and devotional value.”

It also led women to the regressive Devadasi (servant of God) practice. “90 percent of unmarried women with *jata* faced this. While the Devadasi Abolition Act has banned the practice now, it was rampant until the 90s,” Dr Dhaske tells VICE.

---

ADVERTISEMENT



Even without it, young girls have it the worst. Take the case of Harshada Pingale, an 11-year-old girl from Ghawar village in Maharashtra, who had *jata* for seven years, isolating her in school and keeping her in a state of constant ill-health, malnutrition and depression. “It took me three months to counsel her mother who believed cutting it off would harm her sons,” recalls Jadhav. “Finally one day our team reached the village and managed to convince the mother and the villagers after five hours of talking. It was only when I started cutting the girl’s hair and they saw the lice and festering wound in her scalp that they realised how much pain the little girl had been in.”

The Maharashtra Prevention and Eradication of Human Sacrifice and other Inhuman, Evil and Aghori Practices and Black Magic Act, (2013) stipulates preventing a person from seeking medical treatment, and encouraging inhumane activities as a punishable crime. But Dr Dhaske adds that despite this, “messages from religious-based entities often direct a *jata*-affected woman to stop taking medication and maintain personal hygiene in the name of religious conventions.”

## **Battling Dreadlocks**

MANS and other teams working on *Jata Nirmulan* (dreadlock removal) get anonymous tip-offs about victims of this practice. Sometimes, the woman herself calls the organisation, realising after years of ordeal that it is no divine blessing. Rekha (name changed on request), 32, from Pune’s Kharadi area did not remove her dreadlocks for four years fearing a godman’s advice that her husband, a cancer patient, would die if she did so. When even that didn’t save her husband, a distraught Rekha, who couldn’t find a job because of her dreadlocks, approached Jadhav for a scissor-session.

“It’s exploitation of women at a physical, emotional, social and financial level,” says Jadhav. She and her team have faced slammed doors, been shouted at and threatened, sometimes by an entire village. The team treads carefully, showing them videos of *jat* removal and spending anywhere between eight days to two years counselling people. “We respect their faith and don’t interfere with it,” says Deshmukh. “We just tell them that the *jata* is not divine, just bad health and superstition.”

---

ADVERTISEMENT




---

So what’s life like for the women once the dreadlocks have disappeared? Young girls like Pingale now attend school just like other children in the village, and are no longer made to sit separately. She doesn’t fall sick as often either.

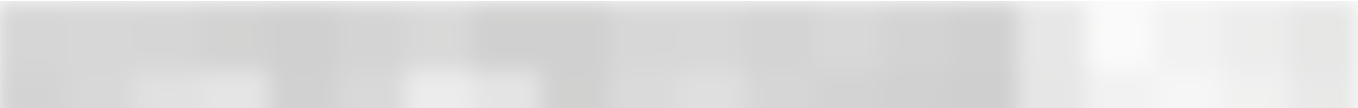
Pushpa Pavle, 67, from Manzar village got her dreadlocks cut off in May 2019 after her son approached Jadhav. “Earlier people wouldn’t come close to me as it would smell and would even call me mad. My health was becoming weaker. Now I feel lighter,” she tells VICE.





“EARLIER PEOPLE WOULDN’T COME CLOSE TO ME AS IT WOULD SMELL AND WOULD EVEN CALL ME MAD. MY HEALTH WAS BECOMING WEAKER. NOW I FEEL LIGHTER.”—PUSHPA PAVLE

Sarita Tai, 50, had dreadlocks weighing 4-5 kgs and says that despite the social pressure to not cut her hair, there were no marriage proposals for her daughter because of the stigma associated. “Now there are *rishtas* (proposals) coming after removing,” she beams.





NANDINI JADHAV COUNSELS A GROUP ON THE ADVANTAGES OF CHOPPING OFF DREADLOCKS. PHOTO: RESHMI CHAKRABORTY

Though there are exceptions, this problem is often common in economically backward or oppressed communities. “One of the reasons is that women in backward and oppressed communities are less educated and find it hard to overcome religious pressures,” says Dr Dhaske. Jadhav thinks that superstition goes beyond communities and income groups too. She has chopped dreadlocks off an IT professional’s hair, successfully counselled a bank manager’s wife to get rid of her dreadlocks and even seen a government official carry the burden on her head.

“Superstition has no boundaries,” she sighs. And sometimes reason and a pair of scissors are the only ways to battle that.

*Follow Reshmi Chakraborty on [Twitter](#).*

---

**TAGGED:** [SUPERSTITION](#), [MYTH](#), [DREADLOCKS](#), [HAIR](#), [MAHARASHTRA](#), [INDIA](#), [INDIAN SUPERSTITION](#), [ACTIVISM](#), [CULTURE](#)

---

# ORIGINAL REPORTING ON EVERYTHING THAT MATTERS IN YOUR INBOX.

Your email address

Subscribe

By signing up, you agree to the [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#) & to receive electronic communications from Vice Media Group, which may include marketing promotions, advertisements and sponsored content.

## MORE FROM VICE



[Identity](#)

**We Asked Atheists How They Deal With Their Religious Families**

NAVIN NORONHA

05.04.23



[News](#)

**How Trying To Stop India's Superstitious Killings Ended in Exile**

AVANTIKA MEHTA

02.16.21



[The VICE Guide to Right Now](#)

**Bengal's BJP Chief Believes Indian Cow Milk Is Yellow Because it 'Contains Gold'**

SHAMANI JOSHI

11.05.19



[The VICE Guide to Right Now](#)

**College Admission Forms in Bengal Now Allow Students to Describe Themselves as Humanist, Secular or Atheist**

SHAMANI JOSHI

06.03.19

[Tech](#)

**This Archeologist Says He's Got Proof That Atlantis Sunk Into the Java Sea**

TITAH AW

04.29.19

[Tech](#)

**Round Earth "Theory" is Western Propaganda, According to This Indian Flat Earther**

SUSHMITA SUNDARAM

04.18.19







[ABOUT](#) [JOBS](#) [PARTNER](#) [VICE VOICES](#) [CONTENT FUNDING ON VICE](#) [SECURITY POLICY](#) [PRIVACY & TERMS](#)

[ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT](#)



© 2024 VICE MEDIA GROUP

