The Indian EXPRESS
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A water rejuvenation lesson from the Maha Kumbh

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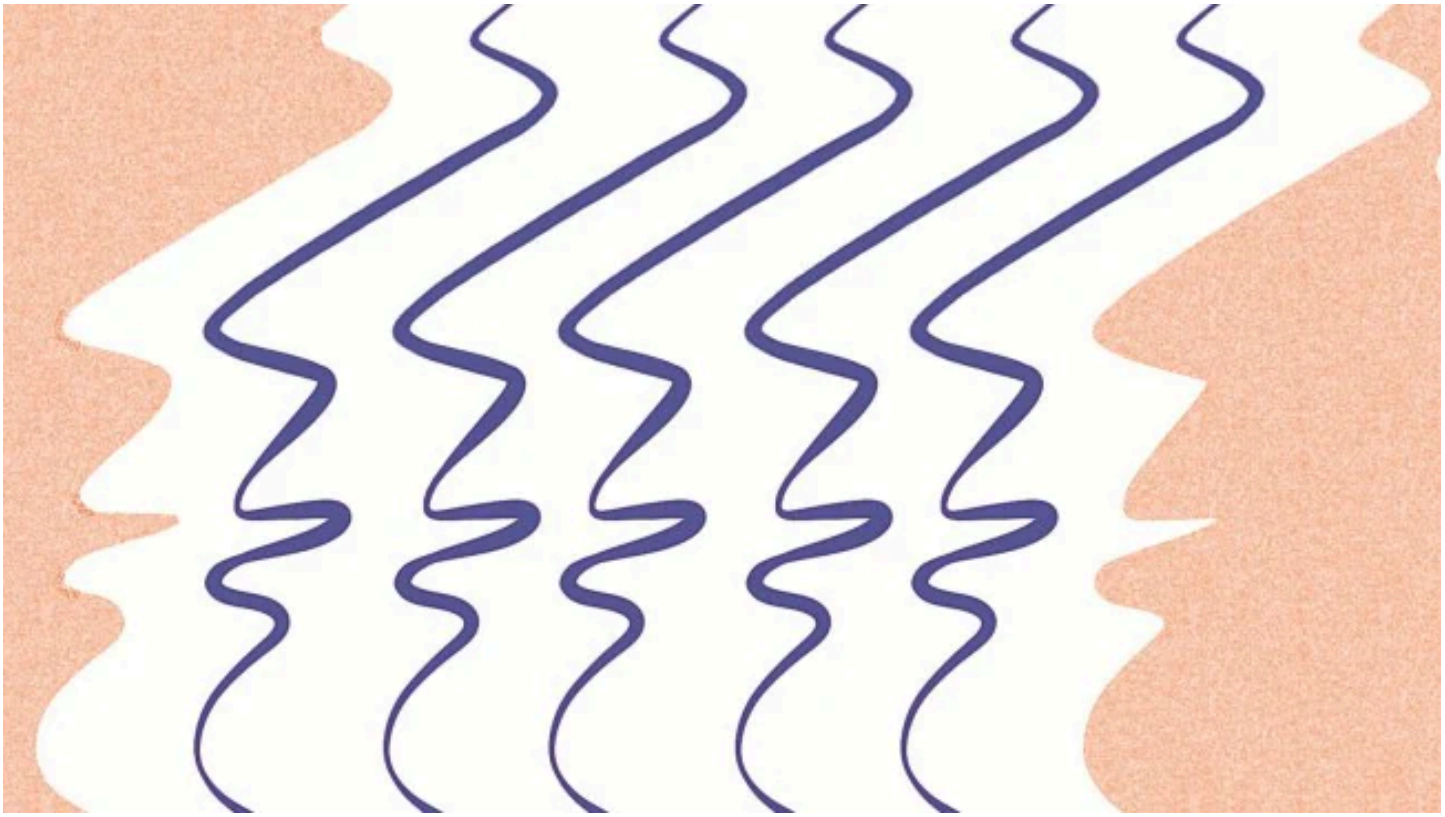

The Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj takes place along a stretch of about 20 km and in an area of 40 square km around the sangam of the Ganga, the Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati (Illustration by C R Sasikumar)

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April 16, 2025 07:01 AM IST
First published on: Apr 16, 2025 at 06:51 AM IST

Prayagraj hosted more than 60 crore pilgrims and visitors over a span of 45 days during the Maha Kumbh, according to the estimates of the Uttar Pradesh government. The world has witnessed the religious and spiritual fervour that moved the entire nation while it celebrated its reverence for the river goddess Ganga. Yet, the event is fundamentally a manifestation of a profound and deep-seated river-society relationship. Cultural gatherings such as the Maha Kumbh are known to happen along rivers and water bodies. Can we leverage this relationship for the enduring rejuvenation of rivers and water bodies?

The **Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj** takes place along a stretch of about 20 km and in an area of 40 square km around the sangam of the Ganga, the Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati. The river bed and surrounding area are transformed into a temporary settlement to receive the pilgrims and visitors. A Harvard University study called it an “ephemeral mega-city”. Built in just eight to 10 weeks in the belly of the river, the city is unbuilt as swiftly, before the river begins to swell. An amazing convergence of cultural, economic and political interests produces this spectacle of making and unmaking the ephemeral city. The city turns into a theatre for celebrating the spiritual connection with the river.

At the same time, the staggering footfall and the mind-numbing scale of rituals and practices along the river stretch, over such a short period, raise concerns about their impact on the river. The Central Pollution Control Board’s (CPCB) monitoring during this Maha Kumbh, as well as the one in 2013, showed high levels of faecal coliform, more so during the amrit snan (auspicious bathing) days. There have been deliberate efforts to respond and mitigate this by allowing adequate flows in the river. There has also been an upsurge of environmental action, both by state institutions and civil society, to mitigate the impact.

The spectacle of the Maha Kumbh is, thus, subject to two seemingly divergent narratives. One that is focused on society and spirituality — it eulogises the virtues of the Indian spiritual traditions of respect and reverence towards nature. The other, shaped by the emerging environmental challenges, is the impact of mass gatherings and a variety of ritual practices on river ecologies.

On the face of it, the two appear conflicting. But a focus on the river-society relationship, embodied by the Maha Kumbh and similar events, can lead to progressive outcomes. The profundity of the relationship is as unfathomable as that of the spectacular nature of the Maha Kumbh. Often described as aastha (deeper than the loose translation, faith), can this embedded spiritual consciousness be deployed for ecological purposes?

It would not be a stretch of imagination to say that indigenous practices — spiritual or non-spiritual — often embody an ecological ethic of conservation. Using indigenous metaphors and practices can be very effective in pursuing environmental outcomes. The recent example of the popular leader Morari Bapu's successful campaign to protect the whale shark in the Saurashtra coastal region is one example.

Such deployment of spiritual consciousness can possibly address a critical gap in the efforts to rejuvenate rivers, especially the Namami Gange programme to clean the Ganga. The programme is unprecedented in its scope, scale and significance and has led to a visible and tangible impact in improving the river's ecological status. But there are two challenges in sustaining this impact. One pertains to the sub-national institutionalisation of the programme for its enduring impact. Discernible institutional mandates or budgetary allocations at the sub-national scale remain elusive. The other is the continuing pollution loads from non-point sources — these are contributed by a multitude of stakeholder interest groups along the river.

The latter is difficult to address without changing the behaviour of people in their everyday engagement with the river. People's engagement with the river must complement and catalyse the efforts of agencies like the National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG). They provide the sub-national churning and accountability that are necessary to make river rejuvenation efforts enduring. Building on aastha can turn the mission into a truly people's programme for an improved ecological status of the river.

The challenge, however, is about unpacking aastha and turning it into an astra — an instrument. While much needs to be understood about the enigmatic aastha, it can begin with its material manifestations — the rituals and practices that impact the river's ecologies. There is a risk here of privileging ritual practices and reinforcing the social and spiritual power hierarchies. These can be avoided through a deeper understanding of the ecosystem that sanctions and sustains the rituals and practices.

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Thus, the takeaway is to bring the rituals and practices to the centre of our analysis. Not just for channelling spiritual consciousness but also to unravel the underlying ecological ethic. This requires recognising that the rituals and practices are informed and constructed by a web of agents, actors and networks. These range from priests, pandas and pandits to popular preachers and spiritual thought-leaders as well as institutions such as ashrams and akharas. These networks transcend the spiritual realm. They can often be driven by the interests of the political economy. The reimagining of rituals must involve working with these networks and institutions to produce means and meanings that can complement river rejuvenation efforts.

India's rivers and water bodies host gatherings of cultural and spiritual significance — a legend usually provides the convening power. And, the river-society relationship unravels in myriad ways: Legends, rituals, beliefs, and practices. It is not restricted to kumbh gatherings but extends to other festivals — the Chhath Puja, for instance. It is time to bring the confluence of culture with river ecologies to the centre of analysis for an Indian model of river rejuvenation and water conservation.

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Chhath Puja # Clean Ganga Mission # Express Premium # Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 # Prayagraj Kumbh Mela