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Kumbh Mela: India's Cultural Heritage

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Abstract: *Kumbh Mela is one of the largest festival celebrated among people. People celebrate the festival by going on a pilgrimage in the hope of washing away their past sins. The Mela has the largest gathering as lakhs and lakhs of devotees come from all over the country. Hindus believe that bathing in the sacred water during the Kumbh Mela makes them eternally blessed by the divine. Millions of people reach the place without any invitation.*

The congregation includes ascetics, saints, sadhus, kalpvasi and visitors. The festival is attended by millions of people irrespective of caste, creed or gender. Its primary bearers however, belong to akhadas and ashrams, religious organization, or are individual living on alms.

Kumbh Mela plays a central spiritual role in the country, exerting a mesmeric influence on ordinary Indians. The event encapsulates the science of astronomy, astrology, spirituality, ritualistic tradition and social and cultural activities, making this a culturally diverse festival.

Key Words: Congregation, visitors, irrespective, primary bearers, religious organization, spiritual role.

Kumbh is the symbol of the confluence of nature and humanity. Kumbh makes humankind realize this world and the other, sins and blessings, wisdom and ignorance, darkness and light. Holy rivers are the symbols of the lyrical flow of humanity. Rivers are indicators of the flow of water of life in the human body itself. In the human body that is an embodiment of home, nothing is possible without the five elements. The elements - fire, wind, water, earth and sky - symbolize the human body. The Himalaya is the abode of the soul of the gods.

The Holy Ganga embarks upon its journey from there, encompassing the forests, the mountain sages and the culture of the villages. The Yamuna is a co-traveler as it puts an end to all sins, and it is known variously as Tripathga, Shivpuri and other names. This is the Ganga that liberated the children of the Suryavanshi king Sagar. Its holy water is considered nectar itself.

Maha Kumbh has a mesmerizing influence over the minds of Indians as it witness to the largest human gathering in history for the same cause on a single day irrespective of any worldly barriers of caste, creed, colour and religion. It is once in a lifetime experience seeing millions of pilgrims and tourists from all over the world come together for a common goal. This festival is held in highest regard as the ritual bath in the sacred water on this day saturated with flower & incense fragrance amidst chanting of vedic hymns and mantras liberates one from all sufferings and miseries of Life.

The Kumbh Mela considered the most sacred and greatest of North Indian festivals where the ceremonial dip in the holy river is an important ritual. It is believed that bathing on this auspicious day cleanses one of all sins. The most auspicious day for the ritual bath at Kumbh is on the day of the new moon when one gets rid of all sins and evils and is granted salvation. Significance of this unique event is the blending of religious and cultural features. Rig Veda has a mention about the significance of convergence of river Ganges, Yamuna and Saraswati at Prayag or Sangam. References can be found about the significance of this ritual in Varaha Purana and Matsya Purana as well. The first recorded history of Kumbh Mela is found in the writings of the Chinese scholar and traveler, Hiuen Tsang (who visited India 629A.D. - 645A.D.). He described thousands of people coming to the opening day of the month-long festival hoping to be blessed with some of the wisdom of the Gurus. The pilgrims, writes Hiuen Tsang, assembled along with their king, his ministers, scholars, philosophers, and sages. He also reports that the king had distributed enormous quantities of gold, silver, and jewels in charity for the purpose of acquiring good merit and thus assuring his place in heaven.

Prayag Kumbh: The Festival- The name Prayag refers to the yajna or yagya, "the sacrifice," the greatest



of Vedic rites, said to have been performed by the creator at the time of creation. The triangular area between the two rivers is the great sacrificial ground, the earth-altar called the vedi. The ancient sacrifice was the elaborate and expensive rite of kings and wealthy sponsors. At this place, however, as with other great tirthas, the meaning and power of the sacrifice is ascribed to simpler and more widely accessible acts of faith, namely pilgrimage and bathing in the sacred waters. The significance of this whole thing is in the word prayag itself. The prefix "pra" means the 'first', the foremost, and the original; and "yag" is yajna, the sacrifice. So, Prayag is the foremost place of sacrifice. This is the best place to make sacrifice and this is the best time to sacrifice. The Kumbh Mela is a macrocosm of sacrifice.

The Prayag Kumbh is considered to be the most significant of all as it marks the direction of wisdom or light. This is the place where the sun, symbolizing wisdom, rises. The Kumbh Mela takes place in an approximately 4x8km area on the flood plain of the Yamuna and Ganga river and on defense land behind the old Quila at Allahabad (popularly known as parade grounds). Creation of the universe is supposed to have originated here and it is supposed to be the center of the Earth. Prajapati Brahma, the God of Creation, is said to have created the Universe after conducting the Ashwamedh Yagna at the Dashashwamedh Ghat..

R Vaidehi (2014) in the study on "A Case Study on Kumbh Mela - The Market Promoter" with an objective to discuss why Kumbh Mela is the most famous religious gathering & how well this natural market promotes various sectors observed that like no other year before, Kumbh Mela (2013) was also given much coverage over the internet. There were many sites that had coverage. These sites 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. These sites were also updated with new stories, photographs and information. Furthermore, the Kumbh 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. Not only was there virtual coverage, there was more media coverage than ever before. Such big names as the BBC, CNN, Stern a magazine from Germany, NHK Japan Broadcasting, and Mainaichi Broadcasting System from Tokyo were covering the Mela. The spiritual channels were present having the rights to telecast the daily events of the Mela.

Gauhar Raza and Surjit Singh (2015) in their study "Science and Efficacy of Media Channels" with the sample size of 3836 respondents at Kumbh Mela 2013, Allahabad found that a very large number of respondents 70 percent reported that they had access to information through television. More than 68 percent reported that they listen to radio and 64 percent said that newspaper is their main source of information. About 45.5 percent said that they received information only through interpersonal mode of communication.

Akhadas- Akhara is a place of practice with facilities for boarding, lodging and training, both in the context of martial arts or sampradaya monastery for religious renunciates in Guru-Shishya tradition. At highest level akhara are classified into one of the three different sampradaya based on their traditional system. There are 14 Akharas in India in which 13 are registered. These 13 Akharas are further divided as Nirvani, Digambar and Nirmal Sampradaya. These akharas also known as Sanyasi, Vairagi and Udasin Sampradaya.

- a. Nirvani: The Shaivite are followers of Lord Shiva also known as Sanyasi. It has the largest number of akharas as well as Sadhus, Saints and Nagas.
- b. Digambar: The Vaishavaite are follower of Lord Vishnu also known as Vairagi.
- c. Nirmal: Also known as Udasin, followers of Multiple Gods.

In the 2013 Prayag Kumbh Mela, a women akhara was registered called the Shri Sarveshwar Mahadev Vaikunthdham Muktidwar Akhara Pari or 'Pari Akhara'. However, in the Nashik Kumbh the next year, women were denied a place on dais and refused a separate time slot for the Shahi Snan. Pilgrims are drawn by the prospect of darshan, the "sacred sight" of the saints, which is the power of simply beholding them and receiving their blessing. What characterizes the Kumbh Mela every twelve years is not only its vast size, but also the massive presence of the orders of the sadhus. These orders are referred to as Akharas and there are thirteen represented at the Kumbh Mela.



both Shaivite and Vaishnavite. According to tradition, again without written record, it was the great eighth-century philosopher Shankaracharya who instigated the gathering of ascetic orders at the Mela. He is said to have established mathas, the headquarters of orders of ascetics, at the four compass points of India. Coming together in conclaves on a regular basis has become part of melas, here as well as elsewhere in India.

The ascetics also participate in the yearning for immortality. Strictly speaking, they have already died. Initiation into an ascetic order includes symbolically lying upon one's own cremation pyre. Diksha-the initiation into the Akhara orders takes place at the Kumbh Mela. When their bodies are adorned with ashes, they are the ashes of another life, or perhaps the ashes of the fire that they keep constantly burning in their tent compounds. They are conquerors of death.

At the Kumbh Mela, some of the most flamboyant sadhus enact their indifference to discomfort and pain, holding one arm in the air for years, lying on a bed of nails, or sitting in meditation in an iron swing, hung over a burning fire. Typically, they go barefoot winter and summer, conquering cold and heat. Their flagrant rejection of the comforts of settled life empowers them in a world dominated by consumerism and the concept of what they call "getting and keeping." Pilgrims flock to the Kumbh Mela by the hundreds of thousands, not only to bath in the sacred waters, but also to receive the blessings of the ascetics whom they have never seen in such numbers.

Conclusion- The intergovernmental committee for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage under UNESCO has inscribed 'Kumbh Mela' on the representative list of Intangible cultural heritage of Humanity during its 12th session held at Jeju, South Korea from 4-9 December, 2017. As a religious festival, the tolerance and inclusiveness that Kumbh Mela demonstrates are especially valuable for contemporary world.

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