

A Description of the Maha Kumbha Mela Experience

By Stephen Knapp

The Maha Kumbha Mela festival of 2001, the first of the new millennium, took place in Allahabad. Allahabad, for the most part, has little in which the general tourist would be interested, when compared to other cities and temple towns. However, a few things to see would include the Anand Bhawan, a two-storey mansion with a collection of personal items of the Nehru family. There is also the Allahabad Museum, as well as the High Court of the United Provinces, known for being a fine example of colonial architecture. For the pilgrim with a spiritual interest there are a few more things to see, such as the huge fort, which foreigners aren't allowed to enter, that has an Ashoka Pillar inside. But through a side door you can see the undying banyan tree that is over 1000 years old and still looks in good condition. You can also visit the Hanuman Temple with a reclining Hanuman, open to non-Hindus, located on the *sangam* side of the fort. The nearby Adi Shankara Temple has nice carvings and a Balaji Deity. The Sri Rupa Gaudiya Math temple on Mallaca Street, in the Madhavapur area by the Ganges River on the way to the *sangam* from downtown, is where Srila Prabhupada took initiation from Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura in 1932. Furthermore, Sri Caitanya Mahaprabhu had visited Allahabad twice; once on His way to Vrindavana from Jagannatha Puri, and again on His return trip when He bathed ten days in a row during the early Magh Mela festival. Therein He visited the Bindu Madhava Temple and also instructed Srila Rupa Gosvami at the Dashashvamedha Ghat near the Ganges. This is fully described in *Caitanya-caritamrita*, *Madhya-lila*, Chapters 17-19.

The name Allahabad, which was given to the city by Emperor Akbar in 1584, means the city of Allah. But prior to this the city was called Prayaga or Prayaga Raja, which means the place where the sacred rivers meet and where great sacrifices are performed. This is the most significant site in Allahabad since this is the confluence (*sangam*) of the sacred Ganges, Yamuna, and the mystical Sarasvati rivers. Lord Ramachandra, Sita and Lakshmana also spent time at Prayaga near the *sangam* while staying at Bharadvaja's ashrama shortly after Lord Rama began His exile from Ayodhya. From there He went on to Chitrakoot where He spent eleven of His 14 year exile. The five Pandavas also spent time at Prayaga during their exile, as described in the *Mahabharata*. Lord Balarama also visited Prayaga after going to Naimisharanya when touring the holy places 5,000 years ago during the battle of Kuruksetra. And 500 years ago Lord Nityananda bathed at Prayaga when He traveled from Jagannatha Puri to Vrindavana.

The *sangam* is the location where the Ganges comes from the north and meets the Yamuna, which flows from the west, although they both have their origins in the Himalayas. The Ganges is somewhat yellowish or white while the Yamuna is blueish and darker. From the beach near the confluence you can see the difference in color as they merge together. Where the two rivers meet is the actual *sangam*, where most people try to take their holy bath.

Hundreds of people come to the *sangam* every day to bathe in the spiritually purifying water. But hundreds of thousands of people come to the *sangam* area when there is the annual festival known as the Magh (January-February) Mela. Every 12 years the Magh Mela becomes the Kumbha Mela which lasts for 41 days. Then millions of pilgrims join together to bathe at the *sangam* and to perform other types of spiritual rituals and activities. The Kumbha Mela alternates every three years between Allahabad, Nasik, Ujjain, and Haridwar. During the last Kumbha Mela festival at Allahabad in 1989 nearly 30 million people attended throughout the 41 days. It is by far the largest gathering in the world, what to speak of religious festival. For that reason it has been called "the largest number of human beings to ever assemble with a common purpose in the entire history of mankind" by the Guinness Book of World Records. That was describing the event in 1989 when 15 million people attended on the Amavasya day. This year, in 2001, nearly 30 million people assembled at one time over the January 24 Amavasya day, making the area of Allahabad the most populated region in the world. Over the course of the 41 days, an estimated 70 million people visited the site.

The Kumbha Mela has the magnetism to draw into its spiritual cauldron many monastics and saints who otherwise prefer to stay incognito. When such a variety of saints and *sadhus* come together, an assortment of views are exchanged and new wisdom is imbued for the general public, at least for those who come to learn. The *akharas* (the different spiritual sects or groups) stay in different camps at the Kumbh Mela wherein their religious discourses and spiritual talks and debates are one of the main attractions for visitors to the Mela.

The Mela is like a huge convention of spiritual groups and ashramas allowing everyone to check them out. The large tents become the temporary dwellings for various spiritual sects, or *akharas*. In some ways, it may seem like they are competing with each other for the attention of the public. They often use very loud public address systems with speakers pointed to the passers by on the road, or large and colorful gateways and facades attracting people into their camps. As soon as you get out of the range of one loudspeaker, you hear the next one. You can walk by the entrance and hear over the loudspeaker the lecture that's being given inside. This may attract people who then go in and sit and listen to the lecture and possibly ask questions. Anyway, more about checking out the camps later.

How people arrives?

When arriving at Allahabad for the Kumbha Mela, we come through a crowded bus or train station. Many pilgrims are waiting to leave, or sleeping on the floor or benches. Others have just arrived wondering how to get transportation to the Mela grounds. Some people simply start walking, making their way through the city. Fortunately for us, we arrived in the night, and taxis were easy to find and ready for business, well, at least a few. So we get a ride to our camp where a tent is waiting for us which we have reserved in advance. As we approach the Mela, you can see how spread out it is and how it is a city of tents. During the Magh and Kumbha Melas, the 3600 acres called the Kumbha Mela grounds that surround the *sangam* becomes its own city with roads, street lights, markets, medical facilities, and areas for food distribution, etc. Hundreds of large tents are erected as far as you can see to accommodate the millions of people. And it is not uncommon to see whole families, including babies, children, parents, and grandparents, come to the festival from any part of India. They come by bus, car, train, plane, or even by foot.

Who attend to the Kumbh Mela?

Not only do ordinary pilgrims attend, but many of India's most elevated mystics, sages, and yogis also attend. Some of these sages are hundreds of years old, live in the pure atmosphere of the Himalayas, and are never seen except at such festivals. In fact, one of the most important aspects of the festival is to allow ordinary pilgrims the opportunity to associate with saintly persons for instruction in attaining spiritual realization.

I've been there when there is nothing but the wind and sand. To see how this huge community springs up is like seeing a spiritual oasis that stays for some time and, when it is over, again disappears. Then all the spiritual groups go back to their permanent dwellings, such as their Himalayan forest ashramas or South Indian temples, while the pilgrims return to their homes.

Wherever you go during the festival there is something spiritual to watch, listen to, or engage in. With all the uplifting activities, such as lectures, plays, *bhajans*, worship, and rituals that go on in the camps or at the *sangam*, along with the presence of highly learned and experienced sages and yogis, the Mela festivals are a highly energized and spiritual event for one to attend. Furthermore, if you are helping with one of the camps, then you will have plenty to keep yourself busy. There is always so much to do in serving the innumerable pilgrims who come through. But regardless of whether you are a serious pilgrim, businessman, teacher, student, housewife, or curious Western tourist, the Kumbha Mela is an event you'll never forget.

The Kumbh is organized in sectors, each sector accommodate different camps. For instance during the Kumbh Mela of 2001 Iscon camp was located in the sector six on Shankaracharya Marg. It was composed by 50 Swiss Cottage tents

While I stayed at the Kumbha Mela, since I'm a disciple of Srila A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, I stayed at the Iskcon camp. The camp had three acres of land in Sector Six on Shankaracharya Marg. They provided 50 Swiss Cottage tents, each with three rooms and six beds, along with 40 European Plan tents, with a big single room. I had an EP toward the back. In mine they placed a big divider to create two rooms, allowing for men and women to share it. With my friends who stayed with me, I had two other men and four women sharing my tent. It was actually quite fun to have others sharing the experience of the austerity and adventure of being at the Kumbha Mela.

The Iskcon camp also supplied eight dormitory tents, one of which was provided for the many young people wondering around, looking for accommodation. At night, pilgrims even packed the *pandal* tent for a place to sleep, and around the main bathing days, such as Amavasya, devotees and travelers slept wherever they could.

The BBC and the press said the Iskcon camp was one of the most lively camps at the Mela. It had beautiful diorama exhibits of Krishna's pastimes in front, with book tables, question and answer booths, a video tent, a snack shop, and a temple and a large *pandal* tent where there would often be either lectures or *bhajans* (devotional music) or plays. This tent was packed most of the time. Also, in front was the *parikrama* cart that had beautiful Deities of Lord Caitanya and Nityananda, as well as Srila Prabhupada. There would be regular *aratis* to the Deities, which many pilgrims would attend. In the afternoon, the devotees would take the cart through the streets of the Mela grounds for Harer Nama congregational chanting, which was greatly appreciated by the pilgrims as they followed along. As reported by Dina Bandhu Prabhu, on Amavasya day, even Srila Prabhupada's youngest son, Vrindavan Chandra De, and granddaughter joined the Hare Nama chanting through the streets. On the sixth of January, Bhaktisvarupa Damodara Maharaja arrived with 100 Manipuri *mridanga* drummers, which greatly added to the attraction of the congregational chanting and the *kirtans* in the *pandal* tent while they were here.

One thing that the Iskcon camp was famous for was the food, the prasada (food first offered to the Lord) that was served to the devotees staying there, but more for the "Food for Life" program that was provided for the numerous pilgrims, *sadhus*, and tourists. The *prasada pandal* tent provided as many as three to four thousand plates everyday to whomever showed up, and as many as 10,000 plates on the main bathing days when the Mela was the most crowded. Though 9 AM and 3 PM were the assigned times for serving *prasada* in the devotee hall, and 11 AM and 5 PM for the "Food for Life" hall, the kitchen was providing *prasada* for guests at all hours. The cooking was arranged by Bhima and Raghunatha Prabhus. So after seeing how much goes on in these camps, it is obvious that you can keep very busy when you are engaged in helping.

How is food organized?

Food can be an important issue while at the Mela, amidst millions of people, all of whom need to eat. If you don't have a particular place or camp where you are getting food, eating facilities at the Mela are not very good. The only other things available to eat, provided by little shops scattered here and there, are simple snacks, like biscuits, roasted nuts, etc. Not a big variety. So the quality of snacks and street food is extremely low around the Mela site. There are no restaurants. So the way the Iskcon camp had regular times for food to be served for anyone was an important service. Some other camps also provided times for serving free food to the *sadhus* or pilgrims, but not many. There were some small shops selling vegetables that I found at regular intervals along the streets, but I found no place that sold fruits.

During the Kumbha Mela, one of the highlights is to bathe in the sacred rivers, especially at the *sangam*. It is said that during the month of Magh all of the holy *tirthas* (sacred pilgrimage places) come to take bath at the *sangam*, along with the demigods, such as Lord Vishnu, Brahma, Shiva, the Rudras, Adityas, Maruts, Gandharvas, Yaksas, Siddhas, and others, along with their consorts, like Lakshmi, Parvati, and the celestial damsels. It is believed that the potency of the holy water at the *sangam* increases by 1000 times if you bathe during the Kumbha Mela, especially on one of the main bathing days. There are six of such particular days that are the most important for bathing. These are known as the *Shahi Snans* or Royal Bathing Days.

When are the main bathing dates?

The main bathing day when the most people come is on January 24, the Mauni Amavasya day (the dark or new moon), when nearly 25 to 30 million people were present. As this day approached, many thousands of pilgrims were continually streaming into the Mela, getting ready for the special day. You could see many of them with all of their belongings in a bag balanced on their heads, walking for miles, and having come from all over India and the world. It's a sea of people. The other major bathing days, or *Shahi Snans*, include Vasant Panchami (fifth day of the new moon), January 29. The third most important day is Maha or Makhara Sankranti on January 14th, 2001 (when the sun enters the sign of Capricorn). It was reported that on this day around five million people bathed. The festival began on January 9th on Pausa Purnima (the full moon). The two other main days are Magh Purnima (full moon) on February 8th and Maha Shivaratri (festival day of Lord Siva) on February 21. The best times to bathe are set by the position of the moon, except on Maha

Sankranti (January 14) which is set by the sun.

On certain days, such as Makhara Sankranti and Mauni Amavasya, as the most auspicious time to bathe in the *sangam* comes near, there is what is called the parade of the saints, or the Shahi (royal) March. In the parade the many saints and their disciples follow each other in an order of importance. As the *sadhhus* and *babas* go down the road through the middle of the crowd, the saints parade past the people and enter the water once the astrologically favorable moment has arrived. Generally, the first group of mystics given the opportunity is called the *naga babas*, which was the case for Makhara Sankranti. Certain groups of these men wear no clothes and often live in the mountains. When they arrived at the *sangam*, they charged into it chanting "Har Har Gange," or "Jai Maa Ganga" and "Har Har Mahadeva" while swinging swords, tridents, and axes. When they are done bathing, the other sects each have their time to come down to the river. In this case, it was limited to about 40 minutes each. This has to be fixed because some *akharas*, like the Juna Akhara (naked *babas*) are the enemies of others, such as the Niranjani Akhara. If there is a clash, it can be bloody. The order in which the various *akharas* appear in the parade and take bath is a matter of great pride, as well as envy and controversy among some of them. Many serious fights have been started over this issue in the past. During the last Kumbha Mela at Haridwar, there was a terrible fight between the "saints" resulting in numerous injuries.

Are they realities between the groups at the Kumbh Mela?

Another example of the problems that can take place in this regard happened the night before the day of Makhara Sankranti, January 14. There had been an issue between the Juna Akhara (the *Naga babas*) and the Agni and Aavahan Akharas. What had happened was that the Aavahan and Agni Akharas had joined and appointed their own heads or leaders who then receive maximum respect. Unfortunately, the Nagas objected to the appointments and the honor of raising large flags during the procession and at the *sangam*. All this may sound a little childish among those who are supposed to be the most spiritual, but this is serious business to the Nagas who can become extremely angry and violent. One of the differences is that the Nagas are mostly Shaivites, worshipers of Shiva, while the Agnis and Aavahans are Vaishnavas, worshipers of Vishnu, Krishna. This makes them rivals in many ways. Most of the other *akharas* prefer to stay out of such controversy. Nonetheless, the problem was settled and the *akharas* were able to take bath at the *sangam* peacefully at 5:15 AM, under heavy police escort.

Among the Nagas, there are 13 main *akharas* or branches, who each march in their own group and bathe at different times. The first group, which bathed at 5 AM, was the Nirvani, who traditionally begin the procession. Then came the Nivani and Juna Akharas. These three make up the Sannyasi sect. The next group to follow is the Vairagi sect, which is formed by such groups as the Digambar and Nirmhi Akharas. Then there was the Udasin sect, which is formed of the Bada Panchayati, Naya Panchayati and the Nirmal Akharas. After the Nagas bathe the other main religious groups bathe, each headed by the main Shankaracarya. Then in a particular set order, the many other groups parade down the street and then bathe in the *sangam*. After the first groups of sects reach the *sangam*, other groups also go, which include first the Vairagis, the Shaivites, Shankarites, Ramanujas, Madhvas, Nimbarkas, and the Gaudiya Vaishnavas. This goes on for quite some time ending around 4 PM.

To reach the *sangam* and be ready for the parade of saints, we got up before 3 AM in order to cross the pontoon bridges before they were closed for the exclusive use of the saints. As we got closer to the bridges we can see that there are many others who had the same idea, in fact hundreds and thousands of people are all working their way to and across the bridges. As we move, it gets really tight, person against person. Everyone has to move together. My camera bag was getting squashed. Then it opens up a bit more on the bridge after getting through the bottle neck. Once on the other side, it is simply a matter of working your way to the *sangam* amongst hundreds of thousands of people.

As you walk in the dark, you see many thousands of people camped out, huddled in blankets, or keeping warm near fires under the numerous street lights or even getting ready to take their holy bath. There is simply no other experience to compare with this. Then, on the morning of Amavasya, a cold wind kicked up, making it more austere for everyone. As we waited for the parade to begin, I felt sorry for the numerous pilgrims who were shivering in the early morning wind, as they prepared to bathe in the rivers. They would be changing clothes and shivering like anything. Then later they would come back to their clothes, wet, and shaking even more. I was dressed in a warm sweat shirt, but after a couple of hours of being in the wind, I was shivering as much as they were. This was still near 5 AM, and the sun doesn't come up until after 7 AM.

saw them and invited them to walk with their *akhara* through the parade and down to the *sangam*, which they did. Apparently, it is a sign of status for the *akhara* to have Westerners in their group. So my friends accompanied them to the *sangam* and had the good fortune to take bath there with the saints and *babas*. I had also seen many other *akharas* in the parade who had displayed Westerners in their groups.

Even as the saints bathe in the special area, there is plenty of room for other pilgrims to continue bathing off to the sides, but it is mighty crowded and can be difficult to find space. Nonetheless, many people do this. After all the prominent saints bathe in the *sangam*, everyone else rushes in to do the same. Then the *sangam* becomes a river of bodies, a roar of voices, all clamoring to get to the water while reciting or even shouting invocations to the Deities and to the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers. Each person blends in with everyone else regardless of race, caste, or sect, or whether one is wealthy or poor, Brahmin or low-caste, mighty or downtrodden, all with the intent of spiritual purification. But as you can imagine, when so many people gather in a relatively small area like this, safety can be a major concern. There have been instances in the past when hundreds of people have died when there is a rush to the river. Of course, newer arrangements have been made to help prevent this. But it is considered that to leave one's body during the Kumbha Mela or while in the *sangam* is especially auspicious and denotes liberation from material existence.

Where do people leave their clothes when they bathe?

Many people simply go to the shore area near the *sangam* and find a place amongst the crowd to keep their clothes, under the watch of a friend, and then go out to where the Ganges and Yamuna meet. This is quite easy because the water is only about half a meter (1 1/2 ft) deep here. You have to walk out quite a ways just to be able to find an area that offers some deeper water. In fact, you can practically walk across the whole river, or even bathe on the other side where the waters of the merged Ganges, Yamuna and Saraswati are located. On any other day, or after the saints have finished, all areas of the beach at the *sangam* are open for the pilgrims.

Where the Ganges and Yamuna meet can be seen in the difference of the color of the rivers, as previously explained. The Ganges is shallower, muddier, and yellowish in color, while the Yamuna is deeper, darker and bluer. Many pilgrims also take boats out to where the rivers actually mix. There are sometimes small wooden platforms for people to use to get out of the boats and dip into the water. Then they change into dry clothes on the boats. Many people also bring big jugs to fill so they can take the holy *sangam* water back with them to their homes.

What Kind of transportations are available during the Kumbh?

If you want to take a boat out to the main area of the *sangam*, find one that is close to it to get the cheaper prices. In the annual Magh Mela season, the boatmen might want to charge a Westerner as much as 200 rupees or more (I once had one try to charge me Rs.500) to take you out to the *sangam*. But if you get closer on the shore, you can find boatmen looking for customers who will charge only 10 or 20 rupees. And if you don't mind taking a boat filled with other pilgrims, it may only cost you three to five rupees. Of course, you'll have to wait until everyone else is ready to come back to shore. However, during the Kumbha Mela you may have to go to the Sarasvati Ghat on the west side of the fort to get a boat. Many of the closer boats were reserved and the police were keeping a tight control of where on the bank the boats could park and where they could go on the river. When things slow down a bit and there is not so many people around, you can easily get boats closer to the *sangam* and pay lower prices. The reason why it can be nice to hire your own boat is that you can go directly to the *sangam* where the rivers meet, and take your time while bathing in the rivers, with all of your things in the boat, not on the shore, which requires someone watching your stuff to be sure it doesn't get stolen. Plus, boat rides are always pleasant, not to mention that it helps take you away from the crowds.

Besides taking a holy bath in the sacred rivers, it is always interesting to go around and check out other camps. You can see other *sadhus*, saints, *mahants* or spiritual teachers and gurus. There will be numerous lectures going on, stories being told, along with *bhajans* and devotional songs being sung in which the pilgrims can participate. Most of the lectures and talks will be in Hindi, so if all you know is English, you may feel a little left out. Other camps may have plays on stage, using adaptations from the *Ramayana*, or *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*. Some used huge screen televisions to broadcast their messages or play videos

of the *Ramayana*, drawing many pilgrims to stop and watch for a while. And as I've previously described, one of the most popular and enlivening camps that pilgrims visited was the Iskcon or Hare Krishna camp. There was plenty being offered for the visitors, as well as books and items they could take with them for future use in their spiritual development.

What are the most visited parts of the Kumbh?

One of the benefits of the Mela is to hear from advanced souls about spiritual knowledge. However, just make sure that's what they are. The Mela can be like a spiritual smorgasbord. So you have to be aware that there are also plenty of charlatans and fakes there as well who try to share the limelight. Another of the more visited areas was that of the babas. It was a section that had small lanes through numerous tents where the various baba sects could be found. As I entered, I was also interested in taking photos. However, you had to be careful. Some of the babas wanted as much as 100 rupees for one photo taken of them. And sometimes they would tell you only after you have taken the shot. Way too expensive, and a sure sign of a phony yogi. Some camps wouldn't allow any photos, while others didn't care. One of the most popular of these camps was the Panch Agni Juna Akhara, which is an order of monastic ascetics specifically known as the Naga Babas. You can see them often merely sitting naked around their sacred fire. Not all of the babas go around naked. Actually, most of them do wear simple clothes. But this group had renounced clothing. Many people would come to see them, offer obeisances and money, and receive sacred ash on their forehead for blessings. Anyone could also come and sit with them, and they are very friendly during this time of the Mela. The Naga babas didn't do much, no *bhajans*, mostly just sitting around the fire eating fruits, engaging in silent meditation, and smoking ganja. There was one *baba* in the camp, Baba Amar Bharti Urdh Babu, who had been holding his hand up in the air for years (supposedly for nearly 27 years). His arm was a bit withered from having his hand in the air for so long and his nails were long and twisted. Other than him, I didn't see anyone doing any severe austerities.

I learned later that there are ascetics from various schools who perform severe austerities for different reasons, but some of them decide to do such difficult *tapasya* because of the bad activities that they may have done earlier in life. They feel that this will help purify them from their misdeeds. There was also a camp where a Japanese yogi, Yogi Maya Kaila Giri Ma, buried herself ten feet underground for three days to promote world peace and harmony. She is an important member of the Pilot Baba Yogi Mata Camp, the leader of which had been a former pilot in the air force, and is a popular guru that has ashrams in India, Switzerland and Japan. In any case, as you can begin to see, there is a wide range of spiritual outlooks and denominations at the Mela.

How is security at the Kumbh Mela?

One thing we need to be aware of while walking through the streets or in the camps is the danger of thieves and pickpockets. There were a number of people who had their pockets picked, even in the Iskcon camp, of large sums of money, which they should not have been carrying in such a way. Others were robbed of all their money and passport while bathing at the *sangam*. That will sure adversely affect one's experience at the Mela, but you have to be very careful. I usually wear types of clothes in such a way that make such stealing practically impossible.

How is the light life at the Kumbh Mela?

As night descends, thousands, if not millions, of people will be wandering the streets checking out the various camps. Evening is one of the busiest times of the days at the camps because most people have performed their bathing and rituals in the day, and now it is time to visit the camps and listen to spiritual lectures and teachers. As it gets late, many of the traveling pilgrims will have shelter at the camps, often in a tent. However, you can see thousands of them camping wherever they can find a space. Millions of people come into the Kumbha Mela just for the day. They may simply bring a blanket with them and sleep out in the open. You will also see, and smell, numerous cooking fires along the roads where the people will be making an evening meal of possibly cooked vegetables, or kneading dough for making chapatis, or simply staying near the fire to keep warm. On many nights the camps and streets were quite active until even 1 AM, and a new day starts with the loudspeakers that get cranked up as early as four in the morning. When it gets light, many pilgrims will begin making their way to around the Kumbha Meal again, or will go on to another holy place somewhere else.

While people are traveling to the Kumbha Mela, they may also visit many other holy places along the way to or from the Mela. That was the case when I had gone on to Ayodhya and Chitrakoot, both of which are not too far from Allahabad.

No matter what aspect of the Kumbha Mela festival a person sees or participates in, it is an event that has no comparison. There is nothing else in the world anything like it. You have to see it to believe it or understand it. Some people may not like it, others may love it. That is typical of India no matter where you go. Yet the Kumbha Mela is an incredibly varied experience that changes with each day that goes by. The most important thing is that it is meant to increase one's faith and connection with the Divine, the Infinite. For some, that may take the shape of Lord Shiva, or maybe the great Brahman, or Lord Vishnu and Krishna. In any case, there is something for everyone at the Mela. Plus, it offers the advantage of being able to look more closely at other doctrines and paths, some of which may open one to new ways of thinking, or for others, like me, reassure one of the path he or she is already taking.

An Extra Report on Kumbha Mela, 2001

By Stephen Knapp

Being a participant in such a huge festival with millions of people from all walks of life certainly means that there are plenty of things and situations about which you may not hear.

How much new infrastructure is deployed at the place of the Kumbh?

Most people may not know the many preparations that are required to get ready for such a huge festival. We have to remember that the Kumbha Mela grounds has to accommodate 50 times more people than the city of Allahabad. Therefore, at the Mela site, over 145 kilometers of pipelines for the water supply have been laid, plus 120 kilometers of connecting pipes. These would be serviced by 26 tubewells specially bored at the ghats. There are also 450 kilometers of overhead power lines, serviced by 35 sub-stations to light up 15,000 streetlights. For the event of a fire, there are 1090 fire hydrants set up. This is a very important factor when one considers that there are about 5,000 ashrams or camps, most of which are using tents, in the Mela grounds, each with numerous participants. Additionally, to get to and from the *sangam* area and around the main grounds, there are 15 specially built pontoon bridges, along with 75 kilometers of metal plated roads (the plates are long steel sheets big enough only to allow traction for the tires of a vehicle), and 74 km of sand and cloth roads. - An Extra Report on Kumbha Mela, 2001. Stephen Knapp

How does pilgrim gets in a gets out of the city?

For one thing, as you can imagine, there were serious traffic problems within the city of Allahabad. Some local workers could no longer drive cars to work because of the number of people on the streets of the city. They had to resort to using bicycles to get to work for several weeks. As groups of 10 to 50 pilgrims would come by train, bus or cars and make their way to the Kumbha Mela camps in unending processions, the city could do nothing but cope and make way. The train and bus stations were filled with arriving and waiting pilgrims milling around or sleeping in whatever space they could find. Trying to get out of Allahabad was sometimes more difficult than trying to get in. - An Extra Report on Kumbha Mela, 2001. Stephen Knapp

Does transportation system change from year to year?

As the time drew closer to the Amavasya Day (the new moon), more and more people were streaming into the Kumbha Mela grounds. There had been seen a four-fold increase in vehicular traffic since the

1989 Mela, and certain vehicles used in the past, like bullock carts, were nowhere to be seen. By the time Amavasya arrived, no cars or trucks were allowed into the grounds or to drive along the streets of the Mela grounds for a day. There was room only for the huge crowds. - An Extra Report on Kumbha Mela, 2001. Stephen Knapp

Is the Kumbh also a venue for important transnational meetings?

For the first time in the history of Prayag, there was also a "Jyotish Mahakumbh," or a global meeting on the science of Astrology from January 19 to 21. This was held at the Prashasan Pandal where more than 2,000 of the world's top astrologers, gem therapists, occultists, clairvoyants, etc., participated. It was organized by the Prachya Vidhya Jyotish Adhyanevam Anusandhan Sansthan (PVJAAS) with the primary motive of promoting a scientific slant to an age old science that is often shaded in mystery or controversy. In light of the fact that the main bathing days and the time of the Kumbha Mela is calculated astrologically, such a gathering would seem most appropriate for the Mela. As it is quoted in the ancient texts:

Makare Cha Divanathe / Brikhage cha Brihaspa toh / Kumbh Yogo bhavettatra Prayage / Hyati Durlabha

"When the Sun is in Aries in the month of Magh (January-February) while the sun is in Capricorn, the Kumbha occurs at Prayag." And:

Magh Mesh Gatey Jive / Makhare Chandra Bhaskaro

"When Jupiter is in Aries in the month of Magh while the sun and moon are in Capricorn, the Kumbha occurs at Prayag."

- An Extra Report on Kumbha Mela, 2001. Stephen Knapp

How is the virtual coverage of the Mela?

Like no other year before, this Kumbha Mela was also given much coverage over the internet. There were many sites that had coverage, but there was a special site at: www.webdunia.com. Unfortunately for us English speaking people it was in Hindi. Nonetheless, for those in India this site provided the means for the faithful to witness the sacred aspects of the festival, such as a "virtual bath," for those who couldn't attend personally in over 150 countries. The site was also updated every four hours with new stories, photographs, and information.

Furthermore, the Kumbha Mela also had two cyber cafes that provided online information about the city, the festival, accommodations, weather, and to help people, such as media personnel, to communicate outside.

- An Extra Report on Kumbha Mela, 2001. Stephen Knapp

How is the media coverage of the Mela?

Not only was there virtual coverage, there was more media coverage than ever before. Such big names as the BBC, CNN, Stern magazine from Germany, NHK Japan Broadcasting, and Mainichi Broadcasting System from Tokyo were covering the Mela. The major news organizations started arriving on January 2, when registration started. Other journalists and photographers also arrived later. Over 30 tents were provided for the visiting journalists, with most of them reserved in advance. The spiritual channel, Aastha, was present with a 125 member crew with ten cameras, after having been granted the rights to telecast the daily events of the Mela.

POPULARITY OF THE KUMBHA MELA

A friend of mine who attended the last major Kumbha Mela in 1989 told me that for the whole month he was there, he never saw but maybe a dozen Westerners, aside from the Hare Krishnas. This year there were hundreds if not thousands of Western tourists and pilgrims who attended, seeking an amazing experience of Indian culture, or maybe salvation. Even the hippies of the Rainbow Festival had their camp near the woods. However, even the stars of Hollywood were said to have visited or had wanted to. Such guests who were said to have had interest or actually attended were Madonna, Sharon Stone, Pierce Brosnan, Demi Moore and Richard Gere. I don't know if any of these were spotted. The Dalai Lama also attended and mentioned that he did not take a bath in the Ganga because he felt the water was too cold.

It was the British tour operator Cox & Kings who had made the arrangements for most of these people and confirmed the visit, but would not give names for security reasons. They said they brought in as many as 600 premium guests, as they called them, from around the world, but mostly from the U.S., the UK and France.

The Indian tour company Travel Corporation of India are also selling the Kumbha Mela as a great value for their itinerary to experience the quintessential exotic East. Tour operators have included special discourses by spiritual leaders, along with consultations with astrologers, for premium clients.

If a person has not previously booked a tent at a camp or *akhara*, the hotels are usually completely booked up on the main bathing days. Even many of the camps were full. Sometimes a person could find a room in one of the hotels in the city, but often they were very basic, and with the demand so high, a room that normally would have cost Rs. 200 could now fetch Rs. 1200. Besides, getting from a hotel to the Kumbha Mela grounds can be difficult, especially on the main bathing days, and adds extra cost if you take transportation. Sometimes you can't even find a cycle ricksha. It is better to simply stay at the Kumbha Mela itself.

Among the Indian VIPs who were seen at the *sangam*, these included Murli Manohar Joshi (human resources minister), Sushma Swaraj (information and broadcasting minister), Uma Bharati (minister for youth and sports), and Madhya Pradesh chief minister Digvijay Singh, along with other Supreme court and high court judges and top bureaucrats.

How secure is the Kumbh?

In view of the fact that there would be as many as 70 million people visiting the Kumbha Mela and taking bath in the waters at the *sangam* (confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna and Sarasvati) over the course of the 41 day festival, there were plenty of police and military keeping guard. Thousands of police, military personnel, and volunteers stood guard against any militant attacks or other dangerous incidents. They also used 10 minesweeper vehicles to comb the grounds, six teams of naval divers to monitor any suspicious activities under the water, as well as sniffer dogs to help watch for any danger to the pilgrims.

The fact of the matter is that the Pakistan-based militant outfit called "Lashkar-e-Taiba" who were responsible for the recent attack on an Army camp in the Red Fort in Delhi, had planned to make similar attacks at the Kumbha Mela. The inside information was that the Lashkar-e-Taiba had deputed top ultras to strike at the Kumbha Mela. For such an organization, the festival is considered a soft or easy target because of the sheer size of it. Naturally, it may have been fairly easy to get in and cause a major disaster against the numerous pilgrims in any part of the festival. It also would have been one of the most cowardly and deceitful ways of attacking Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist pilgrims who had congregated for the festival. Such an attack would have naturally produced serious adverse impacts on not only India's ongoing peace process in the Kashmir Valley, but also on the opinion of the world toward Pakistan and the militant Muslim groups.

In the attempt to watch for snipers, 20 highly sensitive closed circuit television cameras were also used. These could photograph a person from 1.5 kilometers away, even under street lights. The use of underwater nets were also used to sieve out any underwater mines which may have been placed in the river by the militants to reach the *sangam*, where most of the people would be.

POLITICS AT THE MELA

Naturally, there could not be the avoidance of politics being played out at the Mela, although few pilgrims took notice. In any case, probably the most apparent use of politics was the arrival of Sonia Gandhi, the Congress president, to have a visit at the *sangam* and a "darshan" of a section of the *sadhus*. Especially apparent was that the *sadhus* were outside the Sangh Parivar fold. Why would she want to visit the Kumbha Mela and the *sadhus* anyway? She is not a Hindu, but a born and raised Catholic Christian. So this has triggered a debate with political overtones.

The Sangh Parivar fold, of which the BJP is an associate, had organized a discussion on the Ayodhya issue to decide when the date will be for starting the construction of the temple they want to build there on the site of Lord Rama's birth, where the mosque used to be that was torn down. They also had a display of the proposed temple they want to build at Ayodhya. Therefore, they attempted to use the religious sentiment of the festival for their campaign. And Sonia Gandhi obviously steered clear of this.

Of course, Sonia Gandhi, like anyone else, has a right to attend the Kumbha Mela and take a dip in the waters at the *sangam*, but she is no ordinary citizen given her political position. Just being in the vicinity

puts the security personnel under even more stress than they are already, especially when she wanted to tour some of the Mela grounds and meet a number of the religious heads. History has shown when visits by VIPs have caused stampedes when people tried to see them. That is why Jawaharlal Nehru, when a Prime Minister, suggested the VIPs keep out of such Melas. So it can be considered another ploy in Sonia Gandhi's political strategy to gain favor by visiting the Mela, although visiting Swaroopananda Saraswati, the Sankaracharya of the Jyotishpeeth, because he is one of the religious heads who refused to join the VHP's cause. None of her predecessors in her office ever thought it necessary to display their Indianness in such a manner. They gained favor simply by its sensitivity to the needs of the people. Therefore, aside from her "pilgrimage" to the *sangam*, all the controversy that accompanied it and the meetings she had while there would make it an unnecessary diversion.

ONE SAD THING ABOUT THE KUMBHA MELA

Millions of people attend the Kumbha Mela, and many of these are family groups that come together. Often the sons and daughters bring their parents to share in such a traditional and time honored custom as the Kumbha. However, it was found at this Mela some sons and daughters or daughters-in-law, had brought their parents only to leave them to die there. Five women and seven men over 70 years were reported to have been dumped here by their sons and daughters-in-law. Unreported cases were expected to run into the hundreds, mostly because such old people are embarrassed that their relatives have done this. While others accept the fact that they have been abandoned by their off-springs because they are not wanted. Some don't want to go back to their relatives because they know they will be beaten, and probably abandoned again at some time. Some are forcibly taken to the Mela and then ill-treated and later deserted. Still others are not even taken to the Mela grounds, but simply dropped off at the Allahabad train station while their son or daughter disappears, abandoning them. Not knowing what to do, some simply want to go to any *akhara* or camp for consolation and spend the rest of their short lives in *kirtan* and *bhajan*, singing and chanting the Lord's holy names. It was reported that up to February 5, the total number of lost and found were 118,000, according to Raja Ram Tiwari, founder of Bharat Seva Dal.

EXPLANATION OF THE SPIRITUAL GROUPS AT THE MELA

A mammoth gathering of spiritualists from the various *akharas* (sects or training camps) flock to the Mela site. Understanding who is who can be difficult, especially for the foreigner. The word *akhara* refers to an arena or venue for a wrestling match. In the context of the Kumbh Mela, it designates the great congregations of *sadhus*, members of religious communities - mostly celibate, who are sometimes called 'monks' in English. There are different dwelling places for different sects. They have been established at different times and worship their own deity.

Akhara is a special form of 'Math'. Saints belonging to these *akharas* normally stay together in one camp. The origin of *akharas* can be traced to Hindu Monasteries called *Maths*. The objective of *Maths* was to impart intellectual, physical, and spiritual training to those who were willing to lead the austere life of an ascetic. Later, Adi Shankaracharya, in his effort of national integration and cultural enhancement, formed four such *Maths*, one at Dwaraka in the West, another at Jagannatha Puri in the East, Badrinath in the North, and Mysore in the South.

The Ten Sects

The saints were further divided into ten sects: namely Giri, Puri, Bharati, Tirth, Vaan, Aranya, Parvat, Ashram, Sagar, and Saraswati. Besides Adi Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya also established eight *Maths*, and Madhavacharya established eight *Maths*. The spiritual and religious head of the *Maths* are called Shankaracharyas.

Some of the many categories of spiritualists you will find at the Kumbh Mela are: Missionaries and preachers from other religions (Buddhist, Jains, and Christian Missionaries also visit the Kumbh Mela and some of them camp there), along with spiritual saints, spiritual healers, and astrologers. Other Hindu sects include the Aryasamajis (followers of Dayanand Saraswati), Kabir Panthis (followers of Saint Kabir), Rama Krishna Missionaries, and ISKCON followers, among others.

These are also divided into the Kalpwasis: Pilgrims who spend the whole of Kumbh Mela on the sandy bed of the *sangam* (holy confluence).

Promotional Personnel: Since the Kumbh Mela is the largest gathering of mankind on earth, many spiritual institutions and companies set up camps for promoting their products.

Vendors of occult items: Kumbh Mela is a shopping paradise for those who are interested in general and occult shopping. Many items, artifacts and myriad products from various nooks and corners of India are on display and sale.

Types of *Akharas*

The *akharas* are divided into different types according to the concept of God they worship:

Shaiva *Akharas*: These are the followers of Lord Shiva, although some also show respect for Lord Vishnu. Some of these are also known as 'Nagas'; they are known for their celibacy and renunciation of material possessions, and are good in the use of arms for the defense of their religion. The Nagas lead a very austere life and are naked. The Shaiva sects are divided into further groups or *Akharas* which are called Dashnami *Akharas*. These are:

MAHANIRVANI AKHARA

ATAL AKHARA

NIRANJANI AKHARA

ANAND AKHARA

BHAIRAV AKHARA

AWAHAN AKHARA

AGNI AKHARA

The Vaishnava or Vairagi *Akharas*:

These are the wandering mendicants who are followers of Lord Vishnu. They see themselves as parts of the Supreme Lord and live a life of service and dedication to the Lord. They are above the concept of liberation or merging with the Brahman or non-dual aspect of the Supreme. The initiator of these is said to be Shree Balanand Jee. They are divided into three broad categories:

1. **Nirmohi Ani Akhara:** The various sub-sects of this *akhara* are Ramanandiya Nirmohi Akhara, Ramanandiya/Jhariya Nirmohi Akhara, Ramanandiya Maladhari Nirmohi Akhara, Ramanandiya Mahanirvani Nirmohi Akhara, Harivyasi Nirmohi Akhara, and Dadupanthi Akhara.

2. **Nirvani Ani Akhara:** The various subdivisions of this Akhara are Ramanandiya Nirvani Akhara, Ramanandiya Khaki Akhara, Ramanandiya Niralambiya Akhara, Ramanandiya Tatambari Akhara, Harivyasi Nirvani Akhara, Harivyasi Khaki Nirvani Akhara, Balbhadr Akhara.

3. **Digambar Ani Akhara:** This is further divided into Ramji Digambar, Shyamji Digambar.

4. **Udasin Akhara:** These are the followers of Guru Granth Sahib and comprises Sikhs who have converted to Hinduism. This is further divided into: Udasin Panchayati Bara Akhara and Udasin Panchayati Naya Akhara.

5. **Nirmal Akhara:** These are Sikh followers of Guru Nanak Ji. The *akhara* is known as Nirmal Panchayati Akhara.

The religious preacher and the head of the *akharas* of ascetics is popularly known as Mahamandaleshwars. They are held in high esteem and reverence by the inmates of the *akharas* and are carried around in beautifully decorated palanquins during the procession of the *shahi snan* (royal bath).

The Kalpwas

Kalpa means a day of Lord Brahma. It is believed that if one spends the whole month of Magh (Jan/Feb of Roman Calendar) at the banks of the Ganga leading an austere life in thatched huts (nowadays tents) and sleeping on the sandy river bed listening to discourses, giving alms, bathing thrice daily in the holy confluence, eating once in 24 hours, they purportedly can be freed from the cycle of death and rebirth (*moksha*).

The Traditional Legend of the Kumbha Mela

By Stephen Knapp

The significance of the Kumbha Mela festival and the *sangam* is a pre-historic legend that is related in the *Puranas*, especially in the *Bhagavat Purana*. It is told that many millions of years ago there was a battle between the demigods (*devas*) and the demons (*asuras*). Due to an offense by Lord Indra, the king of heaven, to the powerful sage Durvasa Muni, the demigods had lost all of their power. The demons of the universe saw this, and being the natural enemies of the demigods, attacked and took away all of the riches and possessions of Indra. So the demigods sought advice from Lord Vishnu who told them to make an agreement with the *asuras* to churn the ocean of milk together in order to get the nectar of immortality. After everyone agreed to it, they churned the ocean of milk using Vasuki, the huge serpent as a rope, and Mandara Mountain as a churning rod. The demons held the head of the serpent and the gods held the tail. This pastime also incorporated the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth incarnations of God. The eleventh incarnation was Kurma, the tortoise incarnation, who used His huge back as the support of Mandara Mountain, which was sinking into the ocean while they churned it. So with His support, the huge hill stayed in place.

As they churned the milk ocean, it gradually began to yield her divine gifts in the form fourteen wonderful items. However, first was a poison (*halahala*) so strong it could kill all the people on earth. Lord Siva drank it and held it in his throat, which turned his throat blue. Since then Lord Siva has been known as Nila-kantha, or blue-throated.

The items that were manifest included a *surabhi* cow that could give as much milk as was desired, a flying horse named Uccaihsrava, then eight elephants lead by Airavata, another eight she-elephants capable of going in any direction. Next was the Kaustubha gem, which Lord Vishnu took and placed on His chest, and a parijata flower. Then the *apsaras* (most beautiful women) were produced, followed by Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune who was accepted as the wife of Lord Vishnu. Then Chandra (the Moon-god) and a conch named Panchajanya came along with a bow named Haridhanu, the bow of Hari. Then Varuni, the goddess of drinking, appeared who was accepted by the demons. Finally Dhanvantari, the physician of the gods who is a partial and the twelfth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, appeared carrying the final item, which was the *amrita-kumbha*, jug of nectar, capable of making anyone immortal.

The story explains that the demons grabbed the jug and prepared to drink the nectar themselves. However, the demons began fighting among themselves over who would drink the nectar first. Suddenly, Mohini (a partial and thirteenth incarnation of Lord Vishnu) appeared as the most beautiful woman in the universe. Bewildered by her beauty, the demons submitted to her and allowed her to decide who would receive the first drop of nectar and gave the jug to Her. She arranged that the demons and demigods sit separately. She knew that the demons were unfit and should not drink the nectar, so she cheated them by pleasing them with sweet words and then distributing it to the demigods. Thus they became free from invalidity, old age and death.

Once the demons discovered what had happened, they fiercely attacked the demigods. However, the demigods were now enlivened after having drank the nectar. Nonetheless, the fighting was extremely terrible as it went on near the shore of the milk ocean. After much fighting, the demigods finally won the battle.

Another version, as related in the *Skanda Purana*, explains that what happened was that at one point during the fight, Indra's son, Jayanta, took the jug and ran toward the heavenly planets. Four demigods (*devas*) assisted him in protecting the jug from the demons. These were Brihaspati (Jupiter), Surya (the sun), Chandra (the moon), and Shani (Saturn). These demigods ran from the demons with the *amrita-kumbha*. When the demons understood what had happened, they became angry and chased the four demigods with the firm intent of retrieving the jug. The chase lasted twelve days in the life of the demigods (each day of the demigods is one year of our time), at which time the *devas* and *asuras* circled the earth. Over a period of those twelve days of fighting some of the nectar was placed at four locations, or was spilled from the jug and fell onto four places: Nasik, Ujjain, Haridwar, and the *sangam* at Allahabad.

Another version is told in the *Vishnu*, *Brahmananda*, *Padma* and *Agni Puranas*, as well as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. These relate that as soon as the nectar appeared, Lord Vishnu handed the jug to Garuda, who was to take it to the safety of heaven. However, in his attempt, which lasted 12 days or 12 human years, he was stopped by the demons at the four above-mentioned places and was forced to place the *kumbha* of nectar down. Some of the nectar spilled at each of these places, sanctifying them forever. This is why every 12 years there is a Mela at these four places.

So in the end, the demigods got possession of the nectar, but the nectar, which can spiritually purify all who come in contact with it, is said to become manifest or rain down on those four cities during certain auspicious times that are astrologically calculated, known as the Kumbha Mela. Therefore, anyone who is in the area actually becomes purified. Another version is that the nectar becomes present in the rivers, so anyone who bathes in them at the auspicious times during the Mela attains salvation. This is why many people come to these cities for the Kumbha Mela festivals every twelve years, which are equivalent to the twelve days of the demigods. To bathe in the *sangam* on the peak days is said to especially purify one's existence and relieve one from the continued cycle of birth and death in the material world after this life. Thus, the importance and good fortune for those who can do this is taken very seriously.

This is actually the significance of the Kumbha Mela: It offers the chance to transcend, to reach beyond the endless suffering of material existence and reincarnation and enter the level of liberation, salvation, and immortality. It promises to purify us in the spiritual sense, and merge or become connected with the Divine in all of us.

It is related in the *Rig-veda* that the Ganga and Yamuna Rivers are like white and blue-colored streams that mingle at Prayaga, which give immortality to humans when they bathe in it. The *Brahma Purana* mentions that bathing in the month of Magh at the bank of the Ganga and Yamuna at Prayaga gives the results of millions and millions of Ashvamedha rituals.

It is further said in the *Vishnu Purana* that one gets more benefit from bathing at the *sangam* during the Kumbha Mela than performing 1,000 Ashvamedha Yajnas (horse sacrifices) or circumambulating the earth 100,000 times. It is also said that by bathing at the Kumbha Mela all of one's sin is washed away and that 88 generations of ancestors are benefitted.

In the *Varaha Purana* (chapter 144) it is said that, "In Prayaga (Allahabad) there is the Triveni [the confluence of the three sacred rivers: the Ganges, Yamuna and the Sarasvati] where Lord Shiva resides and is known by the names Sulatanka and Somesvara. Lord Vishnu is known as Venu-Madhava, and the Rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Sarasvati meet. By bathing there one goes to heaven, and by dying there one gets liberation. It is the king of all *tirthas* and is dear to Lord Vishnu."

The *Matsya Purana* also narrates the importance of bathing and staying at Prayaga in 151 hymns (*shlokas*). In one hymn it states: "If a man stays for a month at Prayag, he is cleansed of all sins and finds a birth in Rudraloka (the abode of Lord Shiva)."

The *Mahabharata* relates how Lord Brahma performed a sacrifice here thousands of years ago. Lord Ramacandra, His wife Sita and brother Lakshmana visited this place in Treta-yuga. They stayed at the ashram of the great sage Bharadvaja, which is now the location of the Allahabad University. There are also temples of Bharadwajeshwara Mahadeva, Rishi Bharadvaja, and Kali there.

The five Pandava brothers also visited the *sangam*, as described in *Mahabharata*. And 500 years ago Sri Caitanya also stayed for 10 days at the *sangam* and visited the Bindu Madhava temple, one of the important Krishna temples in Allahabad located several kilometers upstream. Sri Caitanya's footprints can also be found nearby at a place called Dashashvamedha Ghat, near the Triveni Sangam. This is where He imparted His teachings to Srila Rupa Gosvami on the science of *bhakti-yoga* for several days. It is called Rupa Siksasthali. And across the river from the *sangam* is another temple on a small hill that Sri Caitanya visited, and about two miles downstream is the house of the saint Vallabhacarya, where Sri Caitanya had lunch with the saint. So for the pilgrim, the area of the confluence of these sacred rivers carries the most importance of any place in Allahabad.

From a different point of view, more recent history reveals that during the time of Gautama Buddha, ancient Prayaga was a part of the Kosala kingdom. It was the Mughal emperor Akbar who renamed the city Allahabad, the place of Allah, during which time it was also made a provincial capital. It was King Harshvardhan who arranged the Kumbha Mela as a great fair and meeting of saints, sages and sects, called the Mahamoksha Parishad. Then Adi Shankaracharya, around the eighth century AD, arranged the Mela to be close to what we still see today. He directed the ten main Akharas, or religious sects, to assemble regularly at the Kumbha Mela in order to maintain contact with each other, as well as have religious discourses and provide spiritual guidance for the masses. I have also heard it explained, rightly so or not, that Adi Shankaracharya established the sects of the babas in order to help defend the faith. These babas were expected to have the ability to easily give up their lives, if necessary, in order to preserve the culture. Being followers of Adi Shankaracharya, they were mostly Shaivites.

In any case, the Kumbha Mela became an event when many of the ascetics and sages, who spent most of their time in solitude and meditation in the inaccessible caves and areas of the Himalayas, came out to attend the Mela. Thus, today the babas with their long tresses wrapped around their heads like turbans, and the saffron attired sadhus and sages are a common sight at the Mela.

In this way, the Kumbha Mela provides a means for the spiritual upliftment of all mankind. It is a time to remember the time honored spiritual knowledge found in the Vedic texts and customs. It is a time when everyone can renew their spiritual unity and values, based on mutual love, brotherhood, compassion, tolerance, and devotion to God.