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Category : [January/February/March 2004](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jan. 02, 2004

FESTIVALS

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD

Come with us into crowds the size of nations, into the heart of devotion at Nashik's magical 40-day Kumbha Mela 2003

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Imagine, if you will and if you can, the light of a bright noonday sun in a cloudless sky during a thunderstorm. That's what it's like right now, just before midnight, as we roll ok, plod into Trimbkeshwar just north of Mumbai in Western India. Festival lights are ablaze everywhere, and it's been raining nonstop for hours. Many streets are flooded. The road we are on is so packed with vehicles and people that moving in any direction by any means is almost impossible. A cold wind shrieks. As unbearable as all of this might seem, it's really not. In fact, no one that I can see seems to care at all. The spirits of these souls just can't be dampened. This is the height of the Nashik Kumbha Mela. For many days, literally millions of pilgrims have been joyously enduring hardship and inconvenience just to be right here right now, marching their way toward the festival's crowning event at the Khushavrat Kund, the sacred tank at the origin of the Godavari River where the grand Shahi Snan, "royal bath, " will take place starting tomorrow morning, August 27, 2003, at 4:00 am. Although the Kumbha Mela officially lasts 40 days, this Shahi Snan will be its culmination.

The Kumbha Mela is the largest religious gathering on Earth. Traditionally, it occurs every three years in one of four locations: Nashik, Haridwar, Ujjain and Allahabad. This year, it is in Nashik, which is of great importance to Hindus because it is on the sacred Godavari River, and because the Ramayana (the famous Indian literary epic) refers to it. Since the source of the Godavari is 15 miles to the West of Nashik in Trimbkeshwar, a small hilly region around the city of Trimbak, the Nashik Kumbha Mela is also celebrated there. Trimbkeshwar is the famed site of one of India's twelve jyotirlingas (naturally formed Lingas).

I am traveling with photographer Devraj Agarwal on assignment for Hinduism Today. We arrived in Nashik just three days ago. Only just now are we finding our way into Trimbkeshwar. It's been a wondrous journey so far like living out some grand, medieval legend somewhere between fact and fantasy. We are trying our best to report objectively on this glorious event without allowing ourselves to be pulled too far into its maddening bhakti (devotion), where nothing matters but the feeling of being here. It's been difficult, I must admit, being part journalist and part pilgrim. Most journalists have almost nothing in common with pilgrims, except that sometimes they walk the same streets.

Earlier today in Nashik we had the good fortune to interview Swami Maheshwarananda, who kindly offered us a place in his entourage as he moves from Nashik to Trimbkeshwar. We appreciate his kindly gesture, since travel through this nearly impenetrable crowd is always difficult and sometimes dangerous.

The Entourage from Nashik

We left Nashik with Swami later than planned about eight o'clock in the evening. As we departed, we could see streams of people still entering the city from all directions. All of Nashik, normally just 10,000 residents, had become a huge camp of sorts, managed jointly by the police and military. The free flow of pilgrim traffic was severely curtailed with heavy barricading at certain key intersections. This was to avoid overcrowding near Nashik's main bathing ghats and to exert protective precautions necessitated by recent terrorist alerts.

Gobind, a disciple of Swami Maheshwarananda, drove the huge, jeep-like vehicle that we were riding in. Two deluxe luxury buses, filled with Swami's devotees, followed closely behind us. Swami led this parade in a separate vehicle with bodyguards provided by the government. We were constantly stopped and questioned by the police. Although all of swami's vehicles had special government permits, there was a problem. Our permits stated that we were supposed to reach Trimbkeshwar by seven in the evening and here we were leaving Nashik after eight. Because of this discrepancy, Gobind constantly had to explain and justify our delay to officials along the way. His fluent Hindi and authoritative self-confidence impressed even the police.

All three vehicles in our caravan were in constant communication via state-of-the-art walkie-talkies. Swami was connected to this network and seemed to enjoy every minute of it. Every fifteen minutes or so, there was a flurry of important-sounding conversation followed by contented silence. It rained constantly all the way from Nashik to Trimbkeshwar, and the bumper-to-bumper traffic was moving at a snail's pace.

It took us more than two hours to move only twelve miles. But that is all in the past now. We have arrived at one of the sadhu camps in Trimbkeshwar about three miles short of our final destination at the Kushavrat Kund. Things are really starting to get exciting.

It has been our plan all along to arrive at the Kushavrat Kund around three in the morning so that we can take up our positions early in places designated for the media. We now have about three hours to wait. After pondering the option of taking a short nap before traveling on, Devraj and I conclude that this just does not seem right. Everyone else is up and busy getting ready for the long-awaited Shahi Snan processions. We decide to move on to the bathing area ahead of time.

Gobind gives us a ride in his jeep as far as vehicles are allowed. From there we walk to the specially constructed media gallery about a half-mile away. Gobind and one of his many sannyasin friends come with us. At the gallery the police stop us again. We are denied entry because we are early.

Gobind suggests that we might wait at a temporary ashram set up near the Kund by a friend of his, Swami Satya Nanda of Mathura. Although it's the middle of the night and not generally considered an appropriate time to be visiting an ashram, the extemporaneous atmosphere of the festival makes it seem appropriate to go. Gobind assures us it's no problem.

I am told by Gobind that during Kumbha Mela celebrations it is a common practice for sadhus like Swami Satya Nanda to arrange for the rental of entire buildings just so friends, devotees and well-wishers can have a convenient place to stay right in the midst of the intensity of it all. Although guests are never formally charged for staying in these temporary quarters, it is customary for them to leave a dakshina, or offering, as they depart.

A Spontaneous Discussion

Swami Satya Nanda is told of our coming and warmly greets us at the door when we arrive. Sensing an opportunity for an interview, I flounder through my shoulder bag for my pocket-size tape recorder and invite him to express his views on the Kumbha Mela. He humbly declines my offer, saying that there are far more learned people than he staying in his ashram, and that I should talk with them. He then introduces me to several of these people and sets me up to conduct interviews in a room that is suddenly packed with pilgrims and devotees all wanting and waiting to listen in. At first, I am a little nervous, but it all goes well and actually transforms unexpectedly into that spontaneous type of interaction that reporters always seek but rarely find.

Once the formal questioning is done, a freewheeling discussion blossoms forth from all those present on the subject of "good money and bad money," which had been the theme of some of my interview questions.

Swami Satya Nanda asserts that, once donated to a worthy place for a worthy cause, so-called "bad money" is automatically purified, and its source becomes irrelevant. Such donations, he says, were customarily offered and received in ancient India, even by kings. This was often done, he further asserts, for the specific purpose of nullifying the effects of the sinful deeds committed by those who acquired the so-called "bad money." Other swamis present disagree, saying that only rightly earned money should go to the temples and religious organizations, and that the source of money is indeed important. In the end, everybody agrees on one thing: It is difficult, if not sometimes impossible, to truly ascertain whether certain money is exclusively good or bad.

After this rousing session, we rest for a short time in a small room made available to us by the swami. It seems like only an instant has passed when we are abruptly shaken from sleep by a loud voice commanding everyone to now go to the main gath (a bathing spot with entry steps). We grab our gear and begin to make our way through the busy streets. As usual, it takes longer than we expect. It is even more crowded than before, and we have to cross a number of new barricades set up by the police. Security is tighter now than ever, and our government press passes are of great assistance, allowing us access denied to most.

The Culmination

Finally, we arrive at the Kund. We find our places and brace for action, but there is unexpected stillness. For an instant, time freezes in mystic clarity through which we can somehow take in the whole scene in a single glance as if through the eyes of a bird flying overhead. The Kushavrat Kund is surprisingly small only about 75 feet square. It's not even very deep. Yet thousands of pilgrims and sadhus surround it, poised and waiting. A covered walkway encloses and frames the entire area, providing a protected place for people to congregate as they come and go from the river water.

On one whole side of the Kund, the police stand in mass like stiff wooden soldiers. On the other side, an army of journalists packs onto a twelve-foot tower, intermittently lit with the blinding flicker of their camera flash bulbs. This is the perch. Hundreds of media personnel, including television crewmen and photographers, are crowded around us. Beyond the Kund on all sides and wherever there is space, a sea of people spreads as far as the eye can see, even past the city's last visible festival lights.

It is now nearly four in the morning on August 27, 2003. The auspicious time is almost upon us. According to Vedic astrology, the Sun, Moon and Jupiter have just entered the constellation Leo in a planetary configuration called Shravana Amavasya. Millions of people all over India would gladly surrender entire fortunes to trade places with us at this moment.

Suddenly, the silence breaks. There is loud chanting: "Siva Siva Sambhu " and "Hara Hara Mahadev." Two grand processions, led by the Niranjani and Anand Akharas (monastic orders), can be seen thundering dust in the distance, proudly carrying silver palanquins and brandishing carved silver maces. A sort of madness descends upon this crowd of people who just moments ago were docile and calm. Pilgrims are scrambling frantically to catch a glimpse of the saints. Some are holding beautiful flower garlands and decorations they hope to offer the sadhus as they pass. A large number of volunteers remain busy cleaning the entire bath area. No one is idle.

At precisely 3:50 the Niranjani Akhara arrives. A puja (ceremony) is performed by

waiting priests as 200 nagas, mahants, babas and sadhus plunge into the water of the Kund. By then, it is 4:00 am. Ten minutes later they are done and rushing madly to the Trimbkeshwar Siva temple nearby.

At 4:10 sharp, the sadhus of Anand Akhara take their holy dip and scurry to the temple. One after another, the other akharas dive into the holy waters. By 10:30

all the illustrious sadhus have completed their Shahi Snan, and thousands of patiently waiting devotees and pilgrims now descend into the Godavari to take their sacred dip.

I will never forget this day. Everyone is constantly chanting praises to Lord Siva even as the guards are yanking them out of the water to give others a chance to bathe. These same guards are also helping the aged, sick and diseased in and out of the Godavari River so that they won't miss this special moment. Such are the ways of India and the ancient Mela.

What intrigues many among the media especially those from foreign countries is the skillfulness with which the pilgrims, both men and women, change into dry clothes without being immodest. While the women can perform this function gracefully with the help of their petticoats, men must use only towels. One journalist calls it "The Great Indian Towel Trick." Other reporters pick up the phrase and it appears in a number of media accounts of the event.

There are moments, here and there, when the ghats are free. This is when government officials, VIP's and journalists have an opportunity to slip into the river for a bath. Around 7:30 am, one such moment occurs and I cannot resist the temptation to take my own quick dip. I don't even take off my clothes no need for the "towel trick." I just jump in, chanting, "Aum Namah Sivaya." It is a great blessing for me, and a spontaneous one, too. For the first time in my life, I am able to take this special bath on this most holy Mahaparvani day. When I reported on the Melas before, I was either too far away from the water to go in, or I was just too busy covering the event. On the main day at the Prayag Maha Kumbha in 2001, the media tower was nearly half a mile away from the main bathing ghats.

In New Delhi before I came here, I promised at least 51 people, including some of my very closest friends and relatives, that if I had the opportunity to take this sacred bath, I would think of them while I was in the water. So, during my 151 seconds in the sacred Godavari, I tried my very best to conjure up their images to share this blessing with each of them.

The Sadhu Sammelans

Now it is time to go back to Nashik where many grand events are still to take place. Of notable importance are the Sadhu Sammelans, distinguished discussion forums organized by various large and small organizations for the purpose of allowing sadhus the opportunity to express their views on a variety of spiritual topics, this being one of the historical purposes of the Mela.

We are lucky to be able to attend two Sadhu Sammelans held in Nashik during our stay there after the Shahi Snan. One is a smaller, intimate meeting organized by Sadguru Haricharandas of Digambar Akhara on August 28, 2003 in his camp in Sadhu Gram at Tapovan. A few hundred people, including a large number of sadhus, attend this meeting. All the sadhus are allowed to address the gathering and express their views on how they feel Hinduism needs to be strengthened worldwide. Afterwards, they are presented with gifts and money.

On Friday, August 29, we attend a much larger conclave of saints organized by a senior member of Dasnami Juna Akhada. Hundreds of the most respected holy men of India are featured, and eight to ten thousand people are present. The three-hour conference is especially significant because it honors sadhus of both the Saiva and Vaishnava akharas. Such a rare display of unity is considered by all to be a new show of strength and maturity among the saints. One after another, these holy men pledge to work together with others like themselves to meet Hinduism's modern-day challenges. I cannot recall if I have ever attended a Sadhu Sammelan that was so meticulously planned and so widely attended.

One Tragic Misstep

On the day of the bath, it was as though fear did not exist. Completely oblivious to police and undeterred by threats of any sort, the Mela's many pilgrims benignly descended upon Nashik and Trimbkeshwar to do what they came to do, just as their ancestors did and theirs before them. The police did a capable job in undeniably difficult circumstances, and all went well except for one tragic occurrence, a stampede that took the lives of 30 pilgrims and left hundreds injured.

There are conflicting versions of what happened. According to the report supported by government administration and widely published in local papers, a sadhu's tossing coins to pilgrims caused crowd excitement that escalated into a stampede. Several of my brethren among the news media told me, however, that government administration was actually at fault for not providing two-way traffic at the place where the stampede occurred. They also asserted that government officials had worked hard to dodge any investigation of their culpability by diverting attention to the sadhu who threw the coins. But the investigation happened anyway, and it has now been well established that the administration was to blame. Making matters more confusing, stick-wielding police tried to control the chaotic crowd with what some consider to be unnecessary violence.

Swami Achalananda Ji Maharaj, a respected holy man from Rajasthan, told me, "I was very close to the place where the tragedy of the stampede took place. The road was so narrow that the elephants and the procession of sadhus could not pass through. It is always easy to blame the sadhus for any wrong that occurs at an event like this. It does not make sense that people would die due to a craving for some coins thrown by sadhus. Two of my own devotees, a couple from Calcutta, died in this mishap. They were multi-millionaires who owned a number of industries. Why should they die for a few coins?"

Some of the media also came under criticism for their conduct after the stampede. They were accused of being "insensitive" in their attempts to catch "gut reactions" from family members of the victims and government officials, including the chief minister and the deputy chief minister.

The Very Rich and the Very Poor

As I reflect upon the Kumbha Mela from the warm comfort of my home back in New

Delhi, my thoughts are drawn to the humble and the poor. At Nashik's Ram Kund, we were honored to watch thousands of villagers take their holy dip. As they prayed with folded hands, they were completely withdrawn from the outer world. They worshiped with such complete surrender, their communion with the inner worlds just had to be complete, total and perfect. Their calm demeanor told its own story. They were in ecstasy. Even police and guards dared not interrupt such mystic reverie.

More than fifteen million pilgrims visited the Nashik Kumbha Mela during those forty days. About eighty percent of these were truly poor. Perhaps five percent were wealthy. The greatest worship was offered by the very poor and the very rich. Those in between including tourists were there primarily out of curiosity or obligation.

The poor are not weak, for they are spiritually strong. Their life is difficult, yet they remain cheerful. They live close to nature, away from the mental stress and strain of big-city problems and the alienating materialism that such an existence breeds. For them, God exists in plants, trees, rivers and stones. Their love for nature comes to them naturally, shall we say, for they feel themselves to be a part of nature.

Many of these poverty-stricken are village folk who are strongly polytheistic. When they pilgrimage to a festival like the Mela, they do so intending to literally commingle with the 330 million Gods and Goddesses of Hinduism. They believe, without the slightest doubt, that a holy dip in the Godavari and a glimpse of the sadhus will assure them spiritual salvation. This unshakable belief makes their eyes shine with the rock-solid security of indomitable faith. Such faith is power, and such power comprises the essential greatness of these people.

For the very rich that are devotional by nature, the Kumbha Mela is an opportunity to offer thanks for their abundant material life. If they believe as many do that all they possess is given by God, then the Mela is an opportunity to give something back. They are the ones who offer generous financial assistance to the holy men and support the innumerable free community meals that are served to one and all during the Mela. It is the unique working together of the very rich and the very poor that create the magic chemistry of the Kumbha Melas.

Testimonials to the divinity of the Kumbha Mela abound. One of my favorites comes

from my camera-carrying comrade, Devraj. "The Kumbha Mela for me was an experience of fulfilment, contentment and spiritual upliftment, " he said. "God bless the Kumbha Mela. Within it, we see the expansive panorama of Hinduism in all of its living and breathing glory. I learned so much from so many people but mainly I learned from the very poor who were so deeply devotional. These humble souls gave me wisdom that I can take into my own future. The Mela teaches us, through millions of impoverished pilgrims, that we do not really need much and that happiness and contentment are free, because they cannot be bought."

It would be very true to say that I am now intoxicated with devotion. During my time at the Mela, I lived life balanced between two worlds and by God's grace was blessed with the best of both. My soul was touched by magic. Hopefully, that magic is reflected somehow in the story I've just told.

First Impressions

Some time around the first of July, I am assigned to report on the Kumbha Mela for Hinduism Today. Immediately, I know what to do. I book plane and hotel reservations and get them confirmed. As it turns out, I'm not a minute too soon. A couple of weeks before I am scheduled to leave, I consider making a few changes and approach both the Taj Hotel, where I will be staying, and the airlines. I am told quite bluntly that changes are impossible, and that I can jolly well cancel my bookings if I so desire. These are the same people who were so very courteous to me when I made my original arrangements just a few weeks ago. By their attitude adjustment, I know that Mela fever is taking hold.

Roaming the streets of Nashik for the first time after we arrive on September 23, photographer Devraj Agarwal and I witness jubilation everywhere. But there is also a palpable uneasiness an unspoken concern about crowd control. When we ask people what arrangements have been made for managing the flow of people, most of them shake their heads and point upwards toward the Gods. Obviously, no one has a clue how this city of one million people will deal with the events on August 27, when seven million pilgrims will take their holy dip in the Godavari River.

We learn from government officials, however, that a great deal of preparation has been made. This is not, after all, India's first Kumbha Mela. More than a million

dollars has been spent over two years in improving the city's basic infrastructure, including widening its roads and bathing ghats.

Visiting the Sadhugram (a village of holy men) on the banks of the Godavari River in Nashik is one of our most informative experiences. Nestled on 200 acres of land measured out in 840 4,000-square-foot plots, this area is designed to accommodate hundreds of thousands of sadhus.

There are also a large number of mobile dispensaries and clinics where doctors are busy dispensing medicines to pilgrims. Teashops and restaurants constructed overnight are doing a booming business. Devraj and I pause to enjoy a hot cup of branded coffee, Nescafe, dispensed from an ultramodern machine that automatically mixes cream and sugar into our coffee, according to our specification, of course.

For Devraj, all that is happening around us is just too magnificent for words a reaction one might well expect from a gifted photographer. For him, every single experience is a mind-boggling photo opportunity. Suddenly, he will disappear for a few minutes. Then he'll be back, beaming a smile from ear to ear. Many times I desperately look around for him in the crowd, thinking he might be lost. Then there he is. He tells me not to worry that I can be easily spotted from a distance due to my ample height and distinctive attire.

Pilgrims, mostly from the rural areas of India, are flooding into the city in large groups all afternoon. The city's population is swelling by the hour. Many of these people are chanting the names of God and singing songs. Men, women and children of all ages are attired in colorful costumes native to the area of India whence they have come. Most of these pilgrims have luggage on their heads and are holding hands so as not to become separated in the crowd. Some men are wearing colorful turbans.

Wealthy people occasionally drive by in shiny limousines. There are also tourists from outside India, some accompanied by Indian friends or sadhus. I must say that I am struck by the fact that I have not seen a single lady Indian or not wearing a skirt, a pair of pants or any sort of a revealing dress. It is as if some sort of dress code had been subliminally established.

Under a tree, I spot a particularly interesting sadhu. I am told he is a mauna baba (a holy man who has taken a vow of silence). Someone traveling with him says, "For the last three years he has been standing like this. He is in this standing position all of the time. He does not speak. He is alone. He thinks only of God. For eating, he takes only a little fruit and milk."

As we leave Mauni Baba, it is getting dark. The Akhara camps are lighting up all around us. Each camp entrance blazes forth a distinctive design in light made of blinking colored bulbs. Different rows of these bulbs are flickering in rhythm, on and off, as if to send some coded message. Small children are mesmerized by these lighting effects. Even their parents can't budge them.

The weather in Nashik is not uncomfortable, even though the rain never stops. People are moving calmly and methodically about their routines. Many of the pilgrims and sadhus carry plastic sheets and umbrellas over their heads. As for me, I never use a raincoat or an umbrella, though I have both in my bags. I am thoroughly enjoying myself.

After spending nearly a whole day in Sadhugram, it is time for us to go back to our hotel. It's 8:30 in the evening and pilgrims are still streaming into the city, making it more and more difficult to move. We are lucky enough to get a three-wheeler without much bargaining. Our destination is the upscale Taj Residency Hotel, which is located on the outskirts of the city. There were no fixed rates for the three-wheelers here in Nashik, and no laws governing fares. So the wallahs (drivers) can ask for any amount they want. For pilgrims coming from outside, including us, haggling for fair fare becomes a way of life. Tonight, our auto wallah wants to charge us only sixty rupees a reasonable rate, considering we have paid double this for the same trip just hours before. We learn a little secret from a local person: If we refrain from naming the Taj as our destination, but instead say, "near the Taj, " we will be asked to pay far less. This one small bit of advice saves us pockets of rupees during the rest of our stay.

Later that evening, my wife calls from Delhi to check on our welfare. She tells me about two terrorists' bombs that exploded in Mumbai that morning and expresses her concern for our safety. When she hears from me that we are perfectly fine and have not even heard about the blasts, she is surprised and glad.½She explains that the two bombs exploded in crowded areas of Mumbai, killing 45 people and injuring more than 150. They were hidden in the trunks of two taxis and went off

five minutes apart. She says that the catastrophe triggered much tension all over India. Sadhugram, where we had spent most of the day, had revealed no signs of panic or high alert. Even with this tragic news fresh in our minds, we retire that evening in bliss, wondering only what new magic the Mela might bring the following morning.