

The Maha Kumbh Mela | A global village of the timeless and the emergent

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This 'Global Village' draws attention from a wide spectrum of humanity. It is a living testament to Hinduism's timeless beliefs and practices while also being a sandbox for newer and emergent facets. It enables the three eternal concurrent processes of Evolution, Equilibrium, and Involution.

This year brings millions of people to the *Maha Kumbh Mela* at Prayagraj. The *Mela* (fair) offers a comprehensive view of Hindu beliefs and practices, providing visual and experiential insights. There is a pervasive feeling of equanimity, where distinctions of all types dissolve, fostering a sense of interconnectedness. The *Mela* connects to nature worshipping, honouring the *Panch Tatvas* – (the five elements of life: Earth, Water, Air, Fire and Space). It recalls a time of ritual observance and intellectual inquiry into natural forces and their astrological significance, emphasising the harmonious balance of these elements.

The *Triveni Sangam* delta at Prayagraj, the confluence of River Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati, draws a wide spectrum of humanity, from the *Yogis* from the Himalayas to devout pilgrims to curious travellers and tourists, diverse people from different walks of life, each with their own objective. This 45-day festival is hosted by an ecosystem of administrators, ground support, volunteers, business people and entrepreneurs. Such a scale also amasses attention from educators, researchers and innovators with a multi-disciplinary lens.

All triune things converge in this land where the three rivers meet, including the compelling combination of three cycles embedded in the sacred trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh. Brahma represents Evolution (Anabolism), and Vishnu represents Equilibrium (Metabolism), and Shiva represents Involution (Catabolism). The *Kumbh Mela* is a rich example of all three processes: the celebration of the past, the reflection on the present, and the preparation for the future.

The *Mela* finds its roots in the famous legend of Hindu mythology - *Samudra Manthan* or the Churning of the Ocean) by *Devtas* (Gods) and *Asuras* (Demons). From the churning emerged various gifts, *Kumbh of Amrit* (a pot of nectar) for immortality, being one of them. The *Kumbh Mela* is a commemoration held every four years in each of the four cities, Haridwar, Nasik, Ujjain and Prayag, on a rotational basis.

Beyond its immense religious significance, the *Kumbh Mela* is also culturally and spiritually significant. The sheer number of devotees and pilgrims in an ephemeral city creates a rare and unique experience, attracting hordes of visitors to gain insights into the mystique of the *Mela*. Historically, many foreign travellers have written detailed accounts of their visits, getting the *Kumbh Mela* widespread global recognition. Hieun Tsang's *Chronicles and Journals* of Fanny Parkes (*Wanderings of a Pilgrim*) have enamoured the global audience across ages.

The scale of the *Mela* has always been immense and is only growing with each decade. The estimated number of visitors this year is likely to cross 400 million through the *Mela* duration. Ten thousand hectares of *Mela* area have been declared a temporary district with 10 zones and 25 sectors. Setting up a temporary city of this scale is a massive administrative challenge, mainly when the location for the same is on the floodplains of the Ganges that receded very reluctantly this year, leaving a very small time frame for making all arrangements.

Despite the limited time, various government departments and agencies have worked round the

clock to provide infrastructure and ready amenities before the first *snan* (holy dip) date. Massive budget allocations and various department personnel have been deployed to manage security, traffic, health, sanitation and other arrangements. The Uttar Pradesh Government has also made a substantial technological push with its Digi Kumbh initiative. AI-powered CCTV systems, using facial and vehicle number plate recognition, have been designed to provide surveillance and monitor crowd movement, traffic flow and parking managements. Further, underwater drones with advanced imaging capabilities have also been deployed to provide round-the-clock aquatic surveillance. An AI-powered chatbot has also been launched to support over 11 languages and enable easy navigation.

In independent India, the *Kumbh Mela* is being hosted since 1954. Each government has put in its best efforts to make it a smooth and memorable experience for the pilgrims. Such efforts in successful set-up and operations have gained attention from across the world and attracted various forms of research efforts beyond just an anthropological perspective.

Leading global and Indian academic establishments such as Harvard University, London School of Economics (LSE), IIM Bangalore and MIT have conducted various comprehensive studies to learn from the scale of operations and draw insights from such a mega event. Through a multi-disciplinary lens, these studies focus on ephemerality and infrastructure, public management, socio-cultural and logistical complexities, AI and technology. The mammoth scale of the pilgrimage, particularly on the main bathing days, when millions take a dip in the holy waters garnering wide-scale astonishment.

Such a concentrated flow of massive footfall has also meant immense potential for brand visibility and marketing opportunities for businesses. Alongside large brands, thriving local enterprises are tapping into every opportunity to serve all segments of the massive crowds. The guests visiting for a few days can choose from a variety of options available -luxury tents, budget tents, hotels, guest houses, homestays. Logistics providers, from taxi drivers to boatmen, are all geared up to provide services to the visitors while small vendors are ready to lend themselves to cater to the essential needs of *puja* (prayers) items and rituals, for the devotees coming for a day.

Hindu astronomy, astrology, built heritage, ecology, and local food, each layer has a rich presence in the *Kumbh Mela*. From pilgrims, devotees, and travellers to market gurus, academicians and research enthusiasts, there's something meaningful and compelling for everyone to witness and partake in the *Maha Kumbh Mela*!

Kavita is an avid traveller who collects stories from everyone and everywhere, completely enamored by the rich tapestry of Indian history and culture. She explores for her wanderlust and brings in unique perspectives! Through *Dus Dishaa* she brings alive local charms in this global village through immersive, specially curated experiences. In her regular days, she is a management professor with over 20 years of experience.