

[River Revelry](#)

Category : [October/November/December 2004](#)

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SPECIAL FEATURE

River Revelry

Thirty million pilgrims gather for Kumbha Mela at the Shipra River in the holy city of Ujjain

Rajiv Malik, Delhi

Ujjain is one of the great cities of the Hindu religion. In ancient times, Lord Krishna went to school here, the poet Kalidas advanced Sanskrit literature and King Vikramaditya ruled a great kingdom. The zero meridian in Hindu astrology passed through the Siva Lingam of the city's Mahakal Temple situated on the shores of the Shipra River. Last, but far from least, Ujjain is one of the four cities blessed by drops from the chalice holding the nectar of immortality, one of the sites of the Kumbha Mela held here every four years. Join us as we recount ten days in the city of Siva at the April, 2004, festival.

Hinduism's Kumbha Mela is by far the largest human event on the planet, a moment when millions of people descend upon a single sacred place. According to Hindu lore, the devas and the asuras teamed up to "churn the ocean, " from which arose a series of precious objects, the most prized of which was the nectar of immortality. As they struggled for the pot, kumbha, holding the elixir, one drop spilled at each of

four sacred places: Nashik, Ujjain, Haridwar and Prayag. From ancient times Hindus have celebrated the Kumbha Mela (festival) at each of these places in a twelve-year rotation determined by the position of Jupiter. The Mela is held in Ujjain when Jupiter is in Leo and the Sun in Aries, which in 2004 occurred from April 5 to May 4.

The nectar is said to have been absorbed in the sacred rivers of these places, which is why tens of millions of people come to these festivals to advance their spiritual life. The Mela is the one time when tens of thousands of saints and sages come out of their solitude and meditation in the inaccessible caves and areas of the Himalayas and mingle with the people. The babas with long dreadlocks wrapped around their heads like turbans, and the saffron-attired sadhus and sages are, for a few days, a common sight.

This was to be the fourth Mela I covered for Hinduism Today, having begun the cycle with Haridwar in 1998, then Prayag (Allahabad) in 2001 and Nashik in 2003. At each event, we covered the sights and sounds of the Mela, and also sought the wisdom and guidance of the saints on a selection of contemporary issues. Questions this year ranged from the theological, such as on the nature of the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva and the use of regional languages in worship in place of Sanskrit, to the ethical, such as organ donation, to the social, including what proved to be a highly controversial question on the Hindu view of "gay marriage." We decided to include the city of Ujjain itself, and that aspect of our journey turned out so rich we've set it aside for the next issue when we will have the space to do it justice.

Preparations

I've learned from experience to have very clear arrangements for accommodation and transport in place far ahead. Ujjain is a small town, just half a million people, soon to be host to several million a day--changing hotels at a moment's notice was not going to be an option! We didn't know anyone in Ujjain, so we decided to go there in advance, in February, to scout out the situation.

What we found in mid-February was a town working as if a war were impending, with a government-funded budget of US\$50 million to get ready to host 30 million visitors over a four-week period. I met with Rajni Kant Gupta, the Indian

Administrative Officer in charge of the Mela. The ancient narrow streets of Ujjain were hardly able to cope with such crowds. Gupta explained how they had set up seven satellite towns and 115 kilometers of outer- and inner-ring roads to handle the traffic. According to C.P. Arora, the Commissioner of Ujjain, the river's bathing ghats had been extended a full two kilometers, and every temple in the city was being renovated.

The full extent of the planning only became clear to me when I spoke with Upendra Jain, Ujjain superintendent of police--the man responsible for festival law and order. "We calculate that if all the ghats (steps built along the river's edge) are full at one time, there are about 60,000 people on the ghats, " he said. "With the help of volunteers, we will keep each pilgrim's bath to six minutes, meaning 250,000 can take a bath in one hour. The roads to the ghats can accommodate 300,000 at a time. So the real problem comes when we have one million people. What we've done is create artificially long roads in 20 hectares of field near the ghats so we have a holding capacity of one million. With this plan, I can manage 1.4 million people at a time, and 5 million can easily be handled in a day. We have arranged it so any individual pilgrim needs to walk at most one kilometer and wait at most two hours. All of this can be observed through closed circuit video. In addition to all this, we've arranged mass transit so pilgrims can get to the major points of interest in Ujjain itself after their bath--e.g., Mahakal Temple and the Saiva and Vaishnava akharas (monastic orders)."

The superintendent had a bigger concern than crowd control and petty crime: terrorism. Muslim militants associated with the attempts to wrest Kashmir from India had already attacked Hindu temples, with considerable loss of life. An attack here and subsequent stampede could be horrendous. He had 15,000 police--that's an entire army division--at his disposal, including 25 commando teams. It was a testament to their planning that no incidents, neither stampedes nor terrorism, occurred at this Mela.

Superintendent Upendra Jain said, "I think it is a God-given opportunity for me to be part of this great event where 30 million people will participate. We have been training the 15,000-member force for one year, and trying to motivate them in a religious and spiritual way. I have told them, 'This is much more than a duty. This is an opportunity for you to contribute to this event and earn punya, good merit. Be a friend, philosopher and guide for the common pilgrim.' " We later witnessed the good results of this training and heard pilgrims compliment the police on their conduct.

Back in Delhi, I completed the remainder of our arrangements, believing getting myself and photographer Thomas Kelly to the Mela should be less of a logistical challenge than Superintendent Jain faced. Then, on departure day, Thomas' flight out of Kathmandu was canceled on account of weather, and I had to fly alone to Indore. After a six-hour car ride to cover just the 60 kilometers to Ujjain, I settled into Sita Travel's "Nirvana Tented Colony." Its air-conditioned tents were a welcome relief from the daytime temperatures which reached 110 degrees fahrenheit.

My First Day

April 19 was my first full day. The roads were jam packed with pilgrims moving towards the main bathing ghats shouting "Jai Mahakal!" and "Jai Mother Shipra!" Many were attired in colorful clothes, carrying luggage and even their small children on their heads and shoulders. Large family groups were firmly holding each others hands, watching out especially for the elderly. It is so common to get lost at a Kumbha Mela that it is a standard plot device of Indian movies.

I met Nitya Devi, age 40, of Indore. She was impressed with the devotion of the rural folk. "If I told a middle class urban person to lie down on the ground under the sun in this heat and wait until four in the morning of the next day for having a bath in holy water, how many would do it? The youth must come here, it will bring change and transformation." She had met Sarkhandi Ji Maharaj, a Vaishnava saint, and was so moved by him that she took initiation. I, too, met this swami who would utter "With the grace of Lord Rama, " before saying anything important. Maharaj told me stories about his guru, Balliya Baba, literally, "sand baba, " who could survive, they say, for months eating nothing but sand.

Janak Singh, age 20, a student from Pali, Rajasthan, said, "It is amazing to see hundreds of thousands of people coming here due to their faith in God. Scientists say that only nature is there and there is nothing like God. But after coming to this Mela, one really feels there is some superpower like God." Umikaa Ghatge, age 15, of Indore, was likewise getting his faith strengthened. "What has impressed me the most about these sadhus and some of the naga babas is that they have no interest in materialism. God is the only thing that one should strive to attain during life. After I go back from here, I will think about God in my own way, relate to Him in my own way and serve Him until the end of my life. In fact, my experience here is difficult to convey in words."

In the evening, I visited Mangalnath Ghat, which is adjacent to the famed Mangalnath Temple. Long lines of pilgrims waited to enter the temple after their bath. It was here I first encountered the commercialization of the Mela. A huge electronic screen had been set up just a few meters from the temple showing glamorous advertisements of toothpastes and shampoos. These were all far beyond the means of the rural folk waiting at the temple, and seemed quite a distraction from the spiritual purpose they had in coming here. In my opinion, these screens could have been better used to enhance the Mela experience with religious messages and teachings. There were thousands of paper posters and billboards announcing the discourses of the numerous saints at the Mela.

This whole first day was one of great tension for me, not knowing if Thomas would catch up or not. But, thanks to the efforts of Sita Travel, he arrived late that evening. The second morning we collected our official press passes and went to work in earnest.

Sadhu Initiation Day

We next went to the camp of Swami Pragyanand, a long-time friend of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, founder of Hinduism Today. Swamiji provided us with an immense boon, a car and driver which allowed us easy access around the vast Mela area. In a few days, Swamiji was to be inducted as mahamandaleshwar of the Avahan Akhara, one of the monastic order's top posts. He informed us that tonight several hundred sadhus were to be initiated into the Avahan Akhara at Ram Ghat. We immediately joined the preparations, which was a rare opportunity. Even Thomas, who has photographed the sadhus of India and Nepal for 20 years, had never been to such an initiation.

In late afternoon about 450 sadhus and 24 sadhvis (women) had their heads shaven by a half-dozen barbers. The monks sat by patiently as this went on, occasionally raising their hands and shouting "Har Har Mahadev!" Shortly the procession to the ghat began, with hundreds of thousands of devotees lining the road. Every time the sadhus would shout "Har Har Mahadev!" or "Om Namasivaya, " the crowd would shout the words back with loud devotion.

Once at the ghats, the two-hour long initiation was conducted by Pandit Shailendra

Shri Sheshnarayan Vaidhka and several senior priests, whose privilege it was to conduct the initiation of sadhus. As the ceremony went on, all 500 or so sadhus and sadhvis would perform the same action at the same time, the offering of incense, for example, or bathing in the river. At one point several supervising sadhus became annoyed with the photographers, including Thomas, and scolded them. It was a passing moment, however, and the photographers continued unhindered a few minutes later. Finally, the ceremony concluded with the donning of new loin cloths and the sacred thread.

I was not especially impressed with the criteria for selecting some of the would-be monks. A few were disabled, others uneducated, perhaps even mentally challenged. Later Sadhvi Meera Puri, who was in charge of the lady initiates, defended the group. "The ones who we think are less educated are often the ones who are more firm in their devotion to God."

The next morning, April 21, we visited the camp of Barfani Baba, acclaimed to be 215 years old. He is said to have revitalized his physical body three times in his lifetime through a technique called kaya kalp. I had met him previously at the Nashik Kumbha Mela and also his would-be successor, Jagadguru Rajivlochanacharya, who has since passed on. We spoke only briefly with Barfani Baba who said, "The future of India is extremely bright, and we can all look forward to a peaceful and prosperous India to come."

Due to the extreme heat, the area was not particularly crowded during the day, except on the main bathing days. People preferred to move about at night, often frequenting the many shops to buy gifts for friends. The stalls selling chilled mineral water were doing a brisk business.

The government had set up allopathic and ayurvedic dispensaries near the media center. They were intensely busy as chest congestion was a widespread problem among both pilgrims and sadhus. There was a constant cloud of dust from the roads, and the impact was compounded by the high quantity of DDT insecticide powder being sprinkled all over the Mela area. Both Thomas and I suffered from chest congestion, and we did not recover until weeks later. The same problem occurred at the Prayag Kumbha Mela in 2001 when dust mixed with sand had played havoc with my lungs. Even many sadhus were afflicted with these kinds of problems.

We had planned our visit to bracket one of the three main bathing days, April 22, known as the shahi snan, or royal bath. This is one of the most colorful and spiritually elevating events of any Kumbha Mela. Shahi snan is the one in which the saints of all sadhu akharas (monastic orders) participate in a colorful procession to the ghats for their bath at the most auspicious time. Devotees of the various akharas keenly looked forward to bathing immediately after their spiritual teachers, at which time the water is all the more holy.

Unfortunately, these shahi snans and the order of procession of the akharas were a point of contention among the sadhus, so much so that Avahan Akhara was unable to participate as they normally would with the Juna Akhara on the 22nd. We were never able to ascertain the issues involved, and several sadhus told us the issues could be easily resolved if it were not for the "big egos" of some sadhu leaders. Even Swami Pragyand, who is well respected, was unable to resolve the matter. This dispute spilled over to the entire Mela, disturbing the pilgrims and worrying the police, who felt it might result in a clash between the Juna and Avahan Akhara. Twenty-year-old Janak Singh asked, "When all our saints have a similar message to give to the masses, why are they themselves divided into so many factions which fight with each other?"

Even though it was not a shahi snan, the largest turnout for bathing was on April 19, the day I arrived, as it was the astrologically auspicious day of Mauni Amavasya. On this day four million people took their sacred bath in the Shipra River.

Holy River Shipra

That there was much river to bathe in at all was a feat of engineering. The Shipra is not a large river, and on all the bathing days water had to be artificially inducted into it, then reprocessed and recycled. It was not as clean as one might wish.

Clean or not, the river is itself an object of worship in Hinduism. Every evening was Shipra arati, the offering of lit oil lamps to the river. This was popular with the pilgrims. Thousands would gather at the ghats at 7 pm, including a large number of saints, to watch the two dozen priests perform the worship. The whole area reverberates with shouts of "Shipra Maiya Ki Jai," "Hail to Mother Shipra" while the bells chime, conches are blown and huge arati trays with flames leaping

skywards are waved by the priests and devotees. Then thousands of small lamps are set afloat on the river on rafts of leaves and flowers. It is believed that the north-bound Shipra takes these offerings to the abode of Lord Siva in the Himalayas. The daily event provided a brisk business for those selling worship material along the river's edge.

After the arati, we took the opportunity to scout out a place for Thomas to take pictures the following morning of the shahi snan. We spotted a high-rise building with a clear view of the ghats, but when we approached, the gatekeeper would not let us in. As he was turning us away, a senior official of the trust which owned the building arrived and, upon learning of Hinduism Today, gave his permission. Thomas took some breath-taking shots from the spot, including this article's opening photo on page 18.

After a hectic day on the grounds, we would come and spend time at the camp of Juna Akhara. We knew one member of this akhara from earlier melas, Mahant Ram Puri, an American sadhu who has spent the last 30 years in India. He speaks excellent Hindi and is well respected in the sadhu community. We would sit with him and the other sadhus around the dhuni, sacred fire, in a section of the camp which served as a kind of gathering space for the sadhus. Everything under the sun was discussed around the dhuni, from politics to spirituality. Everyone who arrived was greeted with "Aum Namō Narayana " by all those sitting around it. Food and drink were served to all. Thousands of pilgrims walking by would all look in on the dhuni and pay their respects to the sadhus from a distance. It is difficult to describe what happens around a dhuni. For me it was a great, soul-stirring experience. You never would know when a sadhu would start giving you some important spiritual knowledge. They welcomed questions and answered them as best they could.

A shahi snan day is always difficult for everyone. Part of the burden on the 22nd was eased by Madhya Pradesh chief minister Sadhvi Uma Bharati, who called a press conference in Delhi to ask that no VIPs come on the shahi snan day. Two years ago there was a deadly mishap at the Mahakal temple here when crowds of devotees were held back as VIPs were given preferential treatment. No one wanted a repeat of that incident.

The Royal Bath

We encountered the parade of Juna Akhara sadhus in the predawn morning of the 22nd as they made their way to the ghats. A band was playing loud music while the sadhus were sitting on a large number of flower-decked vehicles moving towards the ghats. Some were blowing bugles, others dancing and some on horseback showing off their prowess with long, sharp swords. The fact that these sadhus are armed makes clashes between them unpleasant affairs.

Once they reached the ghats, ceremonies were performed, then thousands of naked naga sadhus charged the river with shouts of "Jai Shipra Maiya " and "Jai Mahakal." All the Saiva Akharas took their bath at Datta Akhara Ghat and the Vaishnavs at Harihar Ghat and Ram Ghat on the opposite side of the river. Thousands of devotees were standing on every available space and building top to watch. As soon as one akhara had finished, volunteers would move in, clean the ghats and the next group would arrive. It was wonderfully choreographed. The public address system provided a kind of running commentary on the activity by informing the sadhus when their time was over, who was coming next and when the regular pilgrims could enter. The senior-most officials of the Mela could be seen barefooted on the ghats to receive the leading saints as they arrived.

Adjacent to the Datta Akhara building (their permanent headquarters) are 15 wide steps leading down to the ghats. Here a large number of foreign journalists, cameramen and colorfully dressed foreign ladies observed the proceedings in pin-drop silence. Looking at them on those stadium-like steps was like seeing a group of serious tennis fans watching the crucial stage of a match, so deep was their attention and focus on the shahi snan.

After the ghats were opened for common pilgrims around 1:00 pm, an unending stream of humanity kept pouring in until the next morning. The careful planning paid off handsomely as the Mela proceeded without incident. After being there the whole of the morning, I was feeling totally blissful, quite completely intoxicated. The thought of being near the holy Shipra, with Mahakal temple on its banks, and realizing you are in the company of the 330 million Hindu Gods and Goddesses said to attend the Mela on the inner planes is a truly life-transforming and soul-calming experience.

Moving about with Thomas was entertaining as the handsome cameraman was often mistaken for cricketer Imram Khan or actor Richard Gere, both rumored to be at the Mela. He took the attention in good stride, amusing the pilgrims with a few

words in broken Hindi. Having lived in Kathmandu for two decades, he is fluent in Nepalese and hit it off very well with the Nepal pilgrims. Not only was he a star attraction on the roads of Ujjain, the fellow residents at our tent colony were amazed at his masterful hatha yoga practice each morning. Thomas' photos have appeared in many of the world's leading publications. Fortunately, his love of Hinduism and the dharma inspire him to share his photographic genius with Hinduism Today for a small part of his normal fees.

We spent the next several days visiting the famed temples and holy places of Ujjain. At the caves of Bhartrihari, a large party of Nath sadhus were camped. Bhartrihari was a disciple of Guru Gorakshanatha, whose philosophy of hatha yoga is the basis for most yoga taught in the world today. When we met the Nath sadhus, they were all sitting around their dhunis, looking distinct with their heavy earrings of many different shapes and colors. I felt as if I had been transported back thousands of years. These sparsely-clad sadhus were not willing to spare time to speak with us or even get photographed. But when they were told the publisher of Hinduism Today is connected to the Natha Sampradaya, they opened up. These sadhus reside here permanently, as this is a major center for their lineage.

That evening was an important one for me, also, as I finally got to take the sacred bath myself. Well, myself and 100 relatives and friends who had said, "Take a holy dip in my name also!" It took some time to get through the list, and at the end I felt light, blissful and refreshed.

Monastic Leader Installation

On the 25th, we continued our good fortune in witnessing initiation rites of the sadhu community usually closed to the outsiders, leave alone the press. This was the installation of Swami Pragyanand as Mahamandaleshwar of the Avahan Akhara. Swami normally cuts a stunning pose in his long hair and beard, but for this ceremony he was completely clean-shaven. Many prominent persons had come to attend, including Swami Harinarayananda, president of the Bharat Sadhu Samaj, Swami Nrityagopal Das, president of the Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas and many others. The colorful function was completed with a community meal for a thousand sadhus.

All the while we were trying to get interviews with prominent saints, but it proved

difficult. They were busy, as hundreds of thousands of devotees would gather to listen to their discourses in huge tented areas. On page 36 is a summary of their remarks on important issues.

As we neared the end of our stay, we were able to meet some of the Vaishnava swamis, especially the vairagi sadhus who were engaged in tapas surrounded by fires--and this in the already scorching heat. Shri Mahant Shankar Das Mahatyagi, age 30, explained to us that the purpose of the penance is to connect to God. The fire tapas was one of three, according to the seasons. In winter they have a bath of 108 pitchers of cold water, or stand in water for four hours each day. In the rainy season they stay in an open field rather than under any shelter. These three penances are continued for a period of twelve years. These sadhus only come out in public at the Melas.

We had a memorable encounter with Swami Avdhesananda Giri Ji, a head of the Juna Akhara. He said, "Sannyas (Hindu monasticism) means truthfulness and celibacy. Sannyas means simplicity. Sannyas means offering our everything to others. There is no change coming in the values of sannyas in today's context. Yes, I am living in a time which is the age of information technology. Today the Internet has brought the world to every corner. But does that mean I need to update and upgrade my sannyas? How? Celibacy, truthfulness, sweetness of speech, purity of thought, transparency of conduct, these are our ethics, our values, which will always remain central to our life."

Returning to Delhi

Everywhere in Ujjain you are greeted with "Jai Mahakal, " and by the end of my stay, I, too, was greeting everyone so. It had become such second nature, that upon disembarking from our plane on the return to Delhi, when the air hostess wished me good night, I instinctively responded warmly and even a bit loudly, "Jai Mahakal." She was for a moment nonplussed, not knowing how to respond, but finally she collected herself and said, "Jai Mahakal, " as did all the nearby passengers. Though I had reached New Delhi, I saw that the magic of the mantra was still working.