

[The Lore of Kumbha Melas](#)

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legacy

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Rich traditions extending back thousands of years

legacy

The Kumbha Mela is a gathering of the great monastic orders of India, known as akharas. At the high point of the mela, hundreds of thousands of these renunciate monks will travel in grand procession to the river's edge for the Shahi Snan, "royal bath," while pilgrims line the streets to watch.

Mahant Swami Vidya Giri of the Mahanirvani Akhara recounted for us the scene at one of the main bathing dates this year. She said, "The akhara procession will take place tomorrow, at 4:00 am, but already this evening the pilgrims, including small children and aged people, have reached their chosen vantage points. They are not bothered by the wind, constant rain or cold, night air. They are only looking forward to the darshan (literally, 'sight,' specifically of a holy person or of a Deity) of Bhole Baba, Triyambkeshwar Bhagwan and the other beloved saints. They keenly look forward to their own bath after the Shahi Snan is over. Their devotion demonstrates the power of Hinduism to the whole world." Another observer, local newspaper publisher Vandan A. Potnis, shared her conclusion, "The message has gone across to the world from this mela that Hinduism is a mammoth religion, a religion that can never perish. Maybe there are other religions in danger, but that is not the fear of Hinduism."

The Kumbha Mela takes place every four years in rotation at Haridwar, Prayag (Allahabad), Nashik and Ujjain, according to the position of Jupiter in the Zodiac. A modern innovation are the popular half-melas, ardha-kumbhas, every six years at Haridwar and Prayag. It was at Prayag, where the Yamuna River joins the Ganga,

that the largest number of human beings in history gathered. January 24, 2001, 30 million pilgrims came together, doubling its own single-day record of 15 million set on February 6, 1989. Haridwar, which is logistically less convenient, managed ten million on April 14, 1998. Still, that's five times the the second largest gathering on record--two million Muslim pilgrims who converge in Mecca for the Haj each year.

Every religion engages pilgrimage to holy places. Among Earth's prime destinations are Bodh Gaya, where Buddha attained enlightenment; Jerusalem, sacred to three religions; Lourdes in France for Catholics; Amritsar in India for the Sikhs; the Ise Shrine in Japan for Shintoists.

Most religions practice ritual ablution, or bathing--though only Hinduism by the millions at once. The abultion is called pavitra dubki in Hindi, translated as "holy dip," or just "dip"--a term lost on those unfamiliar with colloquial Indian English. Friends and relatives of a pilgrim on his way to the mela will traditionally entreat him, "Please take a holy dip in my name also."

As with pilgrimage, similar bathing rituals exist in most religions, and mostly for the same purpose, purification. In Judaism, for example, one form is total immersion in "living water"--that is, the sea, a river or spring--for restoration of ritual purity. Christians are known for their rite of baptism. For Protestants it signifies not a ritual cleansing, but rather a public declaration of belief. Catholics believe that baptism removes the "stain of original sin" and is a requirement for entrance to heaven. Muslims have the custom of ghusl, washing of the whole body, recommended, for example, before touching the holy Koran. In the Shinto faith, standing under a waterfall is enjoined for purification.

Asked about the origin of the mela, nearly every pilgrim will narrate the ancient story from the Puranas of the time when the devas (gods or angels) and the asuras (their rivals) cooperated to "churn the Ocean of Milk"--an act which promised to yield countless treasures. With Mount Meru as the post and the giant serpent Shesha as the churning rope, they set about their task. They agreed to share the most coveted result--the pot (kumbha) of nectar (amrit), which endows with immortality all who drink of it. As they churned mightily, the first substances to be released were deadly fumes and gases. These Lord Siva took upon Himself to consume and neutralize, thus saving the world's inhabitants from certain death. These poisons turned His throat blue, giving rise to His name, Nilakantha. After many aeons of churning, the ocean yielded a series of treasures, the last of which

was Dhanvantari, the great healer, who held in his hands the desired chalice of ambrosia.

The asuras demanded their share of the prize, but the devas reneged on their agreement, realizing that if their wicked rivals drank the nectar they would be eternally unbeatable. The asuras, sensing the plot, snatched the kumbha. With the asuras momentarily distracted by Lord Vishnu, the devas retrieved the pot and fled. In their haste they let one drop of nectar fall at four places--Haridwar, Prayag, Ujjain and Nashik.

Esoterically, it is taught that the kumbha represents the sahasrara chakra the force center at the top of the head. The amrit that it holds symbolizes the divine consciousness, which is the true source of immortality.

"Since the beginning," explains Sri Mahant Rudra Giri Ji of the Atal Akhara, "the Kumbha Mela was attended by 330 million devas and 88,000 rishis. It was started to promote and propagate our ancient heritage. Even now these devas and rishis participate." A few of these unseen angelic beings, devas, return home with each pilgrim.

Pilgrimage to sacred rivers is an ancient practice, said by historian S.B. Roy to exist in India as far back as 10,000 bce. Neither the Ramayana nor the Mahabharata, which date back several thousand years, record an event like the Mela, though the Puranic story of the churning of the ocean predates both epics. Megasthenes, a 4th-century bce Greek visitor to India, described something like a Kumbha Mela. But the clearest first reference is given by the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang, who resided in India from 629 to 645 ce. He wrote that King Harshavardhan attended, on every fifth year of his reign, a month-long, "ageless festival" at Prayag that attracted up to half a million people from all walks of life, when India had 60 million people.

By the time written references to the Kumbha Mela appear widely, in the 14th century, the mela has all of its modern elements--the places, the bathing, the hoards of pilgrims and legions of mendicants.

The most prominent akharas are Juna and Niranjani. Others include the Agan, Alakhiya, Abhana, Anand, Mahanirvani and Atal. Most orders are Saivite, three are Vaishnavite (formed beginning in 1299 by Saint Ramananda Ji) and a few are Sikh orders patterned after the Hindu monastic system. Akhara is Hindi for a "wrestling arena." It can mean either a place of verbal debate or one of real fighting. Each akhara may contain monks of several different Dasanami orders--the ten designations--Saraswati, Puri, Bana, Tirtha, Giri, Parvati, Bharati, Aranya, Ashrama and Sagara, as organized by Adi Shankara around 800 ce. There are also sannyasi orders, such as the Nathas, that exist outside the Dasanami and akhara systems. The akharas' dates of founding range from the sixth to the fourteenth century, though large monastic orders have existed throughout India's long history.

The Nashik Mela is the only one where the Saiva and Vaisnavite akahars bathe in different locations--the Saivas at Tryambkshwar and the Vaishnavites at Nashik town. Shrimahant Govindananda Brahmachari, secretary of the Sri Panch Agni Akhara, told Hinduism Today, "In the year 1690, there was a clash between the Vaishnavas and Saivas as to who would have the bath first, as at this time the bathing was done at just one place, Chakrateerath. According to an inscription near here, 60,000 sadhus died in this clash. The local ruler then decided to establish the two bathing places, setting a rule that has continued to this day."

Govindananda explains that military orders of sadhus were formed to fight the Muslim invaders. Shri Arun Khonde, a local expert on the akharas, said, "By the 15th century, there was a systematic effort to destroy our ashrams and temples by the Islamic forces as a way to destroy the Hindu traditions and cultural heritage. Those sadhus of a military spirit were then trained in the use of weapons." Similar groups of militant monks, the Christian Knights Templar and Hospitalers, were formed in 12th-century Europe, also in response to Muslim aggression. During the pre-British times, sadhu armies were a significant force, according to Govindananda. But since British times, and as recently as the 1998 mela at Haridwar, the only battles have been among themselves.

Many are the motivations and benefits for Hindus to attend the Kumbha Mela, the most popular pilgrimage on Earth. It is a time to gain a new look on life, to purify oneself and to regain the sense of Godly aspiration as the central purpose for this earthly incarnation.

Timeline

10,000 bce: Historian S.B. Roy postulates presence of ritual river bathing.

600 bce: River melas are mentioned in Buddhist writings.

400 bce: Greek envoy to Indian King Chandra Gupta reports on a mela.

ca 300 ce: Roy believes the present form of melas crystallizes at this time. Various Puranas, written texts based on ancient oral traditions, recount the dropping of the nectar of immortality at four sites after the "churning of the ocean."

547: Earliest recorded founding date of an akhara (order), the Abhana.

600: Chinese pilgrim and writer Hiuen-Tsang attends a mela at Prayag (modern Allahabad), organized by King Harsha.

904: Founding of Niranjani Akhara.

1146: Founding of Juna Akhara.

1300: Kanphata Yogi militant ascetics are employed in the Rajasthan army.

1398: Timur lays waste to Delhi to punish the sultan's tolerance toward Hindus, then proceeds to Haridwar mela and massacres thousands.

1565: Madhusudana Sarasvati organizes fighting units of Dasanami orders.

1684: Frenchman Tavernier estimates 1.2 million Hindu ascetics in India.

1690: Saivites and Vaishnava sects battle at Nashik; 60,000 are killed.

1760: Saivites and Vaishnavas battle at Haridwar mela; 1,800 die.

1780: British establish the order for royal bathing by the monastic groups.

1820: Stampede leaves 430 dead at the Haridwar mela.

1906: British cavalry intercede in a mela battle between sadhus.

1954: Four million people, 1 percent of India's population, attend the mela at Allahabad; hundreds die in a stampede.

1989: Guinness Book of World Records proclaims the crowd of 15-million crowd at the February 6 Allahabad mela "the largest-ever gathering of human beings for a single purpose."

1995: "Half-mela" (at six-year interval) at Allahabad has 20 million pilgrims on January 30 bathing day.

1998: Haridwar attracts 25 million in four months; ten million on April 14.

2001: Mela at Allahabad attracts 70 million pilgrims in six weeks, 30 million on January 24 alone.

2003: Mela at Nasik attracts 6 million pilgrims on the main bathing day.

2004: The next mela is at Ujjain; main days are April 5, 19, 22, 24 and May 4.