

## Preliminary Questions – Religious Studies

- 1) **How do groups of pilgrims from different economic and social background relate to one another spatially?**
- 2) **Is there a stratification within the grid that separates types of pilgrims, and genders, from each other?**
- 3) **How does the Mela negotiate the tensions between self-identity and national and religious identity?**
- 4) **(Question in progress) Who are the major religious players (both individuals and institutions) at the festival, and what is their impact on the larger population?**

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, Balbhadri 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 Kalpwasis

*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*).

**5) What are the differences in their relationships to pilgrims, tourists, the press, and the Mela's governing organizations?**

**6) What are the edges of sacred space?**

**7) Where do pilgrims come from and how do they travel?**

**8) Where and how are religious institutions allocated space?**