

[Kumbha Mela: Just a Little Gathering of 45 Million Souls](#)

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World's Largest Congregation Lures a Lakh of Sadhus to Lead Pilgrimage and Prayer at Prayag

Rajiv Mallik, New Delhi

I reached the Kumbha Mela city on the morning of January 27th to witness an unending stream of devotees coming on foot, in tractors, trolleys, cars and rickshaws. For eight to ten hours before the main bathing day, January 30th, the inflow of people was estimated at an unrelenting 200,000 per hour. The scene in the predawn darkness that morning at the primary bathing ghat was astonishing. The sadhus and saints of different akharas [religious orders] had started arriving for the shahi snan [royal bath]. They came in a kaleidoscopic procession with the requisite pomp and show accompanied by a pantheon of disciples. A sea of people crowded the banks as far as the eye could see. Prayers were recited, agarbattis lit, rituals performed. The whole atmosphere was surcharged with religious zeal rarely seen anywhere in the world. But there was absolute mayhem between the time the sadhus of one akhara had finished their bath and the next had yet to arrive. The situation was totally out of control as the masses tried to encroach upon the area reserved for the sadhus. Many times it happened that I had no control over my movements. Impelled along by the crowd, I was frightened. There was a menacing risk of falling down and having thousands walk over you. I am sure many would have been injured had there been a stampede. The situation slightly improved when the police prevented more people from getting into the area. Still, before long a few thousand more would enter, jostling and pushing, leading to another frenzy, a latent free-for-all.

In this melāe thousands were separated from their relatives or friends. Many did not know how and where their precious or not-so-precious belongings had disappeared. Yet even in such chaotic conditions most people maintained a calmness and serenity which was nothing short of blissfulness and divinity. Those who were bathing in the Ganges were chanting sacred verses from religious texts

and odes in praise of the sacred rivers. It was indeed a great spiritual experience for me personally.

By official estimates about 20 million pilgrims immersed themselves in the cold waters at the Sangam [confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and invisible Saraswati] on this day. Sadhus and pilgrims started dipping soon after midnight on the 30th and continued throughout the day. By 10:00am 15,000,000 had bathed, and five million were waiting their turn. The old, infirm and invalids were helped by near and dear ones to the ghats. Due to traffic restrictions, thousands had to walk 18 miles or more to reach the Sangam. Many had to bathe at the river banks instead of the Sangam proper, as it was overcrowded with boats of VIPs and army personnel.

Though a separate administrative lane was promised for the use of journalists and photographers, it was nowhere to be seen. Most of the scribes and photographers were seen frantically running from one place to another among the unmanageable mass of millions. Many were seen praying to the Almighty for the safety of their cameras and tape recorders. The enterprising among them brought ladders to get above the crowds.

The procession in which the saints and sadhus of various akharas came for the royal bath at Sangam was wildly colorful, even breathtaking. It came through the hundred-foot-wide "Akshara Road." On the both sides of this road there were barricades behind which hundreds of thousands of people stood with folded hands to seek the blessings of the saints and sadhus. Most of the heads of akharas and senior saints were seated on decorated silver or golden chairs and thrones, with flowers decorating all the vehicles. Hundreds, even thousands, of close disciples followed chanting, "Ganga Maiya Ki Jai." The sadhus would now and then raise their hands to bless the crowds behind the barricades. As always, several thousand unclad naga sadhus were also a part of this procession. Most of them were jumping and running enthusiastically. It was a cold winter morning and the absolutely naked sadhus showed no sign of discomfort, but braved the chilliness in the air with a blissful smile. They were from all age groups including the very young and very old. Naked sadhus-who practice the most rigorous austerities-were received very warmly by the pilgrims and devotees who shouted, "Naga Baba Ki Jai" to greet and honor them. Many of the devotees picked up the dust from the road along which the procession was passing and applied it on their foreheads. The mela is one of the few places devotees can encounter these reclusive ascetics. Indeed, it is the presence of so many sadhus that draws millions to this place. Here is the opportunity to see, meet, speak and worship with the Hindu saints and holy men, even to vicariously share their lives for a few days camped on the banks of Mother Ganga.

Sadhu Boycott Avoided-Barely

Organizers were relieved at the more or less peaceful happening of the "royal bath" ceremony on the 30th. The Akhara Parishad represents 14 of the major religious orders, and includes most of the sadhus. The Parishad had already boycotted the royal bath scheduled for Makar Sankranti, January 14th. They were protesting the ban on chariots and musical bands during the naga procession and the inability of the Mela administration to accommodate the khalsas (a certain group of sadhus) in a particular area. Normally all the sadhu groups were located in one part of the enormous festival grounds. But this year some had been put in camps five miles from the main site. Facilities such as lights, water and latrines were absent, they complained.

Sadhus who had collectively boycotted the royal bath on January 14th had individually bathed in the Sangam that day. But due to the controversy regarding the bath (and very cold weather) the number of pilgrims who came was abysmally low. Three million were expected that day, but only 300,000 participated. Both the sadhus and the administration later played down the boycott. A further boycott on the 30th was out of the question-even the sadhus felt the public pressure for the event to go on as normal.

Saints Speak Out

I had several opportunities to interview the swamis and sadhus attending the mela. In an interview given to Hinduism Today, the firebrand public speaker and head of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's ladies' wing (Durga Vahini), Sadhvi Ritambhara, said that "the Kumbha Mela is an occasion to freely deliberate and ponder upon the problems and issues facing Hindus today. My endeavor at Ardhha Kumbha Mela is to bring together all the women sadhus on one platform and channelize their energies in the area of nation building,"

Brahmarishi Acharya Prakashanandaji, head of the Agni Akhara, told me, "Kumbha Mela is a symbol of unity. As the three rivers are meeting in Prayag, in the same manner the saints and sadhus of all over India are also meeting here."

He added, "If all the dharmacharyas are united, the Ayodhya issue can be solved. The basic problem is that the government is not handing over the land to the sadhus." According to him, the division of Hindus on the basis of caste reduces the power of Hindutva. He feels the so-called low castes also have equal rights and they should not be discriminated against. "We are discussing this problem in detail here at the mela."

Shri Viswambhar Das Maharaj, head of the Chatuh Sampradaya, is an eminent Vaishnava saint. Vaishnavas are divided into four sub-sects-Ramanand Sampradaya, Nimbark, Madhogodeshwar and Vishnuswami. There are over a dozen akharas which fall under these four branches, which are considered together to be the supreme court of the entire Vaishnava Samaj. The decisions of the court are binding on all the akharas falling under it. Shri Viswambhar said that during the mela deserving disciples are initiated. He observed, "The media is also playing a very important role in spreading the message of the sadhus and saints. The local and national papers are prominently publishing our activities. This has a far-reaching impact on the nation." He also noted, "There is no lack of funds for the sadhus at the mela as there are a large number of disciples ready to spend any amount of money for the arrangements."

Swami Ramnareshacharya Ji Maharaj of Varanasi explained the mela in this manner: "Here you get certain things without even making an effort. While you are talking to me, your ears are also listening to the verses of Vedas which are being chanted here day and night. You are not making any effort to listen to these verses, but the benefit is available to you. Similarly, pilgrims get the advantage of this sacred environment without making any effort, but just by being here. No place in the world has the kind of spiritual vibrations that the mela has now."

"I will give you another example," he went on. "If you come to Varanasi and try to meet me, probably it will take you a lot of time to get an appointment. But here I am easily available to everybody. The top religious people are not so easily available roaming on the roads. So you can imagine the kind of energy which is being generated here by the spiritual activities of these holy men at this holy place. It is more than atomic power. This is what I feel."

Swami Chidanand Ji Maharaj (Muniji), president of Parmarth Niketan, Rishikesh, told Hinduism Today, "I feel that every Kumbha Mela should have a theme upon which there should be detailed discussion during the fair. I am putting my energies

on developing some themes for the next mela. The advantage of a theme-based mela would be that discussion will take place on one specific subject and all those who come here will go with a specific and clear message. This message will inspire one and all for dedicating oneself for the welfare of the whole world."

The Half Kumbha Mela

The Kumbha Mela is held at four locations in rotation every three years-Nasiik, Ujjain, Haridwar and Prayag. The event at Prayag (Allahabad) is by far the largest, holding the Guinness record for largest gathering of humanity. The true mela is held every 12 years here, in-between is an ardha or "half" mela-the one this year. It began on January 12th and lasted one and a half months. The most auspicious day of all was January 30th, Amavasya, the day before the new moon. The next full mela at Prayag is in 2001.

Legend traces the origin of Kumbha Mela to the time of Samudramantha, the churning of the oceans, to bring forth the nectar of immortality. The devas foiled the attempt of the asuras to steal the nectar for themselves, and in the process spilled a bit of it at four sites-Nasik, Ujjain, Haridwar and Prayag. Prayag, "place of purification," has the largest concentration of sacred bathing spots and, practically speaking, is the only site which can accommodate such huge numbers of people. The mela is now a symbol of cultural synthesis as people of different races and customs gather seeking truth and liberation from the cycle of life and death.

The mela provides an opportunity for devotees to meet with hundreds of saints, seeking blessings and advice. For the saints and sadhus themselves it is a time of initiations and coordination within and between the various religious orders. Issues are discussed amongst themselves and the problems faced by Hindus addressed.

The Kumbha Mela is a remarkable religious tradition, without parallel anywhere in the world. That millions of devotees gather to share this time with the saints shows the high regard in which they are held. And rightly so, for it is the intense austerity, spiritual learning and profound dedication of the saints which are the foundation of our great faith.

Correspondent Sri Rajiv Mallik lives with his parents, wife, son and daughter in New Delhi, India. He is a free-lance journalist in Hindi and English as well as a partner in a textile showroom.

Sidebar: Votaries' Voices

Basant Mohini Sharma (age 65). "My ancestors lived in Allahabad for the last over 250 years. My parents used to come and stay here on the banks of the Ganges. All my time I am devoting to singing bhajans and doing kirtan. Here one learns a lot about our ancient heritage and culture."

Pandit Ritu Raj Bhargava (age 11). "My message to the world is that if you want to be liberated from the ocean of worldly existence, liberated from the cycle of life and death you must seek the company of holy men and chant the name of the Almighty all the time." He is a class eight student well versed in scripture and a sought-after speaker at the Mela. "I myself would like to become a Vivekananda and work for the unity of India and the welfare of humanity," he said.

Mahadevi Nadchatiram. "I am a Hindu brahmin settled in Malaysia. My guru has initiated me as a brahmachari. I attach a lot of importance to the mela for my own spiritual development. Here we can interact with saints and sadhus who gather in large number."

S.K. Johri (Varanasi-based businessman. "I supply the sadhus, saints and akhara people with the silver chairs in which they are taken to Sangam for the royal bath. Each chair costs a minimum of Rs.500,000 (US\$16,000). Mostly it is the chief of the akhara who sits on this expensive chair."

Manoj Kumar (52, district Begusary, Bihar). "I attend every Kumbha Mela and try to serve the sadhus and saints who come here. I also try to be of help to the poor and needy. All this gives satisfaction and happiness to my soul, and all that I get from here cannot be explained in words."

Hoshiar Singh (Sub-inspector in charge, Chowki Baba Devraha), "In my entire career in the police department this is the best job assigned to me. I never before in my life got an opportunity to see and manage an event of this magnitude. The spiritual atmosphere prevailing here is very, very inspiring."

Rajni Dubey (20, student from Varanasi): "I have come here along with my friends to see Kumbha Mela and by seeing it to learn more about our culture and heritage. I would like to do a lot of bhajan and kirtan during my stay here. We will meet some big spiritual leaders too. I would like to see what kind of life these people lead. I graduate this year and definitely will have a holy dip in Ganga."

Sant Prasad Mishra (31, Ayodhya): "I have come here both for business and pilgrimage. I generally avoid melas, but still I have come here as it is a big event and good business is expected. So far the business has not picked up."

Anand Swaroop (Secretary, Rashtriya Sikh Sangat, Hyderabad Chapter): "Our organization was created to foster unity between Hindus and Sikhs. All the Sikh Gurus fought for the interests of Hindus. My purpose here is to gain more knowledge about the issues and challenges facing the nation and Hindus today. It is unfortunate that the cows are being mercilessly butchered in this country. I also raised the question about why the Ramalaya Trust has been created when Ram Janma Bhumi Nyas has been fighting for the Ram Temple for the last fifty years."

Eknathdas Mahatyagi Tapasvi: "I am a devotee of Lord Ram. My guru is Swami Ramnareshacharya Ji Maharaj of Varanasi. I have no fixed place where I stay. I am constantly on the move. I initiate people in sannyas. My message to people is to follow the moral path. I tell them that God only accepts things done in a moral way. He does not accept anything immoral or impure."

Dr. Bhavna Mishra (26, lecturer of political science): "I belong to a voluntary organization, the Ganga Sewa Sangh, which is based in Varanasi and is running a public awareness campaign on how to keep the Ganga free from pollution. It is not the responsibility of the government alone. We requested this large gathering to not use soap while bathing in Ganga, or throw garbage in the river. I am enjoying the spiritual environment. Moreover, when millions of people pray collectively it has a profound impact. I feel something of this sort happening here."

Pandit Shakar Lal Chaturvedi: "Doing Ramlila is my full-time job. Here my group Bhakti Prakash Ramlila Mandali is performing Ramlila every day. Our aim is to project and promote the character of Ram and tell the people about the values for which Ram stood."

Jawa Devi (70, District Sultanpur, Uttar Pradesh): "I am here with my entire family. We have stayed on the banks of Ganga for one month each year during the last 18 years. We take just one meal a day and bath in Ganga twice. The rest of the day we do bhajan and kirtan. I and my family have absolutely no problems in life with the blessings of Ganga Maiya."

Mamta Devi (32, Satna, Madhya Pradesh): "I and my husband have come here for a week. We are enjoying our stay. I have no desires. I do not ask God for anything as He has already given me everything."

Guru Panda: There is a lot of misinformation spread about the pandas. Our role is that of a family priest. We provide shelter here to our clients who come for the bath. I have been allotted land on which I have set up around a hundred tents. In each tent there are up to twenty people. The big pandas are allotted more land and they put up four to five hundred tents. I do not ask anyone to pay money to me. But the people who come pay out of their own sweet will, from Rs. 11 (US\$0.35) to Rs. 100 (US\$3.25).

Sidebar: The Ultimate Definition Of "Crowd Control"

To begin with, 20 million people is more than the population of 145 countries. It's more like a nation than a crowd, roughly equal to the populations of Malaysia, Afganistan, Peru, Taiwan, Nepal, Saudi Arabia or the Netherlands.

On January 28th, I had gone to interview Swami Ramnareshacharya Ji Maharaj at his camp at North Jhusi. Luckily Mela Adhikari Mr. Lal Bihari Tewari, the man responsible for the entire event, was present. The soft-spoken Mela Adhikari admitted that managing such a colossal event was a challenging job. He said, "The mela is organized with the help of several departments of the state and central

government. Man management, construction of roads and bridges, availability of power, management of electricity and traffic regulation are some basic jobs. The most important factors are the cleanliness of the mela area, the regulation of traffic and the providing of proper lights on the ghats where the bathing will take place."

When asked if he had some kind of spiritual experience himself in the process of mela management, he smilingly offered, "You see I am not that spiritual. I am a simple human being. But yes, I have enjoyed meeting sadhus and saints who are nice souls indeed." Could he have a dip on Mauni Amavasya? "No," replied Tewari, "it will not be possible for me. I will be failing in my duty if I go to take bath. Because my prime responsibility is to see that the whole fair is a success, that all the pilgrims have a dip in the Sangam and river Ganga safely and without any problem."

"The budget of the mela is Rs. 730 million (US\$24 million), Tiwari explained. "Thirteen pontoon bridges have been constructed over the Yamuna. The camping area is spread over four square miles and divided into eight sectors. Each sector is headed by a senior magistrate; under him are nine police stations, each with two fire brigades. Every sector has hospitals and doctors for attending to any emergency. Closed-circuit television has been installed at key vantage points to monitor the movement of the traffic. At least 10,000 police and four companies of the Provincial Armed Constabulary have been deployed. There is a single public address system which connects the entire mela area."

Tewari mentioned that a sizeable number of foreign tourists were joining the mela as several yoga and meditation camps had been set up. In his concluding remarks, Tewari recounted, "One peculiar feature of this mela is that you will not find any cinema songs here. All songs being played and sung here are devotional songs, bhajans and kirtans. Kumbha Mela is a part of our heritage and culture, and definitely such an assembly of saints here is good for the nation. It is heartening to see a very large number of youth participating in the religious and social activities. Most of the social and voluntary organizations here are being run by young people."

The Senior Superintendent of Police for the entire mela was O.P. Singh. Despite his very tight schedule, he agreed to speak with Hinduism Today on the crucial night of January 29th around 11:00pm. The suave Mr. Singh was recently decorated

with a presidential medal for gallantry. "There are civil police, armed police, mounted police, women police, river police, wireless staff, Home Guards, Provincial Armed Constabulary, etc.-10,000 in all. They are now strategically located after extensive training to ensure there are no casualties. It is a very difficult job for a policeman to manage this area because you have millions and millions of people. This is the first time that computers have been used by the force in a big way. We have constructed a lot of watchtowers to assess crowd movements. We also have sophisticated equipment to detect any attempts at sabotage, as well as commandos who can be used for anti-terrorist operations and for ambush. We have spotters from different states who can identify the terrorists of their localities. "

Mr. Singh went on, "The river police are vital. Just today we saved the lives of eleven people from Kashmir when boat capsized"

In his concluding remarks Mr. Singh had this to say, "We have especially directed our police force to be extremely polite with the pilgrims. They are not to carry even a stick. Because if you have a stick in your hand you may use it the moment you get angry. Moreover, the chances of getting angry are greater if you have the stick in your hand. After all, here we are dealing with devotees and not ordinary people."