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SPECIAL FEATURE

Kumbha Mela 2001

Seventy million Hindus from around the world--the largest human gathering in history--worshiped at the confluence of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna

BY RAJIV MALIK, DELHI

The Kumbha Mela is the one event for which no invitation is extended to anyone. There are no India-wide promotional campaigns, no advertisements, no calls for the faithful to come forward. Yet more people gathered in worship on January 24, 2001, at the confluence of the rivers Ganga, Yamuna and celestial Saraswati than the entire 34 million population of

Tokyo--and you could possibly even throw in the citizens of New York, another 20 million. Pilgrims over the rest of the six-week festival easily added the population of the third largest city, Seoul, another 20 million. That the event came off with hardly a hitch was no doubt the direct grace of God, a conclusion readily agreed to by Sri Alok Sharma, the senior superintendent of police.

I started planning for the Mela a few weeks in advance, and came in for a rude shock from day one when I was told there were neither rail nor air reservations available to Allahabad. It looked as if all of Delhi was going. The booking agents had a stock reply, "Sir, after all it is Kumbha Mela; tens of millions are going to be there. You should have done some advance planning. And do you know that this time the information on the Mela was available on

the Internet, and the response from abroad is overwhelming. At this point, you will need to make your request to God, Sir, for your transport and accommodation, and not to us." Everyone I shared my plans with in Delhi and even abroad told me either they themselves or their close relatives or friends were going.

All this was happening even though the Mela is well known for the mind-boggling crowds and all sorts of physical discomforts. It is a famous event to get lost at, with over a dozen Hindi movies on this theme alone. The chances of a stampede or the mob getting out of control are high, a fear compounded by daily news reports that the Mela may be the target of terrorist activities. But obviously there were tens of millions who were just not bothered about all this, and were prepared to worship and purify themselves at Sangam, the sacred

confluence, come what may, even the loss of their lives. Such is the attraction of this Maha Kumbha Mela, regarded as the most auspicious in the last 144 years

I did pray to God as advised, and He began to make things happen. Ultimately, photographer Amit Kumar and I secured both transport and accommodations. We found ourselves on the road into Allahabad January 20 when our car struck a bicycle while passing through an interior village in Uttar Pradesh. Anyone who comes to India from outside is generally amazed at how many people fit on a bicycle in this country, and in this case it was three: mother, father and daughter. Unfortunately, the daughter suffered some minor cuts on her foot. Within minutes, hundreds of people had gathered for what is India's instant version of traffic court in which the offending party can be subject to summary punishment,

such as being pummeled senseless. We tried to explain it was an accident, that if our driver hadn't been proceeding so cautiously it would have been much worse. The shouting only increased. Then I chanced to explain we were on our way to the Kumbha Mela. The whole atmosphere changed dramatically. Those shouting at us calmed down. Our status as Kumbha Mela pilgrims saved us from the mob's fury. After more than an hour and a half in the village we were forgiven and allowed to leave. We arrived late that night in Allahabad.

The Mela city was built upon the sand bars on both sides of the Ganga, a 6,000-acre area some two kilometers wide extending several kilometers up the Ganga away from its confluence with the Yamuna. The bathing ghats, through which every pilgrim will pass at least once, are located at the confluence. From January 21, the flow of

people into this area, fast becoming the world's largest city, was constant and unending. The majority were villagers, holding hands or tied together, walking slowly toward the confluence with their luggage in their hands or on their heads. Few had any idea where they would stay that night or when their next meal would come.

The weather was cold. So much dust was kicked up by the moving crowds, we were told, that each person was inhaling a pound of it a day. I know I was. Walking was the only mode of transport, for no vehicles were allowed in the Mela area two days before January 24, Mauni Amavasya, the most sacred bathing day of the festival. We were visiting the various camps and

covering eight or ten kilometers a day, while those staying in Allahabad itself would have to travel twice that. Many developed severe colds, sore throats and chest congestion. Even the thousands of gathered saints and sadhus did not escape the problems, compounded in their case because they had to speak with so many people. Nothing deterred the pilgrims, however, and one could see in their eyes a shine and hope which said that everything would be alright with the blessings of Ganga.

The 6,000-acre site was divided into 14 sectors, with a camp for virtually every Hindu organization in India, or so it seemed. Most important were the 14 major akharas (monastic orders),

including the Juna, Nirvani and Niranjini. The biggest camp of all was set up by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.

The grounds were a mÃ©lange of people, activities and colors. Table-top shops conducted brisk business alongside each road; telephone booths sported long lines, small restaurants were packed beyond capacity, while roaming vendors sold make-up items for women. Though the mornings and evenings were extremely cold, the daytime sunshine provided a welcome relief, and it was during these late morning and afternoon hours that the Mela was at its best and business at its peak. There were ornamentally decorated elephants and cows being worshiped by people. On the roads

there were naga sadhus sitting with a pipe in their hands surrounded by a number of disciples and larger numbers of onlookers. Then there were astrologers, beggars, cloth sellers, tea shops, book shops, ration shops and, to prove the Mela was in touch with the times, cyber cafes.

The single most inescapable feature of the Mela was noise, for this temporary city boasted the world's largest public address system. This centralized audio Internet made announcements round the clock. And every ashram, large and small, had its own system bellowing out bhajanas, music, discourses and on-going ceremonies. At times, hundreds were speaking at once. Often I could not even hear Amit, who walked

beside me.

The public address system also provided one of the Mela's lighter moments when a village lady lost her husband. The person managing the lost-and-found center asked her over the public address system for the name of her husband. She gave the stock reply that it was not appropriate for her, as a Hindu lady, to speak out the name of her husband, that it would be disrespectful. She suggested that the announcement be made instead for "Bablu's father." The announcer then told her that "Bablu" (her son) was a very common name in villages, and there may be ten thousand Bablu's fathers in the Mela. Finally wisdom dawned on the village lady, and she had

to reveal her husband's name. All this was audible on the public address system and pilgrims let out peels of laughter over the incident, which was recounted again and again for several days.

Getting lost is normally no laughing matter, and the pilgrimage became an anxious search for thousands separated from families and friends. The lost-and-found centers were a long way off, and one could spend half a day just reporting a lost relative, and for an illiterate person, even more. Use of high technology could have expanded the number of reporting centers, as well as close-circuit TV to identify people.

Amazingly, there was a large number of elderly people deliberately abandoned at the Mela [sidebar, page 28].

Fortunately, arrangements were made at the last minute for us to stay at the camp jointly run by Swami Chidananda Saraswati (Muniji) of Parmarth Niketan and Swami Veda Bharati. The food at the camp was very good, probably the best in the Mela, and was only served to the inmates of the camp, half of whom were Westerners [see page 36] who were paying a hefty sum to be a part of this arrangement. We tried not to miss breakfast and dinner here, as we

knew nothing of the same quality would be available once we moved outside. The Parmarth Niketan camp would have been second only to the luxury tents set up by the tour operator Cox and Kings who were charging the phenomenal amount of ^{us}\$250 per person, per day. This is the camp that hit the headlines, not over the cost, but over the accusation, denied by Cox and Kings, that liquor and nonvegetarian food was being made available to the inmates of their tents. Irate sadhus got a court order to move the camp, but the order could not be

enforced before the Mela ended. Many of the foreign journalists were ensconced here, and rumors spoke of several Western celebrities too, although none was actually spotted.

There was an official media center, where we hoped to obtain proper press passes. Dinesh Sharma, an information officer at the center, said the Mela was flooded with with foreign

media. Twelve hundred journalists had been issued passes, out of which over three hundred worked for newspapers and news agencies based overseas. We were not issued passes for some inexplicable technical reason, but Dinesh admitted there were hundreds of freelance journalists and photographers present who had not bothered with formalities. In fact, lack of

an official pass made little difference. Earlier complaints by pilgrims resulted in the enforcement of a long-standing law against photography at the bathing

Foreigners and foreign media personnel, especially photographers, were visible in large numbers all over the Mela area. Foreign television channels devoted hours to it

every day. Not to be outdone, some of the exclusive channels on religion in India were giving six to eight hour coverage per day to the Mela, and even the mainstream news channels put out stories on an hourly basis.

To reach the media center we were walking against the stream of people coming towards the heart of the

festival grounds. A sea of humanity was rushing towards the Sangam area through every available road as the auspicious time approached around 3:15 pm for the Mauni Amavasya bath on January 23. Mauni is the Hindi name of the lunar month, and Amavasya is the New Moon. The time period is that of one tithi, or lunar day, in this case a period 26 hours and 37 minutes, extending through January

24 at 5:52 pm. Constant appeals were being made over the loudspeakers for pilgrims to not take long, so that all could worship within the auspicious time. Despite all the potential hazards that faced this vast chunk of humanity, I sensed no anxiety in the air. Rather, all marched calmly and blissfully towards Mother Ganga which together with Her other two sisters, Yamuna and celestial

Saraswati, were welcoming these children of God with open arms.

Amit and I decided to forego sleep, and headed to the press tower near the bathing ghats, reaching there at 1:00 am on the 24th. Our lack of formal passes proved no obstacle, and we were actually the first two media persons at the 14-foot tower. And there we sat until

5:30 am, with the cold wind of that chilly winter night piercing us to our bones. We badly needed a cup of tea or coffee, but not even water was available here. As photography was banned on the bathing ghats, it was from here only that shooting could be done. We could not see the bathing ghats, only an unending stream of humanity going towards the Sangam at a brisk pace, and thousands of women, men,

babies, children,
middle-aged people and old
people walking back totally
drenched in water in the
biting cold of this winter
night. While we sat shivering
on the tower, those who had
a bath in Sangam shouted
slogans of "Har Har
Gange"--"Praise to Ganga."
There was no distinction of
caste, creed, sect,
nationality or even religion.

From what Amit and I saw in our seven hours in that tower on Mauni Amavasya day, I can say with a lot of conviction that if the authorities have confirmed thirty million people taking a dip in twenty-six hours time on this auspicious occasion, the actual number of people who would have taken a dip in the three days from 23rd to the 26th would not be less than twice this figure, sixty million. We ourselves

managed the sacred bath on the 25th, just before the Ganga arati with the Dalai Lama [see sidebar, page 24].

Around 5:00 am, the police cordoned off the whole area. The flow of pilgrims was totally stopped as the time for Shahi Snan, "Royal Bath," the procession of saints, was about to begin. The main roads on which the

masses were moving were cleared of people, who then waited behind barricades.

Sharp 5.30 am, the Shahi Snan began. Hundreds of stark-naked Naga sadhus came jumping and running on the main road on their way to Ganga. The whole atmosphere was charged with an infectious enthusiasm as soon as the the Nagas appeared on the

main track moving towards the confluence at an extremely fast pace. The masses watching the show started shouting "Har Har Mahadev" and "Har Har Gange." Everyone wanted to touch their feet, bow before them and seek their blessings, for these ascetic Nagas are greatly revered by all in India. Many were seen picking up the dust of their feet and applying it on their heads. The flowers

thrown from their garlands became the cherished possessions of many a devotee.

This scene was repeated every time the Nagas of any monastic order, akhara, appeared on the main track. Some had swords and trishuls in their hands. Different akharas participated in the

procession with majestically dressed-up and garlanded mahamandeshwars, senior monks, sitting on their automobile raths, chariots. The slogan shouting was going on every now and then. Many of the akharas had a large number of devotees behind them, who would also have a bath in the Sangam after the saints. Some of the akharas had

huge bands playing devotional music. All this went on and on until late in the afternoon.

Now, as the Sangam was closed for almost eight to ten hours for the common pilgrims, these people were stranded wherever they were in the entire area, including Allahabad City itself. From railway

station to the Kumbha Mela area, people were made to stay wherever they they happened to be that morning. If the crowds in an area became unmanageable, they were put to walking in a circuitous route until the authorities could relieve the pressure elsewhere. This was a real demonstration of crowd management skills by the police and administration.

Any mistake or miscalculation anywhere could have proved costly in terms of human lives.

After covering the Shahi Snan procession for a few hours, Amit and I started to move out to where we were staying, thinking it would take an hour or so to go the three or four kilometers. But after

moving for one hour at an ant's pace, we got stuck in a mass of people at a crossing blocked by the Shahi Snan procession, which was still in progress. This was a situation in which anything could happen. There were thousands ahead of us and thousands behind us. After an hour, we noticed that the patience of the crowd was gradually wearing out. We were hungry and

thirsty, but our first priority was to get out of this crowd.

We decided upon a risky escape over a barrier of one akhara camp along the road--made hazardous both by the height of the fence and the lathi-wielding guards on the other side who very much needed to prevent the

crowd from storming through their compound. Amit made it over first, but when I got there, the guards were beating people back. There was a stalemate for half an hour until the guards suddenly disappeared, apparently for tea.

After having spent the whole night in the biting

cold and down with a severe chest congestion, I was finding it difficult to hold on to the place where I was stuck. In sheer desperation and realizing that I was almost at my wit's end, I mustered all my energies, started chanting "Aum Namah Sivaya" slowly, leapt the fence and escaped out the ashram gate, sustaining minor injuries in the process and losing my

wool cap. Once out of the ashram, I found Amit coolly clicking pictures of the Shahi Snan which was still going by on the main road outside the ashram.

We worked quickly to wrap up our assignment, visiting one ashram and then another, one akhara and then the next, never with invitations, and

interviewing whomever we could find. At some places we were greeted with love, but the saints refused to talk to us, at other places we were even denied entry into the premises on one or another pretext by those guarding the gates. And then there were cases where we entered with a lot of difficulty and got to speak to the person we wanted to interview and shoot photos [see

interviews page 32]. In a short time we collected an amazing amount of wisdom from the well-known and the unknown saints, as we queried them on questions from the meaning of the Mela to their experience of God.

Our return to Delhi was as haphazard as our arrival.

Fortunately, we secured a taxi to Kanpur--at an exorbitant rate--from one of the city's hotels, as none were available in the Mela area. We had the good fortune to visit the famed Hanuman temple near Kanpur, and by the next day had secured with His grace two first-class train tickets back to Delhi.

After I returned to Delhi, I reflected that this Maha Kumbha Mela truly belonged to the whole world. Add to those who were there the viewers of TV reports or following through the Internet, and the number could run into the hundreds of millions, many of them not even Hindus. Does this not clearly mean that the Mela is as relevant today as it was at any point of time in

the past? All today's hi-tech paraphernalia, such as the Internet and mobile phones, were there to make the event more successful and accessible to all. Even the holy men took full advantage of these.

Now where does all this lead us? I believe the Melas of the future will

deliberate the challenges before not only Hindus but all of humanity. Everyone will want to be there when the Kumbha Mela occurs again at Allahabad in 2013 to know which direction the world should go. It is a grand vision, and if you want to be part of it, I advise you to start arranging for your travel and accommodations today!

Dalai Lama "It is Wrong to Convert"

BY RAJIV MALIK, DELHI,
INDIA

Most memorable experience of this Mela for me was joining the Dalai Lama, the Shankaracharya of

Kanchi and Swami Chidananda Saraswati (Muniji) for the January 25 evening offering of lighted lamps at Sangam, the great bathing ghat at the confluence of the rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati. I knew the head of the police, Sri Alok Sharma, and he allowed photographer Amit Kumar and myself through the formidable

security cordon. The foreign disciples of Muniji and Swami Veda Bharati were there in full force. At least forty cameraman from the national and international media jumped into the Ganga to get the best photo position when the offering began.

This wonderful religious observance carried none of the controversy that the Dalai Lama's remarks earlier in the day managed to generate. At a meeting organized by the VHP, he said, "Whether Hindu or Muslim or Christian, whoever tries to convert, it's wrong, not good." After the meeting, he and others signed a joint

statement saying, "We oppose conversions by any religious tradition using various methods of enticement." Later the Dalai Lama told reporters, "I always believe it's safer and better and reasonable to keep one's own tradition or belief." He also added, "We Buddhists consider Hindus and Buddhists are like twin brothers and

sisters." He expressed hopes to strengthen ties between Hindus and Buddhists, surprisingly remarking he often felt closer ties to his Christian brothers than his Hindu brothers.

The next day India's secular press flayed him for his remarks on

conversion. In an editorial in the Hindustan Times headed, "Dalai Lama's mistake," the editor said, "Perhaps unwittingly the Dalai Lama has entered a controversial field which can become even more complicated as a result. Not unexpectedly, his words have been promptly seized by Ashok Singhal to reiterate the VHP's familiar grievance

against Islam and Christianity. It is this very danger of the Dalai Lama's views being exploited to condemn Islam and Christianity as 'aggressive' of which the Tibetan spiritual leader should have been aware." The editorial went on to dismiss the idea that Islam and Christianity are aggressive or engaged in

religious war against
Hindus.

Such reactions are not unusual, coming from India's secular and left-leaning press. Also, the Dalai Lama does not quite enjoy the same prestige in India as he does elsewhere in the world. The problem lies

not with him, but with the presence of so many Tibetan refugees who many Indians feel are a drain on their economy, and do not hold their communities to a proper standard of conduct.

After the arati, the Dalai Lama gave a brief speech in Tibetan, saying, "To

make the world a more peaceful place we must all come together and deliberate on the religious matters. Only through this can we help achieve the welfare of all humanity. The Buddhist and Hindu dharma both took place in India, the culture and aim are the same." I heard some murmurs in the crowd stating that he should

have said a few words in Hindi, which he also speaks, to show he loves the country which has given him shelter.

Later I heard complaints about the Dalai Lama's presence from many Hindu leaders, including the Shankaracharya of Dwarka and the Akhara

Parishad, who represent the 13 major sadhu orders at the Mela. The Dwarka Shankaracharya blamed the VHP (who invited the Dalai Lama to the mela), RSS and Bajrang Dal for trying to hijack the religious mood of the Mahakumbha with an injection of their political agenda.

United We Stand

Women saints gather in historic solidarity

Deep in the heart of
the kumbha mela,
hundreds of women
renunciates, or sadhvis,
from diverse

backgrounds and faiths gathered in a historic meeting. Hundreds of pilgrims watched the event, which was organized by the Sadhvi Shakti Parishad (SSP) to give sadhvis the opportunity to gain inspiration from their fellow women renunciates and plan their work together for

the good of humankind. "We have to sit together and deliberate what should be our role in tackling problems such as conversion, the killing of cows and the polluted Ganga," said Sadhvi Prachi Arya. "The role of sadhvis is like the role of the mother," she explained. "As the mother prepares her

children, we have to nurture society."

The Sadhvi Shakti Parishad was formed in December, 1998, by the current president of the organization, Mahamandaleshwar Santoshi Mata Ji, with encouragement from

the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. It was created to "give voice to the problems and aspirations of all sadhvis," said Sadhvi Kamlesh Bharati, the Parishad's general secretary. "Through this Parishad, we want to bring all the sadhvis of the country together on one platform," said

Sadhvi Kamlesh. "What is happening now is that the saints and the spiritual institutions are getting divided like the political parties. The disciples of one guru do not want to meet and mix with the disciples of another guru."

One of the SSP's goals is to gather together the estimated 25,000 initiated sadhvis of India. They have already established contacts with 2,000. "By sadhvis," said Sadhvi Kamlesh Bharati, "we mean only the women who have taken sannyasa, or lifetime renunciation, in a formal

manner." Of the initiated sadhvis, 10,000 are in the Juna Akhara. Many others in the Brahma Kumaris, Arya Samaj, Jain Samaj and other orders.

Sadhvi Ritambhara spoke at length about how women power must

be awakened if we are to give good samskaras, or impressions, to our coming generations. Speaker after speaker stressed the need to improve the lives of those women and widows in India who are oppressed and maltreated by their family and society. Some voiced their

concern about the influence of the West on women in India. Others spoke on dowry, abortion, women's liberation, beauty contests, AIDS, education, spiritualism and more. "Whatever we are saying on stage, we must give it a place in practical life also," said Sadhvi Brahma

Kumari Manorama. "We should not get divided when we come down from this stage. If we practice what we preach, then it can certainly benefit the nation."

Got Lost or Get Lost?

Mela as dumping ground for elderly

It's pretty much
effort-less to get lost
in a crowd of tens of
millions of people in
a city with no street
signs or buildings.
Sadly, it's even

easier to leave an elderly, senile, sickly grandmother behind in a moment of confusion--and never come back for her. The harsh reality of each Kumbha Mela is just that: elderly people, mostly women, abandoned

by their families.
During the 1989
Mela in Allahabad,
3,000 were
permanently
separated from their
families. No one
came to claim them,
and the mostly
illiterate women
could not direct

officials back to their distant villages. This time, there are more, 7,000, according to Ramesh Mishra, in charge of the shelter for "lost women and children" set up by the Ranjit Pandit Shiksha Samiti and the Hemvati Nandan

Bahuguna Smriti Samiti. Several thousand more men, women and children reunited safely with their families.

Girija Devi, her back doubled with age and suffering,

sobbed
uncontrollably. "I
came with my sons
and their families.
We were supposed to
take a dip in the
Ganga this morning,
but when I woke up
they were all gone."

"The women invariably think they have simply been separated from their loved ones in the crowd," Mishra told Indian Express, "but nobody ever comes to take them back." Most of the women are in their 70s, and

belong to poor and not-so-poor families. There are a few old men, too. Many are sick with arthritis, asthma, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. They have never gotten proper medical attention at home, and the

doctors at the Mela are not equipped to help them either.

After the Mela, Mishra said, "We will try to trace their families and try to convince them to take them back.

Otherwise, we will send them to an

old-age home."

A lady from Rewa who had been at the shelter for 14 days said, "I am sure my family must be frantic with worry. They must be looking for me. My sons

really love me. They can never leave me here!" However, that seems to be just what they did.