One Pilgrim's Story
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Nothing stopped this Canadian crew

Is it possible to film the Kumbha Mela in all its complex, wild and unruly grandeur? Vancouver director Alan Morinis was optimistic before flying to Delhi in early April. "Armed with a solid budget plan and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's committment to air the film on TV, doors opened for the $150,000 funding," he told Hinduism Today. Airing later this fall, the film tracks a devout Hindu's pilgrimage from Vancouver to the Mela. Upon his return to Canada, Alan said, "Our insurance company had refused to cover us because it was India, meaning they anticipated many problems! A 1989 Mela team lost their cameraman for two days in crowds. In fact, we encountered almost none. Nobody got sick, no equipment was lost, stolen or broken, and good, clean food was available. To me, that was the gift of India to our project."

The team didn't quite know what to expect, but found it all well organized--tent camps, barricades, policemen at every corner and clear rules. It was difficult, as they sometimes had to walk five kilometers lugging cameras, tripods, extra tapes, accessories and lots of water. "The only unhelpful restriction was that filming at the bathing ghat was restricted to one tower, leaving us with a narrow angle," says Alan. Otherwise, all was magical. Led by a Hindi-speaking guide Hinduism Today found to help the team, they stumbled into natural sets serendipitously, like when shooting a simple evening scene of

flame-lit temples. "We suddenly spotted colorfully-costumed, flashy-eyed people and peacocks performing the dance of Radha and Krishna," recalls Alan--a perfectly unexpected spice in the script.

All were receptive to being filmed, contrary to warnings about Naga sadhus. Prior to the main procession, a policeman said, "You aren't our family. We aren't your relatives. We can't protect you if the Nagas decide they don't want to be filmed. If that happens, run for your life!" The cameraman, Len, blanched. But after he showed them proper respect, the Nagas responded enthusiastically. In another humorous instance, the crew caught a red-turbaned policeman dancing enthusiastically to the tune of drummers--a break from his usual stern demeanor while keeping crowds under control.

But the highlight--voted so by the whole team--was evening arati. Alan described the scene. "The Ganga arati song played on loudspeakers, ten million people sang along, the light got darker and evening colors deepened. Priests waved eight-foot flames over the river. Voices of the people, the song and the river all twined together. All the people had a common, powerful primal devotion. This ceremony is the climax of our film."

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