

The Sacrality of Space, Time, and Water: The Biggest Assembly of Kumbha Melā 2025, India

Rana PB Singh[†]

Abstract

The greatest of the religious events, the Kumbha Melā, is a riverside festival held every twelve years, rotating among Prayāgraj (formerly Allahabad), Nasik, Ujjain, and Haridvar. Two traditions determine the origin/location and timing of the festival. The Kumbha Melā is an extended and expanded form of the ancient Māgha Melā, as described in the Atharva Veda, dated ca. 1500 BCE. The Mahā (Great) Kumbha Melā is the largest gathering of humanity on planet Earth. The latest one, held in Prayāgraj (Allahabad) in 2025, set the world record for the largest human gathering, with 663 million bathers and visitors. The Kumbha Melā achieved a significant milestone by being inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2017. This recognition is a testament to the Kumbha Melā's profound cultural and spiritual significance, as well as its unparalleled character as a massive and peaceful gathering of devotees.

Keywords: Kumbha Melā; Sacred Bathing; Pilgrimage; Prayāgraj (Allahabad); Confluence; India

[†] Former Professor of Cultural Landscapes & Heritage Studies, Head, Department of Geography, Institute of Science, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, India; President (Asia), RWYC- Reconnecting With Your Culture (an affiliate of Euro. Comm., and UNESCO); and President, Rana Foundation for Cultural Studies, Varanasi.
Email: ranapbs@gmail.com

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Introduction

The sacred waters “symbolise the universal sum of virtualities; they are fons et origo, “spirit and origin”, the reservoir of all the possibilities of existence; they precede every form and support every creation” (Eliade, 1959, p. 130; Singh & Rana 2020, pp. 82-84). Bathing in the sacred rivers during the Kumbha Melā is considered an endeavour of great merit, cleansing both body and spirit. For many groups, such as ascetics, pilgrimage simplifies life, freeing one from the attachment to possessions, money, or family relations (Singh and Rana, 2025, p. 141). Pilgrimage may be an integral part of life, with the goal of achieving mastery over one’s body and living a life of self-denial from the physical world, as seen in the case of Sadhus during the Kumbha Melās. Along with spiritual well-being, perhaps another value of pilgrimage is achieved. The therapeutic value for many sufferers may be achieved at sacred places (Singh and Rana, 2021, p. 143). Sacred site festivals in India (*melās*) are vital to Hindu pilgrimage traditions. Celebrating a mythological event in the life of a deity or an auspicious astrological period in the form of *melās* attracts enormous numbers of pilgrims from all over the country (cf. Lochtefeld, 2010).

The Māgha Melā is mentioned as early as in the *Mahābhārata* (13.26.36), which goes back to the tenth century BCE; it says, “[t]he one who observes firm vows, having bathed at Prayāga during Māgha, O best of the Bhāratas, becomes spotless and reaches heaven” (Eck, 2012, p. 153). The antiquity of the Kumbha Melā is shrouded in mystery (Dubey, 2001). The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang (Hsüan-Tsang, CE 602-664) recorded a visit to Prayāgraj in CE 643 in the company of King Harsavardhana and described a tradition of Māgha Melā as an “age-long festival” held on the sands of the confluence of the holy rivers, Ganga, and Yamuna, which continued at least since the 5th Century. However, only around the 9th Century did it take its present shape under the guidance of the great philosopher Shankaracharya, who had established four monasteries in the north, south, east and west of India and had called upon the

Hindu ascetics, monks and sages to meet at these sites for an exchange of philosophical views. Indologists speculate that between the 9th and 12th Centuries, other monks and religious reformers perpetuated and reinforced this periodic assemblage of saints and laypeople at sacred sites on the banks of the holy rivers, creating an environment of mutual understanding among different religious sects. Additionally, the festival allowed laypeople to benefit from associating with the ordinarily reclusive sages and yogis living in the forest. What was originally a regional festival at Prayāgraj thus became the pre-eminent pan-Indian pilgrimage site.

Kumbha Melā

The term Kumbha refers to a special water pot, specifically the one containing the nectar of immortality (*amrita*) over which the gods and demons battled in the time of beginnings. As the gods whisked the pot away to heaven, it is said that four drops of it splashed upon the earth, identified with four sacred sites. Over time, these four sites became associated with the Kumbha Melā (Eck 2012, p. 156). Among these, Prayāga’s is the most famous, but the Melās are also held at Haridvar, Ujjain in central India, and Nasik in central western India. The Melā is held four times every twelve years. Its location rotates between Prayāgraj (Allahabad) at the confluence of the Rivers Gaṅgā, Yamunā and mythical Sarasvati, Nasik on the Godāvarī River, Ujjain on the Shiprā River, and Haridvar on the Gaṅgā River (Figure 1). Taking a holy dip in these rivers at the Kumbha Melā is considered to bring great merit and to cleanse both body and spirit. The traditional story told at all the sites has to do with that pot full of *amrita* brought up from the sea when the *devas* and *asuras*, the gods and anti-gods, churned the ocean of milk, as one might churn milk for butter, using Mount Mandara as a churning stick and the serpent Vasuki as a rope. At these sites, purification through bathing reaches its highest level of auspiciousness when the re-actualisation of life-giving cosmic events occurs.

Two traditions determine the origin, location, and timing of the festival. The origins of the location of Kumbha Melā are found in ancient texts known as the *Purāṇas*, which tell about a battle between gods and demons wherein four drops of nectar (*amrita*) were supposed to have fallen to earth on these *melā* sites (Singh, 2006, pp. 228-230; Singh, 2013, pp. 61-63). The second tradition establishes the timeframe and is connected to astrological phenomena. The following list demonstrates the astrological periods of the four *melās* and the years of their most recent and near-future occurrences at the four sacred sites (cf. Figure 1):

- **Prayāgraj (Allahabad)** – when Jupiter is in Aries or Taurus and the Sun and Moon are in Capricorn during the Hindu month

of *Māgha* (January-February): 1965, 1977, 1989, 2001, 2013, 2019, **2025**, 2036.

- **Haridvar** – when Jupiter is in Aquarius, and the Sun is in Aries during the Hindu month of *Chaitra* (March-April): 1962, 1974, 1986, 1998, 2010, 2021, 2033.
- **Ujjain** – when Jupiter is in Leo, and the Sun is in Aries, or when Jupiter, the Sun, and the Moon are in Libra during the Hindu month of *Vaishākha* (April-May); 1968, 1980, 1992, 2004, 2016, 2028, 2040.
- **Nasik** – when Jupiter and the Sun are in Leo in the Hindu month of *Bhādrapada* (August-September): 1956, 1968, 1980, 1992, 2003, 2015, **2027**.

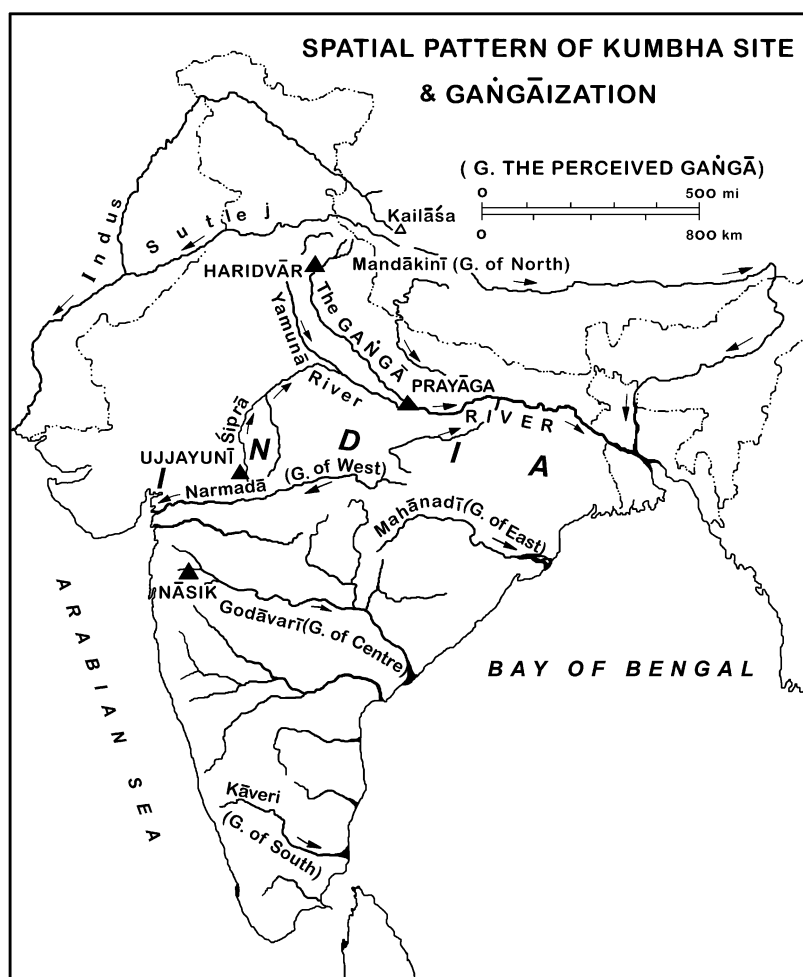


Figure 1: Kumbha Melā Sites in India

Source: Singh 2013: p. 168, reprinted with permission.

The remark that “pilgrimage sites are being transformed by tourism, exploited by politics and challenged by environmental destruction” (Jacobsen, 2013, p. 169) is a complex reality and is used as a means and tools for the political influences, holding, and control over the Hindu sentiments, which results in a complex web of contestation (cf. Singh and Haigh, 2015, p. 784). The strong ties between *dharma* (moral duty) and *karma* (phenomenal action) that were once the nucleus of Hinduism loosened in the current era of globalisation (Singh and Aktor, 2015, pp. 1928-1929).

Prayāgraj: The Site of Mahā Kumbha Melā

The Prayāgraj (Allahabad) and Haridvar festivals are routinely attended by millions of pilgrims (13 million visited Allahabad in 1977, some 18 million in 1989, over 68 million in 2001, over 74 million in 2013, and over 105 million in 2019), making the Mahā Kumbha Melā the largest and most significant religious gathering in the world. It may also be the oldest. The 2019 [14 January – 4 March] event was spread over 6.7 square kilometres and an 8-kilometre length of bathing ghāts (stairways). Twenty-two million people resided in a temporary tent city divided into 22

sectors, and infrastructural facilities included 122,500 toilets, 20,000 sanitation workers, 20,000 dustbins, 90 parking lots for 500,000 vehicles, 22 pontoon bridges on the two rivers, 500 shuttle buses, and 22 hospitals (with 450 beds each) (cf. Singh, 2020, p. 88).

For the 2025 Mahā Kumbha Melā (Prayāgraj) [13 January – 26 February], government authorities had a budget of INR 75 billion (approximately US\$ 877 million at the current exchange rate, as of June 2025), covering an area of 25.5 square kilometres (see the aerial view, Figure 2). This Melā was the nodal centre of the surrounding holy territory, linking three other sacred places of the pan-India level, viz. Varanasi, Ayodhyā, and Chitrakut (Singh and Olimpia, 2025, p. 31). All these centres were connected by a circuit of roads and networks of infrastructural facilities (Singh and Rana, 2023, p. 310). According to an estimate, around 663 million visitors (devout Hindus, pilgrims, etc.) visited the Mahā Kumbha Prayāgraj Melā in 2025; accordingly, infrastructural plans were prepared, and infilling development programmes were in operation (see Table 1).

Table 1: Mahā Kumbha Melā, Prayagraj, Infrastructure Data: 2019, and 2025

Sn	Item/aspect	2019	2025
1	Total visitors/pilgrims (million)	115	663
2	Financial budget (Rs, INR, billion)	37	75
3	Areal expansion, Melā City (sq. km)	6.7	25.5
4	Pontoon bridges	22	30
5	Sectorial divisions, Melā City	20	25
6	Hospitals	22	34
7	Total tents (+Tent city, inner & outer)	5,500	160,000
8	Number of Public Bio-Toilets	68,000	150,000
9	Sanitation workers (cleaners)	20,000	34,000
10	Security guards (Police)	15,000	65,000
11	Volunteers	4,000	10,000
12	New shuttle buses linking Prayāgraj	300	750
13	New trains linking Prayāgraj (for 45 days)	63	992
14	Parking Yards/Lots, in and environs	200	600
15	CCTV Camera (in Melā City)	--	23,000

Source: Reports of the *Mahā Kumbha Yojanā*, 2025 MIB, collated by the Author



Figure 2: Prayāgraj City, the Kumbha Melā Kshetra (region): left is the Yamuna, and right is the Ganga Rivers

Source: Reports of the Mahā Kumbha Yojanā, 2025. New Delhi: MIB, Government of India.

The Kumbha Melā meets all the criteria for intangible cultural heritage, a living tradition deeply ingrained in Hindu culture that has been passed down through generations. Moreover, the Kumbha Melā's inclusivity draws people from diverse backgrounds, highlighting its universal appeal. Beyond its cultural and spiritual importance, this is a significant economic event, contributing billions to the economy and supporting the livelihoods of millions. Its UNESCO recognition is expected to boost tourism further and promote economic development in the regions hosting the festival (Goswami, 2025, p. 377).

Being a sacred site for Hindus, Prayāgraj is frequented by people from many places, especially during the lunar-solar Hindu month of Māgha (coinciding with the January and February months of the Gregorian calendar) for taking a dip in the holy waters at the confluence of the rivers (*Saṅgama*). This event is known as the Māgha Melā. It attracts millions of pilgrims (known as *Kalpavāsī*) who live for a month in temporary tents on the Ganga River floodplain

(Goswami, 2025, p. 376). Pilgrims fervently elaborate on the profound significance of *Kalpavāsa* in their spiritual journeys, highlighting its central role in their lives as a period of intense devotion and purification. For many, the commencement of *Kalpavāsa* marks a time of spiritual renewal and introspection, fostering a transformative journey of self-discovery and atonement. Residing in Prayāgraj during *Kalpavāsa* is cherished for its transformative potential and profound spiritual significance. It offers devotees a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to seek divine blessings and cleanse their souls of accumulated sins amidst an atmosphere of peace and serenity.

In a more recent development, the state government has engaged various governmental departments and multiple agencies in a collaborative effort. This endeavour aims to enhance the urban landscape in preparation for the Mahā Kumbha in 2025 (cf. Singh and Rana, 2023, p. 310). The project entails augmenting greenery along roadways, enhancing the aesthetic appeal of public parks, creating

artificial lakes, and restoring ancient temples (News 18, 2023). It is a government initiative designed to integrate with the broader smart city project of Saṅgam (the confluence of the two rivers, the Ganga and the Yamuna). The overarching goal was to provide visitors with a more pleasant experience while promoting a cleaner and greener image of the state of Uttar Pradesh (Goswami, 2025, p. 388).

The experiences of Prayāgraj, within the broader global context, reveal that achieving sustainability while protecting heritage requires a nuanced strategy. It necessitates adaptable management plans, responsible conduct from visitors, and an unwavering dedication to conserving cultural and natural treasures (Goswami, 2025, p. 391).

Concluding Remarks: The Perspectives

Of course, during the Mahā Kumbha Melā in 2025, Prayāgraj faced numerous challenges in its pursuit of sustainable development, mirroring the complexities that many holy-heritage destinations encounter. However, towards sustainable development, innumerable opportunities for inclusive and holistic growth also emerged. Community engagement and empowerment were central to Prayāgraj's holistic development, which included the involvement of local residents in decision-making and support for local entrepreneurship, leading to economic empowerment and a strong sense of ownership. Initiatives such as promoting local crafts exemplify the potential for preserving cultural heritage while empowering local artisans (Goswami, 2025, p. 391). Turnbull (1992, p. 274) says, "[t]he quest for society is one and the same thing as the quest for the self, which for some of us is also the quest for the Sacred that ultimately unites us all" — reflecting in love and compassion. The Mahā Kumbha Mela at Prayāgraj has proven to be an exemplar of the aliveness of space, the sacredness of time, and the faith of devout Hindus — all forming a cosmic whole, through which Indian culture will raise its voice in support of human service and harmonious life.

Our present Prime Minister, Honourable Narendra Modi, proclaimed a decade ago: "[o]ur

pilgrim (sacred) cities will be models of care and respect for the environment that will showcase environmentally sound technologies and practices and in doing so pilgrims, local officials, faith leaders and millions of faithful around the world will be inspired to be part of an unprecedented collaboration to combat climate change and loss of biodiversity" (Singh, 2013, p. 363). Suppose we want to stay alive, survive, and continue the salvific power of pilgrimage places; in that case, we should minimise human greed and awaken ourselves through lifestyle changes and a more profound quest for realisation (Singh and Rana, 2025, p. 145). Of course, it will take time for Hindu pilgrims, with their inherent virtues of tolerance, ethical values, and *dharma*, to accept and be part of a green and sustainable world where spirituality and concerns for the natural environment will be at its core (cf. Singh et al., 2022, p. 146).

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The author accepts full responsibility for synthesising the viewpoints, narration, and interpretations.

Informed Consent

There is no such issue.

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