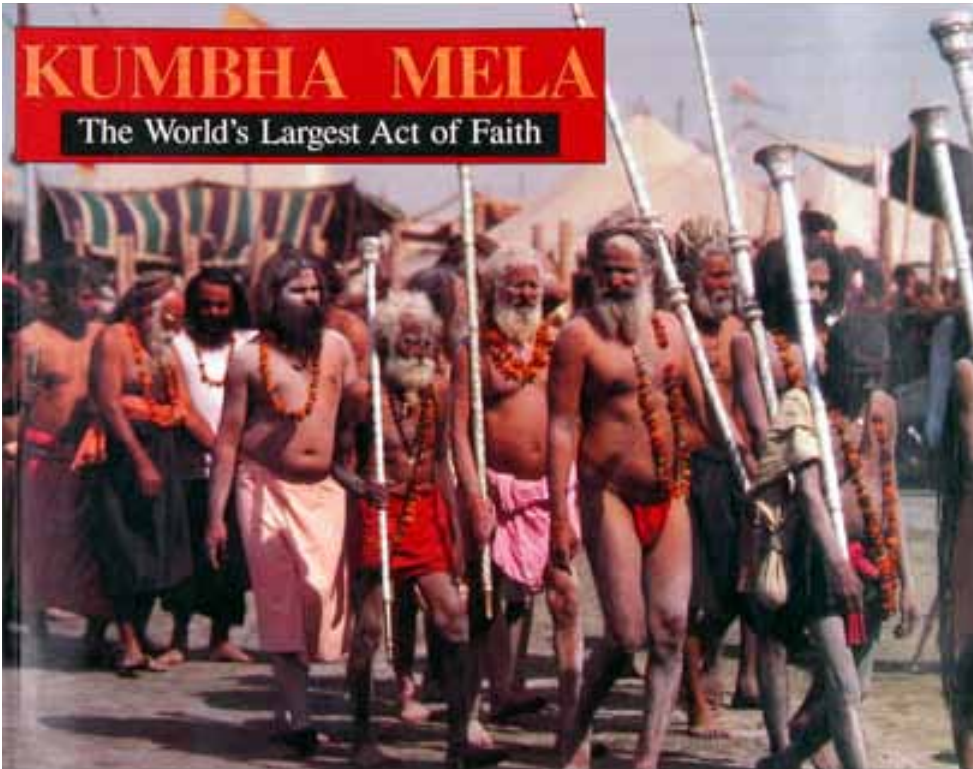


# KUMBHA MELA

The World's Largest Act of Faith





## **Kumbha Mela**

### **The World's Largest Act of Faith**

by Jack B. Hebner and David H. Osborn

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## KUMBHA MELA ~ INTRODUCTION

Festivals have always been an important part of life in India, where a celebration is held for almost every occasion. Some festivals are traditional, like Diwali, the Hindu New Year; some are ceremonial, like Kojagari, the harvest festival; and some are religious, like Rama-vijay, which commemorates Lord Rama's victory over the demon Ravana. All these festivals are held with great pomp and rejoicing. But of all the festivals in India, kumbha mela, the festival held every twelve years at Allahabad, on the bank of the Ganges River, is by far the grandest.

The kumbha mela derives its name from the immortalizing pot of nectar described in India's ancient scriptures. Kumbha in the Sanskrit language means "pot," pitcher," or "jar," and mela means "festival."

Kumbha mela is internationally famous as the earth's largest gathering of human beings. Throughout the twentieth century, Western civilization has marveled at the Kumbha Mela. Sensationalistic and inaccurate journalism-reports of "millions of ignorant people bathing in the filthy water of the Ganges," worshipping pagan gods and performing mysterious sacrifices" – has given the Western world something less than a noble appreciation of the Kumbha Mela. Thus few Westerners have taken the time to attend a Kumbha Mela or to understand the esoteric meaning of this poignant event.

There is something about the Kumbha Mela, however, that captivates the Western mind.

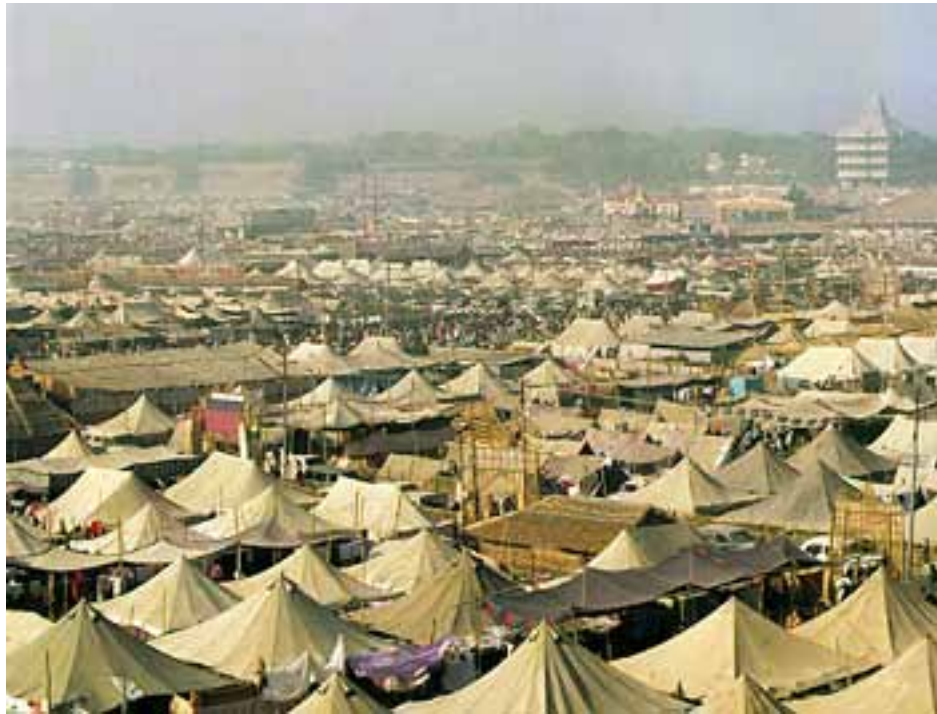


Some people say the reaction to the Kumbha Mela is so strong because kumbha mela represents the opposite of Western culture. Others say that the Kumbha Mela beckons the very soul of our existence, calling our higher self to shake off attachments to worldly life and step toward eternity. At any rate, the kumbha mela stirs the thoughts and emotions of most of us.

Kumbha Mela represents all that is India, past and present. One sees represented at the Kumbha Mela all the great spiritual cultures of India. Side by side the ancient traditions stand with a modern, industrialized India with all the latest innovations in television, radio, and computer technology.

I attended my first Kumbha Mela in 1977. At the time I had little knowledge of what the festival was all about. I had heard mixed reports about what to expect at Kumbha Mela: reports about bad sanitation facilities, dirty water, widespread disease, and overcrowded living conditions; stories about hundred-year-old sages; stories about the magical waters of the Ganges; and stories about yogis with mystic power.

My first impression of the Kumbha Mela as I stood on a high bridge at the northern end of the





festival grounds overlooking an ocean of gray canvas tents was that it was stunning. There were rows of tents spread in every direction for as far as the eye could see. Colorful flags and banners waved gently in the sky. The smell of burning wood pierced my nostrils as the smoke of thousands of campfires filled the air. Thousands of pilgrims bathed in the sacred Ganges at sunrise, and dense crowds filled the streets and thoroughfares.

As the days passed, I encountered the wonder and mystery of the Kumbha Mela. There was more to see than I was able to comprehend. For the first time in my life, I experienced a cultural shock: not only was it difficult to adjust to the customs and manners of the Indian people, but I also found myself questioning my own Western values. The very foundation of my conception of life, the reality in which I lived, was shaken at its root. I was forced by circumstance to find a new identity within myself and to adopt a completely new value system. My Western values just weren't enough to deal with the profundity of Kumbha Mela.

What ensued was an unforgettable experience and a true understanding of the Kumbha Mela. I began to understand why millions of people attend the Kumbha Mela, and I began to imbibe an inkling of their faith.

Returning to the West, I found my friends and relatives unreceptive to my experience.



Kumbha Mela was foreign to their world. My words weren't enough to paint a substantial picture of Kumbha Mela. I thought of Marco Polo, who in the twelfth century had also traveled to India and like me had had a difficult time communicating his experiences to Westerners.

Trying to describe what people have never seen is difficult. I waited twelve years and returned to the Kumbha Mela. This time I was accompanied by a photographer friend. Equipped with cameras and film, we were determined to bring the Kumbha Mela experience to the West in some tangible form,

We hope our readers will enjoy this book and gain an insight into the deep spiritual meaning of Kumbha Mela, "the largest act of faith."



Important Kumbha Mela bath days are:

Pausa Purnima (full moon)

Makhara Sankranti

Mauni Amavasya (dark moon)

Vasant Pancami

Magh Purnima

Maha Shivratri

The systems of astronomy and astrology in India date back thousands of years to the Vedic age, 3,000 B.c. From the Rig Veda, which emerged in the Vedic age as an authoritative literature on cosmic time cycles, information is gathered which enables astrologers to calculate the appropriate dates for observing the Kumbha Mela.

According to the calculations made from the Rig Veda, the sun moves from one of the twelve signs in the zodiac to another twelve times within a period of 360 days. Thus the sun enters the sign of Capricorn once in a year. That day is called Makar Shankranti and is said to be the beginning of an auspicious period for performing ritualistic and other spiritual activities. Jupiter, however, remains for one full year in each of the twelve signs of the zodiac before moving on to the next. Therefore, Jupiter enters a particular sign of the zodiac only once in twelve years. When Jupiter enters the sign of Aries and the sun simultaneously enters Capricorn, once in twelve years, the configuration is called Kumbha snana-yoga, and it sets the time for observing the Kumbha Mela.



Based on astrological calculations from the *Rig Veda*, astrologers have scheduled these six important days for observing a holy bath during the Kumbha Mela. The days considered most auspicious for bathing are

Purnima (full moon);

Makhara Shankranti;

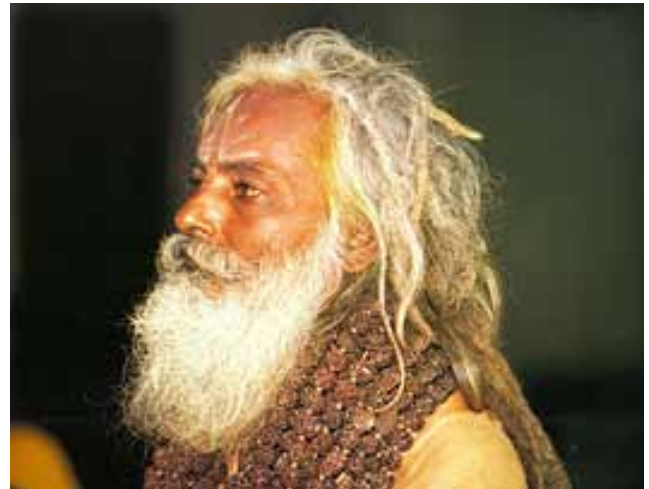
Mauni Amavasya (dark moon);

Vasant Panchami (fifth day of the new moon);

Magh Purnima (full moon); and

Shiva Ratri (appearance day of Shiva).

Those pilgrims who remain for the full forty-one days of the Kumbha Mela and observe all the important holy baths are given the elite distinction of being called *kalpvasis*, residents of the Kumbha.







## MELA PILGRIMS

Pilgrims came by the millions! Some arrived on overcrowded trains carrying five times normal capacity. Some came by bus, some by car, some by ox-drawn carts, and some rode on horses, camels, and even elephants. The rich and famous chartered private planes and helicopters; the less affluent came on foot, carrying their bedrolls and camping equipment in heavy bundles on their heads. Wave after wave, the pilgrims formed a veritable river of humanity that flowed onto the banks of the Ganges at Allahabad to celebrate the greatest spiritual festival ever held-the Kumbha Mela.

On this occasion, pilgrims from even the remotest parts of India-speaking different languages and dialects, wearing distinctive markings on their foreheads, donning various types of dress, and observing different manners and customs-assemble for a holy bath in the sacred water of the Ganges.



Kumbha Mela has gained international fame as “the world’s largest act of faith.” Pilgrims attend this holy event with such tremendous faith and in such overwhelming numbers that it could appear quite bewildering to one who is experiencing it for the first time. Although there is no systematic advertising for the event, Kumbha Mela unfailingly draws huge crowds.

Sidney Low, who visited the Kumbha Mela during the tour of the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1906, was wonderstruck. He wrote: “Nothing more impressive, picturesque, and pregnant with meaning and significance than Kumbha Mela can be witnessed in all of India.”

India’s own citizens are also impressed with the Kumbha Mela. Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister, wrote in *Discovery of India*: “In my old city of Allahabad I would attend the great bathing festival, Kumbha Mela, and see hundreds of thousands of people come, as their forebearers had come for thousands of years from all over India, to bathe in the Ganges.”



Once, long ago, a king named Bali Maharaja conquered all the planets in the universe. Ousting the demigods, the deputed managers of universal affairs, from their heavenly domains, Bali Maharaja installed himself as king of the celestial realm. Aditi, the mother of the demigods, being aggrieved at her sons' defeat, fasted and prayed to Vishnu (God) for twelve consecutive days. Pleased with Aditi, Vishnu agreed to reinstate the demigods by incarnating as Vamanadeva, a dwarf brahmana mendicant (saintly priest).

Vamanadeva approached Bali Maharaja and begged him for three paces of land. When Bali agreed, Vamanadeva expanded His form to gigantic proportions and covered the entire universe with His first step, thus reclaiming the demigods lost property. With His second step, Vamanadeva kicked a hole in the universal shell with His toe, causing a few drops of water from the spiritual world to leak into the universe. This water flowed into the universe and became known as the Ganges River. The Ganges is thus considered sacred because it originated from the spiritual world and because it touched the toe of Vamanadeva, the incarnation of Vishnu.

Originally, the Ganges flowed only in the heavenly planets. Then a great king of ancient India, named Bhagiratha, desired to have the Ganges purify the earth and prayed for the river to descend. The personified Ganges, mother Gangadevi, appeared before King Bhagiratha and agreed to fulfill his desire, but she had two reservations. First, she hesitated to come to earth because she feared that many sinful people would bathe in her waters and contaminate her with bad karma. King Bhagiratha then assured Gangadevi that although many sinful persons would bathe in her waters, many saintly persons who can purify even places of pilgrimage would also bathe there, thus purifying her of all karmic contaminations.



## ORIGIN OF KUMBH MELA

The ancient origin of the kumbh mela is described in the time-honored Vedic literatures of India as having evolved from the bygone days of the universe when the demigods and the demons conjointly produced the nectar of immortality. It is said that the demigods and the demons assembled on the shore of the milk ocean that lies in the celestial region of the cosmos. The demigods and the demons made a plan to churn the milk ocean to produce the nectar of immortality. They then agreed to share the nectar equally once it was produced.

For the task of churning the milk ocean, the Mandara Mountain was used as the churning rod, and Vasuki, the king of serpents, became the rope for churning. As the churning began, the Mandara Mountain began to sink deep into the ocean, at which time Vishnu incarnated as a great tortoise and supported the mountain on His back. With the demigods at Vasuki's tail and the demons at his head, they churned the milk ocean for one thousand years.

The churning of the milk ocean first produced a deadly poison which Shiva drank without being affected. As Shiva drank the poison, a few drops fell from his hands and were licked up by scorpions, snakes, and similar other deadly creatures. After Shiva drank the poison, numerous opulent items were produced. First a surabhi cow appeared, who could yield unlimited quantities of milk. A white horse named Uccaihsrava was then produced, as well as a white elephant named Airavata. Then a valuable gem called the Kaustubha-mani appeared.





Next came the apsaras, beautiful dancing girls, and a host of other wonderful things appeared from the milk ocean. At last a male person named Dhanvantari appeared carrying the pot of immortal nectar in His hands. Seeing Dhanvantari with the pot of nectar, both the demigods and demons became anxious. The demigods, being fearful of what would happen if the demons drank their share of the nectar of immortality, forcibly seized the pot.

Wherever the demigods went with the pot of nectar, fierce fighting ensued. In an endeavor to keep the nectar from falling into the hands of the demons, the demigods hid it in four places on the earth, Prayag (Allahabad), Hardwar, Ujjain, and Nasik. At each of the hiding places, a drop of immortal nectar spilled from the pot and landed on the earth. These four places are since believed to have acquired mystical power.

Eventually, the demons overpowered the demigods and took possession of the nectar of immortality. To rescue the demigods from the hands of fate, Vishnu incarnated as a beautiful woman, Mohini-murti, and approached the demons. When the demons saw the charming beauty of Mohini-murti, they lost all composure. Seeing Her slender hips, raised breasts, and pleasing smile, the demons completely forgot about drinking the nectar of immortality. While the demons were thus bewildered by Her beauty, Mohini-murti seized the nectar and returned it to the demigods, who drank it immediately.



## GANGADEVI THE MOTHER GODDESS

The Kumbha Mela and the Ganges River (Ganga) have become synonymous in the minds of many people due to their being inexorably linked through Indian religious tradition. As the Kumbha Mela is the greatest spiritual festival, so the Ganges is believed to be the greatest spiritual river. Throughout the ages, the Ganges has played a dramatic part in the spiritual lives of the Indian people. It is said that to know the Ganges is to know India and her people. The river is strong, proud, and overbearing; she is also humble, peaceful, and stern; she is always changing yet ever the same.

The Ganges is worshiped as a mother goddess, Gangadevi, and her celestial water is believed to possess supernatural power. Mother Ganges is many things to many people. She is the provider for the millions who reside in the agricultural communities along her banks; she is the bestower of benedictions for the pious, and the redeemer of sins for the sinful; she is the healer of disease for the sick; and for the dying, she is the giver of liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

The devout deeply believe in the powers of the Ganges water. It is said that if one bathes in the Ganges or even sprinkles three drops of Ganges water on his head, he becomes freed from past sins (karma). The Ganges is believed to have such purging effects on the impurities of the soul that if one even remembers the name of the Ganges, he acquires such merit that he easily attains a place in heaven.



## THE HOLY GANGES BATH AT THE SANGAM

Besides the Ganges, there are two other sacred rivers located at Allahabad – the Yamuna and the Saraswati. The Yamuna, like the Ganges, has its earthly origin in the Himalayas. The Saraswati, however, is a mystical river which has no physical form. It is believed that the Saraswati exists only on the ethereal or spiritual plane and is invisible to the human eye. This holy river is mentioned repeatedly in India's sacred texts like the Mahabharata and is said to be present at Allahabad where it joins the Yamuna and the Ganges. This confluence of India's three most sacred rivers is called the Sangam.

The highlight for most pilgrims during a Kumbha Mela festival is the observance of a holy bath at the Sangam. A holy bath in either of the sacred rivers has purifying effects, but where the three rivers meet, the purification is said to increase one hundred times. It is further believed that when one takes a sacred bath at the Sangam during the Kumbha Mela, the potency of the holy water is increased one thousand times. For this reason, Indians believe that the Kumbha Mela is the most auspicious place in the universe to take a holy bath. Armed with this faith, pilgrims attend Kumbha Mela and bathe in the Ganges in a mood of solemn reverence.

The American poet Mark Twain expressed his wonder at the faith of the pilgrims at the Kumbha Mela when he wrote in *More Tramps Abroad* (1895): "These pilgrims had come from all over India: some of them had been months on the way, plodding patiently along in the heat and dust, worn and poor, hungry, but supported and sustained by an unwavering faith and belief. It is wonderful, that the power of faith like that can make multitude upon multitudes of the old and weak and the young and frail enter without hesitation or complaint upon such incredible journeys and endure the resultant miseries without repining."



## EARLY KUMBHA MELA HISTORY

Mark Twain was not the first Westerner to witness the Kumbha Mela. The Kumbha Mela had for many centuries attracted the curiosity of foreign travelers. Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador to the court of King Chandra Gupta, visited Kumbha Mela for seventy-five days in the fourth century B.C. Later, Hieun Tsiang of China toured India in the seventh century A.D. and mentioned Kumbha Mela in his diary. He gave an eyewitness report that during the Hindu month of Magha (January-February), half a million people had gathered on the banks of the Ganges at Allahabad to observe a great celebration. "The pilgrims," writes Hieun Tsiang, "assembled along with their Emperor, Maharaja Harshavardhana, his ministers, scholars, philosophers, and sages." He also reports that the emperor distributed enormous quantities of gold, silver, and jewels in charity to the pilgrims.

Dominated by Buddhism, Jainism, and Islamism in the eighth century, India's ancient spiritual traditions were on the verge of extinction. In an effort to revitalize the ancient traditions, a saint and religious reformer named Shankara popularized the Kumbha Mela as a meeting place for the spiritually inclined. His efforts proved successful, making Kumbha Mela the largest spiritual gathering in the world.





Shankara emphasized the importance of associating with saintly persons while at the Kumbha Mela. Shankara placed more importance on hearing transcendental knowledge with faith and attention from self-realized persons, darshan, than he did on taking a holy bath in the Ganges. According to Shankara, the darshan of saintly persons, who are themselves the personification of truth and purity, can enable one to easily achieve the ultimate stage of self-realization-whereas a holy bath in the Ganges only removes the impediment of bad karma. Thus, both hearing spiritual topics from saints and bathing in the Ganges are still the two main focuses of the people at Kumbha Mela.



During the twentieth century, the attendance at kumbha mela has grown significantly. No other gathering in the history of mankind – including the World’s Fair and the Olympics – can rival the participation witnessed at the kumbha mela. In a league of its own, the kumbha mela has been competing with itself, setting attendance records decade after decade. By 1977, the number of pilgrims at kumbha mela soared to fifteen million. In 1989, thirty million pilgrims attended the kumbha mela, the largest gathering of any type in modern history.

The 1989 kumbha mela also saw record expenditures, as the Indian government spent more than eight million dollars on preliminary organization. According to national newspaper reports, the Kumbha Mela occupied 3,600 acres; arrangements were made to provide 5,000 gallons of purified drinking water per minute to the festival grounds; 6,500 buses provided short and long-range transportation; 16,000 outlets and 6,000 poles provided electrical facilities; 6,000 sweepers and sanitation employees worked around the clock to maintain health standards; 13,500 latrines and lavatories were opened to the public; 9 pontoon bridges spanned the Ganges at intervals; 22 fire-fighting stations were erected; 20,000 policemen and the Indian National Guard kept a constant vigil at checkpoints and with closedcircuit TV to guard against traffic congestion and other possible disturbances; 300 lifeguards and the Indian Boy Scouts constantly patrolled the bank of the river to assure safety to bathers; 400 boats stood at the docks to carry pilgrims across the rivers; and 100 doctors and nurses were on call around the clock at medical assistance stations-a mammoth administrative task.



## SACRED BATH FOR THE SPIRITUALLY RICH

None were too young or too old for this occasion. A young mother sprinkled a few drops of sacred water over the head of her newborn baby, asking God to bless her child with a good life and prosperity. In another place, an elderly couple eased themselves into the cold water. Some bathers made offerings of flowers, sweets, and colored dyes to the sacred water while others offered Vedic hymns. The chanting of Sanskrit mantras and om, the supreme combination of letters, issued from the lips of every pilgrim.

The thoughts of many were turned inward at this time, and the blissfulness of their experience was clearly exhibited on their faces. Even the poorest of pilgrims was spiritually rich during Kumbha Mela. For the devout, the waters of the sangam are more precious than all the silver and gold in the world.

The Indian poet Kalidas, echoing the emotions of the pilgrims, wrote: “When the water of the Ganges and the water of the Yamuna mingle, it appears as though diamonds and sapphires were woven together in a string; as though a flock of white swans had suddenly run into another flock of black swans; as though a garland of white lotus buds were interspersed with blue lotuses; as though streaks of lightning had merged into a sheet of darkness; as though a clear blue sky was spotted with wooly clouds of autumn.



## KUMBHA MELA BATH PROCESSION

The Kumbha Mela commenced on Makhara Sankranti with all the pomp, glory, and enthusiasm for which it is justly famous. Temperatures plunged to freezing during the night, but bathers were not discouraged. Just past midnight thousands entered the confluence of the three sacred rivers, immersing themselves in the ice-cold water. Loud chanting of “Bolo Ganga mai kijai!” (“All glory to mother Ganga!”) filled the clear night air as the pilgrims washed away their bad karma. Bathers emerged from the bathing area wrapped in blankets and shivering from the cold. But as quickly as one group of pilgrims came out of the water, thousands more followed in their wake. With continual chants of ‘Bolo Ganga mai kijai!’ the pilgrims entered the sacred waters.

At dawn, the sky reddened, and the sun rose to reveal a crowd of five million enthusiasts slowly advancing toward the sangam. From the center of that mass of humanity emerged a marvelous procession announcing the official beginning of the kumbha mela. Bands played, people danced in jubilation, and colorful flags and banners flew above the crowd.

Leading the kumbha mela procession were the Nagas, India’s famed naked holy men. These holy men renounce the world in their search for equilibrium. They hope to escape the world’s concomitant reactions and suffering by their austere practices such as celibacy and renunciation of material possessions; thus, they are known as liberationists. With matted locks of hair, their bodies covered in ashes, and their tridents – the symbol of a follower of Shiva –





raised high, they descended upon the bathing area. Entering the water in a tumult, blowing conchshells and singing, "Shiva kijai, Ganga kijai," they splashed the sacred waters on one another and frolicked like children. The Nagas are often called the children of the Ganges.

Next in the procession came the Vairagis, the wandering mendicants who dedicate everything to Vishnu, the Sustainer. These saints live a life of service and complete dedication. Each member of their community sees himself as a serving unit, part of the Supreme Being. Vairagis are said to be on the plane of transcendence that is above both the exploitative mentality of the materialists, as well as the concepts of liberation or merging with the nondifferentiated aspect of the Absolute.

Then came the innumerable other sects of ascetics dressed in saffron-colored cloth and carrying their staffs signifying renunciation. Centuries of India's spiritual evolution were simultaneously represented in procession; the Nagas, Vairagis, Shaivites, Shankarites, Ramanujas, Madhvas, Nimbarkas, Gaudiyas. Each sect, in its turn, bathed in the sangam.

Several hours elapsed before the procession of holy men had finished. Then began the mass bathing of the pilgrims. From the high banks of the river one could see the dark blue water of the Yamuna mixing with the silver-gray water of the Ganges. Standing waist-deep, bathers scooped up water with folded palms and offered it to heaven in a timeless gesture. Boatmen rowed their boats full of pilgrims to a small sandbar in the middle of the sangam that soon disappeared under an eclipse of bathers.



## KUMBHA MELA GURUS

As dusk fell on the kumbha mela, thousands of campfires illumined the river bank. In the central festival area, colorfully decorated sandals (large tents) accommodated the thousands of pilgrims who listened to some of india's most exalted gurus lecturing on the science of self-realization. In one pandal, Shankaracharya Sri Jayendra Saraswati Swami of Shivakanchi spoke on Brahman, the first stage of transcendental knowledge. In another pandal, Swami Visweshwara Tirtha Maharaja of Udupi lectured on the Dwaita philosophy of Madhvacharya, emphasizing the eternal individuality of the atma (soul) and the Paramatma (Supersoul). In yet another pandal, the Gaura bhaktas, who follow Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, discoursed on prema, transcendental love of Godhead, the highest goal of life.

Some pandals (large tents) housed Indian drama and classical dance groups, whose exotic costumes and performances attracted large audiences. Other pandals housed elaborate displays and dioramas illustrating stories from India's ancient epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The variety of things to see and do were endless.



## HINDU RITUALS: TRADITION OF FOREFATHERS

During the day, professional priests availed themselves to pilgrims at key bathing areas to help in the performances of various rituals. The first ritual observed by most pilgrims when arriving at the kumbha mela is the mundana ceremony, shaving the head. Hair is considered the symbol of vanity, and in order to receive the full benefits of a pilgrimage to a holy place, one must first give up vanity. Thus, the pilgrims believe that the hair should be shaven from the head in a gesture of surrender and humility. This mundana ceremony, observed by both men and women, is followed by a full day's fasting, during which pilgrims drink only water.

Rituals such as the mundana ceremony and the worship of the sun-god, Surya, the worship of the goddess of learning, Saraswati, and the worship of Vishnu are customary rituals to be performed by all pilgrims at the kumbha mela. A devout pilgrim would not think of neglecting these same rituals that his ancestors have performed for generations. The rituals require a great amount of skill and knowledge for their proper execution. Some of the pilgrims themselves do not understand the meaning of the rituals or how to perform them; thus, the services of professional priests are indispensable. For a few rupees, everything will be done traditionally, and a pilgrim can return to his village knowing that he has upheld the spiritual standard of his forefathers.



## CITY OF TENTS AT THE KUMBHA MELA - TRIVENI, ALLAHABAD

An entire city was erected along the bank of the Ganges during the kumbha mela, complete with roads, street lights, telephone booths, markets, a maternity ward, and even a tourist camp to accommodate foreign visitors. The tourist camp officials claimed to have sheltered over 1,000 European and South American visitors during the 1989 festivities. Some of these tourists had never been to India before and were assimilating the experience as best they could, while others seemed as well acquainted with what was happening at the kumbha mela as did the Indians.

The market areas offered all the necessities and luxuries of kumbha mela life. Vendors sold fresh fruits and vegetables. Wool blankets, a brisk-selling item, were piled in big stacks for easy selection. Along the main thoroughfares, Gypsies spread their wares, which included different shapes and sizes of brass pots and bowls, beads for meditation, exotic perfumes, fragrant incense like kasto (musk) and chandan (sandalwood), and even tigers' claws set in gold.





For the novelty-seekers at kumbha mela, there was a wide selection of oddities available in the market. For a rupee, one could employ a snake charmer who, by playing on his pungli (flute), would make the cobras dance, swaying to and fro. It is a longstanding belief that the cobra is charmed by the sound of the pungli; however, having observed several of these performances, it was our conclusion that the snake charmer charms his audience rather than the snake.

Many palm readers and mystic astrologers set up shop along the bank of the Ganges, offering passersby a look into the future. Astrology and palmistry are traditional sciences in India, but one could not help but think that some of these “mystics” were out to turn a fast rupee from a gullible public. Undoubtedly, among the sincere and authentic spiritualists at Kumbha Mela there were also the cheaters and hence the cheated.

All food served at the Mela was vegetarian. No meat, fish, or eggs were to be found in any camp or public eating place, as meat-eating is strictly prohibited among all ascetics and holy men in India.

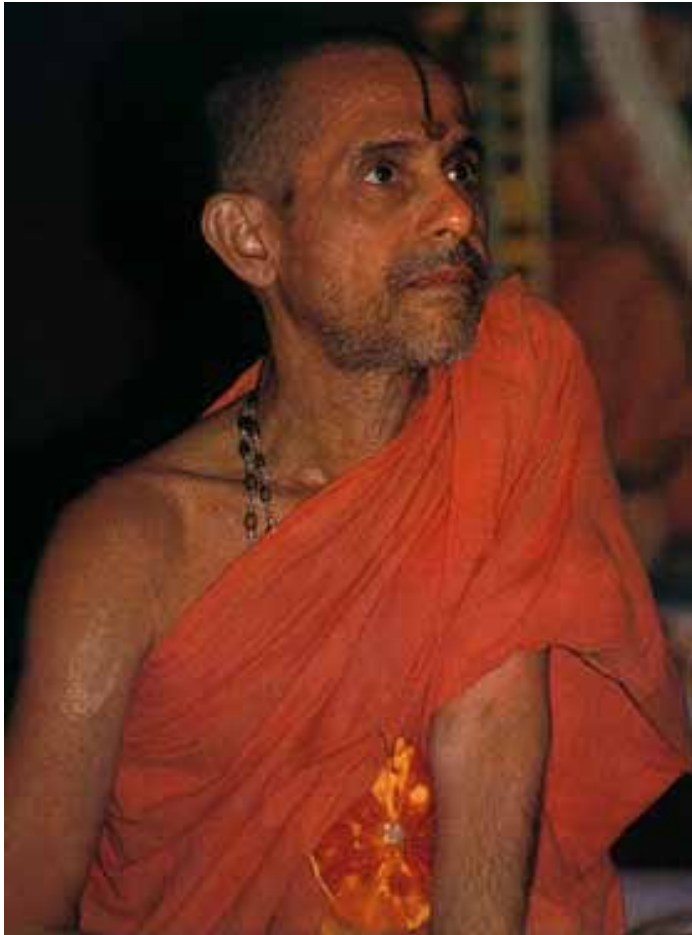
Overlooking the site on the high bank of the Ganges stands the Akbar Fort. Entering the fort through a gate on the eastern side, one could climb the walls for a panoramic view. In the midst of the fort there is a banyan tree known as Akshay-bhat, “the tree that never dies.” This tree was planted by Shankara and is a site worth seeing, as it is over one thousand years old, yet shows no signs of aging.



## FIRE AT KUMBHA MELA

*Camelus dromedarius*, the camel, a hearty beast of burden used in India for centuries to transport cargo long distances and through difficult terrain, was the unsung hero of the Kumbha Mela. Carrying heavy loads of firewood, tents, and food on their raised backs, these awkward creatures formed the lifeline from the outside world to the Kumbha Mela residents. In the soft sand, cars, trucks, and even horse carts often got stuck. While cars, trucks, and even horse-carts often got stuck in the soft sand, the rugged camel and his goods always got through.

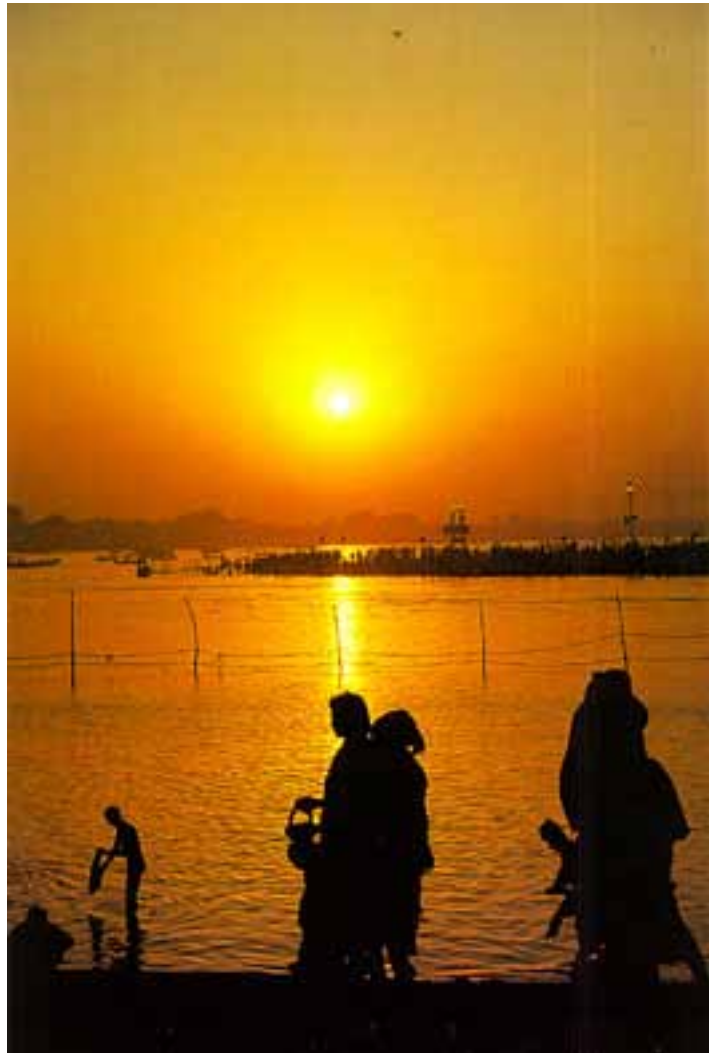
Open fires, an essential part of everyday life at the Kumbha Mela for cooking and performing certain rituals, got out of hand on two occasions and caused considerable property damage. The campsite of the Rama Krishna Mission of Calcutta was eighty percent destroyed when fire broke out in the kitchen, and the 500-square-yard camp of the Panchayati Akhara sect was destroyed in fifteen minutes when a faulty electric switch ignited a fire in their residential quarters.



## KUMBHA MELA SAINTS AND CONTROVERSY

Daily reports from the kumbha mela filled the Patrika, a local Allahabad newspaper, giving accounts of its various events, administrative policies, and even spiritual controversies.

As the kumbha mela provided a format for swamis and gurus to address the public, some sect leaders, such as Swami Mritunjaya, criticized the Indian government, accusing India's politicians of ruining India's spirituality. Other kumbha mela speakers opposed this view, claiming that the low standard of India's "holy men" and "cheating gurus" had ruined India; and yet others, such as Chandraswami, contended that India was a spiritual giant and was destined to lead the world. Many speakers got a chance to express their opinions, and the Patrika reported them all.



## YOGA & SPIRITUAL MEDITATION

For pilgrims at Kumbha Mela, early mornings were the most austere time of day, as it was always colder than at any other time. However, sunrise is also considered to be the most auspicious time of day for spiritual practices, such as meditation & yoga. The yogis call this period of the day brahma-muhurta, or the spiritual hours for awakening higher consciousness. Every day during the brahma-muhurta, thousands of pilgrims rose, bathed in the Ganges, and returned to their camps to chant mantras and meditate.

These early morning practices of the yogis and other spiritualists are called sadhana. These activities include the chanting of mantras, sitting postures, breathing exercises, and silent meditations. The sadhana itself is not the goal of yoga, but is meant to help one develop higher consciousness. In the spiritual development of a yogi there is a progression from one stage of enlightenment to the next. Initially the yogi begins by performing sitting postures called asanas. The asanas then prepare the yogi for the second stage of Yoga, pranayama, or breathing concentration. The yogi then practices control of the mind and begins meditation. Through meditation the yogi develops knowledge of the difference between matter and spirit and realizes that the body is different from the self. The yogi who attains this knowledge is always in contact with the Supreme Truth.

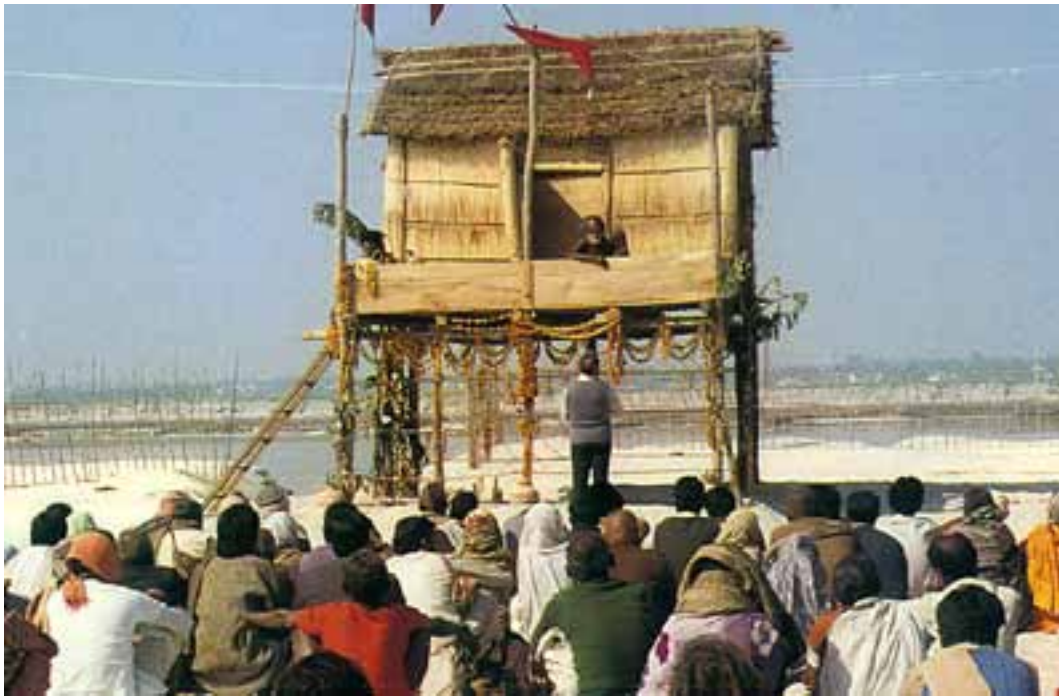




In the thousands of tents erected on the festival grounds, pilgrims and holy men conversed on spiritual subject matters, previous Kumbha Melas, and upcoming events of the day. Sometimes discussion turned to reflecting on the good fortune of one who dies during the Kumbha Mela, as it is considered a blessing when a soul passes away from the world at such an auspicious time.

Early one morning while walking along the bank of the Ganges, we encountered a cremation. An elderly sage with white hair and beard, clad only in a loincloth, lay upon the funeral pyre, his hands poised peacefully at his side, his eyes turned toward the heavens. This saintly man had come to the Kumbha Mela like the millions of others seeking the ultimate benefit in life, and he had achieved it. A few of his disciples stood at a distance with tears in their eyes, looking on as the fire and smoke carried the soul of their guru away from this world. For them it was a time of both happiness and distress: happiness because their guru had attained liberation from the cycle of birth and death, and distress because of their feeling the pains of separation for one they loved dearly.

Death also claimed the lives of many pilgrims during the extreme cold wave that gripped the Kumbha Mela at its onset. At least one death occurred per night during the cold period, and there were also fatalities during the mass bathings. Despite the large crowds at the concentrated bathing areas, there were less fatal drownings at the 1989 Kumbha Mela than at any previously. Shallow water and competent lifeguards kept anyone from being swept away by the current, but four persons lost their lives when boats capsized at the boat dock or in midstream. These deaths were reported in the newspapers with remorse for the loss of life, yet the prevailing attitude was that one who dies at the Kumbha Mela is eternally blessed.



At the northern end of the festival grounds, cast against the still blue sky, stood a lone grass hut built on sturdy stilts. This was the ashram of Devara Baba, who, according to his followers, is more than two hundred years old. Devara Baba is a lifelong vegetarian and a celibate yogi. His followers believe that his exceptional longevity is due to the fact that he bathes in and drinks only the sacred Ganges, whose waters are themselves liquid timelessness. When we asked Devara Baba about his exact age, he replied, "I have lost count of the years. It has been a very long time."

Every morning and evening tens of thousands of pilgrims walked the two-mile stretch along the Ganges to the ashram of Devara Baba in hopes of meeting this ancient sage. Much to their delight, Devara Baba was always willing and even happy to accommodate them. Seated on the veranda of his simple raised hut, the old sage relaxed in the warm rays of sunlight and blessed his visitors. Sometimes smiling from beneath his gray beard or raising his hand in a gesture of grace, Devara Baba radiated an aura of peacefulness. Some pilgrims visiting his ashram brought offerings of fruits and flowers, while others came only with their prayers for his blessings. It was our prayer to the sage that he allow us to take a few photographs, and in his usual gracious manner, he consented.

As prominent as Devara Baba was, one could not help but think that there were many great souls present at the Kumbha Mela who went unnoticed by the general mass of people. One cannot always detect a great soul because he has many followers or because he is very old. But one could feel the divine presence of genuinely great souls throughout the Kumbha Mela, whether they were recognized or not. Sometime before the 2001 Kumbha Mela Devara Baba quietly passed away on the banks of his sacred Ganges River.



Although Kumbha Mela is the world's largest act of faith, the faith demonstrated by the pilgrims is often misunderstood. Faith in the transcendent is something the modern mind tends to reject. Being partial to rational and scientific thought, we may mistake faith for sentiment or even ignorance. However, the faith demonstrated at the Kumbha Mela cannot so easily be dismissed. There, faith is as substantial as the ground upon which the pilgrims stand.

Faith, in the sense of divine experience, has been described as “unflinching trust in something sublime.” According to the sages of India, there is an infinite, transcendental world, or conscious perception, in which doubt is absent – a world guided by faith. Pilgrims bathe in Ganges at Harkipuri, Haridwara Mela

That infinite plane of existence is obtained by an evolution in consciousness, and faith alone can lead one in the attempt. Faith asks one to approach the higher world – to have hope in the infinite. In the spiritual world, faith is more important than human calculation. The relative, physical truths of the lower plane of material existence have no substantial value in the higher, conscious world. The plane of the infinite reality transcends all the laws of the mundane world, regarding them as imperfect and false. Thus, faith is the most important thing for the pilgrims at the Kumbha Mela, all of whom desire to enter into the infinite realm of divine consciousness.

The Kumbha Mela has to be experienced personally, and the next opportunity will be in the year 2013.