

Debunking ‘Kumbh Mela’ from a Sociological Perspective

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Abstract:

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Kumbh Mela which means the “festival of the Sacred Pitcher” is an important Hindu pilgrimage in India, that is celebrated approximately every 6, 12 and 144 years, correlated with the partial or full revolution of Jupiter and representing the largest human gathering in the world. Kumbh Mela has changed over time from a primary religious gathering to a socio-cultural and even a tourist event. Since its inception early in the first millennium CE, the Kumbh Mela has become the largest public gathering in the world; today it draws tens of millions of pilgrims over the course of a few weeks to bathe in the auspicious rivers. Thus today the picture of Kumbh Mela has taken a sharp change highlighting political interventions and has a more economic outcome.

This research focuses on two objectives:

- To analyze whether Kumbh Mela serves actually as a ‘melting pot’.
- To understand the process of how Kumbh Mela has become politicized and commercialized over time.

The researcher tries to find out more about the Kumbh Mela from a sociological perspective. The researcher has done a desk research based on secondary sources of data which include books, journals, articles of newspapers, video clippings and gazetteers.

The social significance of this research is to understand whether the Kumbh Mela acts as a melting pot of cultures and a powerful symbol of unity in diversity or not. The Kumbh Mela has various positive and negative consequences in the recent year. The role of the state, its politics, and commercialization has been studied to understand Kumbh mela from a sociological perspective subsiding the religious aspect.

Keywords: Kumbh, politics, religious beliefs, tourism, socio-cultural shift, false information, commercialization, exploitation.

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Brahmins, Sadhus and Sanyasis taking the first dip in the Kumbh Mela, 2025

https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theKumbhMelaIndia.com%2Fmaha-Kumbh-Mela-2025-traditions-rituals-and-significance%2F&psig=AOvVaw1NhZq3_Qbj9-e01gic9df0&ust=1745338186288000&source=images&cd=vfe&opi=89978449&ved=0CBQQjRxqFwoTCKDDi83B6YwDFQAAAAAdAAAAABA4, accessed on 22.04.2025.

1. Introduction:

The word Kumbh , meaning pot, symbolically embodies a repository ranging from the darkest to the brightest aspect of life, encompassing both venom and nectar. The Kumbh Mela is a significant Hindu pilgrimage and religious celebration. It is renowned as the world's largest peaceful gathering of people (Sen, 2024, p.1). The Kumbh Mela takes place in four locations in India every six years known as Ardh Kumbh Mela, twelve years known as Purna Kumbh Mela and after completion of 12 Purna Kumbh Mela i.e. after one hundred forty-four years takes place the Maha Kumbh Mela. The Ardh Kumbh Mela takes place at Haridwar and Allahabad (Prayag), while the Purna Kumbh Mela occurs at Prayag (Allahabad), Haridwar, Ujjain and Trimbakeshwar in Nashik.

The religious significance of Kumbh Mela is deeply rooted in Hindu mythology, particularly the story of the Samudra Manthan (churning of the ocean), where a pot (Kumbh) of nectar was involved. Devotees believe that bathing in the sacred rivers during the Kumbh Mela cleanses them of sins and brings them closer to spiritual liberation. It's a significant cultural event, drawing millions of pilgrims, including sadhus (holy men), saints, and devotees from all walks of life. The Kumbh Mela is a vibrant display of Hindu traditions, rituals, and spiritual practices. The Kumbh Mela in 2017 has been inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, acknowledging its cultural and spiritual significance (UNESCO, 2017).

Many organisations including the government have benefited from the word on the street. Since its inception early in the first millennium CE, the Kumbh Mela has become the largest public gathering in the world; today it draws tens of millions of pilgrims over the course of a few weeks to bathe in the auspicious rivers. Occurring at the sacred Triveni Sangam—where the Ganga, Yamuna, and mythical Saraswati rivers converge—the Mela attracted a staggering 650 million pilgrims over 45 days, surpassing initial estimates of 400 million (Dhar, 2025; Li, 2025). The event, determined by specific planetary alignments, is categorised into Maha Kumbh (144 years), Purna Kumbh (12 years), Ardh Kumbh (6 years), and the annual Magh Mela (Deshvidesh, 2025). The Mela provides a forum for both individual and collective expressions of faith as pilgrims, religious teachers, and followers of monastic orders converge from all parts of India.

Keeping the above discussion in mind, this research paper, with the help of various secondary sources like books, journals, newspaper articles, video clippings and gazetteers, and tries to debunk how the portrayal of the Kumbh Mela as a melting pot is far more complex than its claim. It also tries to highlight how the Maha Kumbh Mela is politicised and commercialized and has changed over time from a primary religious gathering to a socio-cultural and even a tourist event.

2. Kumbh Mela: Some basic facts

Kumbh Mela, where millions, without any formal invitation, gather on the banks of four sacred rivers. Many pilgrims and even non-pilgrims gather at the Sangam – the confluence of rivers Ganga, Yamuna, and mythological Sarswati in Prayagraj (erstwhile Allahabad), and on the banks of the Ganga at Haridwar,

the Shipra at Ujjain and the Godavari at Nasik. People take ritual baths to purify and make themselves free from the vicious cycle of life and death, and move towards a heavenly realm, where suffering or pain does not exist.

In India, rivers are revered as goddesses and have their significance in the life of every Indian. Being an integral part of Indian culture and religion, no Hindu ritual is complete without their presence, physical or virtual. People prefer to perform the most important rituals of the Hindu religion on the banks of a river. The magnificent event at Kumbh promises an eternal life free of sins.

Described as the ‘greatest show on the earth,’ Kumbh is a symbol of integration, a vessel or pot, in which quintessential wisdom, spiritual thoughts, and human philosophy, as contemplated by saints and seers are accumulated. The value of age-old Indian culture, from which have emerged streams of human bliss, meet in a confluence to revive and awaken Indian society from its torpor.

Maha Kumbh is held after 12 Purna Kumbh Melas, which is once every 144 years, at the confluence of rivers Ganga, Yamuna and mythological Saraswati. “The Maha Kumbh Mela was organised at Prayag after 144 years in 2001 (Sen, 2024, p.14).”

2.1 Stories related to the Kumbh Mela:

According to the myth of the Kumbh Mela- attributed to the Puranas (collections of myth and legend) but not found in any of them- gods and demons fought over the pot (Kumbh) of nectar (Amrit), the elixir of immortality produced by churning the milky ocean. During the struggle, drops of the elixir fell on the four places on the earth. The rivers there are believed to turn back into that primordial nectar at the climatic moment of each Kumbh Mela, giving pilgrims the chance to bathe in the essence of purity, auspiciousness, and immortality.

The origin of Kumbh, like any other tradition in India, is shrouded in a strange yet fascinating mix of myths, scientific reasoning, and historical and astrological theories. The most popular tale includes Kashyap Rishi who had two wives, Diti and Aditi. Diti gave birth to gods while Aditi gave birth to demons. They were in constant battle with each other, and once, the demons attacked the gods and defeated them. Led by Indra, the God of rain, the gods went to Brahma, the Creator, and narrated their ordeal. Brahma then took them to Lord Vishnu, who suggested they collect various herbs and put them in the Kshirsagar (ocean of milk) and churn out nectar by using Mandara Mountain as a churning rod and the serpent king Vsuki as a neti (rope). And after drinking the nectar, gods would become immortal and strong.

The gods sought the help of demons for this sturdy task of Samudramanthan and agreed to give them a share the elixir of immortality. During Samudramanthan, the first entity to appear was poison, which Lord Shiva drank. Due to this his throat became blue and he is called ‘Neel Kanth’ (the one with the blue throat). Apart from this, thirteen other opulent items, where a pitcher (Kumbh) of the nectar of immortality, emerged.

As soon as the Kumbh emerged, Jayant, the son of Indra, took it away in the direction of gods, who did not want to share the nectar with demons. Demons then chased Jayant and got him, but a battle ensued. The fight continued for 12 days and 12 nights. During this, Jayant kept the Kumbh at Prayag, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nasik and it is said that a few drops of nectar were spilt at these places. As one day of the gods is equivalent to 12 years on the earth, therefore the festival is celebrated at the interval of 12 years, as during this period, rivers become pure and give the power of amrit to worshippers. Then Lord Vishnu appeared as Vishwa Mohini to end the fight and lured the demons, and distributed Amrit among the gods. The Moon was assigned to prevent nectar from spilling; the Sun to protect the pot from breaking, Jupiter to safeguard Jayant, and Saturn helped Indra in order to protect it from the demons.

3. Does the Kumbh Mela actually serves as a ‘melting pot’?

While the Kumbh Mela is often portrayed as a spiritual melting pot, the reality is more complex, and critics (Yuman.H, 2025) argue that its practices, both overtly and subtly, can reinforce existing caste differences.

3.1 Historical and Traditional Segregation:

- **Separate Camps and Akhadas:** Historically, and to a large extent even today, different akhadas (sects of sadhus) and caste groups have maintained separate camps and spaces during the Mela (Sen, 2024). This physical segregation, though perhaps less rigid than in the past, still reflects underlying social divisions.
- **Ritual Hierarchy:** The very structure of Hindu pilgrimage and religious practices often inherently involves a caste hierarchy. Brahmins traditionally hold the highest position as priests and custodians of purity, influencing rituals and discourses at the Mela.
- **Purity and Pollution:** The concept of purity and pollution, central to the caste system, plays a role at the Kumbh . While the holy dip is seen as a universal purifier, the social implications of purity and who is considered "polluted" in daily life don't necessarily vanish within the Mela grounds.

3.2 Reinforcement of Caste-Based Labour:

- **Informal Economy:** Studies (Yuman.H, 2025) of the Kumbh Mela have highlighted how individuals from lower-caste communities often engage in informal labour like cleaning, construction, or selling small items, while upper castes and wealthier individuals tend to control larger businesses and formalized jobs. This economic stratification mirrors the broader caste-based division of labour in Indian society.
- **Marginalized Communities:** Dalit and other marginalized communities sometimes face exclusion from core rituals and the dominant religious framework of the Mela, even while their labour might be essential to its functioning.

3.3 Symbolic and Ideological Reinforcement:

- **Brahmanical Hinduism:** Some critics (Yuman.H, 2025) argue that the Kumbh Mela primarily celebrates and reinforces Brahmanical Hinduism, potentially marginalizing diverse cultural and spiritual practices of lower castes and tribal communities.
- **Perpetuation of Notions:** The emphasis on ritual purity within the Mela can unintentionally reinforce societal notions of purity and pollution that are fundamental to caste discrimination.

3.4 Limited Social Integration:

- **Fleeting Equality:** While the act of the holy dip might create a temporary illusion of equality, social interactions beyond the ritual often remain within established caste lines. The symbolic spiritual liberation doesn't necessarily translate to social emancipation.
- **Control of Spaces:** Historically, and to some extent even now, upper-caste authorities often control the primary spaces for religious and social engagement within the Mela, limiting the participation and influence of marginalized communities.

3.5 Counterarguments and Nuances:

It's important to note that many view the Kumbh Mela as a powerful symbol of unity and faith, where millions from diverse backgrounds come together. Efforts are also made by organizers and some religious leaders to promote inclusivity. However, the historical and ongoing influence of the caste system in Indian society means that its complete erasure, even in the supposedly egalitarian space of the Kumbh Mela, is a significant challenge.

One can sum up by saying that while the Kumbh Mela undoubtedly draws people from all walks of life, including different castes, the way its practices have historically evolved and continue to function can inadvertently perpetuate and reflect existing caste differences, making the "melting pot" tag an ideal that is not fully realized in practice. The temporary suspension of some social norms during the Mela might not fundamentally alter the deep-rooted realities of the caste system in the long run.

3.6 How the purity and pollution keeps getting implicated in the Kumbh Mela:

The Maha Kumbh Mela 2025, a grand religious gathering, underscores the intersection of devotion, caste, and labour. While the festival generates massive economic benefits, it also exposes stark social inequalities, particularly in the roles assigned to marginalised communities. Sanitation workers, primarily Dalits, bear the burden of maintaining the event's 'purity' yet remain socially 'impure.' Despite political gestures of inclusion, caste hierarchies persist, limiting Dalit participation to menial labour.

While Maha Kumbh Mela's massive budget and infrastructure projects highlight India's economic prowess and provide a massive boom to hotels, transport services, and local businesses (Dhingra, Agarwal, & Kazi, 2025), thousands of temporary jobs were also created. However, its execution remains deeply entangled in historical social structures. The festival's smooth functioning depends on labour overwhelmingly drawn from marginalised caste groups—particularly sanitation workers, who bear the burden of maintaining the 'purity' of the event. **This raises an essential question: If purity is being ritually restored at the Sangam, why do those who enable this purification remain 'impure' in social perception?** The event's sanitation workforce—primarily Dalits—was responsible for maintaining cleanliness, with 15,000 workers managing 1.5 lakh toilets, amounting to a staggering ratio of 43,333 pilgrims per worker (Dayal, Rajesh, & Fernandez, 2025).

The Maha Kumbh Mela, centred on the ritual bath in the Triveni Sangam, embodies the Hindu belief in purity and pollution. While the sacred dip is seen as a universal act of spiritual renewal, dissolving caste distinctions momentarily, this illusion of equality is short-lived. The caste hierarchy remains intact beyond the waters. Ambedkarite critics argue that such religious events perpetuate caste-based oppression, Brahmanical supremacy, and cultural homogenisation, reinforcing rather than dismantling social inequities (Ambedkar, 1948). They challenge state patronage of the Mela, contending that it aligns with Brahmanical Hinduism instead of fostering social democracy (Dalit Times, 2025).

Louis Dumont's framework of purity and pollution (Dumont, 1980) reveals how caste functions at the Kumbh Mela: Brahmins, as custodians of purity, remain at the top, while Dalits, essential to maintaining cleanliness, are relegated as "polluted." For upper castes, the dip affirms spiritual merit without challenging their status. For Dalits, it offers a fleeting moment of symbolic equality, only for caste stigma to resurface upon emerging from the water. Vaibhav Kharat critiques this as "ritualistic hypocrisy," drawing on Freud's theory of repression (Madison, 1961) and Mary Douglas' concept of purity as a social construct (Douglas, 1966) to show how caste Hindus seek personal purification while sustaining oppressive hierarchies (Kharat, 2025).

M.N. Srinivas' concept of Sanskritization (Srinivas, 1966) further explains how lower castes attempt social mobility through ritual purity, yet sanitation workers—mostly Dalits—remain trapped in a paradox. Their labour is indispensable for maintaining the event's cleanliness, yet their caste status deems them impure.

The contradiction is glaring—if the Ganges can purify all, why does caste impurity persist? Why does a sanitation worker who spends days cleaning the waste of millions remain polluted in the eyes of society,

even after immersing in the same waters that absolve a Brahmin's sins? This reinforces the fundamental truth that caste impurity is not just ritualistic but social—it is not washed away by holy water but reinforced through social structures and everyday interactions.

The Maha Kumbh Mela is not just a religious gathering but a microcosm of India's caste order. The pursuit of purity is upheld by those deemed impure, reinforcing structural exclusion. The dip in the Sangam symbolises spiritual liberation but does not lead to social emancipation for Dalits and informal workers. Rather than viewing these inequalities as administrative lapses, they must be recognised as systemic failures. If the Maha Kumbh truly seeks spiritual transcendence, it must redefine purity—not by exclusion, but through justice and dignity.

This contradiction speaks to a larger reality of caste and devotion in India. The ritual dip in the Sangam symbolises spiritual liberation, yet it does not translate into social emancipation for Dalits and informal workers. The Maha Kumbh Mela exposes how purity is an exclusionary construct that reinforces caste hierarchies even in moments of collective transcendence.

Rather than reducing these inequalities to mere administrative inefficiencies, it is crucial to recognise them as systemic failures. Suppose the Maha Kumbh Mela is to embody the spiritual ideals it proclaims genuinely. In that case, it must become a space of inclusion—one that acknowledges, values, and protects the dignity of those who sustain it. Beyond policy interventions, what is required is a reimagining of social ethics, where devotion does not come at the cost of dignity, and purity is not defined by exclusion but by justice.

4. Commercialization of the Kumbh Mela:

With a record-breaking economic footprint, the Uttar Pradesh government allocated \$2 billion for infrastructure, security, and religious tourism (Financial Express, 2025). The Kumbh has historically generated enormous revenues—12,000 crore in 2013, 1.2 lakh crore in 2019, and an estimated 2 lakh crore in 2025 on an expenditure of 5,000 crore (Taparia, 2025; Kotak Securities Team, 2025; Hindustan Times, 2025). This influx stimulated employment in tourism, transport, hospitality, and retail.

The event transformed Prayagraj into a 'pop-up megacity' spanning 4,000 hectares (Behal, 2025), with 1,60,000 tents, 1,50,000 toilets, 40 km of roads, and security monitored by 50,000 personnel and 2,700 cameras (Iyer, 2025). Connectivity enhancements included 3,000 special trains, 13,100 train services, 132 flights, 14 new flyovers, and 7,000 buses.

While the economic benefits are evident, concerns over environmental degradation, pollution, and overcrowding persist (Wagh & Kohli, 2024; Kanaujiya & Tiwari, 2023). Large-scale waste management challenges and deadly stampedes have repeatedly raised safety concerns (The Hindu, 2025). These issues underscore the urgent need for sustainable planning to balance faith, economy, and ecological well-being. The Prayagraj Maha Kumbh 2025 is expected to witness a participation that surpasses all previous records. With an estimated budget of Rs 7,500 crore for organizing the event, the Maha Kumbh is not only a spiritual event but also a massive logistical feat. Revenue generation is projected to reach Rs 200,000 crore in just 45 days, underscoring the significant impact the festival has on the economy, tourism, and local businesses. The Kumbh Mela's ability to unite people across caste, community, and regional lines reaffirms the Indian ethos of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the world is one family). It is not merely a religious gathering but a profound manifestation of civilizational unity that fosters Samajik Samrasta (social harmony).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has played a pivotal role in elevating the Kumbh Mela's significance on the global stage, while reinforcing its role in fostering social cohesion. His personal involvement, commitment to modernizing the event, and emphasis on its universal values have redefined the festival's narrative. PM Modi's visit to previous Kumbh Melas, where he took holy dips and honoured sanitation workers (Swachhagrahis), has set a strong precedent. By recognizing the contributions of these unsung heroes, he reinforced the ideals of social justice (Samajik Nyay) and inclusivity, aligning with the transformative vision of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan.

The Maha Kumbh Mela, heralded as a cultural beacon and a moment for uncomplicated celebration, at least in many media channels, also reflects the growing influence of religious nationalism, at the expense of the pluralistic ethos central to India's identity. The rebranding of spaces and narratives, such as the renaming of Allahabad to Prayagraj, encapsulates broader attempts to reshape India's cultural memory.

Émile Durkheim viewed the state as a central moral force, essential for maintaining social order and regulating moral life within a society. He believed the state had a vital role in moral education and the protection of individual rights, arguing that morality itself is a social fact rooted in the collective consciousness.

Jacob Moreno's Social Network Theory examines political phenomena through the lens of social networks, analyzing how connections between individuals, groups, and organizations shape political behavior, power dynamics, and the spread of ideas.

Mary Douglas's cultural theory emphasize the role of culture, norms, values, and ideologies in shaping political attitudes, behaviours, and institutions. It also explores how cultural meanings are constructed, contested, and influence political processes.

5. Politicization of Kumbh Mela: the case of Kumbh Mela- 2025:

The Mela is not only a spiritual phenomenon but also a political stage for India's Hindu Right. Under the administration of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the event has been heavily publicized as a showcase of Hindu culture and religiosity. However, critics argue that it represents a deliberate effort to bolster majoritarian narratives while sidelining India's cultural and religious diversity. The BJP's framing of the Kumbh Mela as a monumental Hindu event reflects its broader agenda of promoting religious nationalism and a kind of majoritarianism that marginalizes the pluralistic ethos enshrined in India's constitution. There is an ongoing and expanding program of cultural erasure emblemized by cities with deep multi-religious histories, such as Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad), are being rebranded to emphasize Hindu heritage while side-lining their Islamic (specifically) syncretic pasts.

Ananya Vajpeyi (2025), writing in Bloomberg, highlights how the Kumbh Mela is being utilized to flatten India's cultural diversity into a monolithic religious identity. Vajpeyi notes that while the Mela draws millions of devotees seeking spiritual fulfillment, it also provides the BJP extraordinary access to its predominantly Hindu electoral base, leveraging the event for political capital.

In 2018, the Adityanath government changed the name of Ardh Kumbh to Kumbh , to scale up its significance, as part of the BJP's saffron politics. A year later, the government organised a Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj, which would be remembered for its heavy politicisation as Adityanath broke traditions to

convene a meeting of his cabinet, usually held at the secretariat in the capital of Lucknow, on the ghats of the Sangam during the Mela.

Adityanath conducted a cabinet meeting in the Mela this year i.e. 2025 as well.

The BJP government has marketed the 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela as an event happening after a gap of 144 years. If that's true, it means that the last such celestial event was held in 1881. However, this theory appears to be filled with gaps. In 2023, six years after Adityanath started ruling UP, his government published a document titled 'Guidelines for Managing Crowds at Events of Mass Gathering, 2023'. The 60-odd page document was published by the state disaster management authority and had a large, beaming photograph of Adityanath on the cover.

Referring to the stampede at the Allahabad railway station during the 2013 Maha Kumbh Mela that was held under the rule of the Samajwadi Party, the document stated, "The 2013 event was considered a Maha Kumbh Mela, which comes only once every 144 years. It lasted 55 days and was expected to be attended by 100 million pilgrims, making it the largest temporary gathering of people in the world at that time." (Audit Report, Government of UP, 2014)

5.1 The '144 years' debate:

CAG's performance audit of the 2013 Kumbh Mela also mentioned the gathering as a Maha Kumbh Mela (MKM), held for 55 days from January 14 to March 10 that year.

The CAG report said that the Melas, held in Allahabad (now Prayagraj) in the month of Magh (11th month of the Samvat calendar, January-February) are graded in the order of religious significance on the basis of periodicity.

"Maha Kumbh Mela (MKM) is held every 144 years, Purna Kumbh Mela (KM) every twelve years, Ardh Kumbh Mela (AKM) every six years and Magh Mela every year on the banks of river Ganga and its tributary Yamuna," the CAG report stated.

'Kumbh Mela-Mapping the Ephemeral Mega City', an inter-disciplinary book published by researchers from Harvard University on the 2013 Maha Kumbh Mela, however, said that it was the 2001 Maha Kumbh Mela that was held after 144 years.

"The Maha Kumbh, which occurs every 144 years, last took place in 2001 in Allahabad," it said.

In his short book, *The Kumbh Mela*, senior British journalist Mark Tully (2001), documented his experience of covering the 1989 Maha Kumbh Mela in Allahabad.

On page 12 of the book, Tully documents how the priests believed that the 1989 version of the Mela was being held after 144 years:

"The pandits said that 1989 would be the most important Kumbh Mela for 144 years because of the particularly auspicious position of the stars and planets. I had read the pandits' predictions and the official report on the preparations for the Mela, so I was very surprised when I arrived in Allahabad a week before the big bathe to find administrators, journalists, religious leaders and the local clergy all worried that the millions might not turn out this time."

A documentary on the 1989 Mela, produced by the UP information department, and available online, however, referred to the 1989 event as a Purna Kumbh.

5.2 No mention of '144 years' on official sites:

The official websites of the Prayagraj district and the 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela also do not mention anything about the event being held after 144 years, as projected by the government and members of the Akhara Parishad – the apex umbrella body of the 13 Hindu sects in India.

The Prayagraj district website says, "The Kumbh held every six years and Maha Kumbh Mela every 12

years at Prayagraj (Sangam) are the largest gatherings of pilgrims on this earth. The most recent Maha Kumbh Mela was held in 2013 and the next is due in 2025.”

The official website of the Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 says, “The Maha Kumbh Mela, a sacred congregation that unfolds every twelve years, is more than a spectacular gathering of millions – it is a spiritual odyssey that delves into the very essence of human existence.”

If the last Maha Kumbh Mela was held 144 years ago, in 1881, when the British ruled over the country, it would perhaps find a mention in their records. However, the gazetteer of Allahabad published by British officer H.R. Nevill in 1911, also does not refer to 144 years.

The gazetteer says that the last Kumbh Mela was held in 1906 – which is 119 years before the 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela.

“Every 12th year when the sun is in Aries, and the planet Jupiter is simultaneously in Aquarius, occurs a Kumbh , and on such occasions, a vastly greater concourse assembles,” the gazetteer said.

The claims about 144 years took a political turn when last week Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav, while campaigning for the bypoll election in Milkpur in Ayodhya, took a jocular dig at the government.

6. How politicization of the Kumbh mela further led to complex implications:

6.1 Positive implications-

6.1.1 Eco-friendly Implications- This year's Kumbh Mela showcases significant advancements in sustainable practices. The use of biodegradable materials like leaf plates and clay cups, a ban on single-use plastics, and the introduction of eco-friendly taxis and solar-powered lights highlight efforts to reduce environmental impact. Additionally, waste segregation initiatives and a plastic buyback program are setting a precedent for efficient waste management. As global attention shifts to decarbonizing mega-events, the Kumbh Mela serves as a case study for the challenges and successes of integrating sustainability into a mega-events’s planning and execution — hopefully offering lessons, and perhaps even a model for global gatherings to balance cultural richness with ecological responsibility.

6.1.2 Navigating Health and Medication - The Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 offers not only a spiritual journey for millions but also a significant case study on public health challenges. The event is attracting attention globally for its devotion, politics and scale, but also for the potential health risks it poses amid seasonal flu and other public health concerns. The Kumbh Mela has become a key focus for health experts due to risks such as acute respiratory infections, water-borne diseases, and challenges related to crowd management.

6.1.3 AI- Technology used at the Kumbh Mela - For the first time, advanced Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology is being deployed at this massive gathering to ensure crowd management and enhance the safety and convenience of attendees. This development reflects a significant intersection of tradition and innovation, with profound implications for how such events are managed in the future. 328 AI-enabled cameras installed across the Mela area provide 24/7 surveillance. These cameras generate alerts based on real-time crowd behaviour, enhancing human intelligence with automated monitoring. A "khoya paaya kendra" (lost-and-found center) is equipped with facial recognition technology to reunite individuals separated from their loved ones. Details of missing persons are digitized and shared across platforms like Facebook and X, expediting the process.

6.2 Negative Implications-

The Maha Kumbh Mela 2025, a massive religious gathering in Prayagraj, India, hosting tens of millions of pilgrims, inevitably led to significant environmental challenges. However, authorities implemented various measures to mitigate these impacts, striving for a balance between tradition and sustainability.

6.2.1 Water Pollution:

- **Stress on Rivers:** The sheer number of devotees taking dips in the Ganga and Yamuna rivers placed immense pressure on the water quality. Concerns arose about increased fecal contamination and overall pollution levels.
- **Initial Concerns:** Reports prior to and during the Mela highlighted elevated levels of fecal coliform in the Sangam (confluence of Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati), exceeding permissible limits for safe bathing.
- **Government Response:** The government implemented measures such as increasing monitoring points, regular water quality testing, and ensuring the operation of sewage treatment plants (STPs) to manage the increased wastewater. Temporary STPs and geo-tubes were also set up to treat additional sewage.
- **Conflicting Reports:** While initial reports indicated concerning pollution levels, a later report by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) stated that, based on statistical analysis accounting for data variability, the water quality at Sangam was "fit for bathing" during the Mela.

6.2.2 Waste Management:

- **Enormous Waste Generation:** The congregation of millions daily resulted in a massive amount of solid waste, faecal sludge, and greywater.
- **Technological Solutions:** Advanced technologies like Hybrid Granular Sequencing Batch Reactor (HGSBR) and Geotube Technology were deployed for efficient treatment of faecal sludge and greywater.
- **Comprehensive System:** A comprehensive waste management system was implemented, including source-level waste segregation, a large number of color-coded litter bins and portable toilets, and a dedicated fleet of vehicles for waste collection and transportation to a central processing plant.
- **Plastic Ban and Eco-friendly Alternatives:** A ban on plastic bags, utensils, and bottles was enforced, promoting the use of biodegradable alternatives.
- **Community Engagement:** Initiatives like the "One Plate-One Bag" campaign encouraged pilgrims to use reusable steel plates and cloth bags.
- **Post-Mela Clean-up:** A large-scale clean-up drive was initiated immediately after the Mela to restore the Kumbh area to its original state.

6.2.3 Other Environmental Concerns:

- **Open Defecation:** Despite the installation of a large number of bio-toilets, allegations of open defecation along the riverbanks emerged, leading to notices from the National Green Tribunal (NGT) to the Uttar Pradesh government.
- **Habitat Disruption:** Infrastructure development for such a large event can lead to habitat disruption along the riverbanks.
- **Resource Strain:** The massive influx of people puts a strain on local natural resources, including water and energy.

6.2.4 Mitigation Efforts and Sustainability Focus:

- **Eco-Friendly Initiatives:** Organizers emphasized eco-friendly measures such as using biodegradable

materials for temporary shelters, strict regulations on plastic use, and enhanced waste management systems.

- **Green Mobility:** The promotion of e-rickshaws and electric autos aimed to reduce the carbon footprint within the Mela area.
- **Scientific Collaboration:** Leading Indian scientific institutions contributed to developing and implementing innovative waste management solutions.
- **Financial Commitment:** The Uttar Pradesh government allocated a significant portion of the Mela budget towards waste and water management.
- **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** Efforts were made to align the Mela's organization with various United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, focusing on public health, clean energy, innovation, and responsible consumption.

6.2.5 Accidents in Kumbh Mela:

- **Stampede** – On 29th January, a stampede occurred at the Sangam area in Prayagraj due to a large number of pilgrims rushing to take a holy dip on Mauni Amavasya. This resulted in at least 30 deaths and 90 injuries. The stampede took place between 1-2 a.m., when a huge crowd broke the barricades, which led to casualties. Around 60 individuals were injured in the stampede. Although according to a news report by newslaundry that at least 79 people died due to the stampede.

The Uttar Pradesh government announced ₹25 lakh in financial assistance for the families of the deceased. Another fire incident occurred on the day following the tragic stampede.

A second crush in the following hours killed seven people including a three-year-old child.

- **Fire –**

1. On 19th January, a fire broke out at the Maha Kumbh campsite in Prayagraj due to a cylinder blast. Six tents and 40 mud houses were engulfed in the flames. One person was injured while trying to escape from the spot.
2. On January 25, two cars caught fire in Sector 2 of the Maha Kumbh fair area. No casualties were reported in the incident which occurred due to a short circuit in one. The fire from the first car engulfed another vehicle parked beside it.
3. On 30th January, 15 tents were gutted after they caught fire near Chamanganj Chowki, outside Sector 22 in the Maha Kumbh Mela. No casualties were reported.
4. On 7th February, a fire broke out at a camp near Tulsi Chauraha on Old GT Road. Though no casualties were reported.

- **Road Accidents –**

1. On 25th February, two pilgrims from Chadachan in Vijayapura district of Karnataka, who were going to the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, died in a road accident near Porbandar in Gujarat. The accident occurred when their minibus rammed into another vehicle.
2. On 15th February, car carrying devotees from the central Indian state of Chattisgarh rammed into a bus on the Prayagraj-Mirzapur highway in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. Ten people died and another 19 people were also injured in the incident.

- **New Delhi Railway Station Incident** – On 15th February, 18 people were killed and fifteen were injured in a stampede that broke out late Saturday night at the New Delhi Railway Station. The stampede was preceded by a swell in crowd of passengers waiting to board trains for Prayagraj — where the Maha Kumbh is underway — on platform number 12 and 14 of the station. The Delhi Police found in its initial investigation the deadly stampede at the New Delhi Railway Station (NDLS)

happened as passengers got confused between 'Prayagraj Express' and 'Prayagraj Special', and thought they might miss their train, police sources said. Of the 18 dead, three girls aged seven, eight and fifteen, one young woman of 24 years, nine females aged 35 to 45 and one elderly lady aged 70 years died. Also, one boy aged 12 years, one man aged 25 years and two men aged 45 and 47 years lost their lives. Of the 15 injured, nine are males and six are females. Three have received grievous injuries and 12 have simple injuries. Additionally, four trains were heading to Prayagraj, out of which three were delayed, causing an unexpected overcrowding.

Karl Marx's theory of religion (Smith.C, 2005) as the "opium of the masses" suggests that religion serves as a form of social control, providing solace and illusory happiness to the oppressed, thus distracting them from the real sources of their suffering and preventing them from challenging the existing social and economic order which is seen in the Kumbh Mela.

7. Major Findings:

The claim that Kumbh Mela acts as a 'melting pot' is not completely true and a far more complex issue. Even today after 77 years of independence, India could not come out of the clutches of the caste system and varna system. Though the Indian Constitution claims India to be a secular state, the Indian government has made various arrangements and resource allocations for the Kumbh Mela.

Kumbh Mela has been commercialized and made a tourist spot especially by the state. The government has also earned a lot amount of revenue from the Kumbh Mela in 2025 which is the highest as compared to the previous Kumbh Melas. A lot of people has actually used the popularity of the Mela and made a business oriented approach to gain more profit from it. Other than this, the state has used political influence and there is a big question whether the Kumbh Mela of 2025 is actually occurring after 144 years. The spread of this hype had led to a numerous accidents and numerous environmental hazards.

Thus Kumbh Mela has transcended more from a popular religious gathering to a more complex ritual.

8. Conclusion:

Ultimately, it is difficult to conclude that Kumbh Mela actually serves as a 'melting pot' as the caste differences are prominently present. The Kumbh Mela has been politicized and commercialized and the state plays a huge role in doing so. Thus the Maha Kumbh Mela of 2025 has become the intersection of tradition and modernity, devotion and responsibility, and spirituality and politics offers invaluable lessons—not just about managing and understanding mass gatherings, but about how we navigate the complexities of faith, community, and shared humanity in an increasingly interconnected and polarized world. It underscores a critical paradox: it celebrates humanity's deep longing for connection and shared purpose while reflecting the stark and often politically cynical polarization of contemporary India, where faith and tradition are increasingly intertwined with religious and nationalist agendas. The challenge lies in learning how such events can inspire unity and progress without being co-opted to deepen divides or erode the pluralistic values that are essential to a just and inclusive society.

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