

[Special Feature: Kumbha Mela, Beseeking Mother Ganga's Blessings](#)

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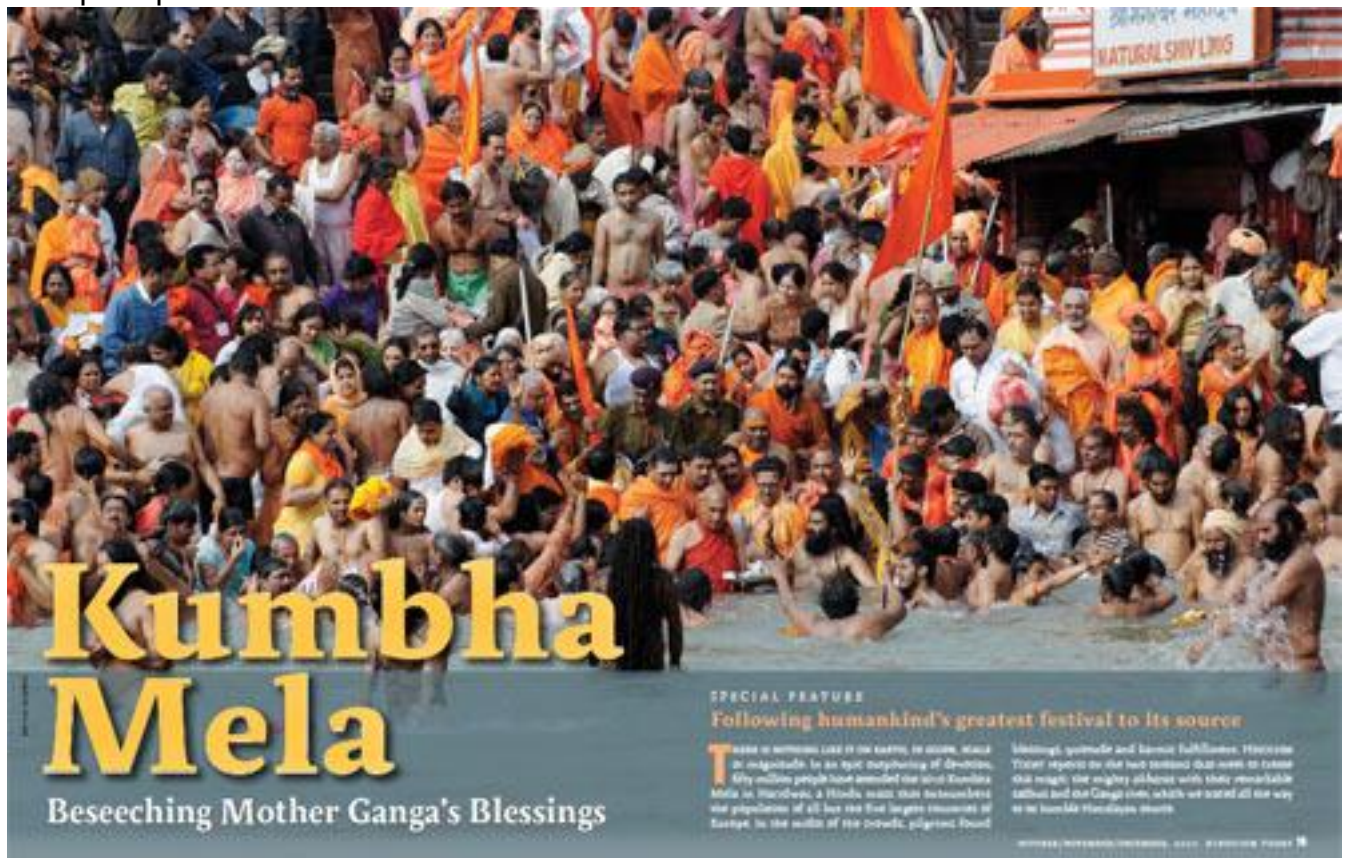
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Special Feature

Kumbha Mela: Beseeking Mother Ganga's Blessings Following humankind's greatest festival to its source

There is nothing like it on Earth, in scope, scale or magnitude. In an epic outpouring of devotion, fifty million people have attended the 2010 Kumbha Mela in Haridwar, a Hindu mass that outnumbers the population of all but the five largest countries of Europe. In the midst of the crowds, pilgrims found blessings, quietude and karmic fulfillment. Hinduism Today reports on the two streams that meet to create this magic: the mighty akharas with their remarkable sadhus and the Ganga river, which we traced all the way to its humble Himalayan source.

Sample spread from this article



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Hinduism Today's team covered the 2010 Kumbha Mela from two perspectives. Correspondent Choodie Shivaram and photographer Dev Raj Agarwal joined the festival separately. We alternate between their unique narratives.

Summoned to the Mela

By Choodie Shivaram, Haridwar

Hindus have absolute belief in the existence of bulava, a divine summons to visit the most sacred places of worship. Without this call, it is impossible for the visit to materialize. When I received an unexpected call asking for my presence at the Kumbha Mela at Haridwar this year, during the time of Maha Sivaratri no less, it felt like heaven beckoning.

I never dreamt that I would ever be part of this great event. My invitation had come from Sri Jayendra Puri Swamiji, the pontiff of Kailasa Ashrama Mahasamsthana in Bangalore, who informed me that he was being crowned mahamandaleshwar on February 15, 2010, during the Kumbha Mela. I jumped at the chance to join his entourage, all other duties at home or work obliterated from my thoughts, and proceeded to Haridwar, foremost among seven holy places where the Melas take place.

This year's Kumbha Mela saw a prodigious attendace of more than 50 million devotees over the course of several weeks, densely populating the area where the event takes place. Pilgrims came to seek blessings from the sea of sadhus present and, later, to take a holy dip of their own in the holy river which is itself a sacred entity, a Goddess. She is reverently called Ganga Ma, "Mother Ganga."

I could barely wait to join millions of fellow Hindus at this most sacred event. As we set out by road to this ancient site of pilgrimage 133 miles east of Delhi, we witnessed a swelling sea of devotees, all single-mindedly on the move to meet their appointment with the Gods. Pilgrims from all walks of life traveled long distances, withstanding physical discomforts such as sleeping in the open air at near freezing temperatures. They came by train, bus, car, truck, tractor, bullock cart, bicycle and donkey. Many thousands traveled by foot, even without shoes. We marveled at the

endless procession of men, women and children walking miles and miles, many with kavadis (offerings carried during the pilgrimage as a form of penance) reverently perched on their shoulders. What firm foundation, what absolute faith makes those devotees undergo such hardships to reach Haridwar and partake in the Kumbha Mela despite all odds?

For many people, the Kumbha Mela is an event best watched on television. Vast crowds and scarce comforts are deterrents, especially to those coming all the way from the South of the subcontinent. Reports of stampedes, pollution in the Ganga and some unseemly stories about the pilgrimage discourage the faint-hearted. But for the millions who come, as I would learn for myself, those challenges are insignificant.

As I approached Haridwar, I could hear devotional chants in energetic unison, such as "Ganga Ma Ki Jai" or "Har Har Mahadev," enveloping the roads. When we drew closer to the holy city, this incessant, divine proclamation increased in decibels as the crowd of devotees grew denser. In several camps, loudspeakers played music or encouraging sermons, fanning the flames of faith's ardor. Huge billboards, posters and banners of different ashrams and sadhus welcomed devotees. I reflected that, for religious leaders seeking attention, the Kumbha Mela is a great opportunity to garner visibility and publicity.

When I finally arrived in Haridwar, I was struck by the intense spiritual vibrancy of the city. Devotion was evident everywhere, in the charged tunes of bhajans and spiritual discourses and in the intense ambience of piety that filled the air. I truly felt I had arrived at "Deva Bhumi," the world of the devas. It felt like a spiritual tornado. I could experience God everywhere.

In my mind, I could hear the echo of Mark Twain's words written after he experienced Kumbha Mela in 1895, 115 years back: "It is wonderful, the power of a faith like that, that can make multitudes upon multitudes of the old and weak and the young and frail enter without hesitation or complaint upon such incredible journeys. It is done in love, or it is done in fear; I do not know which it is. No matter what the impulse is, the act born of it is beyond imagination, marvelous to our kind of people, the cold whites."

Living at the Mela

By Dev Raj Agarwal, Haridwar

Haridwar during the Mela is a beehive, teeming with activity all around. The city is packed with people, policemen in khaki-and-blue uniforms, pilgrims with heavy loads of baggage on their heads, unbearably loud speakers from all directions, busy restaurants and food corners, crowded bus stands and railway stations--everywhere you get the impression that there is no room left for anything more. Yet, the stream of devotees keeps coming. Everytime I decided to cover one part of the mela, I ended up disappointed, unable to finish even half of that area. There is so much to see.

One balmy afternoon, for example, I see a long row of sadhus moving unannounced, holding kamandalus in their hands--those oblong pots usually made from gourds, used to store water or sometimes for begging, traditionally a sadhu's only possession. Their chests are tightly tied with a network of black or brown ropes and colored cloth pinned to the ends of the ropes, swinging around the knees. They are performing a ritual called bhiksha, an ages-old custom, when representatives of the several akharas walk around and gather alms in the form of flour from all camps. They have to keep walking, without stopping and looking back. Other sadhus wait outside their camps and pour some wheat flour in the kamandalus as their biksha-gathering brothers pass by.

Both devotees and journalists actually move to Haridwar for some time during the Kumbha Mela, often staying for months. People cook, sleep, study and do business in the camps; some die and some are born.

One can buy fresh milk, curds, butter, bread and vegetables from small shops inside the camp city. Hundreds of men and women are kept busy cleaning the streets all around. The common pilgrims seem to be more health conscious now. Very rarely did I see pilgrims drinking water from the taps in the camp city and elsewhere. Instead, most depended on bottles of mineral water and sweet beverages, sold everywhere at a premium.

Considering the temporary but exponential boom in the population of the area,

organization is essential. This year's was the first Kumbha Mela under the administration of the new Uttarakhand state, carved out of Himalayan and adjoining districts of Uttar Pradesh on November 9, 2000, to become the 27th state of the Republic of India. The authorities were visibly strict in the running of the mela, perhaps intent on making a positive first impression.

As I walk through the sandy roads of Neeldhara camp, I can't help but think that the organizers did a good job. I am pleased to see the neatly constructed halls of various social and religious organizations. The festival covers over 52 square miles, divided in 35 sectors. Buses are busy ferrying pilgrims to and from distant camps. There are rows of fresh water taps and toilets in many places, newly constructed for the visitors. Official statistics tally 4,000 toilets, 32 police stations, 6 base hospitals and 35 fire stations. The Indian Space Research Organisation even took satellite pictures of the crowds with the hope of improving the conduct of the festival in the future.

Most of the policemen were from Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh. The official staff included 20,000 policemen coming from 17 different police forces, which sounds like a lot until you remember that 50 million people attended the festival. Not all of them at the same time, but on April 14, the last Shahi Snan, an estimated 15 million people gathered at Haridwar. I met a young police officer from Himachal who said he felt a little tense in such a difficult assignment, but at the same time happy to be able to visit the Kumbha Mela. It was common to see police personnel in their off hours becoming simple pilgrims, both men and women, taking a dip in the Ganga and performing various pujas.

The mela felt clean and safe. But if the basics are dutifully covered, the gathering still lacks simple amenities such as an information booth. Almost everybody who lands here looks lost, looking for information or hoping for a map, to no avail. Even those who have been here for weeks have little knowledge to offer, and just a rare few can point the way. "Camp layout maps should be displayed around," suggested a group of elderly men and women from Saurashtra, tired of walking in circles.

The renunciates themselves seem to be ahead in hosting and communication. Ashrams, akharas and sadhus now have their e-mails. And, of course, almost everyone now has a mobile phone, so they can always call a missing companion, be he a family member or a fellow swami, and ask the inevitable question: "Where are you?"

The First Royal Bath

By Dev Raj Agarwal, Haridwar

On this year's Kumbha Mela, the first Shahi Snan (Royal Bath) coincided with the great night of Siva--an auspicious occasion matching a blessed astrological configuration. The first and most important Shahi Snan is when sadhus parade to the river by the thousands and jump into the holy Ganga.

February 12, 2010, is overcast and cold. In the barricaded sidewalks of the streets, thousands are en route to Har ki Pauri, the central ghat on the banks of the Ganga. Many pilgrims are annoyed, blocked from reaching Haridwar's most famous ghats during the bathing of the sadhus. Most of them do not dare to open their mouths in front of an army of police and paramilitary soldiers. In this superbly organized Kumbha Mela, there is a hint of military discipline, with ambivalent results.

As we pass through the camp of Juna Akhara, where thousands of sadhus are gathered, the loud chanting of "Har Har Mahadeva" is almost deafening, saturating the air with strong vibrations. A group of naga sadhus dances in frenzy, while some others display yogic postures in front of cameras. This was one of the most exotic spectacles I have ever seen. The whole scene is dominated by the grey and brown of the ash-smearred bodies and the deep, warm yellow of the marigold garlands. A large group of sadhvis watch from a corner. Soon, all mahamandaleshwars and senior sages come out and accept the greetings from the crowd of nagas, taking their seats in the procession. The already loud voices reach a roar when one of the sadhus lifts the Juna Akhara's giant flag and four others shoulder the silver palanquin with the akhara's Deity: the time has come for the Shahi Yatra.

At the Har ki Pauri, where pressmen and photographers are battling for elbow room, the Juna Akhara's naga sadhus line up along the river and jump into the water as soon as the symbolic bath of the Deities is finished. Then follow the mahamandaleshwars, sadhus and, finally, the devotees, thousands of people from the streets who have somehow sneaked into the Shahis during the procession and now feel privileged to take a bath along with these divine souls! I am entranced by the power and the devotion of this great spectacle. Until late in the evening, the akharas bathe, one after the other, first the Saiva akharas, then the Vaishnavas.

Eventually, everyone, sadhu or householder, poor or rich, famous or anonymous, gets their holy dip. Many Hindus make vows to take a bath in the Ganga after the marriage of their daughters, or to seek blessings for the salvation of departed relatives. Their resolve is often tested with severe challenges, and many are overwhelmed with emotions as they finish the cathartic, soul-cleansing bath. A dip in the Ganga during the Kumbha Mela, tradition says, washes away the karma of many births.

By Choodie Shivaram, Haridwar

I didn't sleep all night. The thought of a dip in the Ganga at 4am on Mahasivaratri inspired me to overcome the freezing weather, at five degrees Celsius, and jovially lead a group to the river. I told the other women that if they felt the water was too cold, they could just sprinkle some water on their heads, so they agreed to come.

Reciting the Ganga Lahiri mantra, we inched into the cold water, shivering and shrieking, chattering "Jai Ganga" and "Aum Namah Shivaya." And then the magic overtook me. I kept taking dip after dip, not just for me but on behalf of my parents, guru, children, relatives, friends and well-wishers. And at the exact moment when I offered arghya (ablution) on behalf of my parents--my father died recently--the temple bells of a Siva temple on the Ghat rang out loud. It was as though He acknowledged my prayers.

Later in the day, at 1:30 pm, I followed the Mahanirvani sadhus, from a distance, on their way to the river. The procession was beyond anything I ever imagined. Hundreds of thousands of sadhus and saints, representatives and devotees, hundreds of chariots formed an unending stream of people that went on for three miles, strongly protected by cautious policemen.

Through the narrow lanes of Haridwar, thousands watched expectantly, hands folded in reverence as the julus (procession) passed by. From the roof tops, flowers showered on the sadhus. We were on the inside of the police line, with lay members of the Mahanirvani Akhara. With us was an elderly sadhvi from Bengaluru, braving the heat, the rush, the dust and the crowd. Those who had experience with similar

situations had formed a ring of protection around us, keeping our mind away from the ghosts of stampedes.

We finally arrived at the ghat. The Ganga was just there, the sadhus were there, I could see and almost touch them. This was, of course, the Royal Bath, and only the sadhus are supposed to be in the water.

But it was a miracle when a policewoman told us the elderly sadhvi could take a dip, with help from my husband and myself. We not only joined in the julus but could take the holy bath immediately after her. This was the high point of our life. It was euphoric. Nothing else existed. We had merged with God.

When I left Bengaluru for this pilgrimage, many among our friends and family warned about stampedes, risk of disease, lack of facilities, pollution--the list was long. I was unmindful of it all. Nothing could shake my faith in Ganga, in Siva, in our customs and traditions. No one could deter me, not even the freezing temperatures.

Arriving back home, no one would believe we had such a smooth experience of the Shahi Snan. I was struck by a magnificent spiritual force that must be experienced to be known.

Spectacle and Spirit

By Dev Raj Agarwal, Haridwar

After a long wait of twelve years, the Kumbha Mela has returned to Haridwar. Its arrival changes the face of the city, an otherwise sleepy town that suddenly comes to life.

To attend a Kumbha Mela is a priceless opportunity. As a photographer, I find myself counting the days between these holy gatherings. More than the chance to

take a sacred bath, it is also time to see the vast surge of humanity in different colors, a look into our diversified culture. When the time for the festival comes, thousands of holy men, ascetics, sadhus and nagas converge towards a holy city to be a part of the largest temporary family humankind has ever assembled.

But it is the pilgrims, so often ignored by the media, that bring the festival to life. There are distinctly two types of pilgrims here. The wealthier (or middle-class) come with a plan, joining the camp of a religious organization they know and staying in their accommodations, sometimes for weeks. They come to learn, to perform selfless service and, most of all, to spend some time near their guru. The majority of pilgrims are poor, humble, scarcely educated, the uninvited lot who travel to Haridwar on a shoestring budget. Their itinerary depends on how much they can spend, often just enough for a day trip or couple days' stay. They are the spirit of the festival and the actual custodians of this age-old extravaganza. They arrive at a bus or railroad station and head straightaway for the bath, perform their austerities, then spend time visiting camps for the darshan of all the saints, ashrams, markets and holy gatherings they manage to find. They often flock around the big tents (called pandals) to hear words of wisdom from the many gurus. By night, they leave in a hurry, feeling blessed and energized with unseen boons they take home to share with their villages and extended families. The Kumbha Mela is a festival for everyone.

The festival actually began on January 14, 2010, on the day of Makar Sankranti. That was a cold and grey morning. When I arrived at the ghats by sunrise, just a few pilgrims were there, huddled around fires along the river. Little happens that early: most camps were still deserted, without the swamis and naga sadhus. Nevertheless, media staff from around the world were already camping in Haridwar, visibly excited with the assignment.

It is only in February that the renunciates and their akharas arrive in full force. It is a solemn occasion, a religious ritual of great significance. The symbolic declaration of an akhara's arrival, called the peshwai, is a major point of the Kumbha Mela. All the akharas try hard to make their own peshwai a grand show and exhibit their importance and prowess in a large parade. Displaying their akhara's heritage through colorful processions, the renunciates march through busy streets with the akhara's flags held high, ash-smeared naga sadhus in the lead, followed by mahamandaleshwars and mahants in their gold and silver-laden chariots, with elephants and music adding verve to the show. After its peshwai, each battalion of sadhus establishes itself at the camp of its particular akhara, spread over a vast area. Colloquies, religious rites and deep philosophical conversations may then

commence.

It is only after the peshwas that the common pilgrim fully realizes what it means to be at a Kumbha Mela. Sadhus are everywhere. Most pilgrims, usually busy with everyday life and mundane issues, bask in the opportunity to have darshan of all these great men whose sole objective is salvation. Anyone interested in Hinduism can learn much during the Kumbha Mela, and make his own life much simpler, just by seeing how renunciates solve the most complex issues in the simplest of ways. Their bhashyas, or teachings, condense countless years of wisdom into simple yet powerful statements, which many are willing to give freely to those who approach.

Westerners, too, find their place in the celebration. Actually, we now see more Westerners attending than ever before. Most are here following a specific saint and staying for extended periods, taking diksha, performing seva and listening to the teachings, hoping to transform themselves and bring a little of the wisdom of the East to the madness of their lives in the West.

And if the Kumbha Mela now has people coming from abroad to join the faithful, an interesting inversion is happening: the media corps that covers the event is increasingly Indian. In the old days, only photographers from Europe and America would come, enticed and mesmerized by the visual spectacle. Illiterate in Hinduism, those reporters understood little of what happened. They focused on the sadhus' nakedness, on the massive crowds and the sheer grandeur of it all. Today it is common to see the Indian media covering the event as it is: the greatest religious festival on Earth. Their audience is more domestic than international. India, it seems, is now proud of the Kumbha Melas and has claimed them as her own.

Modern media plays a wide role in contemporary melas. Nagas are no longer camera shy and hostile to pressmen and photographers who approach them. They are happy to be photographed. Some of them inquire how much money the photographer is going to make from selling their pictures and politely ask for some--it's an opportunity as good as any to ask for alms, it seems.

The media have been wholeheartedly embraced by the festival. Many temporary camps of sadhus have television sets. Newspapers are delivered to the camps early in the morning, and saints and nagas curiously and hastily scan the pages, hoping

to find their own pictures somewhere.

A Unique Conclave

By Choodie Shivaram, Haridwar

I was overwhelmed by the magnitude and diversity of the Kumbha Mela. In a whirlwind of events that defy description, everything seems to happen at once, everywhere, both inside and outside of you. We, pilgrims, feel like we are an integral part of it. The power of the event certainly comes from the presence of the holy Ganga, ever-flowing and ever-giving; from the many pujas that never seem to stop; and also the date's special astrology. But, more than anything else, the mela's spiritual might is due to the presence of sadhus, swamis, glorious akharas and anonymous saints, fruit of their worship and tapas.

Not all the monks of the mela are naked sadhus. The religious orders present include thousands of robed swamis, brahmacharis, guru and sages. Pandits of all kinds gather at the banks of the Ganga, mixing freely in the most orderly chaos there can be. Pervading it all is a profound sense of tolerance.

But the most fascinating are the monks who amble, covered in ash, through the ghats of Haridwar. My first encounter with the naga sadhus happened at Maya Puri, an area housing hundreds of naga camps.

Maya Puri is named after a temple dedicated to Shakti, which is metaphysically said to contain Her heart and navel. Sadhus and saints visiting Haridwar invariably stop at the temple and pay obeisance; She is the city's protector, and it is at Her feet that most sadhus take shelter.

Walking through the naga camp is an indescribable experience. The interiors are well kept and orderly. The one I visited had carpets, a shrine for pujas and a havana kunda where the holy fire is perennially lit, perhaps helping keep the place warm.

Sitting in small circles, renunciates gather to discuss matters of the soul. Perfectly dressed scholars and unabashedly bare sadhus dismiss all external appearances and engage in lively exchanges for hours, into the night and until daybreak. This is not a place ruled by the tick of the clock or the ding of coins. Religion and spirituality are all that matters here.

In the minds of most of us, Indian urban dwellers or Westerners, the Kumbha Mela is misconstrued as nothing but a religious event that brings together a plethora of naked, ash-smearing naga sadhus known for their extraordinary feats. The sensationalizing visual media makes an issue out of their nakedness. These naga sadhus are portrayed as unkempt, ash-smearing, bare-bodied, herb-smoking, aggressive men. What a different feeling I had when I finally met them in person.

The nagas are lost in their own world, oblivious to attention and publicity. Where do they come from, where do they go? The answers they give are vague. I spoke to many naga sannyasins. Some superior force blinded me to their nakedness. Maybe still hesitant about their fearsome appearance, I asked, "Why are people scared of you? Are you as dangerous as people believe?" The answer was calm and composed: "This is a wrong opinion. We consider ourselves a part of Siva, Lord Shankara. We take cudgels only when there is a need to protect dharma. We are harmless warriors."

Seeming at once benign and menacing, naga sadhus are a mystery even to faithful Hindus. People believe that having their darshan brings good luck and alleviates problems. My friend Geetha Limbavalli, who had accompanied me from Bengaluru, firmly believed that her business woes would be solved by seeking blessings from one of the ash-smearing saints.

These mendicants follow strange and severe austerities. We came across two nagas referred to as khade babas, who have been standing for decades and rest their bodies by shifting their weight to ropes hanging from the ceiling, even for sleeping. Another sadhu has kept his right hand held straight up for 27 years, his nails now long and intertwined, grotesque and exotic. "We do it for God," they all say in one way or another, exuding an inner contentment beyond our understanding.

All naga sadhus I spoke to were calm and perfectly mannered. One of them assured me, in a long colloquy, that he has abstained from solid food for decades. He explained, "I do not do this for anyone or for any gain. I do it for myself, for the God within me. Lord Shankara is within us, why do you seek Him outside? Look within!" In the neat but simple camp, devoid of the luxuries of modern life, his statement rang wise and true.

As I took my leave, the naga asked me to garland him by placing a rudraksha mala around his neck. With an unanticipated feeling of devotion, chanting "Om Namah Shivaya," I garlanded him, and I felt blessed.

The Making of a New Mahamandaleshwar

By Choodie Shivaram, Haridwar

Nevermind that I was floored by the kaleidoscopic experiences at the Kumbha Mela: the main reason for my travel was to witness the coronation of Jayendra Puri Swamiji of Kailash Ashram, Bengaluru, as a mahamandaleshwar of the Niranjani Akhara.

Being part of his entourage, I was invited to stay at Jagadguru Ashram, where Swamiji studied during his initial years of sannyasa. The ashram is near the banks of Ganga in Kankhal, not quite two miles south of Haridwar. Kankhal houses the famous temple of Daksheshwar, the place where king Daksha, Sati's father, performed the yagna without inviting Lord Shiva and where Sati (an incarnation of Parvati) immolated herself by entering the holy fire--or so the Puranic story goes. Jagadguru Ashram is now headed by Swami Raja Rajeshwar Ashram Maharaj, a contemporary of Jayendra Puri Swamiji and also a disciple of Swami's Sri Vidya teacher, Prakash Anandji Maharaj.

The morning of the coronation of Jayendra Puri Swamiji, February 15, 2010, began with a navagraha homa at Jagadguru Ashram. We then walked the streets of the holy city in procession, arriving at the Niranjani Akhara camp for the coronation. Senior dignitaries and even mahamandaleshwars of other akharas joined us, in accordance with established practice, a custom that strengthens the amicable ties between the akharas.

The coronation is a dignified and essential ceremony in the mechanism of the akharas, but the celebration differs. Ordination into certain orders is austere and unpretentious, while others glare with pomp and ceremony. "It also depends on who is getting initiated and how he intends to mark his ascension," says Mehanth Ravinder Puri of the Mahanirvani Akhara. The sannyasin aspiring to be a mahamandaleshwar will also have to spend a considerable amount of money towards the ceremony. He must bear the expenses towards the arrangements, feeding of sadhus and nagas, travel arrangements of guests and sadhus.

The event began with an introduction of Jayendra Puri Swami and what made him eligible. The coronation ritual is, surprisingly, a simple process. Swamiji sat on the dais facing the mahamandaleshwars. Punyanandgiri Swamiji, Acharya Mahamandaleshwar of the Niranjani Akhara, sprinkled water and milk on him while mantras were chanted. "In earlier days it was a complete abhishekam performed with milk, curd, honey, etc, just as it is done in the temples to the Deities. Now the process is simplified," later explained Mahant Triyambak Bharati.

By the conclusion of this modest abhishekam, Sri Jayendra Puri Swami had been formally ordained as a mahamandaleshwar. He was led to seat among the other mahamandaleshwars. Immediately the other mahamandaleshwars honored the newly ordained mahamandaleshwar, welcoming him into their fold. Tada astu--so be it!

It is only during Kumbha Mela that mahamandaleshwars are installed by the akharas. It is the highest traditional honor conferred on a sannyasin by an akhara, for his contribution to dharma and spiritual attainment. Literally, "mahamandaleshwar" means "superior of great (or numerous) monasteries." When and how the title was first created and evolved is not known. "It is a development of recent times," says Girshanand Swamiji of Mahanirvani Akhara. But some swamis disagree with this view, saying it began in some form with Adi Shankara.

During this year's 42-day Kumbha Mela, akharas conferred mahamandaleshwar titles on many sadhus: the Juna Akhara to over 30, Niranjani to 17 and Maha Nirvani to 35. Though most of them are North Indian, in recent decades South Indian swamis have also been ordained, a process that unifies Hinduism across India. Women are also eligible. Famous saint Swami Nrishingh Givji gave sannyas diksha

to Santoshi Mataji at the Kumbha in 1974, and that opened doors for women to join the ranks of the akharas all the way to the top.

Being a mahamandaleshwar is a lifetime commitment. They are expected to strictly abide by the disciplines laid down by their akhara. "A mahamandaleshwar's life, karma and character should be in consonance with his elevation," says septuagenarian Mahant Triyambak Bharati, of the Niranjani Akhara. "His duty is to propagate and protect Sanatana Dharma and spiritually elevate people. We confer this honor only after thoroughly verifying the complete background of the sannyasin." Harigiriji Maharaj, secretary of Juna Akhara, adds, "If a sannyasin elevated to mahamandaleshwar falls from grace or engages in adharma, an independent inquiry is held among the akhara's chiefs, and the title may be withdrawn."

Even so, there seems to be a wide swath of styles among the mahamandaleshwars. Some parade around Haridwar in gold-plated chariots, or sit on gold and silver thrones balanced majestically atop elephants, attracting criticism from the locals. Soham Baba, a mahamandaleshwar of the Juna Akhara, recently made the cover of local newspapers after commissioning jewelry worth millions of US dollars, and even my rickshaw driver had something negative to say about that. When I asked one of Soham Baba's fellow akhara members about it, he pointed to his own tattered slippers. "I'm one of the akhara chiefs too, you know, his equal in rank. There is no need for such show, they don't last long."

Indeed, the extravagant and the mundane did find their place in the Kumbha Mela, sometimes in the person of those who have newfound fame hanging heavy on their shoulders. Such flashiness neither befits a renunciate, nor is it encouraged by the akharas. Yet, there seems to be no conflict or reprehension: the true sadhus just wait, knowing that the rotten branches soon fall from the tree.

My own faith in the system grew stronger as I interacted with senior sadhus and akhara leaders. Certainly, conferring the title of mahamandaleshwar to ascetics like Jayendra Puri Swami brings a positive addition.

From the Source

By Dev Raj Agarwal, Gangotri

To close this report on the Kumbha Mela, Hinduism Today went where there are no crowds and the pristine river is still called Bhagirathi, renamed as Ganga only further downstream. The river is the ruling Goddess of a large and picturesque mountain terrain in the Himalayas, where it originates in the lap of snow-capped summits. The terminus of the long glacier that gives birth to the river is called Gomukh, literally meaning cow's mouth, situated at the base of the three Bhagirathi peaks of the Uttarkashi district in Uttarakhand. It was there, a story from time immemorial tells, that sage Bhagirath meditated for years to beg Lord Siva for a river to flow from the heavens and cleanse the ashes of King Sagar's 60,000 sons, who had been killed by a wrathful siddhar. Bound to their mortal remains, Sagar's sons had wandered ever since as ghosts, waiting for a proper disposal ceremony. Pleased with Bhagirath's selfless and dedicated effort, Lord Siva made the mighty waters of the river gradually trickle down through His coiled hair, cleaning the ashes, fertilizing the soil and bringing untold blessings to humankind.

Gomukh is a highly revered place to this day, often recommended by gurus for meditation because of its strong vibration and wild, pure atmosphere. It is situated 12,770 feet above sea level, and its temperatures are low. Devoid of trees, its wide open valley is mostly hidden behind the vertical wall of the glacier. To the east is the magnificent meadow of Tapovan, from which rises a glorious Sivalinga parvat (mountain). The water melting from the glacier results in no more than a small stream that meanders silently through the rocks.

About half a mile downstream is a village called Bhagirathi, the river's namesake. There one finds a few residential facilities and the Lal Baba Ashram. This is the place to see the charm of a river that becomes the lifeline of many millions during its journey to the sea, 2,510 km away. There are innumerable snowy peaks all around, extending as far as the eye can see. The fauna and the flora here are largely untouched. This is a protected area, the 924-square-mile Gangotri National Park.

Many smaller streams of melted ice join the Bhagirathi as it runs down to the next inhabited enclave, Gangotri, altitude 10,000 feet, the abode of Goddess Ganga and a center of pilgrimage. During the warmer months, pilgrims by the thousands come to Gangotri to take a holy dip in pure Ganga jal and have a glimpse of the Goddess Ganga in the imposing local temple.

As we descend from the altitudes of the river's cradle, the topography changes. The icy peaks are replaced by large trees, mostly cedars. Further down is a town called Mukhwa, reminder of a bygone era, where rustic wooden houses overlook the wide valley. This is said to be Goddess Ganga's winter abode: soon after Diwali, as snowy winters approach, a ritual is performed to bring Her to the beautiful local temple. Chanting mantras and singing folklore songs, local women lead the procession from Gangotri to Mukhwa. Atop a silver palanquin sits the Goddess, along with her consorts, Annapurna and Sarasvati. Bagpipers from the army are a peculiar addition to the caravan, but no one here seems to mind the cultural mismatch.

The journey takes a few days. One night the caravan halts at a small place called Diyan. The local temple comes to life the next morning as people from a nearby village rush to the tiny courtyard, carrying the palanquins of their village Deities which will be recharged by the presence of the Goddess. Similar celebrations and adorations accompany the caravan on its journey. A short stop is made at another temple, where Goddess Annapurna will stay. A large crowd is already waiting for her. The other two Goddesses, Ganga and Sarasvati, will finally reach Mukhwa, where a jubilant celebration awaits. There they remain until summer.

The unsurpassed beauty of the valley of the Bhagirathi reaches its peak around Mukhwa. Studded with thick forests of cedars and firs, the valley widens up to a flat, level ground, humbling the river to a wide and silent stream. After that, the Bhagirathi once again enters a narrow valley, so far avoiding the perils of several hydroelectric dam projects in the area, and reaches Deoprayag. There, empowered by its affluent Alaknanda, the Bhagirathi becomes the Ganga, India's immortal river.

The next major spot along its banks is Rishikesh, an old seat of learning in a warm deep valley. Rishikesh relieves Mother Ganga of all the hardships of hilly terrain; there, the river becomes calm. Finally, after cutting through dense subtropical forests known for a rich variety of wildlife, the Ganga enters the plains of North India at Haridwar, home to the 2010 Kumbha Mela.