

An Amazing Phenomenon Called the Kumbha Mela

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IF THERE IS any word in English capable of giving a general idea of what a Kumbha Mela is like, it is this: *incredible*. You might have visited many melas, fairs, in your lifetime, big and small, but if you visit a Kumbha Mela, like the one held at Allahabad from 14 January to 10 March 2013, you will be amazed to find that no other fair comes anywhere near it—of course, for those with a religious bent of mind.

At the Kumbha Mela ‘every day is a surprise’, said Yuri, who had come all the way from Japan to witness the mela. And she is not the only one surprised; more than ten lakh of tourists from abroad visited the Kumbha Mela this year to experience the world’s largest human congregation.

No wonder that Harvard University sent a multidisciplinary team of fifty faculty members, staff, and researchers to study and document the phenomenon—‘The Mapping of the Kumbha Mela’, as they call it. The ‘pop-up megacity’, as this team prefers to refer to the Kumbha *kshetra*, place, that springs up on the dusty sands to house hundreds of thousands of sadhus and millions of their followers for fifty-five days, is a source of amazement.

To have a first-hand experience of this unique phenomenon we visited Allahabad—also called Prayag—from 7 to 11 February 2013. When we alighted at the Allahabad Railway Station, little could we imagine what lay ahead. Once

outside the station we started having a hunch of the grandeur of the mela; a huge number of passengers waited outside the station looking for a means of transport to go to the Kumbha *kshetra*. When we got a vehicle, after one hour or so, and started moving towards the camp of the Ramakrishna Mission, we could see the many temporary offices that had been set up by the government to facilitate the movement of the crowds. Even three days prior to the *shahi snan*, main bath, on Mauni Amavasya, new moon, it took us more than one hour to reach our camp, barely 4 km away from the station!

The Arrangements

On the riverbank at the Sangam—the confluence of the three holy rivers Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Sarasvati—a city of about ten

thousand camps belonging to different akharas, ashramas, societies, and religious leaders had sprung up. The 56 sq km Kumbha City had been divided into 14 sectors, each sector having hundreds of camps. The prominent places had been allotted to the akharas and important ashramas of the monks belonging to the Dashanami Sampradaya, the ten monastic orders founded by Acharya Shankara in the eighth century CE. The very large camps of several akharas, with capacity to accommodate in one sitting thousands of people who go there to listen to religious discourses, were situated towards the fringes of the city.

The entire area had 22,000 temporary electrical poles, having two large halogen lights and four loudspeakers on each of them—the halogen lights flooded the city with a yellowish light, and

Avenue and tents at the Kumbha Mela of 2013





People spending the night under the trees during the Kumbha Mela of 2013

the speakers continuously announced the names of lost-and-found people. But what amazed us the most was the absence of shops in such a huge congregation! Many of us cannot imagine a mela without any shops. Business is one of the biggest motivations for holding a mela, but when it comes to the Kumbha Mela, except for a few tea vendors, one cannot find any other shop around—not even food stalls. What was the arrangement for foods for the pilgrims then? *Anna sattras*, dole houses. Many camps provide the pilgrims good quality food free of charge, right from breakfast to dinner. Apart from that, countless families just sit on the ground and cook very simple food in small earthen ovens, offer the food to God, and partake of the prasad.

Where do the pilgrims stay? Most of the pilgrims are flowing. They enter into the Kumbha *kshetra* through any of the several inlets, take a holy bath at the Sangam, offer their prayers, and move away. To facilitate the movement of the crowds the government has constructed eighteen pontoons, floating bridges, which are wide

enough for vehicles to pass over. Apart from the flowing crowds, a good number of pilgrims—mostly from the rural areas of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan—stay at the Kumbha *kshetra*, especially on the days before the *shahi snans*. They just stay anywhere in the grounds, indifferent to the harsh North Indian winter. It matters little for them where they stay; rather, they consider it a blessing to be able to spend some time in the holy *kshetra*. Many of them spend the nights listening to religious discourses, which go on round the clock, mostly on the Bhagavata and the Ramayana. It is wonderful that at any given moment hundreds, if not thousands, open-to-all discourses are going on at the Kumbha City, each camp vying to attract as many pilgrims as possible. Both the acts of giving religious discourses and listening to them at a holy place are considered extremely meritorious by the Hindus.

Among the crowds one can see countless urban Indians and foreigners, who booked their lodgings in any of the thousands of camps. All



Ramakrishna Mission camp at the Kumbha Mela of 2013

the camps have small and big tents for living, makeshift toilets, and dining spaces for the delegates; most of them have bookstalls and *pan-dals*, temporary sheds, for religious discourses too. The camp erected by the Ramakrishna Mission, which is but one of the modest camps, held intra-faith meetings of different denominations belonging to the Sanatana Dharma, treated more than 20,000 patients at its dispensary, distributed 500 blankets to the needy, set up a bookstall and an exhibition, and accommodated hundreds of monks and thousands of devotees during the mela.

Another surprising thing once you enter the Kumbha *kshetra* is its road system: 156 km of steel-plated roads have been laid down to cover the entire area. The roads are straight, wide, run parallel to each other, and act as an immense grid that sectors the *kshetra*. They are kept clean by many volunteers and government employees who often sprinkle them with water and, frankly speaking, are wider and cleaner than many of the roads of India's metropolitan cities.

The Kumbha Mela is a lesson on how efficient and helpful the police and paramilitary

forces can be. At every crossing, in front of every camp, moving along with every Mahamandaleshvar—virtually everywhere—more than 30,000 police personnel and paramilitary forces were actively providing safety to millions of pilgrims. Above all, they were cordial and extremely cooperative—it seems to be written on their faces that providing security at the Kumbha Mela is as sacred an act as taking a dip at the Sangam. There is no doubt that

one of the major reasons for the Kumbha Mela's success is the efficient and amiable service by the police.

Pontoon bridges at the Kumbha Mela of 2013



PHOTO COURTESY RAMAKRISHNA MISSION SEVASHRAMA, ALLAHABAD

PHOTO BY REUTERS

The Akharas

One of the greatest attractions of the Kumbha Mela is the different akharas, which are the chief stakeholders of the mela. In fact, it can be said that the Kumbha Mela is a festival of monks belonging to different akharas. What is an akhara? An akhara, which literally means a wrestling place, is like an organization of regimented monks. When India was under Muslim rule the sanniyasins were often attacked by Muslims mullahs and soldiers. To protect themselves, the monks of the Dashanami Sampradaya recruited militant monks from ordinary people as well as ex-soldiers. These militant monks were

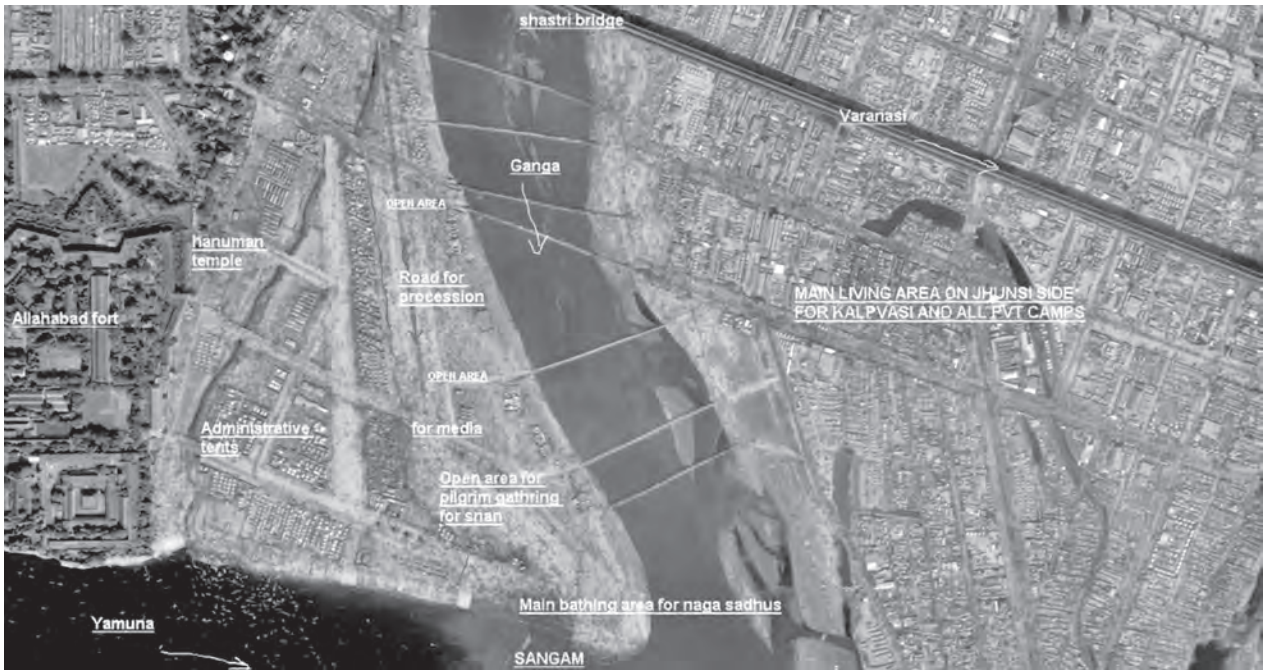


Candidates from an akhara before receiving sannyasa at the Kumbha Mela of 2013

called Nagas, which means 'naked'—they in fact maintain the tradition of remaining naked even today, with their bodies heavily smeared with ashes; they undertake rigorous physical practices, learn fighting and the use of arms, dwell near temples or in huts, and come before the public only during Kumbha Melas.

In order to take part in the procession for the *shahi snan*, which is a big affair and one of the main attractions of the mela, each monastery belonging to the Dashanami Sampradaya should be affiliated to a particular akhara. The ten orders are: Aranya, Ashrama, Bharati, Giri, Parvata, Puri, Sagara, Sarasvati, Tirtha, and Vana. They have four headquarters in India: Joshi Math in the north, Sringeri in the south, Dwaraka in the west, and Govardhan Math in the east. Under these four headquarters there are several monasteries, called maths or ashramas, that are affiliated to one or the other akharas.

There are seven Shaiva akharas overlapping with the Dashanami Sampradaya of monks: Agni, Atal, Avahan, Bhairava, Juna, Mahanirvani, and Niranjani. The head of an akhara is called the Acharya Mahamandaleshvar, or the Pithadhish; he is a learned monk belonging to



Aerial view of Allahabad taken during the Kumbha Mela of 2013

the Dashanami Sampradaya and is elected by the Mahamandaleshvars from among themselves at the time of a Kumbha Mela. Mahamandaleshvars are the regional heads under an akhara. They too are learned monks having a considerable following of monastic and lay disciples. The akharas assume the greatest role during the Kumbha Melas, as it is for the sake of securing a place in the procession for *shahi snan* that the several Vairagi and Udasin akharas came into existence. Digambar Ani, Nirvani Ani, and Nirmohi Ani are the Vairagi akharas, and Naya and Nirmal are the Udasin akharas. These akharas, unlike the Shaiva ones, do not have Naga or Dashanami sadhus.

Curiously, a non-Naga monk is the head of the akhara of the Naga sadhus. There is an interesting story behind this. Before British rule Naga sadhus used to be the heads of the akharas. But when Christian missionaries started attacking Hindu institutions with their doctrines, including the monasteries, the Nagas found themselves in an awkward position. Nagas, who are supposed to defend the monasteries, were not equipped with the knowledge of the English language to

counter the verbal attacks—they had learnt only military practices to deal with the physical attacks of the Muslims. Therefore, they selected learned Dashanami sadhus as their heads, a practice that is still continued now.

There is a dispute among scholars about the period of origin of the akharas. Some scholars believe that Acharya Shankara created them, while some believe that they are much older. But one thing is sure, that Madhusudan Sarasvati, the great scholar monk who lived in Varanasi in the sixteenth century CE, organized the akharas with the help of Akbar, the great Mughal emperor.

The Procession

As mentioned earlier, one of the main attractions of the Kumbha Mela are the grand and flamboyant processions of the sadhus of all denominations, including the Mahamandaleshvars and their followers, on the days of the *shahi snans*. The day before a *shahi snan* the crowds thicken in the Kumbha *kshetra*, the pontoon bridges are overflowing with the continuous movement of pilgrims, and vehicles are restricted in the area.

The following is a personal account of the *shahi snan* of 10 February 2013. We started from our Ramakrishna Mission camp at 4 a.m. to join the procession of the Mahanirvani akhara—this is the akhara the Ramakrishna Mission joins for the procession. The Mahanirvani akhara goes first in the procession at the Kumbha Melas in Allahabad, whereas the Niranjani akhara is the first at the Kumbha Melas in Haridwar. The order in which the different akharas go in the procession is a serious matter—it is for this position that in the past many battles have been fought among the akharas and thousands of sadhus have been killed. In the Kumbha Mela held in 1796, some 5,000 sadhus of the Shaiva akharas were killed in a fight with the Sikh akharas. Fights between Shaiva and Vaishnava sadhus is also not uncommon. Because of such fighting the British made rules regarding the order of the processions in the four places where Kumbha Melas are held.

During the procession we saw literally millions of people standing by the barricades on both sides of the road. All were jostling to have a darshan of the procession of sadhus; they were shouting ‘Hara Hara Mahadeva’ and offering flowers to the sadhus. As we moved towards the Sangam, the crowd assumed an enormity hard to describe. The yellowish light from thousands of halogen lamps at that early morning hour created a mystic atmosphere.

But when the hundreds of ash-smeared Nagas of the Mahanirvani akhara entered the scene—decorated with flower garlands and some of them on horseback, beating drums, and waving their hands in the name of Mahadeva—the combined tumult of drumbeats, music, and the shouts of the crowds changed the environment. Security forces gave way to the sadhus, as they do not meddle with them during the processions—the police just concentrate on the crowd, which may break the barricades to join the procession.

Other colourful attractions of the processions are the chariots, lorries, and elephants carrying the Mahamandaleshvars, who follow the chariot of the Acharya Mahamandaleshvar situated just behind the Nagas. The chariot of a Mahamandaleshvar is followed by his monastic and lay disciples.

Once we reached the Sangam, we were carried forward by the sea of pilgrims and had only a few seconds to dash into the water, have a dip, and come back. There was a constant fear of bumping into the Nagas, who were at their highest ‘mood’ at the time of the bath. If one collides with them, there is every possibility of being thrown back by them. There was a continuous blowing of whistles by the policemen, who would protect the sadhus and would not disturb them at any cost—it seems the security forces are very conscious that the Kumbha Mela is a festival of sadhus.

Kumbha Mela 2013 Facts

- 18 pontoon bridges and 35,000 public toilets were built for the pilgrims
- 156 km of new roads, made of chequered steel plates, were laid on the riverbank
- 571 km of water pipelines were laid, and 800 km of electric wires and 48 power sub-stations were set up in the mela area
- 125 ration shops and 4 warehouses were opened in the mela area for pilgrims to buy grains, groceries, and vegetables
- 30,000 policemen, 30 police stations, and 72 companies of paramilitary forces were deployed to provide security
- 120 CCTV cameras were installed
- 22 doctors and 120 ambulances were on round-the-clock duty at the 100-bed hospital at the mela
- The Mela generated employment for over 600,000 (6 lakh) people and its revenue was more than 120 billion (12,000 crore) rupees.

—See *The Economic Times*, 14 January 2013

The Mauni Amavasya drew the highest crowd in a single day: more than 30,000,000 (3 crore) people took bath in the Sangam—it was the largest human congregation with a single purpose in recorded history, approximately 90 million (9 crore) pilgrims throughout the mela.¹ According to the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University ‘the millions walked to the Sangam with a purpose. They were resolute in step, but not hurried, they were carefree but cautious. They were happy. They were accommodating. They were joyous.’²

The Faith

What is the secret behind the success of the Kumbha Mela? The arrangement, the security, the planning? All these would have been inadequate to make the Kumbha Mela peaceful and successful, had the crowd not been moved by faith, the simple faith that a dip at the Sangam at the auspicious hour would make one free from samsara, the repeated cycles of birth and death. Moksha is the goal of the pilgrims who come to the Sangam. During the Kumbha Mela the Sangam symbolizes not only the confluence of three sacred rivers, but also the confluence, the melting

pot of different world cultures, the urban and the rural, the old and the modern. Above all, the Kumbha Mela celebrates the human endeavour to go beyond the mundane.

It is the sense of sacredness and other-worldliness that keeps the pilgrims peaceful, focused, and self-disciplined. This simple fact may remain a puzzle to researchers, media, and tourists who do not go deep into the spirit of Hindu culture, a culture that demonstrates that diversities can coexist peacefully, a culture in which celebrations, pilgrimages, and rituals are performed for inner transformation. Inner transformation is a silent process, like the actions of the pilgrims of the Kumbha Mela, who come silently, bathe silently, and move away silently. Amidst the hue and cry, it is the silent prayer of the heart that captures the essence of the Kumbha Mela.



References

1. See official statistics by the Government of India at: < http://kumbhmelaallahabad.gov.in/english/kumbh_at_glance.html > accessed 15 March 2013.
2. See < <http://fxbkumbh.wordpress.com/2013/02/11/february-11-2013-the-aftermath/> > accessed 28 March 2013.

