

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO INDIA'S KUMBH MELA

The Kumbh Mela is a Hindu religious fair that occurs every twelve years at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers on the plains of northern India, adjacent to the city of Allahabad. This is the largest human gathering in the world, drawing tens of millions of pilgrims, religious teachers and followers of monastic orders over the course of a few weeks to bathe in the sacred rivers. The next festival will take place from January 14 - February 25, 2013 in Allahabad. While the primary activity of the Kumbh Mela is bathing – said to be especially efficacious at this time and place in eradicating one's sins – there are also forums for religious lectures and debates, devotional singing, dramatic performances and feeding of holy men and women.

Haridwar, Nasik and Ujjain (also located on holy rivers in northern India) host related but lesser melas in between these “purna” or “full” Kumbh Melas which are held every 12 years. There are various explanations as to the sanctity of these particular locales and timings. In general it is said that these spots are where drops of the nectar of immortality fell after the primordial churning of the ocean by *devas* and *asuras* (gods and non-gods) according to the *Samudra Manthan* story found in various Hindu texts. The timings are made auspicious by the particular confluences of the sun and Jupiter. There are around eight major bathing days where the competition for who gets to bathe when and where is quite fierce. Bathing on the other days is considered auspicious as well.

During the monsoon season (June-September), the area that houses the Kumbh is under water. As the waters recede, a temporary city is created. This city is laid out on a grid, constructed and deconstructed within a matter of weeks; within the grid, multiple aspects of contemporary urbanism come to fruition, including spatial zoning, an electricity grid, food and water distribution, physical infrastructure construction, mass vaccinations, public gathering spaces, and nighttime social events.

Here are just a few resources for a very brief background on the Kumbh:

Please visit the South Asia Initiative website for more:

<http://southasiainitiative.harvard.edu/kumbh-mela/>

Some videos:

Trailer for *Shortcut to Nirvana* (3 mins):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eeZUJliReQ>

Kumbh Mela: The World's Largest Act of Faith (30 mins):

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-7814764574432771907>

Kumbh Mela (10 mins):

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZUvBtLxhz4&feature=results_main&playnext=1&list=PL72909403CFA81998

A short synopsis in an encyclopedia on pilgrimage, available in google books:

Dubey, D.B., "Kumbh Mela: India," in *Pilgrimage: From the Ganges to Graceland: An Encyclopedia, Volume 1* by Linda Kay Davidson and David Martin Gitlitz. 2002.

http://books.google.com/books?id=YVYkrNhPMQkC&pg=PA323&lpg=PA323&dq=pilgrimage+kumbh+dubey&source=bl&ots=aP7MPexqRY&sig=Cam19Tk8Rsa6KgdoxDt_RoQoWfs&hl=en&sa=X&ei=se5uUJvulaX10gHF0IDoCg&ved=0CDMQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=pilgrimage%20kumbh%20dubey&f=false

A full length work on the Kumbh, also available on google books:

Maclean, Kama. *Pilgrimage and Power: the Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, 1765-1954*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=MALacgnsroMC&oi=fnd&pg=PR11&dq=kumbha+mela&ots=Mk8RhMFofS&sig=HDFJD6q2aPqkO8n9EMHTih9TuY#v=onepage&q=kumbha%20mela&f=false>