Holy Ones
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KUMBHA MELA

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Next to the blessings of Maother Ganga, Kumbha Mela pilgrims cherish the opportunity to see and meet great saints and sadhus

There was no proper map of the sadhu camps available to us, so in the 42Âi celsius (108Âi F) heat, I and photographer Dev Raj Agarwal trekked 15 to 20 kilometers a day, relying on divine guidance and good luck to meet the prominent saints in residence. As we traveled about, we found the sadhus' camps wore a festive look, with huge wooden gates at the entrance to welcome visitors. The grounds inside were filled with tents used for discussions during the day and sleeping at night. Some camps were surprisingly luxurious, with electricity, water, telephones and televisions. Often my photographer teammate was rudely, if temporarily, stopped from taking photographs by the lathi-wielding sadhus in charge of security. There was significant tension in the air regarding the final bathing day, April 14. The administration had banned the event, fearing a repeat of the earlier violence among the sadhus. Consequently senior monks of the various akharas (orders) were involved in high level arbitration, and were difficult to access. Many saints were not granting interviews to the press, but upon seeing the good work done by Hinduism Today, most agreed to talk. These leaders, whose orders include tens of thousands of sadhus, shared their views on a wide range of subjects.

On youth: "Today's youth at 14 years are busy watching movies and enjoying material comforts," complained Mahant Kapil Puri, one of the pillars of the Juna Akhara. "This is not the job of the youth. Their job is to brighten their dharma, future and life. If dharma is destroyed, the world itself would be no more. Our history is the history of young people. What was the age of Adi Shankara? He raised his flag [as a sannyasin monk] when he was just fourteen years old. What better example can be given to the youth than this?" His fellow sadhu of the Juna Akhara, Swami Lokeshanand Ji, added, "This mela is, in fact, meant for the youth and not for the aged. The youth must come to it and become better physically, mentally and spiritually." "The youth today do not have love or truth, nor the spirit of sacrifice," lamented Sadhvi Meera Puri, a leader of the lady sadhu's wing of Juna Akhara, several thousand strong. "Without these attributes," she said, "they still want everything, which is impossible. But if they would begin meditating, they could solve their problems in life such as earning money and getting along with people."

On corruption: Speaking out boldly on the subject was Santoshi Ma of Niranjani Akhara: "Today there is corruption because there is a race for materialism. But our country has never given importance to bhoga (materialism). The earth of this nation has this speciality that even when one's feet are in bad shape, even when one is not wearing proper clothes, even when one is leading a very low level of material life, still the happiness and contentment of the soul are there. Because we are giving less importance to character building, our ancient heritage and high moral values today we are going downwards." Several saints, such as Mahant Vijaygiri of the Mahanirvani Akhara, sets an example by forbidding bribery and other corrupt practices by their institutions. "We are

waiting for the time when corruption will end and our country will become one of the top countries of the world." Sadhvi Vidyotma Yati, who owns a private ashram in Haridwar, was even more forceful. She said, "Our forefathers never did this wrong thing of earning black money. The parents who earn money by wrongful means and spend it on their children further the reach of corruption. We have forgotten the soul and just remember the body." Summarizes Mahant Kapil Puri, senior member of Juna Akhara, "Today we are stepping back in spirituality and marching ahead in materialism. By doing so, we are walking into the mouth of our own destruction."

Naga sadhus: Certainly the most distinctive feature of the entire Kumbha Mela is the presence of thousands of Naga [naked] sadhus, covered only with ash. These men, about one in ten of the sadhus, go about like this the entire year, regardless of the weather. The articulate Ram Puri of Juna Akhara offered some insight into their lives. "Naga sadhus are an esoteric society, even a secret society. They are not involved much in the world, nor concerned about their image. They see themselves having a very specific type of role. They are involved in a reality which goes beyond that seen on the surface. One cannot easily cross these two worlds, the world of 1998 and televisions, and the internet, and the world of mythology. Another way of looking at it is that one of the things that the Naga sadhus do is fight. The place they live is an akhara, which means a wrestling place, primarily intellectual wrestling. Every sadhu in the akhara is constantly open to challenge and to be challenged. Remember the akhara is a social thing. The akhara is not where you do sadhana--that place is the jungle or the mountains. The akhara is concerned with the bottom-line preservation of Sanatana Dharma, Hinduism. Traditionally, the Naga sadhu is a sign of

auspiciousness. This is also something that easily turns to fear, because the wrath of the Naga is something that no one wants to see. It's frightening, even if the wrath is directed to some other place. And yet in a sense the bottom line is the wrath of the Nagas, which, as they see it, is the ultimate resistance or defense of Sanatana Dharma."

New saints: Several spoke about the selection and training of their young monks. Swami Lokeshanand of Juna Akhara proudly announced they had given initiation to 5,000 sadhus in 1998. Mahant Machendra Puri of the same akhara said, "Those newly initiated are kept under observation for a few years. First we see their spirit of service, and then the final initiation is done to make them sadhus." Mahant Rudra Giri of Atal Akhara reports that "thousands of sannyasins have been initiated at this Mela." The young ones, he explained, were sent to Sanskrit school, the older sannyasins given duties according to their education. In the Niranjani Akhara, Mahant Lalita Giri explained, they initiate "a limited number of deserving people, not too many. In our tradition the final initiation is given only when the mind of the person is firm about becoming a sannyasin and not a householder." Santoshi Ma of Niranjani Akhara told us, "I have given initiation to some sadhvis [lady sadhus]. They were not very educated. They only wanted a direction in which they could move forward and do God's bhajana [singing of sacred songs]. With these feelings, many old ladies also undertook sannyas. They could not do something for society, but at least they could do something for themselves." Sadhvi Meera Puri of Juna Akhara has a unique function with regard to her male counterparts. "A part of my duty is to identify the fake sadhus and deprive them of their saffron clothes. I can understand in one minute whether the sadhu is a genuine one or a fake one."

Abortion: Every saint who commented on the issue condemned abortion. Mahant Ganga Puri of Mahanirvani Akhara said, "Due to the ultrasound machine, hundreds of thousands of girls are being aborted. I have read that eight out of ten children are killed through abortion in India--the highest rate in the world. Abortion is like killing a soul. People even come to the sadhus and tell them that they had the child aborted because it was a girl. This is a very big sin taking place in our country, a very inhuman act." Santoshi Ma agreed, "Today's man is so much influenced by the Western thought and so immersed in materialism that he has no time to understand his ancient scriptures. The result is doing this deplorable crime of abortion in such an easy manner. We do not approve."

Coed ashrams: This has become very much the norm in the West, where unmarried men and women live in the same facilities at nearly every ashram. This form of religious commune is now becoming the pattern in India as well. Mahant Vijay Giri of the Mahanirvani Akhara said, "Men and women do not stay together in our ashrams. The women stay where there are women mandaleshwars [abbots]. Mahant Govind Das of Bada Udasin Akhara said, "Buddha said that when the bhiksunis, women sadhus, enter the ashrams, his followers will undergo decay. I feel men and women sadhus must stay in different ashrams so that they can live in a dignified manner." Swami Chidanand Saraswati (Muniji) said, "The point is not to avoid the contact of women. Yes, this is one way of doing it, and it is the way chosen by many of the ancient sects. Of course, there must be limits, but the real point is to purify our eyes and hearts, to see women as divine, not as sweet wine." Mahant Lalita Giri of the Niranjani Akhara said, "Whenever women and men stay together, there will be problems, so our institution does not approve of it. Married men with their wives

and family serve as managers of the women's ashrams." Sadhvi Meera Puri of Juna Akhara said, "For a true sadhu who does not have any feeling of being a male or a female, it really does not matter whether you stay together or not." "But," she warned, "prakriti [nature] will play its role." Her order has thousands of lady sadhus. Sadhvi Vidyotma Yati, lady head of a Haridwar ashram said, "I do not approve of men and women in the ashrams. Whenever they stay together, wrong things happen. I have seen it with my own eyes."

Kumbha Mela: Swami Lokeshanand observed on the Mela itself that, "People are transformed because they have to do a lot of sadhana [spiritual disciplines] and face a lot of hardship to come here." Santoshi Ma offered another benefit. "Bharatiyata, the culture of India, is vividly explained here," she said. "People have come from East, West, North and South. They have different languages, eating habits and lifestyles. Despite so many differences in us, we are all one. It is here at the Kumbha Mela that we can have a glimpse of this unity in diversity."