

Observations of Mahakumbh

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Abstract

The article "Observations of Mahakumbh" by Ashwini Kumar Rai provides a detailed narrative of the Kumbh Mela experience in Prayagraj, as observed in January 2025. The writer begins by describing the evolving setup of the Kumbh city, the construction of sectors, and the dedication of pilgrims and organizations preparing for the grand spiritual event. Special attention is given to the atmosphere in Sector 10, where the sounds of bhajans and religious activity reverberate through the air. As the preparations unfold, the author reflects on changes in terminology, such as replacing the term 'Shahi' with 'Amrit' to restore ancient traditions. Throughout the article, the importance of humility, devotion, and selfless service is emphasized, particularly through encounters with sadhus and monks, such as the elderly monk carrying a heavy tree trunk. The story conveys profound insights on perseverance, spirituality, and the meaningfulness of life. The observations highlight the harmony between administrative efforts and the spiritual essence of Kumbh, noting that despite challenges, the event's spiritual energy remains potent. The narrative concludes with reflections on assumptions, administrative skills, and the necessity of experiencing the Kumbh without prejudices to truly appreciate its significance.

Keywords: Kumbh Mela, Prayagraj, Spirituality, Pilgrims, Religious Observances

Introduction: A Spiritual Journey Begins

On January 7, 2025, at 4:30 PM, I entered the Kumbh city, which is in the process of being established in the valley of Ganga-Yamuna Maiya, descending from the Phaphamau bridge. This time, the entire Kumbh city has twenty-five sectors. Sector ten starts from under the Phaphamau bridge when coming from Lucknow, and the name of that ghat of Prayagraj, situated on the banks of the Ganges, is Shivpuri. This is the easternmost end of the Kumbh area. After descending under the bridge and going a little further, the sounds of bhajans, kirtans, and chants began to be heard in the caves. Pilgrims and monks started to appear. Semi-constructed camps and pandals of organizations were being erected, and some grand Yagyashalas were being constructed with Kush and Sarkanda grass. Sector ten is located at the very end in the eastern direction of the Kumbh area, due to which there is still less hustle and bustle here compared to the Sangam, but from one point of view, it is like a gateway for passengers coming by motor vehicle from the direction of Lucknow and Pratapgarh. On the day when there is excessive crowd or a bathing festival and day, vehicles are stopped near this Phaphamau bridge, and arrangements for parking etc., are made by the administration here. Moving forward, an old fort was visible on the right side on the banks of the Ganges. Upon inquiring, it was learned that it was built by someone named Tandon. Upon entering Sector ten, religious pandals and Yagyashalas under construction started to appear. After going some distance ahead, the boundary of Sector-11 started. Further ahead, large pandals of organizations and institutions like Brij-Gokul's Swami Guru Sharananand Ji Maharaj, Kailashanand Giri Ji, Ashutosh Maharaj, and Vidya Bharti, Ganga Samagra, etc., were found. Moving towards the Sangam, it seemed that this time the

administration was prepared under the leadership of Pujya Yogi Adityanath, but from the point of view of व्यवस्था, the organizations were a bit late as before, otherwise the construction work of the camps would not have been so slow. The first bath is on Purnima, January 13, and Kalpvas will also start from this day. The first Amrit (Shahi) bath of Makar Sankranti is on January 14. Here, it is necessary to mention that in this Kumbh, the word 'Amrit' is being used in place of the word 'Shahi'. The word 'Shahi' came into use during the time of Muslim invaders; the procession will be called Nagar Pravesh. Both these names were changed by the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath Ji, which was unanimously established by the Akhara Parishad and the saints in their respective meetings. It is a matter of great joy that many such words are being changed, and ancient and original words are being re-established. Even though the preparation seems incomplete right now, work is going on at a war footing, and in seven to eight days from today, the Kumbh will come into its full grand form from Makar Sankranti. Wherever you look now, people of spiritual and other organizations are diligently and painstakingly engaged in the construction of their respective camps. Huge pandals are being constructed in which thousands of people will sit and listen to sermons and satsangs, and some pandals will be used as 'Ann Kshetra' (food distribution centers), where hundreds of people will sit together and receive food offerings with great humility and reverence. Iron check plates have been laid on the paths, due to which the wheels of vehicles will not sink on the sand. Like the previous Kumbh, the pontoon bridge has been constructed. The entire Kumbh city is illuminated by street lights along the roads, spreading a captivating radiance. Akhand Kirtan is going on in some pandals.

After keeping my belongings in Sector twenty-three, I again went out for a night tour and darshan. Due to the night, the traffic congestion had reduced significantly, but the cold and fog were severe. Policemen were guarding the crossroads, warming themselves by the fire. Only a few vehicles and people could be seen passing by. Even in this intense cold and deep night, security is tight.

The Spirit of the Kumbh

Assumptions can also be wrong: Today, on January 8, 2025, at 11:45 PM, I was touring the Prayagraj Mela area on a motorcycle. On Shankaracharya Marg, I suddenly saw a seventy-year-old monk carrying a thick trunk of an uprooted tree with heavy roots on his shoulder, slowly dragging it along the iron check plate road. I was standing and watching him from a distance of ten meters, and I asked two people standing on the road in which sector the Vairagi Vaishnav Khalsa had set up their camp this time. Just then, we saw that the old saint, who was dragging a tree trunk with roots weighing several quintals on his shoulder, got the roots of the tree stuck in a joint of the iron plates laid on the road. With great effort and difficulty, he was trying to pull it out, as if a Nandi (bull) was pulling the plow stuck in the mud of the field. When it didn't come out, he started rotating it like a bull in an oil mill, but still, the root of that heavy tree trunk did not come out of the iron plate and kept sinking in the sand. I and the other two people standing near me were watching with great attention. The two people who looked like labor foremen standing near me started saying, "Look, he is drunk, and this sadhu doesn't seem to be in his senses." The Sadhu Maharaj, oblivious to the entire world, was relentlessly trying to pull the tree trunk in his own tune. I couldn't bear to watch, and I went to him to help him remove the stuck root. Upon approaching and requesting, he politely refused me in a very sweet voice. The sweet, gentle voice and the radiance of his face attracted me to converse with him. I asked, "Maharaj! Where is your place?" He said, "There are two places, one in Himachal and one in Pushkar. In Kumbh, my hut is half a kilometer away from here. I am bringing this wooden trunk with roots from a distance of one and a half kilometers, and I have to take it another half a kilometer. If I wanted, I could have taken it on a cart." Pointing towards his body, he said, "This body should not be given rest; it should strive. As long as there is strength in this body, its capacity should be used in the worship of God and for the welfare of the people. Giving rest makes it delicate and sometimes even sick." I again requested, "Let me help you." He politely refused. He asked about me and then raised both his hands and blessed me profusely. Thereafter, I went on my way, pondering over the purpose of my visit.

In the flow of thoughts, it occurred to me that sometimes the assumptions we harbor are baseless and untrue on the ground of truth, just like the assumption of those two labor foremen about that Mahatma Ji a while ago that "this Sadhu is drunk, he is an addict." But upon going closer and conversing, this assumption

turned out to be completely false that this Sadhu is intoxicated; on the contrary, that Sadhu Mahoday had already conveyed to me an important element of the meaningfulness of life in the form of a direct proof by showing पुरुषार्थ and in a concise, sweet, and attractive voice.

Therefore, I concluded that one should visit the saints who have come to Kumbh, but without any assumptions, without any prejudices, only then can the benefit of this Mahakumbh be obtained. To find a piece of diamond, millions of pieces of stones are searched and explored, considering them to be diamonds, and only then a piece of diamond is found. If we consider everyone to be just pebbles, then society would be deprived of the beauty and usefulness of that diamond.

While conversing, it was already twelve o'clock at night. It was intensely cold & dense fog had spread its empire. But as the fog was increasing here, on the other hand, the vast Sangam area of Ganga Ji Yamuna Ji was becoming vibrant with its spiritual energy and divinity-grandeur. The silence and tranquility of the night is resonating with the devotional sound from the Akhand Kirtan being held in the pandal of the saints. Even in the intense cold, the security guards are vigilantly guarding their posts from the point of view of security. The semi-constructed pandals and Virat grand entrance gates of the institutions are standing tall in the sky in this terrible cold, as if saying that we have been continuously marking our presence in the Kumbh of this Tirthraj Prayag for centuries. We have been providing entry and accommodation to numerous pilgrims. Annakshetras are being prepared in other areas where hundreds of pilgrims will be fed with great reverence. These grand, huge camps and pandals for accommodation and Annakshetra are direct evidence that no pilgrim coming to Kumbh can remain hungry and destitute; everyone gets food and accommodation easily and free of charge.

At 8:30 in the morning, on the lower Sangam Marg in Sector-21, near Baleshwar Temple, Akshayavat Chauraha, Airavat Dwar, I saw a sixty-sixty-five-year-old Vaishnav tilak-wearing Mahatma distributing light refreshments, which the saint society calls Bal-bhog, with great reverence. I stopped there. The crowd must have been around fifty to sixty in number. The Sadhu Maharaj was distributing Balbhog prasad with great reverence. Sadhus and Mahatmas walking on the road, sanitation workers, and policemen were taking and eating aloo-dum, which is called aloo-kachaloo, and throwing the empty containers in the dustbin as they went along. I stood and watched. The Mahatma's eyes fell on me, and he handed me a dona of Bal-bhog with a gentle smile. Now, it was only to take and eat (consume).

Suddenly, the thought came to my mind to go and see their camp. Upon entering, I saw a very simple arrangement. A fire was burning, and two sadhus and some householder seekers were sitting near it. A Sadhu Maharaj, who was probably the head of the arrangement of that place, gestured for me to sit, and I sat down. There was also a Sadhu Maharaj of about a hundred

years old sitting there. A plate was placed in front of him on the chair, in which there were some greens. After some time, two phalahar puris (fruit-based puris) came, by which time he had washed his hands. Upon the arrival of the phalahar puri, the arranging sadhu said, "It took time to make it hot, now please take it." But, the hundred-year-old elder sadhu spontaneously said, "Not now." The arranging sadhu insisted very much, then he said with great firmness and humility, "Why do you want to break my rule, let me follow the rule established by me for years, that after washing my hands, I will not take it again." Hearing this, the arranging sadhu immediately became silent.

Some mothers were also sitting near the fire, who were Kalpavasis. One of them said that our Kalpavas will start from Purnima to Purnima, in which bathing in the Ganges two or three times, self-cooked food once, chanting, meditation, Satsang, etc., will be included in the daily routine. Those fifty-five-sixty-year-old Mata Ji have been continuously doing Kalpavas at Prayagraj Sangam from Paush Purnima to Magh Purnima with her husband for the last twelve years. About her husband, she told that he remains seated in worship and chanting from five o'clock in the morning to ten o'clock. Then the arranging sadhu there told that the life of Kalpavas is full of practice and rules and regulations. In this, a person performs penance for a month, enduring hardships like an ascetic.... Today, after going to Sangam in the morning, I went to meet Shri N.P. Singh, former IAS, Executive Chairman of the Bharatiya Shiksha Board, in the camp of Bhooma Niketan in Sector-19, where I got the darshan and presence of Swami Bhoomananda Ji. From there, both of us left to attend the program of their foundation day organized in the camp of Divya Prem Seva Mission located in Sector-6. Shri N.P. Singh Ji was to preside over the program organized in the camp of Divya Prem Seva Mission, in which Pujya Gaurang Das Prabhu Ji was the main speaker. After reaching there, I got the presence of the respected Ashish Bhaiya Ji. MD of Jal Nigam, Shri Ramakant Pandey Ji, came there to meet Shri N.P. Singh Ji, on whose face the tension and pressure of the work of supplying water smoothly in Kumbh was clearly visible. There, former MLC Shyam Singh Ji met, who was earlier in SP, now has come to BJP, when the name of the concerned leader of his district was mentioned, he said that yes, when I was in SP earlier, he was my opposing election rival in the Lok Sabha elections. This is the character of politics in our country. After conversations with some new important people, both of us started waiting for Pujya Gaurang Das Ji after having food together. Gaurang Das Ji is the director of 'Govardhan Eco Village' operated by 'ISKCON'. After obtaining engineering education from IIT, he dedicated his life to divine work to make his life meaningful by adopting the Indian Sanatan Sanyas path. About fifty-five-year-old Gaurang Das Ji enters the room with a steady smiling face and meets the four-five of us sitting there with great warmth and enthusiasm. There, we got to hear a knowledgeable description about the very important events and history of Kumbh, in which it was told that crores of people come to

Kumbh and this year almost forty crores of people are going to come here, in which almost all the facilities for livelihood are provided, except for the crematorium. Now the question arose that it is a matter of research why the cremation ground is not built here. Sector-20 was going from the camp of Akharas to Sector-19 on the lower Sangam Marg. After going some distance, I saw a crowd of fifty sadhus-saints and other people in the middle of the road, who were blocking the road and sitting in the middle by setting up a platform and Dhuna. After going near, it was known that they were expressing their displeasure due to the mismanagement of electricity, water, toilets, etc., of the concerned sector and were protesting for their demands. There, only Langot-clad Vaishnav-Sant Tyagi Ji is present, whose age is over sixty years. The body is healthy and strong, due to practice and restraint, there is no effect of age on the body, there is immense energy, but the speech is very sweet and attractive, mesmerizing. Thirty-four saints are sitting and standing with him. Tyagi Ji is urging all the saints present there and the pilgrims watching the spectacle to drink tea and have food in the Annakshetra. His disciples are distributing tea from the kettle to the glass with great love to the people standing on the road. Some people from the administration are also standing there, in which three-four people are requesting the sadhus and saints with great humility by joining hands to end the dharna. Among them are a forty-year-old electricity supply contractor and a thirty-three-year-old gentleman related to water supply who are pleading with the saints. His pleading and persuasion style was very effective and restrained and full of Effective administrative ability. The saints were almost satisfied with the request of the people related to electricity and water supply and it seemed that now they will end the dharna. Just then I saw that a thirty-three-year-old short-statured spectacled person started the talk with extreme immaturity. His impertinent Facial expression and speech spoiled the prepared matter and throw cold water on the efforts of the previous two persons. On inquiring, it was known that the youth is the Sector Magistrate of this sector, who is an SDM rank officer. On thinking, it was found that only by passing the exam and getting a big post, a person does not become complete with administrative ability, but he also has to develop his administrative capability by working hard, otherwise he will not be Meaningful for the society and will only give harm to the public due to his administrative inability. Whereas here the demands of the saints were very Legitimate and inevitable, which was very Natural to fulfill. Electricity, water, toilets, etc., are basic facilities, which Honorable Chief Minister revered Yogi Adityanath ji has directed to be made available to everyone Very soon and on time.

On the evening of January 12, 2025, I came to the hut of my acquaintance saint of Mahanirvani Akhada. As soon as I reached the entrance, the CRPF soldiers guarding and stopped me from entering. After much insistence, I said, "You come with me to the hut of the Sadhu Maharaj; if he does not recognize me and asks me to go back, I will return with you." He went, met the saint there, and was warmly welcomed. Thereafter, the

sentry left satisfied with the security. Maharaj asked, "Will you stay here?" I said, "Yes." Then he said, "Okay, just put your sleeping bag near the Dhuna and go to sleep." Then he said, "Go, food is being served, go and have food." Food was being served in a large pandal. The food pandal was so large that at least a thousand people could sit and eat together. I also sat down. There was halwa, puri, rice, lentils, and vegetables in the food. After the food, I came to the hut and Dhuna, which was fifty meters away. There, a gentleman from Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, was sitting, who had been running a tea-biscuit shop at the bus stand of a town there for thirty years. He is the owner of three children and five grandchildren. He was an extremely contented, satisfied, spritual, and religious person. He had traveled with his wife to all four Dhams - Gangotri, Yamunotri, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Purnagiri, Pashupatinath, Dwadash Jyotirlinga, etc., and

pilgrimages. He came close and kept saying again and again.

Conclusion

The Mahakumbh is not just a religious event; it is a profound spiritual experience that requires one to transcend assumptions and prejudices. Through personal observations and interactions with various individuals, it becomes evident that the essence of Kumbh lies in humility, dedication, and the tireless pursuit of spiritual fulfillment. As preparations for the Kumbh Mela unfold, the community's collective effort to create a sacred environment for millions of pilgrims demonstrates the deep-seated connection between faith, service, and social harmony. The writer's experiences at the event underscore the importance of embracing life with purpose, recognizing the true value of human endeavor, and remaining open to the transformative power of the Kumbh.
