

Kumbha Melā: The Largest Gathering on Earth

by Ray Charan das Angona

Ray Charan das Angona pursued graduate studies at the University of Rochester Center for Brain Research. In 1973 he received a grant to do fieldwork in India on traditional religious people, places and festivals. He has completed a full cycle of the Kumbha melā by attending each event over the past 12 years. While in India he has been writing, living with sādhus and studying at Benares Hindu University.

The world's largest gathering of people occurs at the Kumbha *melā*, a cyclical series of month-long spiritual fairs in India. The earliest historical records of this event may be found in writings of the Chinese traveler, Hiuen-Tsang, who visited Prayag (now Allahabad) in 644 A.D. He witnessed a spectacular *melā* attracting half a million people, where the magnanimous king gave away all his acquired possessions to the assembled *brāhmans* and monks of each faith. The mythical origin of the Kumbha *melā* is discussed in the *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyana* and *Purānas*, ancient Hindu scriptures.

According to these accounts, Indra and the other Vedic gods lost their vigor as a result of a curse. Fearing that the *asuras*, or demons, would try to defeat them, the gods fled to Brahmā the Creator for help. Brahmā sent them on to the god Vishnu the Sustainer, who told them their former vigor could be regained by drinking *amrit* — the nectar of immortality — from the holy *kumbha*, or vessel. The *kumbha* had been lost in the milk ocean during the great deluge; to recover it the vast ocean would have to be churned. Since the gods alone did not have the strength to perform the task, they obtained the assistance of the dreaded demons, whom they lured with the promise of a share of the nectar.

The scriptures relate how, during the churning, deadly poison first rose to the surface, then the 14 priceless exotica, and finally the cherished golden *kumbha*. Gods and demons alike dove and fought for the coveted vessel, and as the battle raged, Indra's son Jayanta, in the form of a crow, snatched it and flew away. The chase continued across the heavens for 12 days (12 years in earth time), and in the ensuing scuffle drops of *amrit* fell from the disputed *kumbha* at four places — Hardwar, Allahabad, Ujjain and Nasik. The gods alone finally drank the nectar of immortality, leaving not a drop for the demons and thus preventing the ascendance of evil forever from the earth.

Kumbha *melās* are celebrations of this victory and serve as occasions where humans might sip the fallen drops of the nectar of immortality. The *melās* are celebrated in a 12-year cycle, which corresponds to the movement of the planet Jupiter. The core event of the *melā* is bathing in waters in which the drops of nectar are thought to be present. Thus the Kumbha *melā* occurs at Hardwar (where the Ganges emerges from the Himalayas), at Nasik, when Jupiter is in Leo, and at Ujjain in the Sipra River, when Jupiter is in Scorpio. When Jupiter enters Aquarius, the most dramatic of the Kumbha *melās* occurs in Allahabad, the ancient city of Prayag, where the Ganges and Jamuna Rivers are said to join the invisible and heavenly Saraswati River in a special confluence.

At the Prayag Kumbha *melā* in Allahabad, what was probably the single largest gathering of people on this planet occurred in January

1977. It is estimated that 20 million people attended some portion of the month-long festival, 11 million of whom bathed at the *sangam*, or confluence, on the main bathing day.

Preparations for this *melā* had begun in mid-October of 1976, as soon as the monsoon floodwaters had receded from the 2600-acre *melā* site. Using records from previous years government officials charted out a new Kumbha *melā* city on the sands. Over 20,000 workmen were employed to erect 14 pontoon bridges to ease the crush of pilgrims, 18 tube wells that could provide 22,000 liters of drinking water per minute, three massive water storage tanks, 100 miles of water lines, 4,000 taps and 13,000 hand pumps. Crews laid 60 miles of unmetaled roads, 10 miles of metaled roads and 90 miles of approach roads across the sandy river bed. Over 5,000 utility poles were erected, floodlighting the main bathing areas and roads.

The *melā* area was divided into 10 zones, each with a post office and fire brigade. A 16-bed hospital tent was set up in each zone and a 50-bed central infectious disease hospital erected, all manned by a medical staff of 75 volunteer doctors. In-coming pilgrims were inoculated against cholera in one of 33 inoculation posts. Over 30,000 latrines were constructed and 5,000 sweepers employed to remove trash. More than 200,000 tents were pitched by local associations.

Boatmen from up and down the Ganges and Jamuna flocked to the confluence, bringing 2,000 boats to ferry those pilgrims who preferred not to brave the surging crowds. The Indian Railways provided over

Sādhus bath at the *sangam*, or holy confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers. Photos by Ray Charan das Angona





Sādhus engage in *duni tapasaya*, the austerity performed by sitting in a ring of fire.

300 special trains — 30 to 40 on each peak day — to transport an estimated 1.4 million pilgrims, and buses carried 400,000 on the day preceding the most auspicious bath. To handle these unprecedented numbers, police came from several states — 9,000 officers, plus 12,000 unpaid volunteers — in hopes of preventing another catastrophe as had occurred in 1954, when more than 500 people were trampled to death or drowned in a disastrous stampede at the confluence on the main bathing day.

A common spectacle during the first few days of the melā is the arrival of *sādhus*, or religious mendicants, who come singly or in groups. The group processions are often quite spectacular, featuring religious leaders riding in pomp atop elephants, seated on intricately carved silver thrones and served by attendants with peacock fans and giant velvet and gold brocade parasols. Bands of musicians make way for columns of the highly esteemed warrior ascetics known as *nāgā bābās*, clad only in loincloths or completely naked, their matted hair hanging loose or piled on top of their head. Some *nāgā bābās* ride horses or camels and carry spears with long banners representing their religious order. Bullock carts laden with provisions for their long journey and the month-long stay at Prayag bring up the rear, grinding to a halt at the edge of each camp area.

Crews had been busy erecting some 500 to 1000 makeshift camps replete with giant bamboo entrance arches and signs with the name and banner of each *guru* and his religious order. Behind the arches, spacious pavilions had been set up with central stages equipped with loudspeakers and lights. Around each pavilion were scores of tents and shelters for the *sādhus* and their attendants, as well as for the many pilgrims that would visit the camp. Day after day one pavilion or another would draw crowds from the ever increasing population of pilgrims. Some camps held religious assemblies of pilgrims and mendicants led by learned men on lecture platforms; in others, musicians sang and played *bhajans* (devotional songs); elsewhere, drama troupes



The melā attracts nāgā bābās, mendicants who have devoted their lives to spiritual fulfillment through asceticism.

enacted familiar episodes from the life of Krishna and Rāma, while throughout the melā, convenient altars and shrines could be found where pilgrims joined in *pūjā*, or worship. Vedic fire rituals were held on a grand scale, with hundreds of chanting brahmans offering clarified butter and a mixture of grain to the sacred fires; week-long mass recitations of scriptures were conducted; free literature was distributed from booths. Charismatic gurus entranced spellbound audiences, while elsewhere *mahātmās* (great souls) sat in meditation as pilgrims streamed by to touch their feet. Long into the night, naked sādhus sat around campfires, puffing on their *chilams* (pipes) to keep warm. In other camps continuous rituals were being performed amid the incessant ringing of gongs and cymbals. With arms upraised, exuberant worshipers praised Siva, shouting “*Hara Hara Mahadev!*” In addition to all of these happenings, many pilgrims and beggars flocked to the free food distributions that were held at many locations.

The most awesome sight was vast hordes of pilgrims pouring into the camp as the bathing days grew closer. These pilgrims came predominantly from north India and arrived as family units with burlap sacks of provisions balanced on heads. Some came for specific auspicious days only, others for the entire month.

When pilgrims enter the melā grounds they generally search out their ancestral priest, or *pandā*, who is easily located by a conspicuous banner bearing his name or emblem. These pandās are brahmans who claim to be descended directly from the sages Bhardwaj and Parashar, who lived in Prayag in ancient times. Even if neither a pilgrim nor his father has ever come to a Kumbha, perhaps a grandfather or great-grandfather had attended. This is traced in the pandā's ledgers, which have been handed down from father to son.

Pilgrims follow certain fairly strict regulations: bathing before sunrise in the cold waters, eating only particular foods once daily, avoiding all sexual contact and performing certain rituals. Pilgrims may pass nights in any of the hundreds of pavilions provided by various

sādhu leaders conduct a pūjā or worship ceremony, and distribute blessed items to their followers.

Suggested reading

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gurus and religious leaders, near their ancestral priest, or anywhere there is room to spread a blanket and light their cooking fire.

Kumbha melās are rare events where ordinary villagers may see the great religious leaders of India. The melā also gives leaders themselves the opportunity to meet one another, debate fine philosophical points, decide important religious issues of the day, elect new leaders and participate in ecumenical councils. Typical of the well-known and popular spiritual personages who attend such an event are Deorhia Baba, who is very old and always stays in a stilt house; Prabhudatt Brahmachari, an admired old saint-scholar, whose permanent abode is just across the Ganges; Anandamayee Ma, the best-known woman saint and mystic of India, who died in August 1982, and Karpatri Ji, the great *pandit* of Baranas. Perhaps lesser known are Khadeshwari Baba, who has not sat down for 40 years; Doodhari Baba, who eats nothing other than milk; various Phalhari Babas, who eat only fruit; and Moani Babas, who have remained silent for one or more 12-year periods of *tapasyā* (austerities), generally from one Kumbha melā to the next.

Mauni Amāvasyā (the new moon of January) was the most important bathing day of the Prayag Kumbha melā, attracting an estimated 11 million pilgrims and sādhus. Well before dawn one could head out of the camp and wade through mud streets streaming with people, to be greeted by the almost terrifying sight at Kali Road: an endless vast river of pilgrims flowing at a fast pace, with people shoulder-to-shoulder 30 yards across. One merges into this surging sea, struggling to keep from getting trampled into the mush underfoot. In the predawn darkness one could still distinguish groups of ladies, each holding onto the sārī of the one before her, scurrying along singing cadenced bhajans in unison, or chanting "*Gangā Mā kī Jai!*" (Victory to Mother Ganga). Many carry on their heads burlap bags containing bedding, foodstuffs, fresh clothes, pūjā items and, most essential, a *lotā* (small round metal pot) for bringing home some sacred Ganges water.

An important event at the melā is the procession of religious orders to the confluence and into the water. Amidst blowing conches and



Procession of sādhus at the Kumbha mela. Leaders are heavily garlanded and walk under parasols.

beating drums a naked nāgā bābā horseman appears, covered in ashes, brandishing his trident, hair matted, prancing his gallant white steed. Then two more nāgā bābās on camels pass, vigorously beating their battle drums. Another nāgā bābā carries the monastic flag. He is followed by their tutelary deity, Kapila, on a decorated cart. Next march a band of 50 nāgā bābās carrying orange pendant banners on long bamboo poles. Then more, blaring conches and wielding weapons, demonstrating their traditional skills, swinging swords and long spears at lightning speed all around as they dance wildly, by turn, in front of the crowds. Behind them come the great processions of naked nāgā bābās walking four-abreast, their long matted hair reaching to their waists or even their knees. They are followed by hundreds of the new recruits, for the first time, stark naked in public and covered in ashes, heads freshly shaven from their all-night initiation. Behind them comes the great parade of the leaders of the religious orders. Some are on peacock or lion thrones atop gaily decorated floats, others are in palanquins carried, or carts pulled by as many as 50 disciples. As in the entry processions, each is accorded royal treatment by his followers, with attendants waving fly whisks and holding regal velvet umbrellas overhead. From these seats they give *darshana*, looking with holy grace upon the pilgrims.

Regardless of weather conditions, bathing on such a day is a joyful and liberating event. All protocol is relaxed. The sādhus run and splash water and mud on each other and chant and shout and play and dive into the water, splashing everywhere with abandon. One emerges from the waters feeling elated and light, laughing with new friends, having enacted Hinduism's primeval mythic quest: to sip the nectar of immortality from the golden kumbha.