

## Preliminary Questions – General

### 1) (Question in progress) How is the relationship between different participants at the Kumbh?

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.

### 2) (Question in progress) 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 / Brihage 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

### 3) (Question in progress) 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](http://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

**4) (Question in progress) 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. - An Extra Report on Kumbha Mela, 2001. Stephen Knapp

**5) (Question in progress) Is the Mela starting to be destination for western people?**

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

**6) (Question in progress) Why are they so many lost and found people at the Kumbh 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. - An Extra Report on Kumbha Mela, 2001. Stephen Knapp