KUMBH MELA: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

The Kumbh Mela is a great religious bathing fair and pilgrimage in India, said to be the largest religious gathering on earth. For more than a month every twelve years, this sacred tradition brings tens of millions of people to the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Sarasvati rivers at Allahabad. The size of this pilgrimage, especially on the three main bathing days, has long been the focus of wide-scale astonishment, amplified in the age of multimedia communication. The focus of this amazement stems from images of the vast tent city sprung up on the delta of the three rivers; the royal processions, of holy men and naked ascetics, first in line for bathing in the river on the most "auspicious" (holiest) days; and the densely packed pilgrims who press toward the riverbank by the millions. Vivid color photographs of these remarkable phenomena rocket around the world, creating the global image of an exotic spectacle.

But the Kumbh Mela is far more than a media spectacle. The sheer human achievement of creating the temporary-and yet complex infrastructure of the twenty-square-mile "Kumbh City" on the dry flood plain of the rivers is astonishing. There are tents to house millions of people and like any permanent city there are roads and, bridges, power stations and electricity, sanitation facilities and clinics, police and fire departments, and transportation and telecommunications. And this occurs every twelfth year, prompting the most important question: Why do they all come? What is the significance of this great pilgrimage for the thousands of ascetics
who encamp here for a month and for the pilgrims who come for but a day?"

The place the Kumbh Mela holds in Hindu religious Life must be understood within the context of the pilgrimage networks, religious fairs known as melas that span the length and breadth of India. It is part of a centuries-long tradition that brings Hindus to holy sites throughout the country. In modern India, technological advances in transportation and communications have made the practice of pilgrimage more popular than ever.

### 3.1 TIRTHA: SPIRITUAL FORD

Across India, pilgrimages draw Hindus to bath in the sacred rivers and to experience the festive life of a mela. There are thousands of places of pilgrimage across India, called tirthas, literally "crossing places." Many tirthas are located along the banks of the sacred rivers of India representing both literal and symbolic places of crossing or "fords." They are sites where religious rites simple or elaborate, yield more powerful spiritual fruit. They are places where one's prayers are more readily heard, where one's generosity is amplified, where one's penitential moments are more effective. They are spiritual crossings, where the river of this earthly life enables one to reach the far shore of immortality.

Prayag, the ancient name of Allahabad, is classically called the Tirtha Raja, meaning "King of Tirthas." It is said that other riverside, tirthas absorb the sins and sorrows of countless pilgrims. The tirthas themselves, seeking a place to deposit this load of human burdens also come to Prayag, where they too are cleansed. While there are certainly many important temples in Prayag, the primary "altar" of this sacred place is the river bank, where the
rivers meet and flow together, where people come for the simple rites of bathing, and according to legend, where other tirthas come to bath as well. This is the power of Prayag.

The traditional pilgrim's map of the city focuses on the meeting rivers, with all the Hindu gods congregated in the landscape and river setting. It is a map where divine presence and the earthly city are depicted together.

3.2 **SANGAM: MEETING RIVERS**

![FIGURE-3.1: Sangam in Allahabad](image)
India's great rivers are said to be of divine origin and the waters of these rivers are understood to be a liquid form of the Goddess Shakti, who is the energy of creation itself. The Ganga and Yamuna rivers both come from high mountain of Himalayas at Gangotri and Yamunotri, places visited by pilgrims from throughout India. Many sources of India's other sacred rivers are considered holy as well, including the headwaters of the Godavari, called the Godavari Ganga, near Nashik, in Maharashtra; the source of the Narmada at Amarakantaka in the Maikala Hills of eastern India; and the source of the Kaveri at Talakaveri, in the Coorg hills of southwestern Karnataka.

The confluence where two rivers meet is known as a Sangam and it is especially sacred for bathing. As the Ganga called the Mandakini (meaning "the River of Heaven") courses down the Himalayan mountain, it joins with two other rivers, the Alakananda at Rudra Prayag and the Bhagirathi at Dev Prayag. At both Sangams, chains are sunk into the steep cement steps at the river's edge to enable pilgrims to bathe safely in the swift current of the meeting rivers. The greatest of the Sangams along the Ganga is at Prayag. This is where the Ganga and the Yamuna Rivers meet the invisible, Sarasvati River. This place where the three rivers meet is called the triveni, the "triple-braid" of rivers. When the rivers connect at Prayag, they are broad and swollen with flood-waters from the rainy season. From here, the Ganga flows past Varanasi, and on through what is now Bihar and Bengal. Finally, a thousand miles downstream, there is a great confluence at the delta, where the Ganga meets the sea in the Bay of Bengal. This is the place of the famous Ganga Sagar Island, which hosts a three-day mela of approximately a million people taking bath every January.
The great destination of pilgrims to the Kumbh Mela is the Sangam at Prayag. For pilgrims, bathing at this very location marks the precise holy moment they are seeking. Here, the rivers are said to flow with amrit, "the nectar of immortality" during the auspicious period of the Kumbh Mela.

3.3 AMRLT: NECTAR OF IMMORTALITY

"From untruth, lead us to truth; from darkness, lead us to light; from death, lead us to immortality." This oft-quoted prayer from the Upanishads reveals a more universal truth that spans cultures and religions—the yearning for immortality. In the Hindu story associated with the Kumbh Mela, even the gods seek to overcome death, and according to legend, a drop of amrit fell upon the earth at Prayag. Of old, so they say, the gods sought for themselves the nectar of immortality that was to be found deep in the ocean of milk. They decided to churn the ocean to bring it forth from the deep. Vishnu obliged and became a tortoise and his shell became the base on which the churn could be placed. The Himalayan Mount 'Mandara' became the churning stick and the serpent 'Vasuki' became the rope with which to churn. Yet to gain that nectar, the gods needed the help of the anti-gods, the asuras, to pull one end of the churning rope while they pulled the other. And so they all exerted themselves, each side pulling mightily until the kumbh, the "pot," containing the amrit came forth from the ocean. It was immediately seized by the asuras. It seemed all was lost until Vishnu took the form of an enchanting maiden named Mohini, the deluder, and beguiled the asuras into letting her hold the kumbh. She delivered it immediately to the gods who swept it away to heaven. As they sped off with the pot, four drops of amrit fell upon the earth. According to tradition, these drops landed in the four locations where the Kumbh Mela is observed today:
1. Haridwar where the Ganga enters the plains,
2. Prayag at the Triveni Sangam,
3. Nashik on the Godavari River in Maharashtra, and
4. Ujjain on the Kshipra River in Madhya Pradesh.

Each place hosts a *mela* every twelve years in an astrologically determined, cyclic sequence that enables the Kumbh Mela to occur in approximately three-year intervals.

**TABLE-3.1:** Zodiacal positions of Jupitor, Sun and Moon during Kumbh.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>River</th>
<th>Zodiac</th>
<th>Month</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haridwar</td>
<td>Ganga</td>
<td>Jupiter in Aquarius, Sun in Aries</td>
<td>Chaitra (March – April)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayag (Allahabad)</td>
<td>Ganga, Yamuna &amp; invisible Saraswati</td>
<td>Jupiter in Aries, Sun and Moon in Capricorn or Jupiter in Taurus and Sun in Capricorn</td>
<td>Magh (January – February)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trimbkeshwar, Nashik</td>
<td>Godavari</td>
<td>Jupiter in Leo or Jupiter, Sun and Moon in Cancer or Lunar Conjunction (Amavasya)</td>
<td>Bhadrapada (August – September)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ujjain</td>
<td>Shipra</td>
<td>Jupiter in Leo, Sun in Aries or Jupiter, Sun and Moon in Libra on Kartik Amavasya</td>
<td>Vaishakha (April – May)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The story of the churning of the ocean and the battle over the immortal nectar is told in the Puranas, the "old stories," passed down and amplified in one version after another. While the Kumbh Mela is not mentioned by name, its connection with the churning of the ocean is so widely known today that the official website of the 2013 Kumbh Mela portrays the gods and asuras churning the sea on the banner of its homepage.
Skanda Purana contains the story and links it to the astrological conjunctions when the four Kumbh Melas take place and the places where the drops of nectar were spilled. It is generally agreed that the mention of a large astrologically determined *mela* occurred first in relation to the Kumbh Mela at Haridwar. According to Prof. D.P. Dubey, "It appears that the Kumbha Parva derives its name from an auspicious occasion of ritual bathing that used to take place at Haridvara, every twelfth year, when Jupiter was in Aquarius, and the sun entered Aries." The legend of the immortal nectar aside, the praises of bathing in the San-gam and sipping its waters are ubiquitous in the Puranas. Two examples of many hundreds may suffice:

**FIGURE-3.2**: Four Sites in India where Kumbh Mela takes place
"If one bathes and sips water where the Ganga, Yamuna, and Sarasvati meet, he enjoys liberation, and of this there is no doubt".

- Padma Purana Uttara Khanda 23.14

"Those who bath in the bright waters of the Ganga where they meet the dark waters of the Yamuna during the month of Magh will not be reborn, even in thousands of years".

- Matsya Purana 107.7
3.4 HISTORY

While the Kumbh Mela is often said to be "ageless" and "ancient," those who have studied the history of the large mela in Allahabad see it as being more or less continuous since the Gupta period from the fourth to the sixth centuries. Perhaps the first historical description of a great mela in this region was in 643 CE, written by the Chinese, Buddhist monk Hsuan Tsang, who had travelled to India to find Buddhist sacred texts. Hsuan Tsang wrote of a gathering of pilgrims to an "age-long festival" in the month of Magh (January-February). He explained how King Harsha displayed his generosity by giving away goods to all classes of people until he himself possessed nothing and returned to his capital wearing only single piece of cloth. The Narasimha Purana, dated to the fifth or sixth centuries, also gives evidence that a month-long mela was known during the Gupta period. Sages are said to come from different orders assembling from various parts of India during the month of Magh.

One aspect of today's Kumbh Mela that truly seems to be ancient is this gathering during the winter month of Magh. This Magh Mela may well have taken place annually, as it does today. It was during the time of the Mughal emperor Akbar that Prayag was renamed Ilahabad, which later became Allahabad. The emperor visited the city in 1582 and asked that a fort be built at this strategic location where the two waterways converged. The fort remains to this day, a lofty sentinel at one end of the Kumbh Mela grounds. Historians of the Islami kings give notice of this gathering through the years and, subsequently, British writers have added their descriptive accounts. The traditional scene of the mela has remained almost unchanged: the ascetics exhibitions of yogic performance, the
recitation of religious texts, discourses on socio-religious problems, and sectarian propaganda continue to be the main attractions of the fair.

The Kumbh Mela name seems to have been adopted by Prayag from the Kumbh Mela that took place, as it does today. Historian Kama Maclean's careful analysis has concluded that prior to the eighteen sixties there is no mention in textual sources of a kumbh in Allahabad or of a special mela occurring every twelve years, although the Magh Mela was well known. The first modern Kumbh Mela was likely in 1870. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the festival has expanded in size and scope. Ironically, the attempt of the British colonial state to regulate the seemingly chaotic and possible dangerous practice of such a pilgrimage contributed to its success. Maclean writes, "Colonial government intervention in melas, though often controversial, generally made them safer, which consequently encouraged pilgrimage attendance."

### 3.5 MELA: FESTIVAL

It has been said that one must understand the *mela* to really know India. A *mela* is a great religious fair where spiritual life and the robust world of commerce and entertainment come together; it is a confluence of people from all walks of life and from all over India and it is a microcosm of India's spiritual life.

Many of India's *melas* last but a few days. The annual *mela* i.e. Magh Mela held at Prayag every winter lasts for the whole month of Magh. The Magh Mela is about a quarter the size of the Kumbh Mela. However, like the Kumbh Mela, the Magh Mela brings day pilgrims as well as the *kalpavisas*—the devotees who take a vow to stay for the entire month. They bath in the rivers daily, praying, meditating, and listening to the
discourses of teachers. The grid of streets, the tent city, and the combination of religious life and festivity is an annual smaller version of the great Kumbh Mela. What attracts them as a magnet, all at one time, to the same place, is the still vital strength of religious tradition. A miniature spiritual India is represented on the dry flood plain between the Ganga and the Yamuna during the shivering cold month of Magha.

The great Kumbh Mela is of a far greater magnitude and scale than other melas, but has some of the same elements. The pavilions constructed along the main streets of the Kumbh City have colorful gateways, decorated with flags, flashing lights, and spinning fluorescent pinwheels. Crowds of pilgrims are welcomed into large halls where hundreds may sit for the discourses of a famous teacher for whom the great mela is a chance to gather their followers and recruit new ones. Gurus sit with their disciples and interpret sacred texts. Yogis demonstrate their spiritual accomplishments. Popular singers and musical artists are invited to perform. Some of the great pavilions are built especially to house the theater groups that perform the 'lilas', the religious plays in which actors enact favorite scenes from the Ramayana or the life of Krishna. These performances occur twice a day, in the morning and evening, and conclude with worship, religious songs, and a ceremonial lamp and flower offering to the principal actors who portray the deities. Lilas incorporate a multimedia approach that provides vibrancy and energy to the mela.

Outside, along the streets of the Kumbh Mela's encampment, sit hundreds of merchants, selling daily necessities and various wares and trinkets of religious life. They spread their merchandise on the ground or wheel it along the streets in carts. For them, the mela is a great opportunity for business.
In short, a mela combines the festivity of a festival and a fair with the intention and devotion of a pilgrimage. For pilgrims, it is a family affair. On the quieter days of the mela, bathing in the sacred rivers might be followed by a moment of reading and reflection and perhaps a family picnic on the riverbank, with cotton candy and pinwheels for the children.

### 3.6 SNAN AND SHAHI SNAN

What is the spiritual pull of the Kumbh Mela? For most pilgrims, a holy dip in the rivers holds the most spiritual value. They dip fully into the waters once, twice, three times, and then take the waters in their cupped hands to pour it again into the river as an offering to the gods and to the ancestors. They make offerings of flowers and oil lamps, floating them into the current of the mother waters. In the evening, the pilgrims might come to the river bank for one of the Aratis (lamp offerings) that are performed by pujaris (priests) who raise huge, multi-wicked oil lamps to the river. The rites are simple, but absolutely central to the spiritual experience of the kumbh Mela. This is what they have come for. For those kalpavasis who have vowed to stay for a whole month, Ganga snan is a once or twice-a-day rite.

On an ordinary day, bathing is a constant activity along the riverbank, beginning before dawn. The riverfront mud ghats have been reinforced with sandbags to allow secure footing. In some places, bamboo guardrails and fences have been anchored in the river to protect pilgrims from the press of crowds that might push them too far into the current. Many pilgrims take a boat into the river where a makeshift dock enables them to bath in the actual waters where the other rivers join. Shahi Snan, the Royal Bathing Days are astrologically auspicious, so on these days the power and
magnetism of the holy waters is amplified, and the crowds swell. On these
days, the ordinary bathing of pilgrims takes place in a crowd as many as
twenty million.

There are three traditional Shahi Snan days: Makar Sankranti, Mauni
Amavasya and Vasant Panchami. There are other spiritually auspicious
bathing days Paush Purnima, Maghi Purnima and Maha Shivratri but
above three are the great days of the Royal Procession. The heads of the
Akharas, the monastic orders of renunciants, are the kings of the Kumbh
Mela. They ride atop elephants, tractors, or flatbed trucks, elaborately
decorated with flowers and surmounted by the umbrella of royalty. Behind
them follow the members of the Akhara, carrying the insignia of their
order, their scantily clad or completely naked bodies covered with ash for
the sacred bathing.

The orders of Akharas are given priority and exclusive rights to bathing at
the Sangam on these auspicious days. In the past, there were often battles
between Akharas for precedence to bath at the most sacred time. However,
today the bathing order has been fixed. James Lochtefeld writes about the
Kumbh Mela, "Since the early eighteen hundreds, the Mela
authorities—first British, and later Indian—have maintained the
established bathing order, freezing into custom and privilege what had
once been claimed solely by force of arms."

3.7 AKHARAS: ASCETIC ENCAMPMENTS

Akhara is a place of practice with facilities for boarding, lodging and
training, both in the context of martial arts or sampradaya monastery for
religious renunciates in Guru-Shishya tradition.
At highest level akhara are classified into one of the three different sampradaya based on their traditional system.

There are 14 Akharas in India in which 13 are registered. These 13 Akharas are further divided as Nirvani, Digambar and Nirmal Sampradaya. These akharas also known as Sanyasi, Vairagi and Udasin Sampradaya.

(A.) Nirvani: The Shaivite are followers of Lord Shiva also known as Sanyasi. It has the largest number of akharas as well as Sadhus, Saints and Nagas.

(B.) Digambar: The Vaishavaite are follower of Lord Vishnu also known as Vairagi.

(C.) Nirmal: Also known as Udasin, followers of Multiple Gods.

**TABLE-3.2:** Akharas and their Headquarters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sampradaya</th>
<th>Name of Akhara's</th>
<th>Headquarters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nirvani</td>
<td>1. Shri Panchayati Akhara Maharanirvani</td>
<td>Allahabad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Shri Panch Atal Akhara</td>
<td>Varanasi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Shri Panchayati Akhara Niranjani</td>
<td>Allahbad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Topinidhi Shri Anand Akhara Panchayati</td>
<td>Nashik</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Shi Panchdashnam Juna Akhara</td>
<td>Varanasi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Shri Panchdashnam Ahavan Akhara</td>
<td>Varanasi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Shri Panchdashnam Panchagni Akhara</td>
<td>Junagarh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vairagi Vaishnav Akharas</td>
<td>8. Shri Digambarani Akhara</td>
<td>Sabarkhantha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. Shri Nirvani Akhara</td>
<td>Ayodhy, Faizabad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Shri Nirmohi Akhara</td>
<td>Mathura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Udasin Sampradaya</td>
<td>11. Shri Panchayati Baba Udasin</td>
<td>Allahabad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12. Shri Panchayati Akhara Naya Udasin</td>
<td>Haridwar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13. Shri Nirmal Panchayati Akhara</td>
<td>Haridwar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURE-3.4: Showing Akharas and their Headquarters in India

In the 2013 Prayag Kumbh Mela, an women akhara was registered called the Shri Sarveshwar Mahadev Vaikunthdham Muktidwar Akhara Pari or
'Pari Akhara'. However, in the Nashik Kumbh the next year, women were denied a place on dais and refused a separate time slot for the Shahi Snan. Pilgrims are drawn by the prospect of darshan, the "sacred sight" of the saints, which is the power of simply beholding them and receiving their blessing. What characterizes the Kumbh Mela every twelve years is not only its vast size, but also the massive presence of the orders of the sadhus. These orders are referred to as Akharas and there are thirteen represented at the Kumbh Mela, both Shaivite and Vaishnavite. According to tradition, again without written record, it was the great eighth-century philosopher Shankara who instigated the gathering of ascetic orders at the mela. He is said to have established mathas, the headquarters of orders of ascetics, at the four compass points of India. Coming together in conclaves on a regular basis has become part of melas, here as well as elsewhere in India. It was estimated by authorities that some 200,000 ascetics were present at the 2013 Kumbh Mela. The ascetics also participate in the yearning for immortality. Strictly speaking, they have already died. Initiation into an ascetic order includes symbolically lying upon one's own cremation pyre. Dikhsha—the initiation into the Akhara orders takes place at the Kumbh Mela. When their bodies are adorned with ashes, they are the ashes of another life, or perhaps the ashes of the fire that they keep constantly burning in their tent compounds. They are conquerors of death. At the Kumbh Mela, some of the most flamboyant sadhus enact their indifference to discomfort and pain, holding one arm in the air for years, lying on a bed of nails, or sitting in meditation in an iron swing, hung over a burning fire. Typically, they go barefoot winter and summer, conquering cold and heat. Their flagrant rejection of the comforts of settled life
empowers them in a world dominated by consumerism and the concept of what they call "getting and keeping."

**FIGURE-3.5:** Showing Four Matha established by Shankaracharya’s

Pilgrims flock to the Kumbh Mela by the hundreds of thousands, not only to bath in the sacred waters, but also to receive the blessings of the ascetics
whom they have never seen in such numbers. They press forward to
glimpse the babas (as they call them) in the great Shahi Snan processions.
Many pilgrims aspire for darshan of the holy ones. To see the babas up
close, pilgrims may venture, into the dense neighborhood of the Akharas,
to perhaps converse with them, or simply to have their silent blessing. As
the dates of the Kumbh Mela approach, each of the orders receives a for-
mal invitation to the mela from the government authorities in charge. The
event is called Pravesh, or the "Entrance," and it begins when the Akharas
and their generals, the Mahamandaleshvars make their processional entry
into the Kumbh Mela grounds. This signals the beginning of the
encampment that will last for nearly two months. In the build-up to this
moment, however, workers have already set up camp. In 2013 the
Akharas' allotments of land, called "Sector 4," were in the choicest area of
the Kumbh Mela grounds, nearly adjacent to the riverbank. The perimeter
of each encampment is laid out and each order has a bhumi puja (earth
prayer), to sanctify the ground at the central altar of the camp. Each camp
raises a huge flagpole to symbol size the deity of the Akhara. Great
gateways are built along one of the main roads to mark the entryway into
the Akhara.

Both in numbers and in real estate, the largest Akhara of the Kumbh Mela
encampment is the Juna Akhara. Like others, this was formerly a
militarized monastic order that included traders and warrior ascetics. They
would compete for precedence at each mela, including bathing rights and
rights to receive the alms of pilgrims. Of course, asceticism has to do with
power: the particular kind of power called tapas is associated with
renunciation and ascetic practice. The power of the great ascetics is very
much a counterpoint to kingly were, an alternative that is asserted, as we
have seen, in the Shahi Snan processions. The Kumbh Mela is a time when renouncers and ascetics gather as an order. They initiate members, and the initiation ceremonies in which the new members are shaven and naked as newborns, constitute one of the important iconic moments of the mela. In their mela conclaves, the Akharas also discuss policies. They elect officers. Indeed, at the melas, the Akharas demonstrate an astonishing display of complex, hierarchical organization despite commonly held misconceptions that they are a loose band of otherworldly and usually solitary renouncers.

3.8 GURUS AND TEACHINGS: SPIRITUAL, NATIONAL, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL

The sector of the Akharas is a densely populated area not unlike the ancient urban heart of an old Indian city. On the other hand, the broad avenues that crisscross the flood plain are lined with camps of another kind—the pavilions and halls and housing of the teachers, acharyas, and their followers. In the vast Kumbh city, some of the teachers have real estate in both the Akhara sector and in the more spacious "suburbs." For instance, one of the most prominent camps is that of Avdeshanand Giri Maharaj, the Acharya Mahamandaleshvar of the Juna Akhara. Spread over acres, his camp includes a capacious assembly hall, a traditional fire pit to perform Vedic rituals, a huge dining hall and kitchen that feeds thousands of ascetics and pilgrims every day, a free medical clinic, a shop selling essentials at cost, and a bookstore. The camp is managed entirely by volunteers from across the world. Their quarters are of temporary but sturdy construction, with basic electricity and water. The administrative offices and the residence of Avdeshanand himself are in a large central compound.
The Kumbh Mela grounds provides a different glimpse into the meanings of the mela. The perimeter of the Mela is a series of tents housing those who have come for the month-long discipline of the 'Kalpavas'. There are also tents for toilets and showers, and there is a kitchen refectory tent. In the center is a spacious meeting hall tent with a raised platform on one side for the daily teachings from the Bhagavata Purana. The teachers intersperse the narratives of Krishna with devotional classical singing. The crowd includes many Bengalis, the followers of this form of Krishna devotion based in Brindavan, as well as devotees from all over India. During the opening weeks, camp hosts an inter faith dialogue conference offering teachings by Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and Sikh leaders, enabling an interfaith experience in the heart of the Kumbh Mela.

3.9 GREEN KUMBH

The 2013 Kumbh Mela authorities called it a "Green Kumbh." They banned polythene plastic bags from the site and called on NGOs, educational institutions, and religious leaders to spread environmental awareness at the gathering. The internationally known teacher, Swami Chidananda from Paramarth Niketan ashram in Rishikesh, launched a series of green initiatives. Noting the ineffectiveness of the Government of India's Ganga Action Plan, Chidananda took the GAP acronym for the Ganga Action Parivar (parivar meaning "family"). It would be necessary for Indians to act together on behalf of Mother Ganga, with the urgency of a family protecting the health of their mother. During the Kumbh Mela, Chidananda hosted a two day meeting of stakeholders as well as the mayors of the major cities along the Ganga that could make the biggest difference in stemming river pollution through sewage and industrial waste.
Throughout the *mela*, Green Kumbh efforts were visible. There were paid sanitation workers with red aprons and long nets, fishing litter and marigold offerings out of the river. Thin cotton reusable bags were offered as substitutes for plastic. Chidananda also piloted a program for repurposing the eco-friendly toilets used during the mela for other pilgrimage sites. Along with members of his community, Chidananda made daily sweeps along the riverbank, picking up litter and marigold garlands, making the cleaning of the Ganga a visible reality. Their tips for pilgrims, with the do's and don'ts of pilgrimage included, If your offering (to the Ganga) is in a plastic bag, make sure to take the offering out of the bag before offering it to the Sangam, and recycle the plastic bag. The Sangam is a great purifier, but plastics kill all the life in her waters and along her banks.

### 3.10 PRAYAG: MEANINGS OF SACRIFICE

The name Prayag refers to the yajna or yagya, "the sacrifice," the greatest of Vedic rites, said to have been performed by the creator at the time of creation. The triangular area between the two rivers is the great sacrificial
ground, the earth-altar called the *vedi*. The ancient sacrifice was the elaborate and expensive rite of kings and wealthy sponsors. At this place, however, as with other great tirthas, the meaning and power of the sacrifice is ascribed to simpler and more widely accessible acts of faith, namely pilgrimage and bathing in the sacred waters. The significance of this whole thing is in the word *prayag* itself. The prefix "pra" means the 'first', the foremost, and the original; and "yag" is *yajna*, the sacrifice. So, Prayag, where we are sitting, is the foremost place of sacrifice.

This is the best place to make sacrifice and this is the best time to sacrifice. The Kumbh Mela is a macrocosm of sacrifice. In the microcosm, in the family, we have the same thing, taking place. For example, the mother sacrifices her individuality and she interest to make the baby as healthy as possible. Here in the ascetic community, we also make sacrifice of our self-interest, our individuality, towards the collective interest, and we become one limb of the collective. This is the sacrifice. This is Prayag. The ones who have offered sacrifice here are many. Of old, the kings and patrons who sponsored great sacrificial rites did so for the benefit of the whole society. The ascetics, sadhus, and sanyasis cast off the life and wealth of the householder, to live a life of renunciation. The pilgrims who come sacrifice the comfort of home and often take on great hard ship in order to bath at the Sangam and receive the darshan of the saints.

### 3.11 SACRIFICE OF PERSONAL WEALTH

There is another kind of *yajna* associated with the Kumbh Mela. The offering of personal wealth by donors and sponsors in order to make it possible. The administration in Allahabad sought a government budget of about INR 1.55 billion, about 300 million dollars, to put in place the infrastructure and
staff for the Kumbh Mela arrangement. But beyond the roadways, bridges, and power stations, there is an enormous cost in erecting and running the temporary city of the Kumbh Mela, which comprises hundreds of large encampments constructed and maintained by traditional Akharas and religious, social, or cultural organizations. Many of these encampments are spread over tens of acres of soft river sand, and provide lodgings and boarding to thousands of ascetics and devotees. They feed thousands of pilgrims two or three times a day, free of cost. Camps maintain huge pavilions with canopies and marquees for hosting religious discourses and cultural performances. In the camps of many traditional Akharas, such as the Juna Akhara, thousands of male and female ascetics burn hundreds of quintals of wood to keep their dhunis smoldering twenty-four hours a day.

Who covers the expenses of the Kumbh Mela? Who pays the company that supplies the tents? What about food deliveries and wood deliveries? A system of patronage in kumbh has usurped the traditional role of royalty from the time of kingdoms and rajas. As the Kumbh Mela approaches, wealthy patrons usually donate to the Akharas and religious organizations to construct the encampments, which comprise makeshift accommodations, temples, assembly halls, performance areas, kitchens, and drainage and sewage systems. Once it is all in place, they donate again to maintain daily operations. In addition, many wealthy and middle class members affiliated with gurus and the great leaders of the Akharas not only make donations, but become volunteers. Some people support the gatherings because they view it as their social responsibility, whereas others support the charities for religious reasons. In the Hindu tradition, performing acts of charity has been associated with yajna (sacrifice) since Vedic times. The word yajna is derived from the Sanskrit verb root yaj,
which has a three-fold meaning: worship, unity, and charity. In Vedic times, many kings performed royal sacrifices, such as the ashvamedha (horse sacrifice), in order to earn punya, or religious merit, and to increase the prosperity of the kingdom and its subjects. In addition, the term dana is used to speak of charity. Dana is the "religious gift" and in the Hindu ethos, the most powerful and fruitful gifts are what are called gupt dan, meaning the secret and anonymous.

There is no question that dana, whether anonymous or named, is what maintains the life of the Kumbh Mela. Many donors may not be inclined to share their fortunes with others for non-religious reasons. Their sacrifices and philanthropic contributions help promote humanitarian tendencies. Many of these wealthy patrons also believe that by engaging in charitable giving they earn religious merit, while at the same time help the local community socially and economically. Ultimately, these charitable sacrifices make possible the running of a long event that facilitates the coexistence of millions of people from diverse religious traditions. The Kumbh Mela nourishes their faith, rejuvenates their social bonding, and helps foster a harmonious society. Moreover, the local economy is bolstered by the increase in monetary transactions that occur among thousands of businesses large and small, ranging from the construction of the temporary city to the many hawkers selling trinkets (small ornaments). Thus, the sacrifice of personal wealth for the Kumbh Mela helps the donor as well as society.

3.12 SACRIFICE OF PERSONAL COMFORT

There is also a sacrifice on the part of those who come as pilgrims and kalpavasis. Millions of pilgrims who faithfully flock to the Kumbh Mela
with the hope of acquiring everlasting peace are usually greeted by dust, smoke, noise, the cold, and chaos. As morning dawns over shimmering waters and sandy riverbeds, thousands of shivering pilgrims emerge from tattered tents, thatched huts, or elaborate shelters to perform rituals and to seek wisdom from the multitude of sadhus. They must make their way through the overcrowded, muddy, makeshift roads made of unevenly laid steel plates to reach the confluence and bath in the spine-chilling water. They change clothes outdoors, and when required, use toilets that facilitate this huge, popup megacity. At this sacred carnival, along with the sanctity of the atmosphere, millions of participants also inhale the fine, sandy particles of ashy smog.

The hardships and adversities of the Kumbh Mela for the pilgrims are multiplied many times over for the *kalpavasis*, the spiritual aspirants who vow to spend the entire month of Magh at the Kumbh Mela devoting themselves to prayer, meditation, and satsang (devotional group singing). They temporarily leave their families, stay in fragile tents with no heating, follow the oath of self-denial, abstain from enjoying worldly pleasures, eat non-spicy vegetarian food once a day, and try to live a strict life of renunciation and devotion. They immerse themselves twice daily—morning and evening—in the waters of the confluence, listen to spiritual discourses, and participate in religious rituals. They also help in the daily operations of the camp.

Why do an estimated 2.5 million *kalpavasis* and tens of millions of pilgrims willingly sacrifice personal comforts and endure hardships at the Kumbh Mela? What do they receive in return? Many respond to attain moksa (liberation)" or "to live a successful, prosperous life".
3.13 SACRIFICE OF PERSONAL BONDS

While the kalpavasis and pilgrims of the Kumbh renounce personal comforts for a few weeks, the hundreds of thousands of ascetics who throng the Kumbh Mela not only renounce personal comforts but also personal property, familial bonds, and communal connections for a lifetime. For many, hundreds of years, ascetics have wandered the sacred geography of India, from the high Himalayas to the southern seashores, from the populated plains to the dense forests, in pursuit of this worldly and otherworldly ends. In the fourth century BCE, during his brief incursion into northwest India, Alexander the Great is said to have been impressed after his encounter with ten naga sadhus who pursued asceticism to the point of regarding food and clothing as injurious to purity of thought.

The goal of the Hindu ascetics has been to acquire unusual temporal skills or abilities (siddhis), to experience imperturbable tranquility, or to attain the blissful beatitude in the state of liberation (moksa). Many are initiated into the Akhara orders during the Kumbh Mela. There are innumerable variations in ideologies, practices, and attire of ascetics in the different Akharas. As a group, they may be called ascetics, renouncers, saints, sadhus, yogis, babas, or sannyasins. What they have in common, however, is the renunciation of personal bonds.

The Bhagavad Gita teaches the practice of four physical and mental discipline's or yogas: karmayoga (yoga of action), gyanayoga (yoga of knowledge), bhaktiyoga (yoga of devotion), and dhyanayoga (yoga of meditation). The ultimate goal of most yogis, whatever path they may take, is to unite with the divine. However, Sondra Hausner, who studies the wandering sadhus of the Himalayas, argues that, "Ironically, the fusion
with the divine is only possible through fission, or by breaking apart from the trap of material reality with its seeming social and physical laws of differentiation. The physical, social, and psychological worlds of these renouncers are often symbolized by metaphors of sacrifice.

Most renouncers of the traditional Akharas live around *dhunis*, the personal sacred fire pits that are slow-burning symbols of the continual sacrifice they need to make in order to achieve their goals. A proper *dhuni* includes all five essential elements of the universe: the elements of earth, water, fire, air, and space. The mud of the fire pit represents earth; the water is kept in a small pot by the pit; the mantras recited by the sadhus represent air; fire, of course, is kindled in the dhuni; and space pervades and sustains the four other elements. The world of five elements present in a dhuni represents both the outer physical body of the renouncer and the inner psychological body, both of which will be burned one day and turned into ashes.

Thus, the sacrifices of thousands of dhunis at the Kumbh Mela represent the macrocosm and microcosm of Hindu renouncers. The ash produced by the fire, known as *vibhuti* or bhasma, signifies the fact that all substances reduce to the same grey dust one day. It reminds the renouncers as well as others of the impermanence of all material forms. The fire at a *dhuni* keeps a renouncer's sacrifice alive by reminding him to break away from the outer world of social relations and material gratifications as well as from the inner world of thoughts and cognitions, the fission with the mundane required for the fusion with divine.
What do ascetics do at the Kumbh Mela? Apart from the ritualistic bathing and public blessing for which they are famous, they in fact pursue their spiritual endeavors in a myriad of ways.

There are various methods and ways of worshipping in the Hindu tradition. Some do satsang, some simply sit with the dhuni, some sit in vairagya that is total dispassion, some just bless those who come to them, and some don't do anything. They are just there. We find all sorts of sadhus at the Kumbh Mela. It is like a spiritual expo. In some places, we find that it is beyond reason. We can't reason out why they do what they are doing. That is freedom of worship. Everybody is free to find their own path, their own way. There is no saying whether it is correct or not correct. Everybody is free to explore their way into spirituality. An explorer doesn't say this is right and that is wrong. He just wants to experiment with his life, experiment with truth. In the process of experimentation we may make wrong turns, and learn from that as well. That is a beauty of Hinduism. Hinduism is basically liberal. It doesn't say that you have to believe in just one book or one thing. It gives individual freedom of thinking, freedom of practicing rituals the way they would like. So, it is an inherent characteristic of Hinduism—harmony in diversity.

The Kumbh Mela facilitates the coming together of ascetics, scholars, practitioners, volunteers, and pilgrims from diverse traditions. Most participate in discourses, discussions, reflections, and meditation with the positive intention of elevating the self and benefiting society. People cannot visit all the different places ascetics and scholars come from, but they can all converge in one place to share their thoughts and experiences, and learn from one another.
3.14 SACRIFICE OF DIFFERENCES: INGATHERING OF INDIA

One common meaning of the word sacrifice in the English language is "an act of giving up something valued for the sake of something else regarded as more important or worthy". In this context, the sacrifice of differences may well-engender the more important and worthy value of human harmony. Yet, as we know, many people are not willing to sacrifice their differences for the sake of social cohesion and peace. Even if we wish to accommodate the religious other, we are sometimes too preoccupied with our perceptions to act in a manner that respects diversity. Despite knowing the flipside of our differences, many of us are not ready to let go of even small things or ideas of ours that might cause divisiveness. Hence, it takes a conscious effort to let go, to sacrifice our personal opinions, beliefs, and differences, even temporarily, for the larger good of society.

Renouncers at the Kumbh Mela are no exception to this human tendency to become quarrelsome over differences. Fractional feuds among the orders of ascetics come up occasionally on issues such as which Akhara ascetics will be first in line for the Shahi Snan, the royal ritual bathing on the most auspicious days. Sometimes an Akhara threatens to boycott the Shahi Snana if it is not allowed to take part in a certain order, at a certain place, or at a certain time. However, at the 2001 Maha Kumbh Mela at Allahabad, the mela administration and Akharas reached a historic agreement on the sequencing and timing of the Shahi Snan. It is one of the most significant achievements of the Kumbh Mela. The mutual respect, understanding and the overwhelming sense of accommodation on both the sides shall be regarded as the most important milestone in the management of this Mahakumbh of the new millennium.
The fact that there is agreement at one level, however, does not necessarily mean that there will be concord at other levels. Occasional inter and intra-Akhara conflicts arise, as do disputes between the Akharas and the mela administration. Considering the demographic, spatial, and spiritual vastness of the Kumbh Mela, conflicts are bound to come up, especially about space allocation. Nevertheless, these conflicts do not diminish the sense of commonality that is the basis for religious, social, and communal harmony. One common belief among many pilgrims is that the divine power of the confluence of the three rivers is so redemptive that regardless of one's imperfections, just bathing here during the auspicious times bestows moksa in this lifetime. Similarly, most religious discourse stresses the common Hindu ideology that all living beings are essentially 'aatma', the inner breath—the spirit that pervades all experience. While similarities bind the ascetics and pilgrims through unifying threads, there is no need to resolve differences in order to live together.

3.15 JUNA AKHARA: LARGEST AKHARA

The Juna Akhara, one of the largest with about 400,000 ascetics, is divided into fifty-two lineages. It is fundamentally a Shaivite tradition established by Adi Shankaracharya, the commonly held first guru and yet the chosen deity of all 52 lineages is Guru Dattatreya, who is regarded as an avatara of Lord Vishnu. Hence, the ascetics of the Juna Akhara greet each other with "Om Namo Narayana," invoking one of the names of Vishnu even though they worship Lord Shiva.

The Juna Akhara tradition has not only embraced diverse Hindu deities and gurus; but has also accommodated Buddhists and Muslims within the tradition and exalted them as the head of their lineages. One of the
fifty-two lineages of the Juna Akhara was established by Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche "Precious Guru." Padmasambhava was instrumental in transmitting Vajrayana Buddhism to Tibet and is considered an emanation of Buddha Amitabha. Recognizing that the Juna Akhara includes a lineage associated with the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition, the Dalai Lama often visits the Juna Akhara camp during Kumbh Melas. In addition, the another lineage known as the Multani Marhi of the Juna Akhara. It is called Multani Marhi because a Hindu-Sufi saint called Multani Baba, also known by Hindus as Keshav Puri Baba and by Muslims as Pir Shah Shams-i Tabriz, the teacher of Rumi, established it. The tomb of Multani Baba is located just outside the city of Multan, Pakistan with which his name is connected. Multani Baba had Hindu as well as Muslim disciples. He wrote books on both Sufi and Hindu subjects. When he left his body, he gave instructions that he be interred in a traditional Hindu sannyasi way, sitting in a meditative posture in an underground cave, with mala in hand. He maintained, however, that a qabr, a Muslim grave, even if empty, should be built next to the samadhi. Beyond the Juna Akhara, however, it is important to note that there are three Udasin Akharas, comprised of Sikhs following Guru Nanak and guided by the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, these Udasin ascetics are also an integral part of the traditional Akharas present at the Kumbh Mela.

In so many ways, the Kumbh Mela facilitates the coexistence of diverse traditions that have partially sacrificed their theological, ideological, cultural, and social differences in order to engage, with one another and to seek understanding and even harmony.

Religious teachers from heterogeneous traditions converge in this multicultural, multi faith event with their own perspectives, purposes, and
prejudices. While they share the same space with each other if many of them also share sentiments of mutual acceptance and assimilation and thereby impart the spirit of pluralism through their discourses at the Kumbh Mela.

Many religious leaders expressed one common theme: that the Kumbh is a place where one should learn to get rid of one's ego. Ego, the sense of "I" and "me," is the root cause of arrogance, intolerance, fear, jealousy, tension, and stress. How does the Kumbh Mela help let go of ego?

The Kumbh is such an overwhelming experience that makes a person humble. The spiritual leaders who come to the Kumbh may have a great permanent ashram. But here, everything is temporary and everybody is on the same plane. Spiritual leaders who come to the Kumbh realize that they are not the only one; there are hundreds out there who are leading the masses. Whether they say it or not, in their heart they accept it. Before the grandeur of the Ganga and Yamuna, in the eternity of the sands of time, before the cosmic force, everybody is on the same earth, on the same level. And they also accept the fact that other people are doing good work. So, even spiritual leaders are humbled, which is very important for a leader. Even the followers are humbled when they see thousands of other followers. So this gathering itself, which humbles both the devotees and the spiritual leaders before the energy of God, leads perforce to harmony. Ego leads to disharmony, humility leads to harmony. They carry back with them a lot of faith, a lot of hope, and also a lot of humility. For whatever reason you come to the Kumbh, whether you are searching for a guru, or whether you are a guru searching for more disciples, you are humbled. And this humility leads to harmony.
3.16  KUMBH MELA LISTED IN THE REPRESENTATIVE LIST OF UNESCO'S INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF HUMANITY

The intergovernmental committee for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage under UNESCO has inscribed 'Kumbh Mela' on the representative list of Intangible cultural heritage of Humanity during its 12th session held at Jeju, South Korea from 4-9 December, 2017.

The inscription of 'Kumbh Mela' was recommended by the expert body which examine in detail the nomination submitted by Member States. The committee observed that 'Kumbh Mela' is the largest peaceful congregation of pilgrims on earth. The festival, held in Allahabad, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nasik, represents a syncretic set of rituals related to worship in India. It is a social ritual and festive event closely linked to the community's perception of its own history and memory. The element is compatible with the existing human rights instruments since people from the walks of life, without any discrimination participate in the festival with equal fervor. As a religious festival, the tolerance and inclusiveness that Kumbh Mela demonstrates are especially valuable for contemporary world.

3.17  CONCLUSION

The Kumbh Mela is a confluence of sacred rivers and sacred time, with a colossal number of people. Millions of lay pilgrims, religious practitioners, volunteers, and ascetics live together in the tent city created on the huge expanse of sandy riverbeds. Adherents of many Indian traditions sometimes antithetical to each other, converge to observe a single ritual-bathing in the rivers. And they come, as well, to benefit from the
company of spiritual teachers and aspirants. There is no other ecumenical event in the World, held on such a vast scale, where ascetics and lay people from theologically disparate traditions coexist and coalesce. The Kumbh Mela pragmatically promotes the pluralism inherent in Indian civilization by creating the spatial and psychological conditions in which followers of disparate traditions live together, reflecting the spirit, "By whatever path you go, you will have to lose yourself in the one."