

A person wearing a light-colored shawl is shown from the chest up, holding a lit diya (oil lamp) in their hands. The person's face is partially visible, looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark, and the light from the diya illuminates the person's face and the shawl. The overall mood is solemn and contemplative.

**Prayag Magh Mela
Research Group**

Understanding the Pilgrim Experience

*Findings from a three year Indo-British Research Collaboration
funded by the Economic and Social Research Council*

An overview of the project

The Prayag Magh Mela is a unique event. Understanding it required a unique research collaboration. But as so often, that collaboration came about gradually, and almost by chance.

Every year, in the month of Magh (January/February) millions gather at the conjunction of the Yamuna and Ganges rivers to celebrate their Hindu faith. For one lunar cycle a vast tented city grows up on the floodplain. Roads appear, bridges are secured over the river, residential camps are marked out, the more celebrated religious organisations pitch huge marquees, and besides all this there are shops, postal and telephonic services, political parties and NGO's promoting their messages, even a massive funfair. Every year the Mela is vast. On the 12th year, as in 2013, the size is almost unimaginable. This is the Kumbh Mela.

From 2005, a number of British and Indian Universities got together in Allahabad to discuss our shared interests in the psychology of groups. That first year we met at the very tail end of the Mela, but still we were struck by the apparent power of the event over those who attended it. The following year we looked more closely and became more excited by the phenomena we found. So in 2007 we began to collect more systematic data which would help us understand some simple but fundamental questions about the role of collective events in our lives. Are they just exotic experiences, which are totally separate from anything else, or do they play an important part in shaping our everyday lives? To be more specific, does participation in the Mela affect the way people see themselves? Does it affect their sense of well-being? And, if so, what is it about the collective experience which brings about these changes?



Children dressed as deities

In 2009 we obtained a major grant from the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) which allowed us to put together the team and implement a strategy to answer these questions. The team involved 11 senior academics from nine Universities (4 in the UK and 5 in India), five post-doctoral researchers employed on the project, and some 30 field workers in total. Together we carried out four major lines of research which together constitute what is possibly the largest Anglo-Indian social science project that has ever been.





Completing the pre-mela survey in a local village

Survey: We carried out two surveys in 2010 and 2011, the largest of which was undertaken in 2011. This involved 416 pilgrims (or, as they are known locally, kalpwasis) and a matched sample of 127 people who did not attend the Mela. First we scoured the villages of rural Uttar Pradesh to find our participants and to question them a month before the event. Next, we tracked down the kalpwasis in the Mela itself (no easy task in the huge tented city!) and questioned them for a second time. Finally, we questioned everyone (kalpwasis and non-kalpwasis alike) back in their villages a month after the Mela. The logistics involved were formidable – but the effort was worth it. The three wave, matched sample survey allowed us to see if the experience of the Mela did produce changes in kalpwasis and also, what elements of the Mela experience were associated with these changes.

Interviews and ethnography: To complement the surveys we conducted in-depth interviews with kalpwasis about their experiences. Then, taking things further still, two of our researchers lived with pilgrims before during and after the Mela of 2011. This allowed us to see what people do as well as what they say, to get a rich sense of their everyday lives – their joys, their frustrations and how they go about their day-to-day business. In this way, we could put flesh on the raw numbers from the survey and get a rich and nuanced understanding of the kalpwasi experience.



Our 'experimental laboratory' in the Mela

Experiments: We even set up our own makeshift 'laboratory' – a tent in the middle of the Mela – to examine how kalpwasis experience the harsh physical environment of the Mela. Are they bothered by the endless cacophony or else do they somehow experience noise differently because of its association with a cherished event.

By coming at the kalpwasi experience in these different ways we were able to build up a fuller picture than would have been possible by one one approach alone. As we relate in the following sheets, the evidence we collected allowed us to map out how people experience the Mela and how the Mela changed them. Already our findings are being published in some of the major journals in the field and changing our understanding of the importance of the collective for individual lives.



The team responsible for the longitudinal survey

A day in the life of a pilgrim

Many different people can be found at the Mela. There are the day-bathers who do not stay in the Mela but who visit, especially on the more auspicious days of the lunar calendar, to bathe in the Ganges. There are those who service the Mela, sweeping the roads, removing rubbish, cleaning latrines and a myriad of other tasks. There are shopkeepers, social activists, police officers and firefighters. But at the core of the event are the pilgrims or kalpwasis who live in tented encampments for the entire month.

Kalpwasis are mostly rural, elderly (predominantly in their 60s and 70s) and of the higher castes. Their aim is to attain religious merit by attending for 12 consecutive years. And, while they attend, they seek to renounce all worldly ways and everyday comforts in order to live a purely spiritual existence. This purpose is expressed in the name 'kalpwasi' itself which is made of two words: *kalpa*, denoting the transformation of the self through inner resolve, and *vas*, denoting the living out of this resolve.



Bathing in the Ganges



Attending a religious performance

In general, the kalpwasis live in encampments based on where they come from and organised by local magistrate-like figures or 'pandas'. The camps are little more than rows of flimsy canvas tents. Kalpwasis bring their own bedding, furniture and supplies. But these are generally very basic. People sleep on the ground, wrapped in blankets and mostly without any heating. They eat one meal a day and that is made up of bland foods, eschewing anything spicy (*'tamasic'*) or which might excite the body to the detriment of the spirit. They also eschew any other activities (such as gossip) which might distract them from their devotions.

The kalpwasi's day starts early. Very early. Well before dawn they rise to do their devotions (*puja*). They then go down to the Ganges for the most important part of their rituals – immersion in the sacred river (often referred to as the 'holy dip'). The most auspicious place to bathe is at the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna (the Sangam) but, apart from special days, most will generally content themselves with the nearest spot to their camp.



Getting a shave

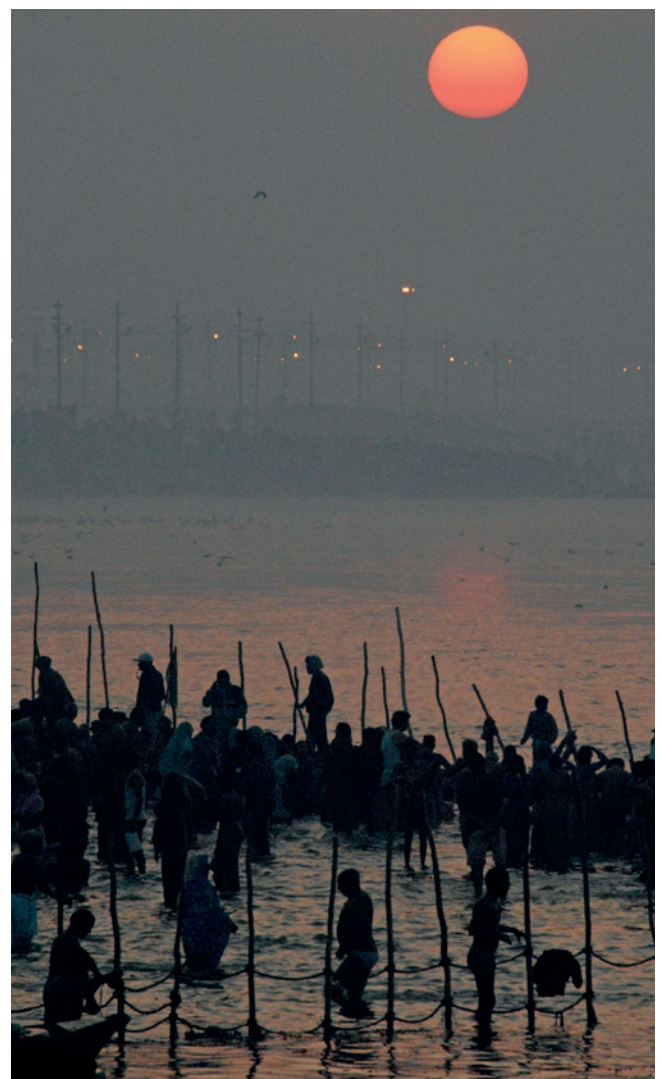
As they leave the bathing spot, they will give a small donation (daan) to the rows of beggars who line the approach paths. Once again, a key element of the pilgrim experience is to divest oneself of worldly goods, to give rather than to take. Indeed many kalpwasi camps will provide meals for the destitute. They would never take food themselves.

Once back at the camp, kalpwasis will devote themselves to mundane tasks: preparing the midday meal, buying wood or dung for the stoves on which the meal will be cooked, talking to neighbours – but much of their time will be spent on reading holy texts or else performing long ritual incantations.

The afternoon is typically the time when the kalpwasis attend meetings addressed by holy men. Throughout the mela site there are tented venues in which kalpwasis gather. Many venues are small – with room for just a few to sit on the straw-strewn floor. Other venues will accommodate several hundred or even thousands. At the larger venues it is typical for men and women to be seated in different areas. The programmes vary. Some involve a performance of scenes from the holy scriptures accompanied by the singing of religious songs. Others involve injunctions concerning one's religious duties and obligations. Still others touch upon social issues such as the causes and consequences of the pollution of India's holy rivers.

After these meetings, the Kalpwasis typically bathe for a second time and then, when back in their camps, take some light snacks. Many of the domestic preparations are undertaken by the women and the men have rather more opportunities to visit friends and relatives staying in other camps. But, here too they avoid gossip or being drawn into the politics of village life. Rather, the preferred topics relate to the practical and spiritual dimensions of life in the Mela.

By 9pm most are in bed. But the Mela is never still. Countless sound systems continue to blare out their messages and their devotional music. The noise greets them as they rise again early to bathe. And so, another day in the Mela begins.



Dealing with the hard life

There are no two ways about it. The Mela is an ordeal. It is intensely crowded – at times you are locked into a sea of humanity and can hardly move. It is raucously noisy. Multiple sound systems blare out competing sounds throughout the day and night. And it can be intensely cold, especially early on when the temperatures fall near zero, winds whistle across the Ganges plains and the river itself is icy cold for the pre-dawn bathers.

All of this might be taxing enough for the fittest of people. Most kalpwasis, however, are elderly, many are frail and, what is more, it is not as if they have warm comfortable accommodation to return to after their exertions. But, for all this, they don't merely cope. Many of these pilgrims describe the Mela as 'serene' or as 'blissful'. How can this be?

The first thing to be said is that it seems that the way people evaluate *physical* conditions is heavily dependent on their *social* significance. In one of our experiments, for instance, we played kalpwasis identical loud noises through headphones but which we told them were either noises of the city or of the Mela. They interpreted and experienced these noises much more positively when they believed them to be Mela-related. We also found that when the noise was associated with the Mela it was processed differently ¹.



Freezing fog at daybreak

A similar conclusion came out from our ethnographic and interview studies, but this time relating to temperature rather than noise. As we have already explained, overcoming one's bodily needs is part and parcel of the kalpwasi experience. One is tested by the cold and meeting this challenge attests to one's faith. Hence, there is a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in dealing the harsh conditions. Kalpwasis meet the cold with fortitude and even with an enthusiasm – an enthusiasm they share with and communicate to others, especially newcomers.

¹ One of these studies is currently in press in *Psychological Science*.

Dense crowds by the Ganges



This brings us to a second point. Kalpwasis do not confront the conditions of the Mela alone, but with their fellow pilgrims. There are a series of ways in which people help each-other to cope. Or, to put it somewhat more poetically, the common sense of 'kalpwasi' identity engenders a warmth of friendship which goes a long way towards compensating for the cold temperatures.

Kalpwasis actively come to the aid of their fellow pilgrims – even strangers. They shield them from the winds; they aid them in dressing and undressing quickly. Should they become unwell, they provide assistance. But it is not only that kalpwasis provide help to their fellows, they also expect it from their fellows. This sense of a 'social safety net' gives people the confidence to confront challenges that they might otherwise shy away from.

If implicit expectations won't do, kalpwasis also help each-other with explicit words of encouragement. Especially in the pre-dawn cold, when bathing in the icy Ganges might seem an impossibly arduous task to those unused to it, the urgings of friends and strangers alike helps to overcome the challenge.



Accommodation in the Mela can be very basic

'You can do it!'; 'You'll get used to it!'; 'Mother Ganges will look after you!'; they cry. And in sharing their faith, it seems, kalpwasis also multiply their fortitude.

But sometimes, actions can speak louder than words. Kalpwasis encourage each other through the power of example. They don't just bathe; they bathe sometimes with relish, sometimes with serenity, sometimes with silent stoicism. Such displays show others that endurance is possible and inspires them to emulation. People tell us of their admiration for the composure of their fellow Kalpwasis. Moreover, they tell us that when one sees a huge throng of pilgrims, old and young alike, braving the hostile weather, they experience a tangible sense of the power of Hindu faith. This in turn inspires in them the personal fortitude to endure the challenges of pilgrimage.

What all this amounts to is another demonstration of the power of the collective over the individual. When physical hardship is linked to the identity of a group and where the group deals with hardship together, then the frailest of individuals can display the most remarkable feats of endurance.



Loudspeakers make the mela incredibly noisy

Explaining the joy of crowds

Imagine this: It is 3am in the morning, and yet still the air is loud with clashing sound systems blaring out distorted sounds and music. It is cold, near freezing. You are lying on the cold earth, sleeping in a flimsy tent without heating. The tent has only the most basic sanitation. You have only the most basic and blandest foodstuffs to eat. Now you must rise. You must jostle your way through dense crowds to undress and bathe in the icy and heavily polluted waters of the Ganges.

How would you feel? Well almost without fail, the pilgrims (kalpwasis) tell us that they feel good. Actually, more than good. Their language verges on the ecstatic. The word that comes out time and again in our interviews and our ethnography is '*anand*' – a state of serene bliss. It is a feeling which gives pilgrims – often elderly people in their 70's and 80's – the strength to deal with gruelling conditions and which draws them back to the Mela time and again.

While the specific language may be specific to the Mela and to India, the general sentiment is not. Since people started studying crowds they have stressed the strong emotions that accompany them. Most famously, the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim coined the term '*effervescence*' to describe the fizzing, bubbling excitement of crowd experience. Actually, Durkheim was studying religious experience, but he believed that these experiences were emblematic of crowds in general. So what is it that leads to '*anand*'; to '*effervescence*'; to the '*joy of crowds*'?

Our studies, which involve talking to kalpwasis, living with them and also surveying nearly 500 people, point to three interconnected factors as being crucial. These are shared identity, relationality, and collective self-realisation. Let us explain these terms, explain how they are connected, and explain how they produce the joy of crowds.

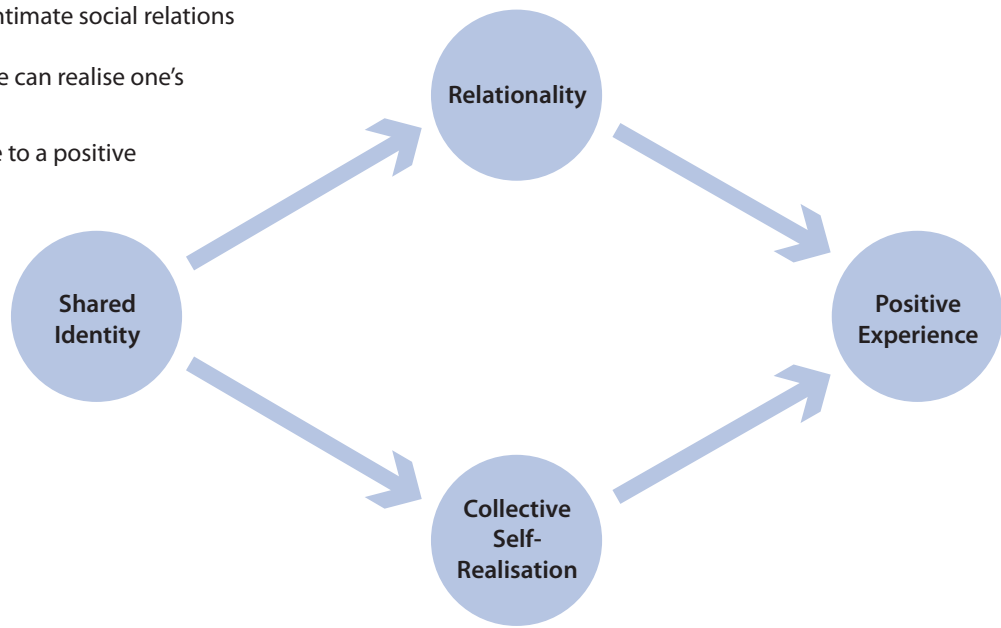


The determinants of a positive experience of the Mela.

A sense of shared identity leads to:

- i. a sense of more intimate social relations with others, and
- ii. the sense that one can realise one's pilgrim identity.

In turn, both contribute to a positive experience of the Mela.



Shared identity refers to a sense of 'usness'. It is the sense that develops in some crowds where everyone thinks of themselves in terms of the same group membership ('we are all Manchester United fans', 'we are all environmentalists'; or, as in the Mela, 'we are all pilgrims'). It is thinking of others as 'one of us' and believing that others equally see you as 'one of us'. Or, in the language of one of our survey items, it is the feeling that the crowd is like a family.

Relationality is one consequence of being in a crowd with shared identity. It has to do with the way we treat others, even complete strangers, who are part of such a crowd. It is a sense of intimacy we have with those we see as 'one of us'. It is reflected in civility, in respect and trust, in the support we give to and expect from those around us. And such intimacy, in a world where we are so often separated and alienated from others, is a joyous thing.

Collective self-realisation is another consequence of being in a crowd with shared identity and another source of intense pleasure. It has to do with being able to turn group norms and priorities into lived realities. In the Mela it means being able to live the

spiritual life that a true pilgrim should. And that depends upon others giving you the space to do so – not gossiping, not offering prohibited foods, etc. That is, it depends upon the fact that these priorities are shared due to shared identity.

In sum, the model we propose is one where shared social identity leads to both relationality and to collective self-realisation and where both of these are a source of '*anand*' or (to put it more generally) effervescence. This picture is strongly supported by our statistical modelling.

Clearly not all crowds will have shared identity (think of a crowd of shoppers competing in the sales) and the nature of the shared identity will be very different in different crowds. Equally clearly, the norms of different groups will vary widely as will collective self-realisation (what it means to achieve one's goals will differ widely for football fans, political activists, and *kalpwasis*). Nonetheless, the underlying processes may be common to many crowds. These findings therefore provide a tantalising insight into one of the oldest puzzles in the study of human society: what explains the passion of crowds?



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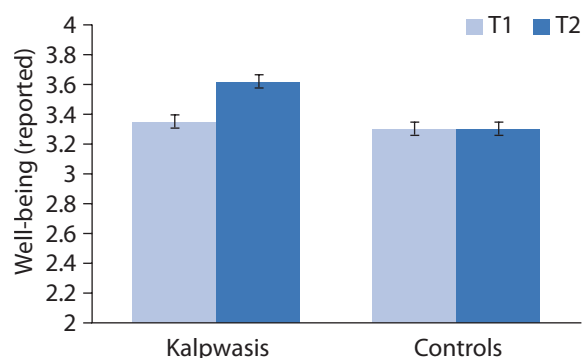
Crowds and health

Not long ago, The Lancet, one of the world's leading medical journals, ran a series of articles on why mass gatherings are bad for your health. When vast numbers of people are crowded together, the potential for disease to spread is greatly increased. When on top of that sanitary conditions are poor at best, the danger is yet further enhanced. When people are cold and eating a basic diet such that the functioning of their immune systems will be reduced, when they are stressed by constant noise and severe crowding, when they are mostly of retirement age and above... well the list of health hazards just goes on.

No doubt the Mela does pose real health threats and it would be folly to ignore these. But this is only one side of the story. Indeed one of the most remarkable findings from our research, based the analysis on a two-wave matched-sample survey, is that, looked at in the round, participation at the Mela actually *increases* peoples' mental and physical well-being¹! Compared to a sample of controls who did not attend the Mela, kalpwasis did report better

well-being after the Mela (see figure 1). While some might indeed fall ill and feel worse, for most the Mela gathering is good for their health.

Figure 1. Well-being amongst Kalpwasis and Controls before the Mela (T1) and after the Mela (T2).



Tewari S, Khan S, Hopkins N, Srinivasan N, et al. (2012) Participation in Mass Gatherings Can Benefit Well-Being: Longitudinal and Control Data from a North Indian Hindu Pilgrimage Event. PLoS ONE 7(10): e47291. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0047291 <http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0047291>

¹ These findings have been published in the international open access journal PLoS1. See <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0047291>

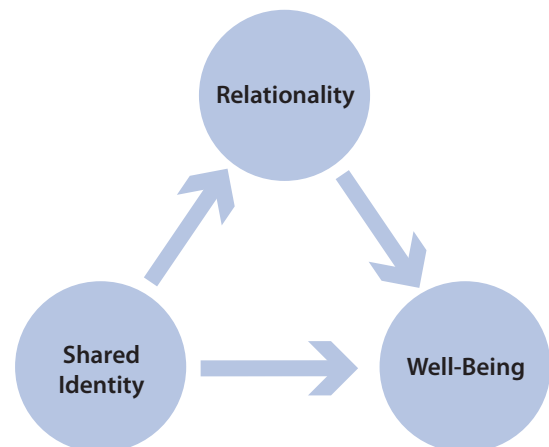


In order to understand how this is possible, we need to refer to a remarkable body of research which has accumulated in recent years and which maps out what has been described as 'the social cure'. This research shows the importance of networks and groups in sustaining our health. The more we are part of a network or a group, the better our health and conversely anything which disrupts our networks or group memberships is bad for our health. For instance, the best predictor of recovery from a heart attack is how many group memberships are lost. And the greatest problem when people enter old-age homes is the loss of the groups one used to be in and the failure to develop new ones.

So how does this work? Well, our ability to cope with the world has much to do with the support we get from others. Equally, our confidence in going out into the world depends upon the expectation that others are there if we need them. They constitute a 'social safety net'. Now, what we found from our research in the Mela is that the experience of being part of a tightly-knit group of Hindu pilgrims, and the sense of support one gets from one's fellow pilgrims, enhances one's sense of being part of the community more generally. Even after the Mela, when people are back in their home villages, they have an enhanced sense of being able to deal with the challenges that life throws at them. That is the root of their enhanced well-being. The process is illustrated in figure 2.



Figure 2. The determinants of pilgrims' post-Mela well-being.



For kalpawasis, a sense of shared identity with others in the Mela led to a sense of more intimate relations (relationality). This, in turn, led to higher well-being after the Mela.

When one thinks about the process more generally, perhaps it isn't so strange after all. For instance, when the UK had a harsh winter a couple of years back, certainly many people suffered. But at the same time, the shared experience created an unprecedented sense of community as neighbours who had never spoken helped dig each other's cars out from the snow. And many people spoke of the pleasure and sense of confidence this gave them. Or again, when British people spoke of the London Olympics, for many what counted was not so much the gold medals, but the sense of national togetherness that was created, the friendly interactions with erstwhile strangers, and the sense of living in a place where people are there for each other.

So, the Mela has much to teach us about the roots of human well-being. Clearly, groups and crowds can be bad for you. But let us not forget the many ways in which they can be good for you.



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We are grateful to our advisory panel, consisting of
Professor Ramesh Mishra, Banaras Hindu University;
Professor Girishwar Misra, University of Delhi;
Professor Purnima Singh, IIT Delhi;
Professor R C Tripathi, GB Pant Social Science Institute.

We are grateful to the large team of postgraduate students from the
University of Allahabad who served valiantly as our fieldworkers.

We are grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)
who funded this research through a grant no. RES-062-23-1449

And finally, we are particularly grateful to
Professor Janak Pandey, Vice-Chancellor of the Central University of Bihar.
Without his inspiration and support this research could not and would not have been possible.

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Produced by University of St Andrews Print & Design, January 2013.

