

## KUMBHA MELA

The Kumbha Mela is a pilgrimage festival in contemporary India, which attracts millions of Hindus to various sites to bathe in sacred waters. Hindus believe the Kumbha Mela (or Kumbh Mela) is a time when all forces of creation are collected into one vessel (*Kumbha*) and celebration (*Mela*) ensues. It has been estimated that up to 70 million people attended the last Kumbh Mela in Prayaga. The mythological beginnings of the Kumbh mela are a central focus of the pilgrimage and festival in contemporary India, though economic and political factors also influence the religious festival.

The Kumbh Mela has textual, mythical, and historical roots. It is believed that at the beginning of creation the gods were under a curse that made them weak. Brahma the creator god, advised them to churn the oceans in search of the nectar of immortality (*amrta*) from the primordial ocean of milk (*Ksira sagara*) and share the nectar equally. The gods sought help from the demons, and together churned the primordial ocean to bring up the nectar. However when the nectar was gathered up in the *Kumbh* (pot, vessel) the demons ran away with it, and the gods chased them. The battle for the nectar lasted twelve days and nights (the equivalent of twelve earth years). Drops of the nectar fell to earth during the battle in four locations Prayag, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nashik (Hebner, 1990:viii).

Historically the origins of the festival are difficult to identify. Rivers such as the Ganges have long been considered givers of life, often seen as bridges between the immortal heavens and mortal humans. Evidence exists of the Kumbh Mela dating back as far as the sixth century but its date of origin is inconclusive. The Kumbha is mentioned in the *Vedas* although no specific reference to the event itself, as well in the *Ramayana* (see Rai Subhas chapter two)

The Kumbh Mela is celebrated every three years, rotating between the four sacred places completing a cycle every twelve years. The central focus is a tale of mythological life arising from the ocean. This life, once born, needed help to grow which was provided by both the Devas and Asuras. It is believed that bathing in these spots will cleanse your soul and help a person reach immortality.

The Kumbh Mela at Prayag (Allahabad) is the most holy of the four fairs, and takes place every twelfth year. Three sacred rivers converge at Allahabad: the Ganges, the Yamuna and the mythological Saraswati. The Ganges and the Yamuna both have physical origins in the Himalayan Mountains, while the Saraswati is a mythic river that does not exist in a physical form, but is said to join the Yamuna and the Ganges at Prayag. Bathing at any of the sites where the nectar was dropped is believed to have purifying effects. This place where the three rivers join is regarded as particularly beneficial. Purification is increased one hundred times, and when bathing during the Kumbh Mela purification is thought increased one thousand times. Bathing here is thought to be an act of great absolution of ones sins.

The Kumbh Mela begins on Makar Sankranti, an auspicious day when the moon and sun enters Capricorn and Jupiter enters Aries. Astrology plays a role in the festival as it is said that during this time the passage from earth to higher planets is open allowing earthly souls to enter the celestial world. According to Subhas Rai, the cosmic alignments associated with the festival are chosen so as to increase the efficacy of the pilgrims' bathing. The combined power of river Ganges and the auspicious planetary positions creates a unique purifying power ( see Rai Subhas 1-2 )

During the Kumbha Mela, the Hindu Sastras ordain particular bathing norms to pilgrims. Observance of these rituals and baths are greatly eulogized are said to aid in the liberation from

the cycle of life and death as well as earn praise from the gods. Akharas have exclusive rights to the most holy bathing areas, and the procession of royal baths are known as Shahi Snans.

Akharas are sects or religious orders, however in the instance of the kumbh Akhara refers to the great congregation of sadhus, and members of mostly celibate religious communities. Each Akhara will have a large compound with many tents to hold thousands of members. The Akharas hold weapons and banners symbolizing royal authority, and are highly scripted. Before 1800 the bathing order reflected the individual's status in relation to one another (Lochtefeld 103-126).

Shanhi-Snan is the royal bath, in which members of various akharas are given priority access in a prearranged order for bathing. When Akharas are bathing ordinary pilgrims are not allowed to bathe. The procession of the Akharas is an elaborate ritual and one of the most colorful events of the Kumbh Mela. After the eulogies and first rights to bathe in the Ganges, the crowds of millions are allowed to walk in and perform the sacred ritual bath.

A temporary city is erected as a result of the crowds. Often during the Kumbh Mela tents are erected as hospitals for the pilgrims, offering free health care which is not offered in India normally. State governments have implemented sanitary arrangements, roads, and food shops. In the main festival area a wide variety of entertainment is available, and Indian culture and history is put on display. Images from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* can be seen, traditional plays and songs are performed, and elaborate paintings are sold. The gathering of a vast amount of people provides an opportunity for merchants to capitalize on tourism and religious fervor.

The magnitude of the gathering also provides an opportunity to gain exposure and prestige for political organizations, activists and religious teachers. Economic and political pressures alter the tone of Kumbh Mela, Because of these pressures the Kumbh Mela at times becomes a stage for military power and government control, and a footing for economic and

social change. In recent years the government has used the Mela to promote its own agenda such as family planning and environmental concerns, tourism and economic development. At times the festival also becomes a center in which a nationalistic identity is expressed through religious festival on an international stage (Lochtefeld 103-126).

The crowds of the festival can also have disastrous results when many families get separated, and children are often lost. Stories tell of families that were caring for a member of the family, such as an elderly person, who being a burden was left at the festival. Political tensions if high have sometimes boiled over with deadly results, and anxious rushes of pilgrims to the river have resulted in people being trampled. Despite these tragic stories we must keep in mind that the festival centers on purification and liberation. Although there are small pockets of tragedy and uprising the majority of the people come for a beautiful religious experience. Holy men are on every corner giving inspiration, people give of themselves to help strangers, and a culture is being celebrated through joyous festivities.

Bathing during the time of Kumbh mela is thought by Hindus to be of immeasurable significance. It also becomes a time in which people of different sects resolve their differences to bathe in holy waters, to resolve sins that all share in. Millions of people gather in the world's largest pilgrimage during an astrologically auspicious time to absolve their sins. Mythology, literature and history become one as a culture and a religion is celebrated. Class and caste although carefully defined come together in a world renowned event. This can become a stage in which politics and economics is acted out, which in turn redefines the Kumbh mela.

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