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Finally, South Indian Hindus Get Their Own Kumbha Mela

New Event Allows Pilgrims to Think Globally and Worship Locally

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Three hundred thousand grateful Hindus fulfilled their spiritual aspirations by participating in the third Dakshna (Southern) Kumbha Mela February 13th to 15th, 1995. Until just six years ago, each would have had to trek 1,000 miles north to join one of the four tri-annual Kumbha Melas. But thanks to the innovation and blessing of South India's religious leaders, pilgrims needed journey only to Triveni Sangam near Mysore, Karnataka, for three days of yajnas, elaborate pujas and the company of saints and holy men.

As in previous years, the gracious presence of His Holiness, Jagadguru Sri Sri Sri Thiruchi Mahaswamikal, dressed in white, overshadowed this year's hallowed congregation of saffron-clad sadhus. It was he who conceived this Southern Kumbha Mela following the famous, time-honored Kumbha Melas of the North. On the full-moon day of the 15th, he and the other sadhus were brought in procession to the river bank. Just as he was dismounting from his flower-bedecked truck, the milling throng was treated to a memorable sight. A lone eagle flew near and circled slowly thrice above. The auspicious spectacle of the solitary eagle, his russet wings glinting in the midday sun and his snowy throat setting him off against the blue sky, was received with gasps of delight and wonder by the onlookers.

Was the new Mela appreciated? I needed ask no further than 34-year-old Ram Kumar, an incense seller, for the answer. "I have always wanted to go to North India for a Kumbha Mela, but cannot afford it. Now my life-long ambition has been fulfilled with the Southern Kumbha Mela."

The Triveni Sangam, literally "confluence of three rivers," is located at Tiramakudalu Narasipur in Mysore district of Karnataka State, a six-hour drive south from Bangalore. Here the Kapila river merges with the Kaveri [see map]. The third "river" is an underground spring known as the Spatika Sarovar, "crystal pool," which can be observed at the confluence. Sage Agastya did penance here in ancient times, and several famous temples and ashrams are nearby.

Men and women of all ages flocked to this sequestered pilgrimage center nestling on the bank of the triple rivers. Some were hardy, ingenuous rustics clasping the hands of their tiny tots. Others were zealous young women with their babies, unmindful of the inherent perils of such a vast congregation and the inconveniences of packed public transports. And even affluent urbanites commanding commodious cars were among the faithful.

Devotees who started pouring in from the previous afternoon vied with each other in offering puja and taking the holy bath. The local villagers cooperated wholeheartedly with the personnel of the various mutts and the government in helping pilgrims cross the rivers by operating the local almost Alice-in-Wonderland round metal boats. A makeshift bridge adroitly built by the Armed Forces enabled pilgrims to easily gather at the Dharma Sabha venue situated on an islet between the encircling rivers. Three main temples were filled with devotees waiting to offer prayers.

The infant morning of Kumbha Mela here pulsed to the sacred stir that galvanized a vast multitude. There was sweet, sacred music in the air. Thousands made a beeline for the sacred bath during the auspicious hour between 7.30am to 8.30am. The heads of several mutts joined devotees in their holy dip. The river bank near Vyasraya Mutt was fragrant with sandal smoke coiling up from pots of clay carried by itinerant vendors. Even the very poor found a little cash to buy a bit of sandal dust and burn it chanting the names of Gods. So too there was none too poor to buy a fistful of sacred bilva leaves and shower them on the countless Lingas adorning the Shiva shrine.

Rudra homa and puja to India's seven celebrated holy rivers were performed that 15th morning. After completing their bath, the heads of various mutts were taken in a colorful, three-mile-long procession that wound its way around the small town. The procession, led by young girls and women carrying kumbhas (pots) on their heads, featured nine tableaux. The tableau of Goddess Chowdeshwari, the

presiding deity of the temple town, was in the front. Preeminent among the spiritual leaders was Sri Thiruchi Swamiji. He was the picture of tranquil benignity, his dusky locks framing a face that belies his age of three score and more. Cymbals clashed, drums throbbed and pipes blared as a band of Adivasis (tribals) swayed and chanted with gay abandon. They formed a spectacular vanguard to the pageant that conveyed the saints from the town outskirts to the local Siva temple.

Conspicuous among the galaxy of saffron-clad swamis who graced the occasion were Sri Balagangadharanatha Swami, the head of Adi Chunchanagiri Mutt, Sri Beerendhra Keshava Tarakananda Swami of Kaginele Kanaka Peetam, Sri Shivapuri Swami of Omkhar Hills, Bangalore, Sri Shivarathree Deshikendra Swami of Suttur Mutt and Sri Dayanandapuri Swami of Hampi in North Karnataka.

The newly-elected Chief Minister of Karnataka, Shri H.D. Deva Gowda and his cabinet colleagues Shri P.G.R. Scindia, Siddharamaiah, S. Nanjappa, H.C. Mahadevappa and Member of the Legislative Assembly Shri Mahadeva Prasad represented the government at the meet. In a memorandum submitted to the Chief Minister on the occasion, the organizers urged the government to declare and recognize the Kumbha Mela as a state festival. Tiruchi Mahaswami hoisted the Dharma flag and draped dainty shawls on the shoulders of the Chief Minister and other dignitaries.

Shri Deva Gowda said, "The sacred roots of the Indian culture and Dharma have gone deep. Dharma is an inherent part of the religious minded people and it greatly influences the behaviors of the society. Our heritage is a radiant model for the whole earth. Democracy can never decay here. The Thiveni Sangam here would soon become one of the biggest religious centers in South India as it is religiously as important as Kasi [Benares]."

Sri Balagangadharanatha, whose mutt was responsible for many of the arrangements, observed: "This place of pilgrimage is a symbol of integration, peaceful coexistence and social harmony. This Mela is an occasion where lakhs of devotees from the southern States can come together with total faith in God."

In response to the invitation of Sri Balagangadharanatha, Sri Vishvesha Thirtha Swamiji of Pejavar Mutt, Udipi, graced the occasion. His is one of the eight ancient

Mutts whose heads enjoy the privilege of doing puja to Lord Krishna at Udipi, the famous Krishna shrine in Western Karnataka near Mangalore. It is significant, for these Madhwa acharyas are very staunch Vaishnavites and usually do not mix with followers of other Hindu denominations. His presence significantly contributed to the occasion.

February 15th clearly belonged to the swamis. A day that proclaimed triumphantly that Hindus still cherish the lowliest of the wandering monks above anybody else in their eternal peregrination in search of God. The faith of the pilgrims was strong, touching and as lucid as the waters they came to bathe in.

The ashrams who made all of the arrangements for the event are to be congratulated for bringing this new spiritual dimension to the Hindus of South India.

Correspondent V. Gowri Shankar is an Associate Editor at the Institute of Asian Studies in Madras. He is translating Periapuranam into English verse, and hoping to publish it soon. He lives with his wife, son and two daughters.

Sidebar: How the Mela Began

The idea for a Southern Kumbha Mela was conceived in 1989 at the Kumbha Mela in Prayag. Amidst 30 million devotees, Jagadguru Sri Sri Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal of Sri Kailas Ashram (Bangalore), Jagadguru Sri Sri Sri Balagangadharanatha Mahaswamigal of Sri Adi Chunchanagiri Mahasamsthana and other swamis there decided to hold a Southern Kumbha Mela at the Tirumakudalu Sangama. They felt the millions of southern Hindus should have the same opportunity to participate in such a great spiritual event as their brothers and sisters of the north. Many who would like to attend cannot afford the time or expense to get to northern India.

Returning to Karnataka, the swamis discussed the proposal with Jagadguru Sri Sri Sri Shivaratri Desikendra Mahaswamigal of Sri Sunthara Mahasamsthana of Mysore, who unconditionally seconded the suggestion. They ambitiously decided to

put the plan into immediate effect and scheduled the first mela for the 20th of February, 1989, the auspicious day of Magha Purnima-a mere fifteen days away. The event was held at the Triveni Sangam near Mysore. In spite of the short notice, about two-hundred-thousand delighted people participated, including a large number of sadhus and religious leaders.

The second Dakshina (southern) Kumbha Mela was also held at the Triveni Sangama in 1992, again attracting two-hundred-thousand people. The event will continue to be held at the site until it becomes firmly established. Then it will rotate among four auspicious locations in southern India-following the twelve-year cycle of the four northern melas. The bathing days are determined by the same astrological calculations as the North. The 1995 mela is the third of the South.

Sri Thiruchiswami is well known throughout South India as a spiritual leader and healer. His influence, born of rare spiritual attainment, extends wider and deeper than simple fame. Since his early days, Swamiji has worked methodically toward the revival of Hinduism in his area. He's improved the temples by raising money for construction and renovation. But more importantly, and reflecting far-sightedness, his ashram's patasala school has graduated a steady stream of proficient priests since its founding in 1976. Some of the patasala boys have opted to become renunciates and have joined his or another ashram after their thorough religious training at Kailas Ashram, thus greatly improving the religious teaching and leadership of the Bangalore region. The ashram has spawned a number of subsidiary spiritual centers staffed by Swamiji's monks, mostly in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

Sri Sri Sri Balagangadharanatha Swami ascended the abbot's seat of the Adi Chunchanagiri Mutt in September 1974. It is a huge, monolithic complex that girdles a granite and forest hill jutting up off the arid floor of Karnataka's southern plains. It is famous for its five Siva Linga temples and empowered by centuries of yogic austerities and rigorous discipline. In just 21 years Swamiji has reshaped the previously obscure Adi Chunchanagiri Mutt into the single most effective institution of education, social service and religious teaching in this state of 25 million people. In the last several years Swamiji has branched out nationally and internationally from his base in Karnataka, acquiring land in New Delhi and establishing foundations in America and Germany. The Southern Mela is among his ambitious projects.

Address: Sri Adi Chunchanagiri Mutt, Nagamangala Taluk, Mandya District,
Karnataka, India.