

[A Mela History](#)

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TRADITION

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Cosmic alignment and divine presence empower humanity's grandest religious observance

One typical mela pilgrim, an illiterate woman, traveled with her family by crowded bus from West Bengal, slept in the open and ate at the free feeding tents. "We are poor, but we have enough. I asked God not for money but for peace and salvation"--so easily did this humble villager capture the essence of the world's greatest act of pilgrimage, the Kumbha Mela.

For her and millions of others, the religious ritual of pilgrimage--one of the five obligatory duties of every Hindu--began with the first plans to attend, and encompassed the entire process of getting ready, freeing oneself from worldly affairs, traveling to the site, taking the bath, meeting the sadhu-mendicants (or just observing them from a distance), and the return home. For the true devotee, pilgrimage is among the most profound religious practices.

The Kumbha Mela takes place every four years in rotation at Haridwar, Prayag (Allahabad), Nasik and Ujjain, according to the placement of Jupiter in the Zodiac. A modern innovation are the popular half-melas, ardha-kumbhas, every six years at Haridwar and Prayag. It is at Prayag, where the Yamuna River joins the Ganga, that the largest number of human beings in history gathered. This January 24, 30 million pilgrims came together, doubling its own single-day record of 15 million set on February 6, 1989. Haridwar, logistically less convenient, managed ten million on April 14, 1998. Still, that's five times the two million Muslim pilgrims who journey to Mecca for the Haj each year for the second largest gathering.

Every religion, as a matter of doctrine or custom, engages in the practice of pilgrimage to holy places. Among the world's prime destinations are Bodh Gaya, where Buddha attained enlightenment; Jerusalem, sacred to three religions; Lourdes in France for Catholics; Amritsar in India for the Sikhs; the Ise Shrine in Japan; and the various Jain sites throughout India.

Asked the origin of the event, nearly every pilgrim will narrate the ancient story from the Puranas of the time when the devas (gods or angels) and the asuras (their rivals) cooperated to "churn the Ocean of Milk"--an act which promised to yield countless treasures. With

Mount Meru as the post and the serpent Shesha as the churning rope, they set about their task. They agreed to share the most coveted result--the pot (kumbha) of nectar (amrit), by consuming which anyone would become immortal. As they churned mightily, the first substances to be released were deadly fumes and gases. These Lord Siva took upon Himself to consume and neutralize, thus saving the world's inhabitants from certain death. These poisons turned His throat blue and resulted in His name, Nilakantha. After many aeons of churning, the ocean yielded a series of treasures, the last of which was Dhanvantari, the great healer, who held in his hands the desired chalice of ambrosia.

The asuras immediately demanded their share of the prize, but the devas reneged on their agreement, knowing that if their rivals were to drink the nectar they would be eternally unbeatable, too great a power to keep in check. The asuras, sensing their position, snatched the kumbha and fled. With the asuras momentarily distracted by Lord Vishnu, the devas retrieved the pot and fled. In their haste they let one drop of nectar fall at Haridwar, Prayag, Ujjain and Nasik.

Esoterically, it is taught that the kumbha represents higher consciousness, the sahasrara chakra. The amrit that it holds symbolizes mankind's attainment of that higher reality--the true source of immortality.

"Since the beginning," explains Sri Mahant Rudra Giri Ji of the Atal Akhara, "the Kumbha Mela was attended by 350 million devas and 88,000 rishis. It was started to promote and propagate our ancient heritage. Even now these devas and rishis participate." A few of the angelic beings, devas, are able to return with each pilgrim to their home, carried, in a mystical sense, in the pot of Ganga water that each pilgrim collects and places on his home altar. Thus the blessing of the pilgrimage is extended months beyond the actual event. This year, one villager told a reporter, "It gets very cold, but we don't mind the hardship. We pass the night singing songs in praise of our mother Ganga. When we get home, people will touch our feet because we will be sacred now."

Pilgrimage to sacred rivers is an ancient practice believed by historian S.B. Roy to exist in India as

far back as 10,000 bce. Megasthenes, the 4th century bce Greek visitor to India, described something like a Kumbha Mela, but the most certain first reference is by the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang, who resided in India from 629 to 645 ce. He wrote that King Harshavardhan attended, on every fifth year of his reign, a month-long, "ageless festival" at Prayag that attracted up to half a million people from all walks of life, when India had 60 million people.

When references to the Kumbha Mela appear clearly in the 14th century, the mela has all of its modern characteristics--the places, the bathing, the hoards of pilgrims and legions of mendicants. By the 14th century the presence of large numbers of militant sadhu orders was also a clear feature, especially after the wholesale slaughter of Mela pilgrims in 1398 by the Muslim general Timur, shortly after he leveled Delhi because the reigning sultan was "too tolerant" of Hindus. Similar martial monastic orders have developed in other religions, such as the 12th-century Christian Knights Templar and Hospitalers in Europe--also to protect pilgrims against Muslim oppression, the Shao Lin monks of Kung Fu martial arts fame in

China, the Buddhist monastic police of Tibet and the Zen master archers and swordsmen of Japan. Sadly, through the centuries mendicant militancy has led to frequent Kumbha Mela battles over who gets to bathe closest to the supremely auspicious moment--the very issue which caused a major fight in 1998 at Haridwar.

Many orders of sadhus gather at the Mela. Most are members of a dozen orders called akharas, the most prominent being the Juna and Niranjani. Others include the Agan, Alakhiya, Abhana, Anand, Mahanirvani and Atal. Most orders are Saivite, three are Vaishnavite and a few are Sikh orders patterned after the Hindu monastic system. Akhara is Hindi for a "wrestling arena," and can mean either a place of verbal debate or one of real fighting. Each akhara may contain monks of several different Dasanami orders--the ten designations--Saraswati, Puri, Bana, Tirtha, Giri, Parvati, Bharati, Aranya, Ashrama, and Sagara. Thus, the akharas overlap with the Dasanami system. There are also sannyasi orders, such as the Nathas, that exist outside the Dasanami system. The akharas' dates of founding range from the sixth to the fourteenth century.

The development of the akharas and the Kumbha Mela took place over the same time span and are likely related. Akharas may include thousands, even tens of thousands, of sadhus. Several akharas run hundreds of ashrams, schools and service institutions.

The Kumbha Mela is a time to elect new akhara leadership, discuss and solve problems, consult with the other akharas, meet with devotees and initiate new monastics. During Muslim and British times, the mela gathering of pilgrims and sadhus was a significant force in the preservation of Hinduism and the continued identity of India as a Hindu nation. "Kumbha weaves our nation into one," said Mahant Ganga Puri of the Mahanirvani Akhara.

One little-known purpose of the Mela is to review smriti, the codes (shastras) of law and conduct which govern Hindu society. Unlike the Vedas and other revealed scriptures, these codes are meant to be adjusted according to changes in time and circumstance. Ramesh Bhai Oza explained, "The saints from all over India should get together at

the Mela to discuss not only religious and spiritual matters, but also the problems faced by the contemporary society. Their solutions offer a new system and a new smriti."

Many are the motivations and benefits for Hindus to attend the Kumbha Mela, the most popular pilgrimage of the day. It is a time to gain a new look on life, to purify oneself and to regain the sense of Godly aspiration as the central purpose for this earthly incarnation.

TIMELINE

10,000 bce: Historian S.B. Roy postulates presence of ritual river bathing

600 bce: River melas are mentioned in Buddhist writings

400 bce: Greek envoy to Indian King Chandra Gupta reports on a mela

ca 300 ce: Roy believes present form of melas crystallizes. Various Puranas, written texts based on oral traditions of unknown antiquity, recount the dropping of the nectar of immortality at four sites after the "churning of the ocean."

547: Earliest recorded founding date of an akhara, the Abhana

600: Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang attends mela at Prayag (modern Allahabad) organized by King Harsha

904: Founding of Niranjani Akhara

1146: Founding of Juna Akhara

1300: Kanphata Yogi militant ascetics employed in Rajasthan army

1398: Timur lays waste to Delhi to punish sultan's tolerance toward Hindus, proceeds to Haridwar mela and massacres thousands. Hindu ascetics arm themselves.

1565: Madhusudana Sarasvati organizes fighting units of Dasanami orders

1684: Frenchman Tavernier estimates 1.2 million Hindu ascetics in India

1760: Saivites battle with Vaishnava sects at Haridwar; 1,800 are killed

ca 1780: British establish the order for royal bathing by the monastic groups (the same order is followed today)

1820: Stampede leaves 430 dead at Haridwar mela

1906: British cavalry intercede in mela battle between sadhus

1954: Four million people, one percent of India's population, attend mela at Allahabad, hundreds die in a stampede.

1989: Guinness Book of World Records proclaims 15-million mela crowd at Allahabad on February 6 "the largest-ever gathering of human beings for a single purpose"

1992: Mela at Ujjain and Nasik

1995: "Half-mela" (at six-year interval) at Allahabad has 20 million pilgrims by official estimates on January 30 bathing day

1998: Haridwar attracts 25 million pilgrims in four months, ten million on April 14

2001: Mela at Allahabad attracts 70 million pilgrims in six weeks, 30 million on January 24 alone

2004: Next mela at Nasik

2007: Next mela at Ujjain

2010: Next mela at Haridwar

2013: Next mela at Allahabad