

[A Sea of Seekers Floods The 1996 Mela at Allahabad](#)

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## A Sea of Seekers Floods The 1996 Mela at Allahabad A Month of Diversion and Devotion Draws Five Million Pilgrims to Bathe

Rajiv Malik, New Delhi

Over 50 lakh (5 million) pilgrims purified themselves in the icy cold river waters of the sangamin Allahabad from 2:00am to 2:00pm on January 20, 1996. The mass ritual ablution took place as part of the month-long Magh mela, the yearly festival held here during the month of Magh(January-February). Like a thousand smaller holy festivals held regionally throughout India, the congregation exemplified the strength of Hindu commitment and community.

The Magh melais a mix of festivity and spirituality, devotion and diversion. There are rides and games, and there is the opportunity for personal contact with saints and life-changing sadhanafor those who seek it. This year, the sea of sincere seekers took authorities by surprise.

Scanning the horizon from his wooden watchtower, assistant superintendent of police, Ajay Anand, reported that, "The number of people bathing is so high that they are utilizing around 90 percent capacity of the bathing area. Even during the Ardhamela only this many people could bathe in this area

at a given time. So by these standards the crowd is no less than the Ardha mela. My information is that all the roads of Allahabad leading to the sangamare choked with people."

The Allahabad sangamis the confluence of three of India's most sacred rivers: Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati (the Saraswati is said to flow in from underground). The sangam is the site of the largest spiritual gatherings known to humanity--the great Kumbha mela, which takes place every 12 years, and the ardha(half) Kumbha mela, held every 6 years. The Kumbha and Ardha melasare unequaled assemblies of humanity.

It is from this tower that, one after the other, police officials and melaadministrators told me that what we were beholding below was hardly being controlled by them. They humbly admitted that they were witnessing divine administration--a kind-of empyreal crowd control. Anand gestured to the vast sea of humanity spread across the banks of the Ganga and said, "You see the sheer magnitude of the event? Do you think a mortal like me or a group of people comprising the police force can manage this? Certainly not. It's quite clear to me that there is a superpower in control." I needed no assurance. My own experiences and conversations with others concurred.

What follows is the account of my pilgrimage to the mela, brief interviews with some of the many saints and sincere seekers I met and some practical information which may help those who wish to attend next year's mela--and the next.

## The Road to the Mela

Allahabad is around 627 kilometers from New Delhi and is well connected by super-fast trains--an overnight journey. However, it was impossible to make a train reservation from the capital due to the heavy rush of pilgrims headed for the mela, so, on January 19, I flew to UP's Capital, Lucknow, grabbing a train to Allahabad. That evening, before retiring, I arranged for an auto-rickshaw to pick me up early the next morning.

My driver was there on time, and at 4:30am, January 20, I left the UP tourist Bungalow at Civil Lines. It was a chilly morning, and I was hit hard by the cold pre-dawn wind, as an auto-rickshaw is open on all three sides.

We covered the 7 or 8 kilometers from Civil Lines to the Magh Melaside in thirty minutes. Throughout the route, I found thousands of people, including old men, women and children, walking briskly down the roads, loudly chanting the slogans, "Ganga maiya ki Jai," "Victory to mother Ganga" and "Jai Gange .". Their devotion must have kept them warm, as they seemed oblivious to the icy winds facing them.

The roads of Allahabad were dark. If there were streetlights, they were not working. But this did not matter to the thousands and thousands of pilgrims, who seemed accustomed to walking in darkness. Most of the people on the roads carried luggage on their heads and many had small children seated on their shoulders.

As we approached the mela area, the assembly got thicker and thicker. Not only was the crowd coming from the Civil Lines side, but all the roads of Allahabad were converging, full of people coming from every direction by all modes of transport, including scooters, cars, mini buses, mega buses, bullock carts and tractors. Among them, I noticed a number of foreign visitors and devotees. After passing several police posts by telling them I was a journalist, one constable put his foot down and would not allow the auto-rickshaw to go any farther. No matter. It could not--so packed were the streets. I disembarked and started walking.

Five kilometers later, I reached the sangam ghats where the bathing was already underway in earnest. Dust kicked up by the walking crowd got into my eyes, eventually infecting them, and I had to use eye drops during my entire stay. However, walking down the roads with other pilgrims, some shouting slogans, others reciting mantras, was a joyful and liberating experience. On both sides of the main roads, I could see people sitting, chatting, enjoying bonfires, shopping at roadside shops and relaxing in their tented accommodations.

Approaching, I noticed the number of people returning from their bath gradually swelling. I asked how the bath was, and everyone told me that they had enjoyed it despite the early morning chill. The temperature at that time was around 6 degrees Celsius (42 degrees Fahrenheit).

I was encouraged to see eager and sincere youths in large numbers, more than I had noticed during the Ardha melalast year. Many of the youth were activists of the Bajrang Dal (a

nationalist youth group), whose annual conference was scheduled for the next day. Most of them had saffron bands of cloth tied on their forehead as well as across their shoulders. Interestingly, at their conference, they all took a vow to "ban" cow slaughter in India. National president, Jai Jaibhan Singh Pawaiya, later told me, "We will sacrifice even our lives to save cows from being slaughtered."

## The Sacred Sangam

I reached the main sangam ghat around 6:30am, amid a vast multitude. It was a serenely disciplined crowd. Thousands were slowly walking towards the bathing areas, and at the same time thousands were coming back. Repeated announcements were made from the public address system requesting the pilgrims to leave the sangam ghats immediately after bathing so that others could participate.

A magnificent Surya darshana, sunrise, occurred at 6:50am, leaving lakhs and lakhs mesmerized. It was a breathtakingly beautiful and soul-stirring scene.

Around this time, I ventured up the police tower and spent an hour there recording the scene through the eye of the camera. But my attempts to capture this phenomenon on film proved futile. I realized that the melacould not be reduced to mere images for the eyes. The melais an experience for the soul, and experience is the only way to understand it.

The holy Mother Ganga blessed all who came that day, including me. While viewing the sangam ghats from the police tower, I was spellbound by the unfolding scene. All around were millions of people--vibrant and colorful. I was overcome by a deeply blissful state of trance. Even the blaring announcements on the public address system could not disturb me, immersed as I was in bliss. For a few moments, I am sure, I was tuned to Him. For a few moments, I had joined the sea of humanity around me in remembering Him. And when lakhs of people remember Him together, what happens can neither be captured through a camera nor can it be written with the help of a pen. It is a unique and ineffable experience.

After absorbing the divine bliss for a couple of hours at the sangam and after having made physical contact with the icy sangam water, I started my journey home. It was around 10:00am. I had very little sleep the night before and had to again walk six-seven kilometers to get a transport. But you would be wrong if you thought I was tired. I was full of freshness, and reached my family in Delhi still feeling it.

Rajiv Malik, one of Hinduism Today's India correspondents, lives in Delhi with his wife and family. He is a free-lance journalist and part owner of a textile showroom.

Sidebar: Pilgrims' Passages -- Describing the Ineffable

Interviews by Rajiv Malik

I spoke to highly revered saints and top officials managing the mela with virtually no effort. I would simply turn a corner and

the next opportunity would present itself. As I now see it, all of it was happening on its own. Here is what they told me!

Sri Sri Devoraha Hans Baba, (photo on page one): Baba was a center of attraction at the mela. A large number of people were always near his kuthir to have his glimpse and receive blessings. From his everlasting stock of fruit and other eatables, he distributed prasado to one and all. Normally, he quietly sits on an eight-foot-high raised platform and blesses devotees. When I presented him a copy of Hinduism Today and asked for his message, he told me, "All of you who are living in Bharat must live together, because all of you belong to Bharat. You are all one. Stay together. See India with love. India is yours. Let us all make India a great nation. The animal within has to be transcended for man to grow and manifest his divine nature. Scriptures say that we are children of immortality. The radiant Great One is within. Self realization alone will endow us with a sense of values and cleanse all evils like violence and corruption."

Baba was in a state of radiant bliss. His words had a magical effect on all those listening to him.

Anandamayi Lakshmi Ma, disciple of late Paramhans Swami Sri Vidyanandaji Maharaj: "The significance of this melacannot be described in words. One can only understand it by experiencing it personally. It is an experience of the divine mother--Ganga. You must inform your readers of how beautiful the atmosphere is here. Hindus from all over the world must spare time to come here. After all, how else will the Hindus living abroad come to know what is Hindu Sanskriti? They must

come and experience the spirit of Hinduism. The purpose of coming here is to become spiritual. In fact, life is fulfilled only when one becomes spiritual. It is only through penance done by saints that the vibrations of the Magh Melamake you turn to spirituality. It's only upon whom God has been kind who can spend one month on the shores of the Ganga. Even those who only come for a few hours benefit."

Jadadguru Sri Shankaracharya Swami Vasudevanand Saraswati Maharaj, Jyotirmatha, Badarikashram, Himalayas: "The Ganga and Yamuna, both rivers are symbols of knowledge and love respectively. Similarly, unless you take both influences, cold and hot, or Ganga and Yamuna, you cannot have proper tattva jnana(knowledge of the primal elements). On this occasion, if you observe silence and have a bath in sheetoshan jala(cold and hot water), it will lead to a boost in your physical energy and improve your power to think. When you utilize this energy and power to improve your behavior and perform public service, you will do it with renewed vigor and inspiration and finally emerge victorious and highly successful in life."

Tantrik Yogi Ramesh Ji:"People come here to live in a restrained manner by exercising control over their senses. They have to live a disciplined life. Only this can be called kalpavas. Those who come as kalpavasiare supposed to have food once a day, bathe in the Ganga twice a day and the rest of their time must be spent in reciting God's name. The true melais a training to live with your senses under control. Only when humans do sadhanawill they get liberated. They will not be liberated by my doing it."



Sri Mahavtar Babaji, popularly known as Nainital Wale Baba: "During the Magh Mela, the particular astronomical system, astrophysical system and the scientific phenomenon totally correlate with this bathing ritual.

"Hindus believe that after bathing in the sangam their body and their inner consciousness will be purified. Hindus also believe that their lives totally depend on the currents of the Ganga and Yamuna. We believe that our spine has three parts--Ida, Pingala and Sushmna. They are blue, red and white. The red is the Saraswati, the White is the Ganges and the Blue is the Yamuna.

"My message is to live according to nature. Surrender to the will of God. Abandon the western culture--any culture which destroys the spirit of living for and giving to others."

Jagadguru Swami Krishnanand Teerth Shankaracharya, Ujjain Peetham and Joshi Matha, Gangotri: "The Magh Melais part of our rishi parampara (tradition of saints). It was the beautiful idea of our saints to have this mela. This melais one occasion when sadhus from all over India assemble and have discussions and deliberations on various issues concerning the religion and the nation. The saints also give directions on this occasion on how to check the adharmic (unrighteous) forces."

Pradeep Kumar Singh, a research fellow of University Grants Commission, age 25: "Events like this are a part of the glorious traditions of India. But the problem is, our youth want to be modern and elite in a western way, so they do not participate

in events like this, fearing that they may be labeled as backward. I would term westernization as cultural pollution. The time has come for the saints to launch a revolution of ideas and tell everybody of the spiritual powers of our rishis and our great ancient heritage. The youth must be told that it was due to our spiritual powers that we were on the top of the world at one point of time. When this is understood, the blind race for materialism and consumerism will stop."

Panda Shravan Kumar Sharma:"The Magh Melais a sangam of faith. Fifty lakh to one crore people gather here every year. No one goes and invites these people. The event is not advertised. But still tens of millions come here because they have a strong faith in their traditions and religion."

K.P. Tewari, age 44, bank official and long-time resident of Allahabad: "There is no doubt that the people of Allahabad face a lot of inconvenience due to mega-events like these. But we feel we are doing our duty by helping people to fulfill their spiritual aspirations. And, yes, the business in the city is intense during these events as a lot of money is spent by the tourists."

Ajay Singh,age 44, national secretary, World Hindu Federation, India Chapter:"For today's grihastha, householder, it is not possible to go to the jungle or forest to do penance and meditation. But grihasthascan easily come to the Magh Mela and do kalpavas[see sidebar, page 4]. It is a form of penance and worship together."

Raja Ram Tiwari, popularly known as Bhule Bhatke, "the one who is lost": "Over 8,000 men, women and children got separated from their families and, with our team of 150 volunteers, we arranged for their reunion. For those who have lost their way and reunion is not possible till night, they are provided food and other needs, all free of cost to the pilgrims. Those who get lost and have no money in their pockets are even given railway or bus fare to reach their home."

Dr. S.K. Pandey, mela adhikari, first in charge: "We make the arrangements here to the best of our abilities, but we always believe that all goes smoothly here only through the grace of God. If God's grace is not here, then the arrangements cannot be successful. You see, when you have lakhs of people, including old people and children and nothing adverse occurs, it is only due to God's grace."

Jagadguru Anantashri Vibhushit Swami Govindacharya, Ayodhya Peetham: "The question mark that has been put on Sanatana Dharma has to be answered properly. Science has given interpretations about our beliefs and practices that differ from our interpretation. I request Hindus all over the world to maintain our traditions. Our Sanatana Dharma must remain a dharma that always unites us."

Jagadguru Shankaracharya Swami Akhileshwaranand Teerthaji Maharaj: "My message for your readers is that they must exercise control on the two types of hunger. They are the hunger for sex and for food. If they do this, the quality of their lives will improve."

Len, a Holland national and disciple of Sacha Baba:"What I really liked was the scene where you could see tents and tents set up on all sides. And there was this constant flow of people coming to the mela from all directions. It was amazing to see such a large number of people coming for spirituality. I also like the Indian people for their joyfulness and simplicity. Looking into the eyes of Indian people is a beautiful experience. In fact, eye contact with people here is a meeting of hearts, with no need for words. I love being here."

Durga, a German desciple of Sri Sacha Baba of Rishikesh:"Oh! There are so many people. In the name of God they come here shouting "Jai Ram, Jai Ram." There are so many loud speakers working, but the atmosphere is very pleasant and quiet. Quiet may not be the right word, but it is indeed pleasant. I was fascinated with the morning scene on the banks of Ganga where pujawas being done."

There are plentiful accomodations for pilgrims in and around the Mela site. I happened to stay at the bungalow of the State Tourism Department, which I found quite pleasant. Hinduism Today's readers who would like to visit Allahabad can reach the bungalow's manager, Mr. Aziz Abbas, at:UPSTDC, Tourist Bungalow, 35, M.G. Marg, Civil Lines, Allahabad 211 001. Tel: 601-440 and 601-104.

### Sidebar: Explaining Mela Observances

The Indian month of Magh is from mid-January to mid-February and the melais celebrated throughout this month. Within this period, there are several favorable days for bathing in the Ganga, but the most auspicious time is during the phase of the

new moon, called amavasya, which is precisely calculated according to traditional Hindu astrology. Mauni amavasya occurs at a slightly different time each year due to the specific movements of the planets. This year, mauni amavasya fell between 2:00am to 2:00pm on January 20.

Pilgrims observe silence, mauna, while bathing, allowing for self-introspection and meditation. Thus arose the name mauni amavasya. Within the period of mauni amavasya, bathing before sunrise or at dawn is considered most auspicious.

Sadhus and sincere seekers stay for the entire month as a kalpavasi, one who performs sadhana and penance on the banks of the Ganga, including bathing in the Ganga daily. Religious texts also state that pilgrims should prostrate immediately upon arrival, then take a preliminary bath and thereupon, while the clothes are wet, have the head completely shaved and again bathe, offering gifts to the Brahmins and the poor.