

REVIEW ARTICLE



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'KUMBH MELA': A SPIRITUAL CONFLUENCE

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ABSTRACT

Kumbh Mela is where millions of devout Hindus gather for a ritual bath at four different places – Prayag (Allahabad), Nashik, Ujjain and Haridwar - on the banks of important rivers. Prayag (Allahabad) is at the Triveni Sangam, the confluence of three rivers – the Ganga, the Yamuna and the mythical Sarswati. Haridwar is on the banks of the Ganga. Nashik is where the Godavari originates and flows. Ujjain is on the banks of the Sipra. Sadhus, saints, Gurus, Tantriks, devotees and countless people belonging to different sects, converge for a holy dip every twelve (12) years at one of these four places. The Mela alternates between Prayag, Nashik, Ujjain and Haridwar every third year.

Kumbh Mela, like innumerable festivities and rituals in India, has its origin in mythology. It is referred in the timeless Vedas. Specific reference is made in Atharva Veda, which says that Brahma (the creator of the universe) established this tradition to liberate and purify the human soul. It so happened that once due to a curse of Durvas Maharishi the surs (Gods) found themselves weak and distraught. They approached Lord Vishnu who advised them to get hold of *Amrit kumbh* – the pitcher containing the nectar of immortality. In an uneasy alliance the gods and demons (asuras) churned the ocean of milk which yielded the *amrit* in a *kumbh*. Reluctant to share the *amrit* with the troublesome demons, the gods deftly stole the pitcher containing *amrit*. This led to a battle between the two for twelve cosmic days (equivalent to 12 years of human time). It so happened that during the tussle for the pitcher, four drops of nectar fell on Prayag, Nashik, Ujjain and Haridwar. The rivers that flowed through these locations have not only become sacred but every 12 years, when the planets align themselves in the same position that they were during that colossal battle, they acquire such transformative power that a dip in them is considered tasting the *amrit* – the nectar of immortality. A single dip or *snan* (holy bath) during the most auspicious hour, calculated on the basis of specific planetary configuration, is believed to be having a cosmo-biological effect on human mind and body.

Key Words: mythical, location, of immortality, tradition, liberate, purify

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From times immemorial the Indian mind recognized the wisdom of cosmic existence that connects man and nature, hence the universe is – *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. The entire universe is a

family. Living with, and in harmony with nature, and adoring it has always been a part the Hindu way of life. Environmental ethics have always been an inherent part of Indian religious precepts and

philosophy. Man nature relationship is specifically at the centre of vedic vision and those sacred scriptures talks specifically talk about man's responsibility to preserve his environment. Bhagavad Gita, another holy scripture in Chapter 6, Sloka 29 elucidates that every living creature has emanated from the *Paramatma* –the Supreme God:

Sarva bhuta-stam atmanam sarva-bhutani
catmani

Iksate yoga-yuktma- atma – sarvatra sama
– darsanah

Ramanuja, the revered Vaishanava guru
explains the sloka:

The word Sarvatra sama-darsanah means equal vision everywhere. This means realizing the atma or soul that abides in oneself and abides in other beings is of the same transcendental essence in all beings equally. This is perceived by spiritual consciousness and this transcendental essence is an attribute equally present in all atmas. Hence, worship of nature – Sun, Moon, Earth, Air and Water was not merely vedic India's response to the fear of the unknown, but arose from the deep reverence shown to the forces of nature which sustained and preserved human life on earth. Water, especially is considered to be Jeevanam and hence rivers are worshipped a mother. So all rivers in India, except Brahmaputra, are female giving life to humanity.

Even Upanishads provide a vision of cosmic piety and harmony with the natural environment. The 12 year interval is significant as there are 12 Zodiac signs, 12 jyotirlingas (self-emanated Shivalings) and 12 months. The ritual bath at Kumbh Mela at 12 year interval is symbolic of the purification of the body sublimating the inherent vices of the 12 sense organs – the five organs of action, the five organs of perception, the mind and the intellect. In the process of this cleansing, the body's six psychic centres (*chakras*) are also stimulated. The 2013 Kumbh Mela is a Maha Kumbh that only happens after 12 *purna*(full) *kumbhs*, every 144 years and that too only in Allahabad.

Apart from mythology there are numerous historical references to Kumbh Mela. One such reference is found in the writings of the famous Chinese traveler – Hiuen Tsang, who visited India between 629 and 645 AD during King Harshavardana's (AD 606 – 645) reign. He witnessed

the Kumbh Mela at Prayag in AD 643 which in his travelogue he records as an "ageless" bathing tradition. Hiuen Tsang even narrates how King Harshavardana distributed jewelry and precious stones as alms to the pilgrims and when he ran out of them, gave away every piece of valuable jewellery he wore at that time.

However, it was the highly venerated Hindu guru and philosopher of the 8th Century AD Shri Adi Shankaracharya who rejuvenated Hinduism that organized, promoted and transformed the Kumbh Mela into a mass meeting point of devout Hindus. He visualized the occasion to be a forum for religious debates strengthening the doctrines among sadhus, sants and ordinary devotees. Indeed, numerous groups of sadhus and gurus that belong to various monastic orders like Nagas and Agoris, who have shunned the material world and live in remote hills and caves, come into contact with the pilgrims.

More than these gurus and sants, it was the ordinary devotees seeking salvation that dares to reach the site of kumbh Mela from the nook and corner of the country that need to be mentioned. In the days of yore, pilgrims braved the perils of weather, the threat of robbers, and risked their health and lives to reach the kumbh Mela with utmost faith in God. They undertook the journey on foot or by bullock cart travelling through thick jungles and at times starved of food and water. They faced acute physical discomfort to perform this extraordinary feat. These ordinary pilgrims, who are neither ascetics nor royals have nothing a protection except their immense faith in God. Mark Twain, the great American writer who visited the Kumbh Mela in 1895 in his travelogue 'Following the Equator: A journey around the World' notes how he was touched by the "unwavering faith" of the pilgrims who undertook such "incredible journeys" – plodding for months the heat to get here, worn, poor and hungry'.

Compared with the bygone days, pilgrims of recent times are better off as far as their travel and security is concerned. These pilgrims are not so severely tested of their faith, even though they may have to forego certain material comforts and plan in advance. Facilities and other arrangements have significantly improved in Independent India keeping

in view the bitter experiences that took place during the recent colonial times.

Elaborate arrangements are made for the 55 day Maha Kumbh Mela festival that began on 14th January across a 20sqkm. stretch on the *Triveni Sangam* banks. It is expected to be the biggest religious gathering of humanity on earth with up to 100 million pilgrims taking bath in the holy waters in January and February. The arrangements that began six months before the Mela include 25 lost and found centres, 100 bed hospital with intensive care units, road and river ambulances, 35,000 single seat toilets and 4000 urinals, As temperatures are expected to dip as low as 0c or 1c at night subsidized supply of food and fuel was also arranged. Security is a major issue in the recent times, around 30,000 policemen, including commandos, were pressed into service for round the clock vigil.

Sadhus and sants, gurus and priests, throng their way into the ghats at around 3 a.m on 10th February 2013 to take the holy dip. The naked Naga Babas and Agoris, smeared in ash, dreadlocked arrive in processions, in gaudily decorated chariots, on horseback, or even elephants to the ghats. They take the first dip followed by the ordinary devotees. The ascetics and the common man make good use of the opportunity to absolve themselves of the sins. A mythological story best explains the spirit of Kumbh Mela.

One day Lord Shiva and Parvati were watching the Kumbh Mela from Kailas. Millions of devotees are taking the holy dip to wash off their sins. Parvati felt restless and turned to Shiva with a thought. She is particularly not happy that salvation *Moksha* could come so cheap with just a dip in the holy water during Kumbh Mela. How can anyone who has committed many sins throughout his life be rid of the sins with a bath in the holy waters during Kumbh Mela? To this Shiva suggested that they visit Kumbh Mela disguised as a Brahmin couple.

Shiva pretended to be lying dead with Parvati weeping inconsolably besides him. Pilgrims passing on their way to the holy dip enquired her about the death of her husband. To this Parvati replied that Shiva has promised to bring her husband back to life if he was touched by a sinless man. However, if the man is not sinless, he will pay for it with his life by dying instantly. The

pilgrims expressed their sympathy and took their holy bath but did not dare to touch the body. They walked away, turning a blind eye at the tragic sight.

At this point, a simple villager curiously enquired about the dead man. Parvati gave him the same reply. He told her that he will come back after the bath as he was sure that the holy bath will rid him of all the sins that he committed in his life. He promptly took the holy bath, returned and touched the dead body. Of all the pilgrims he was the only one who had true faith that his sins were washed away with the holy dip. For the rest, it was only a ritual to be performed every 12 years. Shiva revealed himself and granted *moksha* to the simple villager. Shiva thus told Parvati that only with immense faith in the ritual bath can one achieve *moksha*. Performing it, for the sake of it, will give no result. It is the faith that makes the difference.

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