

Reading Rituals for River Rejuvenation at Maha Kumbh 2025



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1. INTRODUCTION: RITUALS AND RIVER-SOCIETY RELATIONSHIP

The Maha Kumbh 2025 in Prayag Raj hosted more than 65 crore pilgrims and visitors over a span of 45 days, going by the estimates of the Government of Uttar Pradesh. The world has witnessed the religious and spiritual fervor that moved the entire nation in celebrating its reverence to the river Goddess Ganga. Yet the event is fundamentally a manifestation of a profound and deep-seated river-society relationship. Maha Kumbh and similar cultural gatherings around water bodies are manifestations of a profound river-society relationship. **Can the rituals and practices in the intersection be reimagined to turn river rejuvenation into a people's programme?**

The colossal Maha Kumbh in Prayag Raj happens over a stretch of about **20 km** and in an area of **40 square km** around the **Triveni Sangam of Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati**. The riverbed and the surrounding area is transformed into a temporary settlement to receive the large number of pilgrims and visitors. A **Harvard University study** called it an *Ephemeral megacity*. Built in just 8-10 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 the making and unmaking of the ephemeral city. The city turns into a theater 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 that it raises concerns about their impact on the river. The Central Pollution Control Board's (CPCB) monitoring during this Maha Kumbh, as well as that in 2013 showed high levels of fecal 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. As witnessed at the Kumbh of Prayag Raj, there has also been an upsurge of environmental action to mitigate the impact, both by the state institutions and the civic society.



Aerial view of Triveni Sangam on Mauni Amavasya (TREADS@CPR)

1.1 Converging the conflictual

The spectacle of *Maha Kumbh* is subjected to two outwardly divergent narratives. One that is focused on society and spirituality – eulogising the virtues of the Indian spiritual traditions of respect and reverence towards nature. The other, shaped by the emerging environmental challenges, is how mass gatherings accompanied by a variety of ritual practices impact river ecologies.

On the face of it, these two appear conflicting. But a focus on the river-society relationship embodied by the *Maha Kumbh* and similar events can offer a powerful convergence for progressive outcomes. The profundity of the relationship is as unfathomable as that of the spectacularity of the *Maha Kumbh*. Often described as '*Aastha*' (deeper than the loose translation of 'faith'), can this embedded spiritual consciousness be deployed for that of ecological?

It is by no means a stretch of imagination if we consider the vast literature that recognises how indigenous practices – spiritual or otherwise – often embody ecological ethics of conservation. Using indigenous metaphors and practices can be very effective in pursuing environmental

outcomes. Consider the recent example of Morari Bapu, the popular spiritual leader's successful campaign for protecting Whale Shark in the Saurashtra coastal region.

1.2 Namami Gange: Towards a people's programme

Such deployment of spiritual consciousness can possibly address an important gap in the efforts to rejuvenate rivers, especially the *Namami Gange* programme for cleaning Ganga. The programme is unprecedented in its scope, scale and significance that has led to visible and tangible impact in improving its ecological status. But sustaining this impact is confronted with two challenges. One is about the subnational institutionalisation of the programme for its enduring impact. Discernible institutional mandates or budgetary allocations at a subnational scale remain elusive. The other is the continuing pollution loads from nonpoint sources – contributed by a multitude of stakeholder interest groups along the river.

The latter is a difficult one to address without changing the behaviour of the populations 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). It provides the necessary subnational churning and accountabilities for an enduring and invigorating impact of river rejuvenation efforts. Building on the *Aastha* can turn the mission into truly a people's programme for an improved ecological status of the river.

1.3 Unpacking Aastha as an Astra: Reimagine rituals for rejuvenation

The challenge, however, is the part about unpacking *Aastha* to turn it into an *Astra*. While much needs to be understood about the enigmatic *Aastha*, it can begin with its material manifestations: the rituals and practices impacting the river ecologies. This is, however, filled with the trappings of privileging ritual practices and reinforcing the social and spiritual power hierarchies. These trappings can be avoided through a deeper understanding of the ecosystem that sanctions and sustains the rituals and practices.

The takeaway, thus, is to bring the rituals and practices to the centre of our analysis. Not just for channelling the spiritual consciousness but also to unravel the underlying ecological ethic. This warrants 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, extending to the institutionalised versions, including ashrams, akharas, and other institutional forms. These networks transcend the spiritual realm. They can often be driven by political economic interests. According to one estimate, the Maha Kumbh period in Prayag Raj had three lakh crore transactions of USD 360 billion value. Reimagining rituals must work with these networks and institutions to produce means and meanings towards complementing river rejuvenation efforts.

India's rivers and water bodies host gatherings of cultural and spiritual significance, with one or other legend providing the convening power. And the river-society relationship unravels in a variety of ways: legends, rituals, beliefs, and practices. It is not restricted to *Kumbh* gatherings alone but extends to other festivals such as *chaat puja*. It is time for bringing this cultural confluence with river ecologies to the centre of analysis for an Indian model of river rejuvenation and water conservation.



Prayers to River Ganga at Arail ghat, Prayagraj

2. READING THE RITUALS FOR RIVER REJUVENATION AT MAHAKUMBH 2025

Kumbh is a mix of things, as Adi Shankaracharya made it popular, saying if you come here, you'll find something. There's a scientific reason behind it, too, like how the river is in that state and why it's good for your body because it's filled with nectar. Then there's its mythological value, like earning good karma. Therefore, the central legend behind the Kumbh Mela is based on Samudra Manthan, a mythical story in Hinduism, which is the churning of the ocean. The nectar of immortality was dropped in the scuffle between the demons and the gods. Therefore, the drops of nectar created a gathering around the river where it is believed that bathing in these holy rivers at a certain time will purify the soul and gain spiritual merit.

We all benefit from our good deeds, and together we go to the Kumbh Mela. It's all about that feeling of virtue. Our actions now affect our next life, and this idea has been passed down through generations. Everyone believes in some saint or local god, and this knowledge is common among people. Thousands, even millions, have been going there since ancient times.

The study employed a multi-stage, mixed-methods design with roots in ethnographic and observation methods for deconstructing the socio-ecological aspects of the Maha Kumbh and its possible contribution to river rejuvenation. The research design was made to conform closely to the project's expressed aims:

- (1) Documentation of rituals and their ecological implications,**
- (2) understanding river-society relationships,**
- (3) mapping power dynamics in ritual materialization, and**
- (4) exploring the redeployment of these dynamics for sustainable outcomes.**

1. Literature Review: We initiated the research with a broad review of the available literature. The first aspect was to refer to the spatiality and rituals of Kumbh and snowball to literature exploring the ecological and sociocultural dimensions. Through it, we could identify the prime stakeholder groups relevant to our study, including the Panda Pujaris, Kalpavasis,

Sadhus, Pilgrims and vendors, as well as the spectrum of rituals at Kumbh Mela. It laid the groundwork for understanding the spatial and institutional context of the Kumbh, serving as a conceptual anchor for our future research.

- 2. Pre-Kumbh Field Visit:** Before the Kumbh Mela kicked off, we made reconnaissance trips to get a feel for the layout of the Mela sites and the organisational structure of the infrastructures. Through ethnographic field observation, we began to grasp the ritual space, the flow of materials, and the roles of various stakeholders. This initial phase was crucial in shaping our survey instruments and guiding our operational engagement plan.
- 3. Instrument Design and Pilot Testing:** Three professionally designed survey instruments were created in order to study the ritual activities, motivational models, and material connection of three significant stakeholder groups: Pilgrims, Panda Pujaris, and Small Vendors. The instruments were piloted through a pilot study and were subsequently redesigned for accuracy, reliability, and contextual appropriateness based on feedback given by research assistants and preliminary field data.
- 4. Quantitative and Qualitative Data Collection:** After the Maha Kumbh had begun at all pace, field data collection was undertaken with the new survey instruments. The surveys were undertaken by a trained group of research assistants, and, at the same time, field qualitative notes were collected by them. Quantitative data were used to identify the principal rituals, material practices, and livelihood linkages. Narrative field notes, on the other hand, yielded data on spatial and behavioural dynamics inaccessible to structured instruments.
- 5. 2nd Field Visit:** Core research participants undertook semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders such as pilgrims, Kalpavasis, Akhara members, panda pujaris, and sadhus to draw out richer meanings and motivations behind ritual action, how these are bonded with the river, and the mediational power relations which underlie these interactions. Moreover, our understanding regarding the ritual-ecology interlinkage at the Kumbh deepened.

Our team had also created a guide for audio-visual documentation of the event prior to the visit. Following this guidebook, we attempted an overall audio-visual documentation – rituals, stakeholder interactions and spatial mapping of the Mela. We utilized still photography, video, and even drone footage to record key moments and locations. This strategy not only served as a research archive but also fostered public engagement and information sharing.

We collected insights from important stakeholder groups to validate the themes that emerged, share experiences, and discuss how we could incorporate ecologically conscious practices into traditional rituals. The interviews we undertook strengthened our qualitative understanding and provided us with participatory insights. After the conclusion of our visits and their data analysis, we also deep-dived into the secondary data about the recently conducted Kumbh, including the reports from CPCB and NGT documents. We examined the institutional construct of the river water quality management for the event at different scales.

- 6. Synthesis and Reporting:** The final task was to triangulate primary data findings, secondary sources, and visual data to create a composite narrative according to the project aims. The findings were structured in a report and complemented by a curated audio-visual repository to enable dissemination and policy uptake.

3. LEGENDS, RITUALS, CUSTOMS & PRACTICES AT MAHA KUMBH

Kumbh is a mix of things, as Adi Shankaracharya made it popular, saying if you come here, you'll find something. There's a scientific reason behind it, too, like how the river is in that state and why it's good for your body because it's filled with nectar. Then there's its mythological value, like earning good karma. Therefore, the central legend behind the Kumbh Mela is based on Samudra Manthan (*mentioned in 3.1*), a mythical story in Hinduism, which is the churning of the ocean. The nectar of immortality was dropped in the scuffle between the demons and the gods. Therefore, the drops of nectar created a gathering around the river where it is believed that bathing in these holy rivers at a certain time will purify the soul and gain spiritual merit.

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In the context of Kumbh, the Vedas mention in bits and pieces about the existence of Kumbh as a "pot or pitcher" in Sanskrit. The Kumbh Mela as we know it today is not explicitly mentioned in the Vedas. But the word 'Kumbha' or its derivatives are found as an assembly around water or the nectar of immortality.

3.1 The Legend of Kumbh – The Elixir of Immortality

It is a religious belief that by taking a holy dip in the Sangam during the Maha Kumbh Mela, all man's sins are destroyed. Therefore, the legend of Kumbh is of great pride, divine interventions, and the retrieval of powers.

It is said in the **Skanda Purana** (*'Bathing Mantra'*/'स्नान मंत्र'):

ॐ गङ्गे च यमुने चैव गोदावरि सरस्वति ।
नर्मदे सिन्धु कावेरि जलेऽस्मिन् सन्निधिं कुरु ॥

May the waters of the holy rivers of India – Ganges, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindu and Cauvery – merge into this water.

The **Ganga**, the **Yamuna**, and a mythical river, **Saraswati**, forming **the Triveni Sangam**, have had their importance for thousands of years. In Sanskrit, 'Kumbh' means '*pot, jar, or pitcher*', and Kumbh Mela is the festival **of the sacred pitcher**. The whole gathering is linked to a mythical story of '**Samudra Manthan**' about why Kumbh happens at a particular time and in four places (*Haridwar, Prayagraj, Ujjain & Nashik*). It all started with a curse of Sage Durvasa to Lord Indra (*King of the gods*), resulting in a solution of churning the ocean, the tug-of-war for nectar of immortality and *finally*, the Kumbh Mela.

The specific remedy was given to the Devas by **Lord Vishnu** to regain their powers and cancel the curse of Sage Durvasa by consuming the Amrit coming out of churning the Kshir Sagar (*Cosmic Ocean*). The **Asuras** (demons) helped the Devas in churning the ocean in the quest of having half a kumbh of Amrit.

A lot of gems came out by churning the ocean – 14 gems to be exact. The spillage from the Kumbh in 4 sacred locations became the sites for the Kumbh Mela. The Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj has great significance, as there are 4 types of kumbh, i.e., Maha Kumbh (*happens in 144 years*), Purna Kumbh (*happens every 12 years*), Ardh Kumbh (*happens every 6 years*), and the Kumbh Mela (*basic Event happens every 4 years*).

It is said in the **Skanda Purana**:

"सद्यः पाप संघात-नाशिनी, सद्यः दुःख विनाशिनी;
सुखदा, मोक्षदा गंगा, गंगा ही परम गति है।"

"In the name of that Almighty, Oh Holy Ganges! Who takes away all the sins and miseries and brings happiness? You are the only way to attain salvation."

During our field visit to Prayagraj, we found various camps portraying the Samudra Manthan scenario, where the Asuras and Devatas are churning the ocean. At various places in the Mela ground, toys related to Samudra Manthan were being sold; for example, the turtle (*Kurma Avatar of Lord Vishnu*) was being sold by local vendors. Also, the miniatures of Mount Mandara, as the gods eventually needed a base and a support where Mount Mandara became the base.

The pilgrims who are ready to take the holy dip in the confluence have a clear conscience and believe that the mythical story of Samudra Manthan is true, and they will feel the elixir of immortality to rejoice in their remaining lives, making it sin-free.

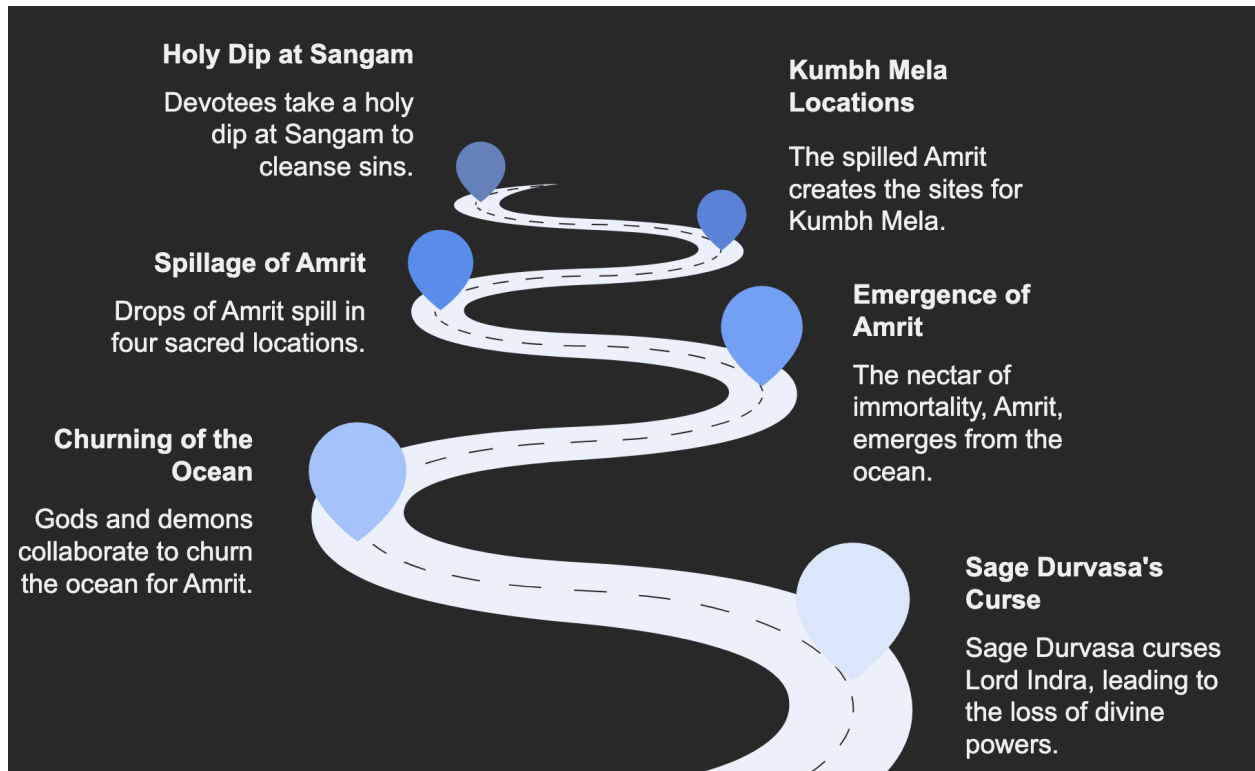


Image: Road to Holy Dip at Sangam (Source: TREADS@CPR)

Through our interactions with Saints, pilgrims and authorities at Prayagraj, we observed that kumbh can be defined based on three things, *i.e.*,

Firstly, the **Sadhus** (*saints*) who are spiritual guru, who shape their disciples. They have the spiritual wisdom, which they attain by hard *Tapasya* (austerity), doing it for years (*mentioned in chapter 4*). It is believed that the mythological river Saraswati confluences at the Sangam with the words of wisdom from the Saints.

Secondly, the **Tirth Yatri** (*pilgrim*) join the event to attain peace and consume positivity by taking a holy dip at the confluence and performing certain rituals and practices (*mentioned in 3.2 Rituals & Practices*).

And *lastly*, the **Kalpavasis** (*Pilgrims who stay for spiritual austerities*) live a short period of their lives following 21 principles (*mentioned in 3.2.3 Kalpvasis*), following a disciplined life to overcome the worldly orders and purify their souls.

3.2 Rituals & Practices

The Kumbh Mela is a grand assembly of rituals and the most sacred cultural gathering in the world, with Amrit Snan being the eye-catching and auspicious among all of them. The rituals and practices observed in this celebration are of the greatest importance to millions of pilgrims, sadhus, or ascetics, and intellectuals. These traditions, rooted deep within the Hindu cosmography, mythology, and yogic practices, serve a variety of purposes – spiritual cleansing to affirm social bonds.

The Rituals and Practices reflect the rich traditions of Sanatan, which have been followed throughout the centuries. In this section, we have detailed the rituals and their connections to mythology while interpreting them through reflections drawn from our field observations.

3.2.1 Amrit Snan: An Evidence of Credence and Devoutness

Amrit Snan (or ‘*Shahi Snan*’) is a bathing ritual at Kumbh Mela on certain cosmic alignments (‘*Amrit Yog*’) of the Sun, Moon, and Jupiter, where Jupiter enters Taurus and the Sun and Moon align in Capricorn. The most notable highlight of Amrit Snan is the magnificent processions of saints and ascetics from various *Akharas* (*sects*), particularly the ash-covered Naga Sadhus taking the holy dip.

The Amrit Snan of the Maha Kumbh Mela is a reflection of unshakeable faith and deep spirituality. It's a sight to behold that summarises the cultural richness, the religious fervour, and the spiritual depth of India. It's an experience that lingers, a memory that continues to draw you back to the holy waters of the Sangam.

Among the different rituals that take place during the Mela, the Amrit Snan is the most focal and sacred. Fieldwork observations and interviews with pilgrims belonging to different backgrounds, ethnicities, and age groups confirmed a common perception about the purificatory power of the ritual bath. Visitors, from children to the aged, all alike expressed that the Amrit Snan would wash away sins knowingly or unknowingly and bestow spiritual merit.

In their interactions, pilgrims conveyed that performing the holy dip on the sacred Amrit Snan days would especially be productive in attaining the blessings of Ganga Maa. Devotees, together chanting “*Har Har Mahadev*”, testified to travelling from far-off places and nations as a deliberate attempt to “*sparsh*” (embracing) the spiritual ambrosia, echoing the Mela's pan-Indian and international appeal.

Most interviewees underscored that watching the Maha Kumbh at Prayagraj was not an individual pilgrimage but a moment of history that would be an iconic memory for generations to come, considering the unusual phenomenon of having such a magnificent Maha Kumbh after 144 years.



Devotees performing rituals on the Amrit Snan day

3.2.1.1 Organisation and Dynamics of Amrit Snan

The ritual organisation of the Amrit Snan is characterised by simplicity, consisting of minimal material elements other than the act of immersion itself. Ancillary rituals like **Deep Daan** (*lamp offerings*) and **Tarpan** (*offering to ancestors*) typically accompanied the process of bathing. Field observations showed that the Akharas, the ascetic monastic orders, dominated the ceremonial procession and dips, adhering strictly to a traditional hierarchical setup brokered by the **Prayagraj Mela Authority (PMA)**. Having performed their ritual immersion, mobs of pilgrims rushed into the waters to perform their dips.

Though the Triveni Sangam—the union of the Ganga, Yamuna, and mythical Saraswati—continued to be the most popular spot for ritual bathing, site observations showed that riverbanks along Jhunsi and the VIP ghats at Arail also saw good crowds. The questionnaire responses indicated that those who had the means, in most cases, arranged for boats to gain access to islands along rivers that were at the centre of the Sangam, driven by a feeling that a splash at the river centre provided a greater spiritual experience.

Fieldwork additionally observed the location of temporary toilet facilities at multiple bathing areas and huge unguarded heaps of apparel, indicative of the sheer degree of participation.

3.2.1.2 Cultural Transmission and Modern Expressions

Aside from the ritualistic performance, the Kumbh Mela became a pivotal site of cultural transmission and identity affirmation. From interviews with pilgrims, it was clear that most people viewed Ganga not just as a river but as a divine mother figure (Ganga Maa). Some of the pilgrims clarified that their participation was driven not merely by spiritual cleansing but even by the necessity to obtain solace and blessings to go through the hardships of life.

A group of South Indian pilgrims, including mothers and their adolescent children, emphasised in interviews that their pilgrimage was to bridge the younger generation with their cultural heritage and introduce them to the richness and legacy of their religion. Likewise, a few younger interviewees explained their experience at the Mela as life-changing, giving them a humble realization of the insignificance of individual lives against the larger ocean of spirituality. They

noted that being among this huge crowd helped to alleviate daily worries and also promoted a closer sense of religious unity.

Interestingly, observations also showed the changing form of participation, with numerous pilgrims widely recording and reporting on social networking sites. This online interaction hints at a modern mediation of customary practices, where old rituals are coupled with current communication tools.

3.2.1.3 Key Bathing Dates and Their Observations

The Maha Kumbh featured six officially designated bathing dates, each with distinct religious significance:

Paush Purnima (13th January 2025)

According to the Hindu Calendar, the full moon day of Paush Maas marks the start of Maha Kumbh at Prayagraj, with crores of devotees eager to take the holy dip at the confluence for cleansing their souls. In Sanatana Dharma, Paush Purimna tithi (or '*Shakambari purnima*'), bright moon light is a symbol of inner peace, where the divine energies are at its peak, where taking a holy dip is considered to be auspicious. This sacred day, taking a dip in holy waters, offering prayers to Goddess Lakshmi and Lord Vishnu, and observing the *purnima vrat* (full moon fast), is believed to fulfil all wishes.

The first Snan saw an unprecedented rush of pilgrims, despite inclement weather. Interviews with volunteers who had experienced the spectacle reflected the feelings of the devotees, who considered their experience as part of a collective familial inheritance, claiming that the experience would become etched in the memory of future generations. The local business owners repeatedly stated that the diversion of roads and highways to deal with the huge pilgrim turnout on bathing dates was the key observation.

Makar Sankranti (14th January 2025)

The Sun moves to the northern hemisphere (*'Uttarayan period'*), as Sankranti means "transition", and the day marks a significant movement in the zodiac signs (*Sun enters Capricorn*) because of the arrangement of the earth's dial around the sun – and this movement brings about a new change in the way we experience the planet itself. It marks the official beginning of Maha Kumbh and is recognised as the first Amrit Snan for the Akharas.

The pilgrims interviewed explained that on this day, ritual immersion in water during Makar Sankranti was thought to reduce astrological maleficence and ensure desirable consequences in the future. An estimated 3.5 crore pilgrims participated, with Surya (the Sun God) receiving special prayers

Mauni Amavasya (29th January 2025)

It is the last *Amavasya* (new moon) before the Mahashivratri and has great significance, as it is believed that the departed souls of the ancestors descend on the earth and bless the next generations. To pay tribute to the departed souls, eliminating the *Pitru dosha* (ancestral curse), *Amavasya tithi* is the ideal time to perform 'tarpana' & 'Shradh' rituals with a holy dip at Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, making it more paramount. On this day, the Mahakumbh Nagar became the world's most populated district, with 8 crore people taking the holy dip.

This date saw the largest ever congregation at the Mela. Observations of fieldwork assistants stated that most pilgrims were one-day pilgrims who came particularly to Prayagraj for the dip on Mauni Amavasya. However, they came an evening prior and rested in any space available. Interviews with them indicated that devotees equated the practice of maun (silence) and fasting with spiritual cleansing and seeking blessings of ancestors, concluding with the dip.

Basant Panchmi (3rd February 2025)

The day of Goddess Saraswati, Basant Panchami, blesses people with knowledge, wisdom, and wit. As per the Hindu calendar, it falls on the Magh Shukla Panchami, marking the auspicious arrival of the spring season. Amrit Snan on this day is the last 'Amrit Snan', according to the Akharas. On this day, during a MahaKumbh, it is believed that taking a holy dip would grant the devotee Moksha, purification of 7 generations, leading to spiritual purification.

It is believed that Goddess Saraswati incarnated on this day, and as a result, her invisible form resides as a river at the Sangam in Prayagraj. Taking a dip in these sacred waters is thought to bring fulfilment to the souls of one's ancestors and offer spiritual tranquillity to the devotee.

The day is dedicated to **Goddess Saraswati** and focused on devotion to wisdom and knowledge. Our field assistants observed that pilgrims believed that bathing at the Sangam during this day ritually aligned them with divine knowledge, boosting their intellectual and academic pursuits.

Maghi Purnima (12th February 2025)

The 15th and final day of Shukla Paksha in the Magh month marks the Maghi Purnima and the conclusion of the auspicious Magha Month, as per the **Drik Panchang**. On this day, keeping a good conscience and taking a ritual bath in holy rivers wash away all the sins and bring blessings to the devotees. Worshipping Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi on this day, with a sacred dip at the confluence, is believed to cleanse the bad sins in their entirety.

Marking the end of the auspicious Magh month, ritual bathing on this day was thought to wash away all sins. Pilgrim interviews revealed that offerings and prayers to Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu, and Goddess Lakshmi were part of the day's rituals. The most notable observation on this day was the departure of most of the Kalpavasis from the Mela.

Maha Shivratri (26th February 2025)

The great night of Lord Shiva, where the Devatas and Asuras collectively take part in celebrating the Maha Shivratri, venerating the most powerful energies and vibrations. A dip in the confluence is believed to bring the devotees closer to Lord Shiva and remove all forms of ignorance from a person's life. A natural upsurge of energies, resounding chants of "*Har Har Mahadev*", and Maha Shivratri at the Kumbh Mela connect people to the cosmic rhythm of the universe.

The field observations reported a climate that was charged with piety on Maha Shivratri, as devotees worshipped Lord Shiva with chants and ritual baths. Interview answers universally stressed the notion that bathing at the Sangam on Maha Shivratri would wash away spiritual ignorance and make the devotees closer to cosmic consciousness.

3.2.2 Kalpavas

Kalpavas is a profound spiritual tradition where devotees reside near a sacred site (like the Sangam in Prayagraj) for a set period, living a disciplined life of prayer, fasting, and rituals. During the Magh Month, devotees observe 1 month of fasting and spiritual discipline, and live a minimalist life, performing various rituals along the banks of confluence for their spiritual evolution.

A devotee would be called a Kalpavasi, staying at a site near the river during the entire duration of Kumbh Mela, dedicating themselves to a life of austerity, meditation, and spiritual discipline. The term "**Kalpa**" refers to a cosmic cycle of **8.64 billion years in Hindu cosmology**, and "**vas**" means "**to dwell.**"

In the mela ground near the banks, Sectors 11 to 15 were dedicatedly built to accommodate lakhs of devotees performing the kalpavas, becoming their home for a month. A kalpavasi would be wearing only white or yellow clothes made of silk or wool, residing in the Mela ground for a full month, starting from Paush Purnima to Maghi Purnima, completing a full circle of the moon.

*According to tradition, Kalpvasis shall recite **Satyanarayan Katha**, **Havan Puja**, and make donations to their **Tirth purohits**. The **barley seeds** planted at the initiation of Kalpavas are dipped in the Ganga, and the **Tulsi** is brought home as a blessing from God. The twelve-year cycle of Kalpavas ends with **Maha Kumbh** and a community feast at their villages.*

A day of a kalpavasi would include a disciplined life, performing meditations, prayers, and community services on the bank of the holy river. They perform their Sadhana with the help of tirth purohits (*panda pujaris*), sleeping on the bare ground and abstaining from worldly distractions, ultimately purifying their minds and spirits.



“Kalpavas is not just a vow; it is a rebirth in the sacred waters of the Sangam.”

There are **21 rules of Kalapvas** outlined by **Maharishi Dattatreya** in the **Padma Puran**, which are essential to be followed by a Kalpavasi:

1. True speech, i.e., abstinence from untruthfulness.

2. Non-violence.
3. Mitigation of senses.
4. Feeling benevolence for all living beings.
5. Observance of
6. Celibacy.
7. Renunciation of all indulgence.
8. Rising before sunrise.
9. Bathing thrice a day.
10. Observance of 'Trikal Sandhya'.
11. 'Pind Daan' of ancestors.
12. Donate as per your capacity.
13. Afferent Jaap.
14. Satsang.
15. Shetra Sanyas (non-violation of reserved space).
16. Renunciation of criticism.
17. Offer services to ascetics and saints.
18. Japa.
19. Sankirtan.
20. Meals are to be taken only once a day.
21. Sleeping on the ground.
22. Denouncing Gangodak-Agni.

The Kalpavas tradition finds an important place in the larger scheme of the Kumbh Mela and the Magh Mela held once a year. At the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, the Kalpavasi camps spread across Sectors 11 to 15 of the Mela ground along the banks of the Sangam housed lakhs of pilgrims who opted to lead an austere and pious life for a full lunar month from Paush Purnima to Maghi Purnima. Kalpavasis usually wear plain white or yellow silk or woollen attire, which denotes renunciation and purity.

Kalpavas presents a special option for members in the *Grihastha Ashram* (family phase) to take up temporary elements of the *Vanaprastha* (hermit phase) without renouncing their worldly obligations completely. Field observations and interviews indicated that while the practice has

long involved older couples, it is not unusual for the younger relatives to join them. These relatives frequently help the elderly with daily activities and, at the same time, participate in *sewa* (selfless service), which they feel accrues to their spiritual merit.

The everyday existence of a Kalpavasi is regulated by an austere and spiritually demanding routine. A standard 24-hour cycle involves waking up at 4:00 AM to the ringing of temple bells and chanting "**Har Har Mahadev**". The early morning consists of Surya Namaskar and yoga on the riverbank, followed by a sacred bath (Ganga Snan) where the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati rivers meet. After the bath, Kalpavasis wear clean, wet clothes representing chastity and go on to construct a Shivling from riverbed mud to carry out Abhishekam (*ritual offering*).

During the day, some activities involve lighting lamps, recitation of the Gayatri Mantra, taking a vow (*Sankalp*) to abstain from worldly pleasures for the day, preparing simple satvik food (*onion and garlic-free*), and giving food (*Anna daan*) to other pilgrims and sadhus. Group meditation (*Dhyan*), spiritual talks (*Satsang*), and fire rituals (*Havan*) are all part of the Kalpavasi way of life. Evenings are spent with a second dip in the river, floating diyas to the Ganga as a reminder of their ancestors, visiting the Aarti of the Ganga, joining bhajan and kirtan sessions, and having a vow of silence (*Maun Vrat*) under the starry sky before sleeping on grass mats without pillows and mattresses—stress on being one with the earth.

From our field observations, it was seen that although the spirit of this strict spiritual life persists, significant alterations have become rooted. Kalpavasis traditionally were supposed to fetch water directly from the river for everyday bathing and rituals. However, in present practice, the majority of Kalpavasis now depend on community taps arranged within the campsites. Interviews indicated that fewer Kalpavasis now take multiple river baths a day as was traditional, a change brought about by infrastructural amenities and practical constraints.

In addition, a more in-depth interaction with Kalpavasis showed a shift in the fundamental values of Kalpavas. Whereas the initial concept revolved around radical austerity and sheer worship of the river, some participants conceded that the practice is now more viewed as a cultural activity or a spiritual "camping". Some camps even had contemporary luxuries such as sofas, beds, and cooktops, thus watering down the austere simplicity that initially characterised Kalpavas.

Especially at the time of Maha Kumbh, commercial branding of “*Kalpavasi Tents*” was noticed to entice pilgrims looking for a mix of spiritual involvement and affordable comfort.

Though these have changed, some of the major rituals like *Satyanarayan Katha*, *Havan Puja*, and offerings to the tirth purohit, are still maintained by most Kalpavasis. Traditionally, barley planted at the beginning of Kalpavas is submerged in the Ganga towards the end, while a holy Tulsi plant is brought back home as a godly boon. Interviews showed that for long-term practitioners, the twelve-year Kalpavas cycle is particularly significant, climaxing at the Maha Kumbh and marked by community feasts in their home villages.

Following the Maghi Purnima Snan (bath), notes observed a perceptible drop-off in activity at the Kalpavasi camps. Most of these tents were subsequently reassigned by Panda Pujaris for incoming pilgrims from far-flung areas. This rotation occupancy is indicative of the fluidity of camp existence at the Kumbh, where ancient religious practice coexists with changing realities of large-scale pilgrimage.

Overall, while Kalpavas remains a living tradition rich in devotion, field observations and interviews show that it is experiencing profound changes. The lived experiences of Kalpavasis today swing between holding on to traditional austerity and negotiating new forms of religious participation, mirroring the wider changes in India's pilgrimage culture.

24-hour journey of a Kalpavasi		
Time	Routine	Significance
04:00 AM	Wake up to temple bells/mantras (" <i>Har Har Mahadev</i> " chants).	<p>Brahma Muhurta (Spiritual Dawn)</p> <p>Waking up and engaging in spiritual activities during Brahma Muhurta is believed to facilitate inner transformation and a deeper connection with one's spiritual path.</p>
04:15 AM	<i>Surya Namaskar (Sun salutations) and Yoga by the riverbank.</i>	
04:30 AM	Holy dip (<i>Ganga Snan</i>) at Sangam, offering prayers to Lord Shiva.	
05:00 AM	Wear clean, damp clothes after bath (representing purity).	<p>Morning Rituals (Purification)</p> <p>After the holy dip, a kalpavasi will move forward to perform certain rituals, such as '<i>abhishekam</i>', at the bank of the river. It's believed to be a time of increased access to divine guidance and higher consciousness, making it suitable for introspection and spiritual growth.</p>
05:15 AM	Create a <i>Shivling</i> from riverbank clay, perform <i>Abhishekam</i> (milk/honey offering).	
05:45 AM	Light diya (lamp) and recite Gayatri Mantra towards the rising sun.	
06:30 AM	Community aarti (prayer with lamps) at the Sangam	<p>Puja & Sankalp (Sacred Vow)</p>
07:00 AM	Take Sankalp (pledge) for the day: " <i>I give up worldly desires. Today, I eat once, serve others, and reflect on the Divine.</i> "	
08:00 AM	Cook <i>satvik</i> food (no onion/garlic)	<p>Seva (Selfless Service)</p>

09:00 AM	Serve food to pilgrims/sadhus (<i>Annadanam</i> sacred charity)	
10:00 AM	Group meditation (<i>Dhyan</i>) under tents/trees.	Meditation & Satsang
11:00 AM	Attend <i>satsang</i> (spiritual discourse) by Akhada leaders.	
12:00 PM	Take one meal a banana leaf (usually khichdi, fruits, and milk).	Single Meal (Bhiksha)
12:30 PM	Rest (<i>Shayana</i>) on the riverbank (no beds, only grass mats).	
02:00 PM	Chant <i>Ramayana/Tulsidas Chaupais</i> in groups.	Afternoon Devotion 10-15 mins of silent meditation (eyes closed, facing the Ganga)
03:00 PM	<i>Havan</i> (fire ritual) with Vedic mantras for universal peace.	
04:00 PM	Second holy dip.	Evening Ganga Snan
04:30 PM	Offer <i>floating diyas</i> to Ganga with prayers for ancestors.	
06:00 PM	Attend <i>Ganga Aarti</i> by lighting lamps.	Sandhya Aarti (Twilight Prayer)
06:30 PM	<i>Bhajan/kirtan</i> sessions (devotional songs).	

08:00 PM	Silent <i>maun vrat</i> (vow of silence) under stars	Night Reflections
09:00 PM	Share spiritual stories (<i>kathas</i>) around bonfires.	
10:00 PM	Sleep on the ground (<i>dharti se judaai</i> = union with Earth). No mattresses/pillows – Only dhoti as bedclothing.	Rest (Earth as Bed)

3.2.3 Aarti: Reverence at the Banks

Aarti is also called ‘Aaratri’, ‘Aartik’ or ‘Neerajan’. It is performed at the end of the puja, overcoming any mistakes that remain in the puja that are covered in the Aarti. It is not just a ritual by way of offering a light, as the flame represents the removal of darkness with the arrival of divine wisdom, but a devotional moment connecting the souls with the divine.

It is said in the **Skanda Purana**:

मन्त्रहीनं क्रियाहीनं यत् कृतं पूजनं हरेः।
सर्वं सम्पूर्णतामेति कृते निराजने शिवे ॥

It means that “*even if the worship is without mantra and ritual, by performing Neerajan (Aarti) it attains completeness.*”

Aarti on the riverbank is a deeply spiritual ceremony where, by way of aarti, devotees worship the rivers and consider them divine. In Hindu mythology, Ganga is worshipped as a goddess, as it is believed to have originated from the heavens and is seen as the mother of humanity. Therefore, *Aarti includes 5 elements of life, balancing the energy of the universe.*

During the Mahakumbh, a majestic Aarti ceremony was performed every day at the Dashashwamedh Ghat along Daraganj, drawing huge crowds of pilgrims during the 45-day duration. Devotees joined in by lighting lamps and flowers and offering them to the holy Ganga, making the riverbanks a breathtakingly beautiful and spiritually uplifting place. After Amrit Snan, attending Aarti can be viewed as one of the most emotionally charged experiences for pilgrims at the Maha Kumbh 2025. Pilgrims offered the Aarti individually or in larger religious groups. Even with the gigantic scale of the Kumbh, it was remarkable that the Aarti ceremonies themselves were quite humble and intimate, save for Daraganj.

Our field observations noted that, following Aarti worship, pilgrims usually released little lamps (*Deeps*) on the river as a gesture of devotion and respect. During one event we were attending, the senior priest made an effort to inform the gathered pilgrims about the history of the Kumbh and the sanctity of Prayagraj. He insisted on respect for the river and categorically told participants not to dispose of waste or non-biodegradable items into its waters.

In some groups, devotees were also provided with Aarti Thaals (*plates*) to join in, even from a respectful distance at the back of officiating priests. Symbolic shrines were also seen in several locations, where devotees put in flowers, garlands, and raw rice. These offerings, classed as *Nirmalya (natural sacrament)*, were traditionally dipped into the Ganga during the next morning's Puja, preserving a religious and ecologically sensitive tradition. The ambience around these Aartis depicted a simple yet intense kind of worship, far removed from the larger public pageants of the Mela.

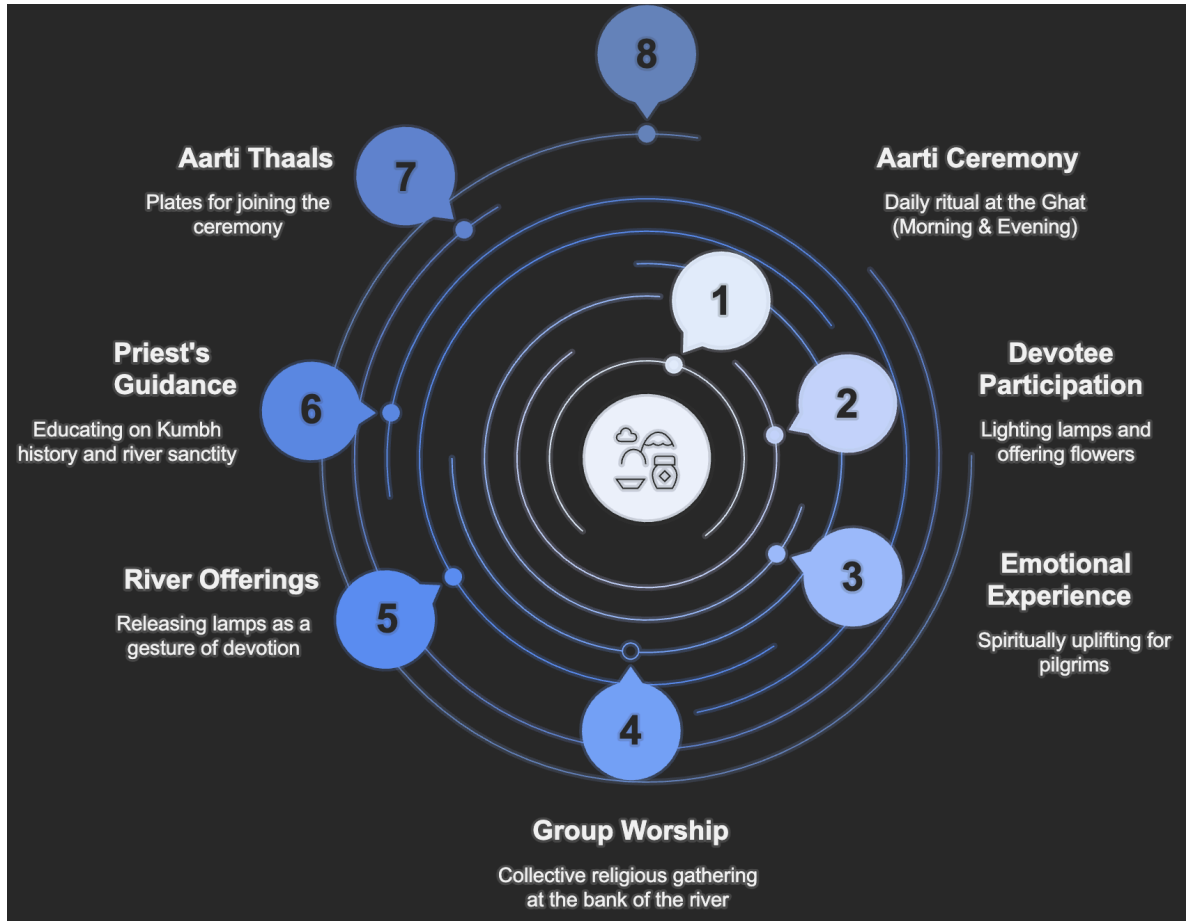


Image: Spiritual Essence of Aarti at the bank of a river (Source: Treads@CPR)

3.2.4 Satsang: A Collective Spiritual Immersion

The Maha Kumbh Mela is a centre point for knowledge sharing, where the saints and sages meet at a regular interval and share their knowledge with various experiences for the common good. It is believed that the cosmic energies are at their peak due to the presence of holy men; spiritual convenings play an important role in reviving the deep insights from the scriptures like the Vedas, Bhagavad Gita, and the Puranas. The teachings from the Ramayana and Mahabharata are spread out to common people, accelerating the pilgrims' spiritual progress, driving them on their path to self-realisation.

Various prominent spiritual leaders gather together at Kumbh Mela and conduct their satsang on a large scale for the association with the truth and reinforcing the faith in the divine through the shared experiences and devotion of others. The words of wisdom flow from their lips like the ‘Nectar’ or ‘Amrit’. These **gurus shape their disciples like a potter, firm yet gentle within, where they remove the flaws with care, refining the disciple’s spirit.**

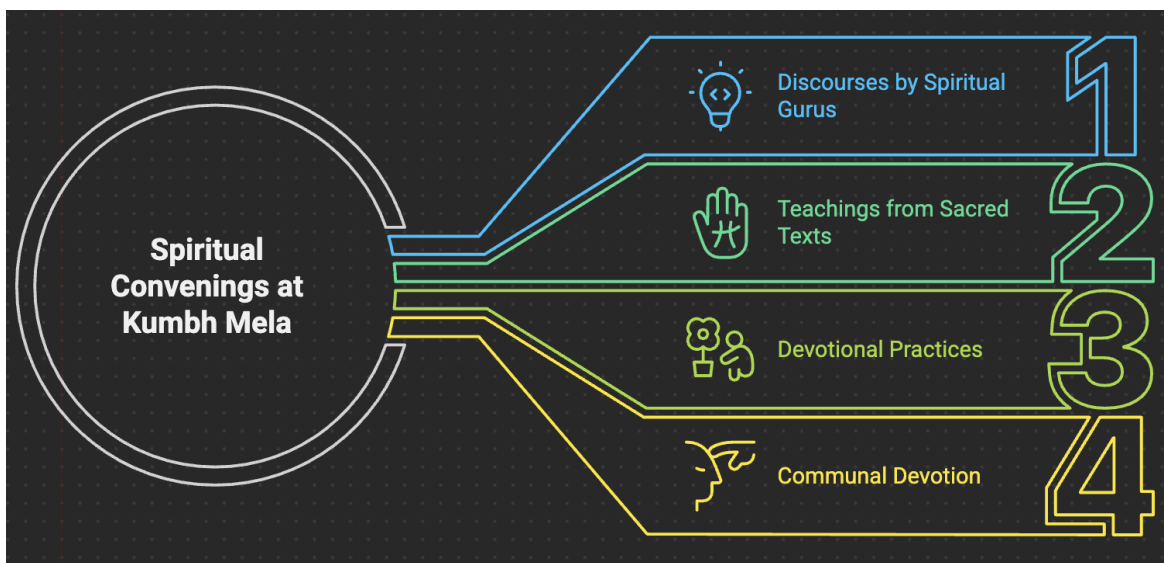


Spiritual teachings on the banks of River Ganga

According to the *Ramcharitramanas by Tulsidas*, Prayagraj is itself a sangam of Sadhus, where Maa Ganga stands for the Bhakti of Shri Ram, Maa Yamuna stands for the karmic bonds of Karma that she will liberate us from, and Maa Saraswati, which goes underground at the confluence, stands for the Gyan (Knowledge). Therefore, standing at the Prayagraj confluence and taking a holy dip will free you from all the bondages of life.

The spiritual convenings at the Kumbh Mela function as vital knowledge centers for pilgrims, where they listen to discourses by prominent spiritual gurus and receive teachings from sacred texts such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, thus establishing the Kumbh as a dynamic colloquium of spiritual wisdom. These Satsangs at Maha Kumbh 2025 represented another key aspect of the spiritual landscape, blending devotional listening with collective participation. Our observations recorded large tents specially erected for these gatherings, often with elaborate stages and multiple screens projecting live feeds of the speaking Guru to thousands of assembled devotees.

The magnitude of these Mela gatherings was substantial, with participants often during the intense afternoon sun, laying down plastic sheets on the ground, and sitting for hours to listen attentively. The sessions typically involved singing bhajans, listening to spiritual discourses, and openly sharing personal problems and life experiences with the Gurus. In many instances, the Gurus recommended specific devotional practices such as lighting lamps made of flour, releasing them into water bodies on particular dates, feeding specific materials to cattle, or planting sacred saplings like Tulsi in a designated direction within one's home. These ritualistic instructions were explained in the context of their supposed spiritual and material benefits, offering devotees practical pathways to transformation and problem-solving.



The significance of Satsangs at Kumbh Mela (Source: Treads@CPR)

3.2.5 Daan

Daan is a holy '*act of giving*' that blesses the giver and helps the poor. It is said to cleanse the soul and wash away past karmic sins. Various types of Daan are performed at Kumbh Mela, signifying a few of them here:

3.2.5.1 Pind Daan

To respect and pacify the souls of ancestors who have left this world, a holy Hindu ritual, i.e., Pind Daan, is conducted. It is thought that this act of gratitude will free the departed souls, i.e., achieve Moksha, and will bless the living family members. **The significance of Pind Daan at Maha Kumbh is that conducting this ritual at the confluence will increase its spiritual power.** It entails presenting pinda balls of rice combined with other holy ingredients and presenting them to the river for peace for the souls of the dead.

3.2.5.2 Veeni Daan

It is a significant ritual from Maharashtra and Southern India performed by married couples as well as singles at the confluence. For couples, this ritual symbolises the reinforcement of vows of marriage, the couple's desire to be with each other across seven lifetimes. **The most notable offering in this ritual is the husband cutting a small portion of his wife's plaited hair, which is then offered to the river.**

The ceremony is an imitation of the traditional Hindu wedding ritual and comprises dressing up in ceremonial attire, performing puja, and the husband adorning his wife's hair with flowers before the hair offering. The couple may also take a boat ride to the Sangam and bathe there, thereby terminating the ceremony. Veeni Daan is not merely a religious tradition, it is a cultural practice steeped in Hindu spirituality, which emphasises the sanctity of the union.

Through interactions at the site with pilgrims, it was collected that hair is viewed as one of the most significant parts of an individual's physical self. Abandoning one's hair in the form of Veeni Daan is regarded as a symbolic act of forsaking worldly desires, mostly beauty, pride, and lust (*Maya and Kama*).

Pilgrims said that by presenting their hair to the divine, they aim to achieve a cleansed soul and show their complete commitment to the Almighty. The ritual was witnessed especially among people performing personal penance or paying ancestral vows at the Kumbh.

3.2.5.3 *Deep Daan*

It is believed that by donating a lamp to a deity in a temple or on riverbanks, Goddess Laxmi gives the blessings to the devotee, according to Padma Purana. A person donating a lamp is believed to be rescued from going to hell. Lamps are ideally made of mud and clay, floating them in the holy water.

During observations, it was seen that Deep Daan — offering lighted lamps to the river — was one of the most commonly done rituals after the religious Snan or Aarti sessions. There were several vendors positioned around the banks selling Deep Daan kits, usually consisting of a small disposable dish containing flowers, vermilion (*Kumkum/Sindoor*), incense sticks, and a lamp. Worshipers were spotted moving towards the riverbank boundaries, especially by the floating interceptors that distinguish shallow banks from the main channel, where they lit their lamps and let them float on the water.

Nonetheless, contact with sanitation volunteers revealed that pilgrims frequently asked them to place the offerings inside demarcated interceptor zones to contain river pollution — a request met at times with reluctance from devotees. With all attempts at waste management, visible piles of floral waste congregated along the banks, where sanitation teams frequently discarded offerings for disposal. Significantly, vendors stood strategically on both riverbanks and the Panda Pujaris (priests) to make it convenient for pilgrims.



Deep Daan

3.2.5.4 Anna Daan

Donating food is considered to be the most auspicious and greatest daan among all in the Hindu traditions. Feeding the needy person is the ultimate good work – even feeding the fish in the river is auspicious. Therefore, at the Mahakumbh, free food is available for all in all the camps throughout the Kumbh Mela.

Anna Daan was done at various scales during the Maha Kumbh — from the large kitchens of Akharas and big religious establishments to individual small acts of charity by travelling pilgrims. Especially on the peak bathing days, the generosity of Anna Daan, Prasadi (*blessed*

food), and Bhandaras (*communal feasts*) made food available to everyone without cost, representing communal concern and religious merit.

Observations indicated that although such charitable activities were rampant, sanitation workers and organizers would have to deal with the massive waste that was left behind, particularly disposable plates. Interviews with an Akhara chief indicated that their kitchens were functional day and night, supported by donations collected over many years, which are kept consciously aside to maintain such large-scale feeding efforts during the Kumbh. Additionally, partnerships between corporate houses and religious institutions were also seen, with corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds being directed to sponsor large Anna Daan programmes.

3.2.5.5 Vastra Daan

Donating clothes is considered to be a noble act at the Mahakumbh, reflecting on the giver as well as the recipient, purifying the souls and bringing prosperity to both parties. It is a sacred and virtuous practice in the principles of Hinduism, an estimable act rooted in the principles of seva, compassion, and dharma. Vastra Daan at Kumbh makes it more spiritually energetic, symbolises dignity, warmth and protection, and makes the giver live in the memory of the receiver for a long time.

Vastra Daan was another seen act of devotion at the Maha Kumbh. From talks with Panda Pujaris, it is a traditional practice among pilgrims to donate clothes to priests upon the successful completion of an important ritual or Puja. On field visits, we saw cases where families, especially after conducting commemorative rituals for deceased family members, participated in the act of donating clothes. The apparel provided was generally plain and modest, representing humility and commitment. The practice, while intimate, was integrated into the broader tapestry of ritualistic sacrifice at the Kumbh, establishing the spirit of donation and service.

3.2.6 Other Practices

3.2.6.1 Dev Pujan

During the Kumbh Mela the Gods visit the banks of Sangam, and meditating in their honour with complete devotion brings well-being. The devotion of the worshipper is paramount in Dev puja because if the devotee is not completely immersed in the ceremony, then the puja will not be fruitful.

3.2.6.2 Shraadh (Ancestral offerings)

Shraadh means offering of Pinda with complete devotion that can only be performed by a priest. There are specialised priests available at Prayagraj only for this purpose, as they have the genealogy of the devotee performing the shraadh.

3.2.6.3 Tarpan

The offering of water while chanting specific Vedic mantras, mixed with sesame seeds, barley, and Kush grass, invokes the blessings of the deities and ancestors. During the *Pitru Paksha period*, this ritual can be performed by anyone, especially on auspicious days, for the removal of any Pitru dosha (ancestral curse), blessing the well-being of the family.

3.2.6.4 Homa and Yajna (fire rituals)

Yajna was one of the most complex and symbolic rituals at the Maha Kumbh 2025, performed by individuals, organised parties, mass gatherings, and Akharas. Observations in the field were such that Yajnas were normally conducted at the end of a pilgrim's or group's objective of stay or as the culmination of a sacred Sankalpa (*vow*) taken during the Mela.

The ritual process included presenting an assortment of natural materials to the sacred fire (*Agni*) such as ghee, coconut, sesame seeds, cereals, milk, honey, camphor, betel nut, and kanda (*cakes of dried dung*), amongst many others. The ash and the remaining offerings (*Tilanjali*), when the Yajna fire turned cold, were taken together and ritualistically plunged in the Ganga River to close the ritual circle. The ash, being extremely sacred, was also seen being used as Tilak marks on the forehead and neck by the devotees, which indicate spiritual purification and benediction.

In interactions and participant observation, there was a reflective understanding that emerged: although fire is conceived in the spiritual tradition as the greatest purifier, its remains need the help of the opposite element of water for their ultimate consecration. This exchange brings to the fore a deep philosophical insight — the complementary co-existence of opposites — wherein purification by fire is finalised by being immersed in water, emphasising the cyclical and interdependent nature of cosmic elements in Hindu ritualistic practices.

3.2.6.5 Yoga and Meditation

The Kumbh is considered to be the focal point of Yoga and meditation because of various positive energies due to the presence of saints and sadhus across the river banks. With the words of wisdom from spiritual leaders at Satsangs, Kumbh becomes the ideal place for yoga and meditation, purifying one's soul and rejuvenating through divinity.

3.2.6.6 Mundan Ceremony

The shaving off of the head is called a Mudan ceremony, which starts after the first Amrit Snan at Mahakumbh. In Hinduism, the hairs are devoted to the gods, as it is considered that the hair is related to the vanity of the person. Mundan at the Maha Kumbh is considered auspicious and one of the essential practices for a Kalpavasi, giving away the past sins for the purification of the soul.

Reading the Rituals: A Snapshot of the ritual dynamics

Ritual	Site	Day & Time	Purpose	Stakeholders	Materials Involved	Key Stakeholder Dynamics
Amrit Snan	Primarily Triveni Sangam (Sector 3 to 5) (Confluence of Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati)	Paush Purnima (13th January 2025), Makar Sankranti (14th January 2025), Mauni Amavasya (29th January 2025), Basant Panchami (03rd February 2025), Maghi Purnima (12th February 2025), Maha Shivratri (26th February 2025)	Spiritual cleansing, attainment of moksha	Akharas, Prayagraj Mela Authority (PMA), pilgrims	River water, basic bathing gear	Akharas lead processions; PMA controls order/time; Crowd rushes in after Akhara dips; Crowd being watched by PMA managed by UP Police
Kalpavas	Kalpavasi Camps (Sector 11 to 15)	A Month duration from Paush Purnima (13th January 2025) to Maghi Purnima (12th February 2025)	Austerity, renunciation, spiritual evolution	Kalpavasis, Panda Pujaris, families	White/yellow clothes, Tulsi plant, barley, simple food items	Tirth Purohits (Panda Priests) have powers to host, rituals and donation.
Aarti	Dashashwamedh Ghat near Daraganj, Camps of Religious & community based Organizations (Sector 5 to 10)	Daily mornings & evenings, post-Snan	Reverence, devotion, seeking divine connection	Priests, pilgrims, sanitation workers	Aarti Thaals/Diyas, flowers, kumkum (vermilion or saffron), symbolic figurines or shrines	Priests conduct ceremonies; pilgrims do it behind; priests' guidance for green immersion

Satsang	Designated large tents (Mostly in Akhara (Sector 17 to 20) & Other NGOs based in Sector 5 to 10)	Daily during prime Mela days	Knowledge sharing, spiritual guidance	Gurus, Akhadas, pilgrims	Scriptures (Ramayana, Mahabharata), microphones, screens	Gurus dominate knowledge sharing; pilgrims hear and obey ritual counsel
Veeni Daan	At the Confluence, near the Ghats.	Flexible, during pilgrim's stay	Marital sanctity, renunciation of vanity	Married couples, priests	Hair (plaited hair offering), ceremonial attire	Ritual conducted by Panda Pujaris; close ritual under priest direction.
Deep Daan	Riverbanks (near floating interceptors)	After Snan and Aarti throughout the Mela	Light offering, spiritual merit, wish fulfillment	Vendors, pilgrims, sanitation volunteers	Diyas, flowers, kumkum, incense sticks, disposable dishes	Disagreement between environmental standards (volunteers/ sanitation personnel) and ritual practice by devotees.
Anna Daan	Akharas, religious camps, pilgrim gatherings (Throughout the Mela Area)	Throughout the Mela, especially on prime days	Charity, communal sharing, earning merit	Akharas, corporate sponsors, individual donors	Food (Khichdi, fruits, milk), disposable plates	Akharas and religious groups connect directly with pilgrims or visitors; some corporate involvements observed
Vastra Daan	Akharas, religious camps, pilgrim gatherings (Throughout the Mela Area)	After special Puja rituals throughout the Mela	Charity, humility, spiritual purification	Panda Pujaris, pilgrims, families	Simple clothes (white/yellow garments)	Implicit norm in Pilgrim-Panda Priest interactions
Yajna (Homa)	Akhara Camps (Sector 17 to 20) & other	End of pilgrim stay or Sankalpa fulfillment (Basant Panchmi)	Purification, completion of vows	Akharas, pilgrims, Tirth Purohits	Ghee, coconuts, grains, milk, honey,	Ash applied post-ritual followed by immersion rites led by Pujaris/priestly groups

	Individual campsites.				camphor, sesame seeds, betel nuts	
Pind Daan	Sangam banks	Flexible (especially on Mauni Amavasya)	Ancestor liberation (Moksha)	Specialized priests (Genealogy Pujaris), families	Rice balls (Pindas), flowers, sesame seeds	Specialized Panda Priests hold authority due to genealogical knowledge in their records
Mundan	Sangam banks & Kalpavasi Camps (Sector 11 to 15)	After first Amrit Snan and beginning of Mela	Renouncing vanity, purification of soul	Barbers, priests, pilgrims	Shaving kits, holy river water	Barbers allied with religious service providers; performed ritually under Panda Priest's gaze.
Dev Pujan	Sangam banks & Kalpavasi Camps (Sector 11 to 15)	Flexible, (mostly after taking the holy dip)	Honoring deities at Sangam	Pilgrims, priests	Incense, flowers, fruits	Devotion-driven; less hierarchical, occasionally priest-led ceremonies
Shraadh & Tarpan	At the Ghats throughout the Mela Area	Mauni Amavasya, auspicious days	Ancestor appeasement, removal of Pitru dosha	Priests specializing in ancestral rites	Water, sesame seeds, barley, kush grass	Specific Panda Priests dominate rituals due to specialization.

4. Permeating power: Spiritual and spatial (river-society intersection)

4.1 The Key Stakeholders at Mahakumbh 2025

4.1.1 Akharas or Akhara System

An Akhara literally means a '*wrestling ring*' in Sanskrit but also stands for a place of debate. These are monastic orders of ascetics that date as far back as the early 8th century. Sri Adi Shankaracharya is believed to have established 7 Akharas evolved from the Dasnaami tradition: Mahanirvani, Niranjani, Juna, Atal, Avahan, Agni and Anand Akhara.

The earliest recorded founding of an Akhara was that of the Abhana in 547 CE. During the period of Muslim rule in India and later British rule, the Akharas congregated and organised together, especially during the Kumbh Mela, to work for the preservation of Hindu religion and culture. In 1565, Madhusudana Sarasvati started preparing akharas as an armed military force to resist invasions and protect Hindus. The saints and ascetics associated with an Akhara specialize in both scriptures and armaments.

4.1.2 Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad (ABAP)

The ABAP is an organisation of the Akharas that was formed in 1954 post the tragic stampede at Prayagraj Kumbh Mela. The organisation acts as a link between the saints, akharas, people and the administration, aiding the management of the event and the continuance of the customs, practices and rituals of Kumbh Mela in a proper manner (Bhakuni, 2023) (Mishra, 2021) (Sharma, 2021). The Parishad does this task at all four venues of the Mela. The committee of ABAP consists of two members from each Akhara, and it recognises thirteen Akharas except for the Kinnar Akhara and the Dasnami Sanyasini Akhara (Bevilacqua, 2022).

Type of Akhara	Akhara	Establishment	Headquarters	Chief	Deity	Specialties	Description
Shavaite (Sanyasi)	Shri Panchayati Akhara Niranjani	904 AD	Daraganj, Prayagraj (Uttar Pradesh)	Acharya Maha Mandaleshwar Kailashanand Giri Maharaj	Kartikeya Swami	It is the second largest Akhara. Apart from religion, it focuses on education and is known for its educated saints	It is known for educated saints and is committed to the protection of Sanatan Dharma. Founded in 726 AD in Mandvi (Gujarat). Members of this sect consider each other as brothers and consider their founder as Guru.
	Shri Panch Dashnam Juna Akhara	1146 AD	Baba Hanuman Ghat, Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh)	Acharya Maha Mandaleshwar Swami Avadheshanand Giri	Dattatreya	Largest and most diverse. It embraces anyone who wants it, keeping dogs as companions.	Associates itself with the Dashnami sect. Apart from being the largest 'Akhada' in terms of numbers, it is perhaps the most distinctive too and is known for its rich tradition of 'Shastra' (weapons) and 'Shastras'. It is home to the largest number of Naga ascetics, hatha yogis and sanyasis. It also adopted the newly formed Kinnar Akhara. Many popular spiritual leaders with centres across the world associate themselves with it.
	Shri Panch Atal Akhara	646 AD	Chak Hanuman, Prayagraj (Uttar Pradesh)	Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Swami Vishwatmanand Saraswati	Lord Ganesh	One of the three oldest. Known for discipline.	This 'Akhada' works to promote moral and religious virtues among people. It visualises a sanyasi as holding a rosary in one hand and a spear in the other. This Akhara has also faced many Muslim invaders. They do not believe in the caste system or Brahminical system and do not appoint Mahamandaleshwars for it.

Shri Panchayati Akhara Mahanirvani	749 AD	Daraganj, Prayagraj (Uttar Pradesh)	Acharya Mahamandaleswar Swami Vishokananda Maharaj	Sage Kapilmuni (said to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu)	Introduced the concept of Mandleshwar. Promoted an eco-friendly lifestyle.	Committed to spreading the principles of Sanatan Dharma, this Akhara propounded the concept of Mahamandleshwar or spiritual head. The idea was to create a mandali (or group) to attract the masses and make them aware of the importance and greatness of the religion. Their 'Naga Sanyasis' also do 'Mimamsa' (religious investigation and interpretation). The head of this 'mandali' was called 'Mandalishwar' which later came to be known as 'Mandleshwar'. The head of many 'Mandaleshwars' was called 'Mahamandaleshwar'. This Akhara was the first Akhara to appoint a woman as 'Mahamandaleshwar'.
Shri Taponidhi Anand Akhara Panchayat	1856 AD	Trimbakeshwar , Nashik (Maharashtra)	Acharya Mahamandaleswar Swami Balakanand Giri	Sun	Promotes independence, discipline and promotes nationalist ideology.	Unlike other 'Akhadas', it does not follow any protocol. Here even a 'sanyasi' at the lowest level of the ladder can speak his mind freely. It also does not follow certain practices like city entry. It selects scholars from the society and academia committed to the promotion of Vedic education and Indian culture to be appointed as Mahamandleshwar
Shree Panchadas hnam Avahan Akhara	547 AD	Dashashwamed h Ghat, Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh)	Acharya Mahamandaleswar Arun Giri Maharaj	Sun	Pioneer of the Naga ascetics, first to set up his camp in Kumbh.	The Awahan Akhada is said to be the forerunner of the Naga ascetics. Once the ascetics entered a war. Then Adi Shankaracharya called upon the ascetics of Atal and Maha Nirvani Akhadas to perform 'pind-daan' (a kind of funeral ritual) and stand up for religion. After the ritual, the ascetics stripped themselves naked (as if they had given up the last layer of consciousness for the material world). They then smeared the ashes of the cremated tachita on their bodies, picked up a spear and leapt into battle and won.

	Shri Panchadas hnam Panch Agni Akhara	1192 AD	Girinagar, Bhavanai, Junagadh (Gujarat)	Acharya Mahamandaleshwar Sri Mat Ram Krishnananda	Gayatri Mata	Akhara without Naga monks, takes up social work like free education, afforestation and service to cows.	This 'Akhada' consists of Naishtik Brahmachari or someone who vows to remain celibate and stay with the Guru till death. Adi Shankaracharya appointed four dedicated brahmacharis named Anand, Chaitanya, Swarupa and Prakashak in the four monasteries established by him. Their duties included studying scriptures such as the Vedas, Puranas and Upanishads, as well as performing rituals such as puja and sacrifices. Over time, the core purpose of this tradition became the primary purpose of the Agni Akhara. Their main objectives include propagating religion, protecting and advancing culture, serving schools, cow shelters and serving wandering saints
Vaishnav (Bairagi)	Shri Digambar Ani Akhara	1784 AD	Shamlaji Kakchowk Temple, Sambhar Kantha (Gujarat)	Vacant	Lord Hanuman	Their Naga only wear white clothes	Maximum 850 'Khalsa' (equivalent to Mahamandleshwar). The Naga sadhus of this Akhara are ready to fight for religion through both 'shastras' and 'shastras'. They believe in service and run langar and bhandaras during Kumbh
	Shri Panch Nirvani Ani Akhara Hanuman Garhi	1476 AD	Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh)	Shri Mahant Murali Das	Lord Hanuman	Wrestling promotion, without battle of weapons.	The sadhus of this akhada are distinct because of their unique tilak. But apart from serving their deity and their devotees, this akhada promotes the culture of wrestling. Many sadhus from here have participated in national level wrestling competitions and won medals. Shri Maha Gyan Das Maharaj, who became the president of the Akhada Parishad in 2004, was also a champion in Uttar Pradesh and won many titles. The Akhada also has a tradition of Ni-Yuddha or fighting without weapons.

	All India Shri Panch Nirmohi Ani Akhara	1720 AD	Dheer Sameer Temple Bansiwat, Vrindavan, Mathura (Uttar Pradesh)	Shri Mahant Rajendra Das Maharaj	Lord Ram	Association with Ram Mandir movement	A key player in the Ram Mandir movement, the Nirmohi Akhara follows the Ramanandi sect of Vaishnavism. It was founded by Acharya Ramanandacharya. More than 6 lakh saints are associated with this sect all over India.
Udasin	Shri Panchayati Bada Udasi Akhara	1825 AD	Krishnanagar, Prayagraj (Uttar Pradesh)	Shri Mukhiya Mahant Durgadas (and three other Mukhiyas who are heads of other branches)	Guru Chandradev	Did not believe in caste discrimination, was part of the freedom movement.	Follow the basic principles of devotion and are committed to the study of Vedas, Vedangas and Ashtanga Yoga. He runs more than 100 'ashrams' across India. It is claimed that at the Kumbhs held in the 1920s and 30s, he trained revolutionaries.
	Shree Panchayati New Udasin Akhara	1846 AD	Kankhal, Haridwar (Uttarakhand)	Mahant Jagtar Muni	Guru Chandracharya	Service to humanity	Committed to establishing Sanskrit schools, hospitals, temples and inns for public welfare. It provides free food and accommodation to pilgrims while promoting religious teachings. In times of natural calamities and national crises, the 'Akhada' actively contributes in maintaining the unity and integrity of the country
	Shri Nirmal Panchayati Akhara	1856 AD	Kankhal, Haridwar (Uttarakhand)	Shri Gyan Dev	Lord Ram	Close connection with Sikhism	The 'Akhada' has links with Sikhism, especially the Khalsa Sikhs. It is also home to the Nihang Sikhs. It is said that Guru Govind Singh sent a group of five saffron-robed saints (Panch Nirmal Gaurik) to Varanasi to learn Vedas, Vedangas and Dharmashastras. However, these saints are believed to have formed their own separate sect by the name of Nirmal Sampradaya

4.1.3 Prayagraj Mela Authority

The Uttar Pradesh government, through the Uttar Pradesh Prayagraj Mela Authority (Allahabad Act) of 2017, established the Prayagraj Mela Authority for the management of Magh Melas annually and the Ardh Kumbh and the Kumbh Mela at intervals of 6 and 12 years, respectively. The Authority is a body corporate and has been assigned the mandate of infrastructure provision, including civic amenities, health facilities, and power supply.

The Mela Authority comprises members from the Prayagraj Development Authority; the Senior Superintendent of Police (Prayagraj and the Kumbh Mela); the Municipal Commissioner (Municipal Corporation of Prayagraj); the Joint Director Treasury; the Managing Director (City Transport Services); the Chief Medical Officer; the Superintending Engineer (each from the Irrigation Department, P.W.D., Jal Nigam, and Purvanchal Vidyut Nigam); the C.E.O. (Allahabad Cantonment Board); a representative from the army; and three other distinguished members nominated by the U.P. government. The body is headed by the Commissioner of the Prayagraj division, along with the Inspector General of Police and the District Magistrate as vice chairpersons and a Mela Adhikari appointed by the state as the C.E.O.

4.1.4 Pragwals/Prayagwalas

The Prayagwals, or the Pragwals, are the priests, or Pandas, associated with the sacred Triveni Sangam, similar to the *Gayawals* at Gaya or the *Gangaputras* at Varanasi. They lead the pilgrims through the rituals that are performed at the confluence. The Pragwals belong to the Brahmins and also claim to be the ones with privileged rights to perform pujas since Akbar's reign, according to a royal decree from 1593 (Maclean, 2003).

The other key stakeholders that form the defining interactions in the Maha Kumbh include Kalpavasis (described in sections before), religious organisations/community-based organisations, businesses/corporate houses and small vendors.

5. Critical Observations on Power Dynamics and Relationships at Maha Kumbh 2025

The Maha Kumbh 2025 was a rich web of interactions, hierarchies, and negotiations among religious, administrative, and commercial players. Power, although superficially distributed across multiple nodes, was distinctly held by a handful of central nodes — largely the **Prayagraj Mela Authority (PMA)** and the **Akhil Bhartiya Akhara Parishad (ABAP)** and its member Akharas.

5.1 Central Administrative Power: Prayagraj Mela Authority (PMA)

The PMA, vested by the U.P. Prayagraj Mela Authority Act, 2017, stood as the uppermost administrative organisation to control planning, infrastructure, sanitation, security, licensing, and regulation of activities in the vast expanse of the Kumbh fair. Its mandate is similar to that of a municipal corporation, along with the capacity to levy tolls, provide licences, manage trade, and even punish offenders.

While the PMA set the structural conditions for the Mela to operate — including providing civic amenities, sanitation, temporary police stations, medical facilities, and green zones — it also controlled access to the sacred spaces by regulating land allocation to Akharas, religious groups, Pandas, businesses and vendors. Through its licensing and by-law mechanisms, the PMA can subtly steer the flows of commerce, ritual, and even spontaneous devotional acts. Its role was not just logistical but deeply decisive: by settling which groups were allocated prime space and resources, the PMA effectively influenced the visibility, prestige, and ritual primacy of various actors.

Yet, the PMA did not act in isolation. Its decisions were conditioned by negotiations with the most powerful spiritual entities, particularly the Akharas. However, the PMA Act has also provided the state government of Uttar Pradesh with powers to override or cancel the bye-laws drafted by the PMA thereby establishing its supremacy.

5.2 Spiritual Authority: ABAP and the Akharas

The Akharas, operating under the ABAP umbrella, had a parallel axis of influence based on centuries-old religious authority. The Akharas were not merely religious institutions but politically influential actors — organising the Amrit Snan, taking charge of important religious processions, and commanding huge public audiences during the Mela.

Our stakeholder mappings and field observations indicated that Akharas had considerable bargaining power in procession planning and land allocation, which tended to force the PMA to negotiate and consult terms in advance. The Akhara leaders, who were elected in their traditional councils, coordinated both intra- and inter-Akhara and made sure that their spatial and ritualistic concerns were protected.

In reality, it meant that the most strategic bathing places, high-visibility camp sites, and attendant support facilities (water, electricity, sanitation) were aligned with Akhara needs. With their mass mobilisation capability and legitimacy with the masses, Akharas were able to place themselves as necessary partners — and periodic nuisances — to the authority of the PMA.

5.3 Ritual Anchors: Kalpavasis and Panda Pujaris

Kalpavasis, the pilgrims who undertook a month-long vow of ascetic living by the river, formed the spiritual core of the Mela. Nonetheless, they still relied on Panda Pujaris for ritual management, spiritual counsel, and frequently, for fundamental subsistence.

Panda Pujaris, registered under the PMA system, played pivotal roles as mediators — their customary authority entwined with administrative legitimacy. They arranged for plots of land on which Kalpavasis erected tents, conducted daily Pujas, and handled donations (daan rituals such as Vastra Daan and Ann Daan).

This connection exposed a layered dynamic: while Kalpavasis advanced spiritual objectives by way of denial, they were still bound to the service systems administered by Pandas and indirectly governed by the PMA. Panda Pujaris also asserted their position by way of ritual dependency, as devotees depended on them for the administration of necessary rites to complete spiritually.

5.4 Small Vendors, Religious Organizations, and Peripheral Actors

The fringes of this organised spiritual-commercial space were inhabited by miniature vendors, companies, and spiritual-cultural organisations. Vendors offering Puja-related items, cuisine, Deep Daan lamps, and religious paraphernalia did business formally (under PMA licences) or informally, based on whether they could pay tolls or fees. The regulatory discretion of the PMA determined whether or not they could do business.

In parallel, cultural and religious organisations organised Satsangs, Kathas, Havans, and other large devotional events. They provided a valuable spiritual add-on, with varied points of interaction for pilgrims, but were once again reliant on PMA's event permissions and land allocation.

Here too, a hierarchy emerged: larger, wealthier organisations got better locations and timings, while smaller organisations had less preferred conditions.

5.5 Power Concentration and Negotiated Authority

Overall, the power dynamics of Maha Kumbh 2025 can be conceptualised as a **negotiated hierarchy**:

- **PMA** functioned as the regulatory core — infrastructural, financial, and administrative.
- **Akharas** embodied ritual supremacy — spiritually legitimising the event while exerting political leverage.
- **Pandas** facilitated the pilgrim experience — upholding ritual orthodoxy and obtaining donations.
- **Kalpavasis** and **ordinary pilgrims** supplied the mass but exerted little direct impact beyond ritual action.
- **Vendors and businesses** remained economically vital but administratively peripheral.

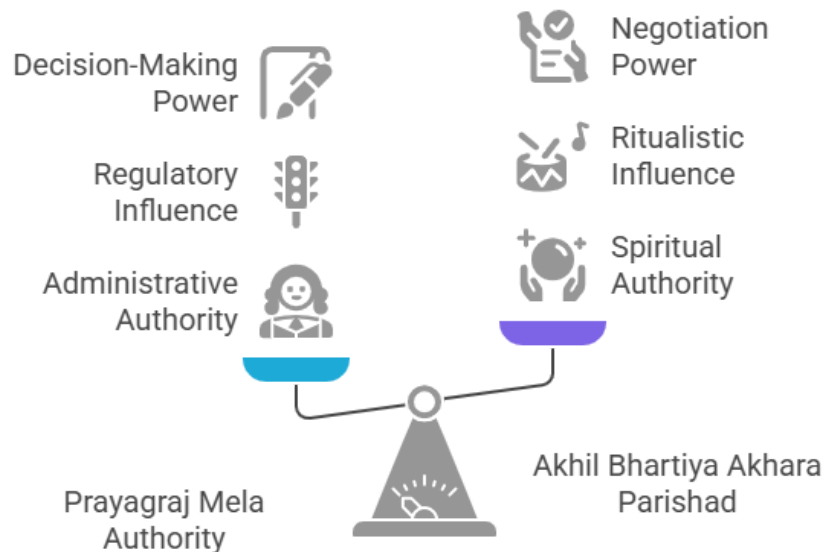


Figure: Balancing Administrative and Social Authority at Maha Kumbh

Although the PMA had formal regulatory control, its efficacy relied on upholding tacit and at times explicit compacts with Akharas and religious leaders. Akharas were unable to operate without PMA's infrastructural assistance; PMA was unable to uphold public order and ritual authenticity without Akhara collaboration.

This interdependence—administrative authority coming into contact with religious legitimacy—characterized the success of Maha Kumbh 2025 in operation. Behind the majestic pageantry of piety, the Mela presented itself as a delicate balance of ritual, power, commerce, and negotiation, in which power was neither absolute nor uniplural but distributed dynamically among salient nodes.



Figure: Relationship amongst the various stakeholders at Maha Kumbh against the backdrop of rituals, practices and customs at the Maha Kumbh 2025

6. Institutional Framework for River Water Quality Management at Maha Kumbh 2025

At the Maha Kumbh 2025, river water quality and sanitation of the floodplains had to be achieved through coordination by a multi-layered institutional arrangement, integrating judicial control, regulation enforcement, infrastructural implementation, and local self-governance. At the peak of this complex was the **National Green Tribunal (NGT)**, a court that was established through the National Green Tribunal Act, 2010. Responsible for ensuring compliance regarding the environment, the NGT was key to enforcing and directing the enforcement of water quality levels and sanitation strategies throughout the area of the Mela.

Backing the NGT's guidelines was the **Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB)**, a ministry under the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)**. The CPCB was the national regulatory agency whose responsibilities included real-time monitoring of water quality, identification of pollution sources, and coordination with parastatal institutions and state pollution boards. It worked under the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974, and made sure that environmental standards were fulfilled before, during, and after the festival.

Central to the revitalization and sanitization of the Ganga River was the **National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG)**, a flagship program under the **Ministry of Jal Shakti (MoJS)**. The NMCG facilitated financial as well as infrastructural assistance, with a focus on the development of sewage treatment facilities, the application of innovative wastewater management practices, and the deployment of sanitation facilities in conjunction with state and local governments. Supporting this at the state level, the **State Mission for Clean Ganga (SMCG)** got to work translating national-level objectives into on-ground activities, teaming up with executing agencies to unleash real-time action.

State-wise, the **Uttar Pradesh Pollution Control Board (UPPCB)** regulated environmental policies, coordinated efforts with industries to control effluents, and checked the status of the floodplain ecosystem. The Uttar Pradesh Jal Nigam (UPJN) maintained temporary toilets and treated drains within the Mela area, which played an important role in managing waste and sanitation infrastructure.

Importantly, the **Prayagraj Mela Authority (PMA)** acted as the nodal agency with a mandate of overall planning, allotment of land, civic infrastructure, and enforcement during the Kumbh. Authorized under the U.P. Prayagraj Mela Authority Act, 2017, the PMA had the powers of a municipal corporation, managing water supply, sanitation, licensing of traders, and regulating religious camps and activities. It worked in coordination with state and central authorities to implement environmental laws and create green belts around the Sangam and floodplains. Although the PMA was mainly administrative, its land use and infrastructure decisions had direct environmental implications, affecting how sewage, solid waste, and ritual offerings were handled throughout the Mela landscape.

The **Prayagraj Municipal Corporation (PMC)** also assisted in sanitation and waste management across urban boundaries contiguous to the Mela grounds. These institutions collectively—varied from judicial to municipal implementers—constituted an incremental governance framework that dealt with the colossal environmental pressures of Maha Kumbh 2025 while sustaining religious rituals and environmental accountability.

Institutional Framework for River Water Quality and Sanitation Management at Maha Kumbh 2025

Category	Institution	Affiliated to	Power derived from	Main Function	Role in Mahakumbh
Central					
Regulatory Body	Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB)	Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)	Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974 (Act No. 06 of 1974)	Apex body in India for monitoring and regulating water pollution. It conducts real-time water quality assessments, collects samples, and reports findings to bodies like the NGT & other parastatals.	Regular Monitoring of Water Via Mahakumbh Water Quality Data
Financing and Regulatory Body	National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG)	Ministry of Jal Shakti (MoJS), Department of Water Resources River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation	Societies Registration Act, 1860 Environment (Protection) Act (EPA), 1986	Under the Namami Gange programme, a flagship initiative launched in 2014 to rejuvenate the Ganga. Legal Authority on Ganga.	Providing support in form of: Expansion of Sewage Treatment Infrastructure; Implementation of Innovative Wastewater Management Techniques; Installation of Sanitation and Waste Management Facilities; Building awareness through Community Engagement and Beautification Efforts
Compliance & Oversight	National Green Tribunal (NGT)	Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) [Administrative Control]	National Green Tribunal Act, 2010 (Act No. 19 of 2010)	A judicial body addressing the environmental disputes and enforcing compliance with environmental laws.	Overseeing and mandating environmental compliance focused on ensuring adequate sanitation facilities and maintaining the water quality
	National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA)	Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA)	Disaster Management Act, 2005 (Act No. 53 of 2005)	Apex body on formulating disaster mitigation policies; Coordinate the enforcement and implementation of the policy and plans for disaster management	Crucial role in disaster prevention, mitigation, preparedness, and response, ensuring a safe and secure environment for the millions of pilgrims.
	Central Water Commission (CWC)	MoJS, Department of Water Resources River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation	<i>No Specific Act but a decision of a Government</i>		

State					
Regulatory Bodies (Parastatal to CPCB)	Uttar Pradesh Pollution Control Board (UPPCB)	Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC)	Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974 and Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981.	Identification and assessment of industrial and municipal pollution sources and control thereof, Assessment of quality of inland surface waters, Notification of effluent and emission standards, Instituting legal action against defaulters	Roster to regulate industrial operations of units on specific dates to prevent water pollution during the event. To enforce the directive, vigilant committees have been formed across the 11 districts.
Implementer (Parastatal to NMCG)	State Mission for Clean Ganga (SMCG)	Ministry of Jal Shakti, Uttar Pradesh	Societies Registration Act, 1860	Implementing the Namami Gange and other programmes through various executing agencies	
Implementer	Uttar Pradesh Jal Nigam (UPJN)	Ministry of Jal Shakti, Uttar Pradesh	Uttar Pradesh Water Supply and Sewerage ACT, 1975 (Act No. 43, 1975)		UPJN (Urban) – Maintenance of temporary toilets and treatment of drains in the Mela site
	Irrigation and Water resources department, UP	Ministry of Jal Shakti, Uttar Pradesh			Management of the river flow and the reclamation of floodplains
Local					
Implementer	Prayagraj Mela Authority (PMA)	Government of Uttar Pradesh (GoUP)	U.P. Prayagraj Mela Authority, Allahabad, Act, 2017 (Act no 5 of 2017)		leasing of land, provision of infrastructure – physical (water, sanitation and power) and social (health and law enforcement), developing and maintaining Green Zone in Sangam and Mela Area
ULB	Prayagraj Municipal Corporation (PMC)		UP Municipal Corporation Act, 1959		

6.1. National Green Tribunal: Catalyzing Compliance and Monitoring at Maha Kumbh

The **National Green Tribunal (NGT)** issued a final order, dated 23.12.2024, taking a cognizant approach in the case of **Kamlesh Singh v. Union of India (OA 310/2022)** and **Saurabh Tiwari v. Union of India (MA 59/2024)**, filed before the principal bench regarding the preparedness of the Maha Kumbh Mela being conducted from 13th January to 26th February 2025. The primary issue raised by the petitioners regarding the government's preparedness regarding infrastructure and sanitation for a massive influx of pilgrims for a short period of time in the city of Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, is the untreated sewage discharging into the rivers which would be impacting the water quality during the massive gathering with an estimated 40 crores people coming to take the holy bath.

According to the petition, the discharge of sewage from Rasulabad to Triveni Sangam has 50 drains. NGT referred the matter to a joint committee by order dated 18.01.2024 to submit an action report to ascertain the correct factual position while determining the truthfulness of the allegations made by taking appropriate remedial action.

The Joint Committee submitted a report through UPPCB on 26.04.2024, revealing that the untreated sewage through the untapped drains was flowing into the river and there was a significant gap in the generation and treatment of sewage. It was found that out of 76 drains, 37 were tapped by UP Jal Nigam, which are being treated by 10 STPs, and the discharge was being made in the rivers. **This would pose a significant environmental threat as the remaining 39 drains discharged untreated sewage into the rivers.**

Also, on 20.09.2024, UPPCB highlighted a reported gap of 128.28 MLD (million litres per day) in sewage treatment capacity, with 394.48 MLD treated out of 468.28 MLD generated. Therefore, in the action plan, 3 new STPs are under construction to address the gap with a combined capacity of 183 MLD. Also, the grey water from the mela area would be treated in constructed ponds using bioremediation methods.

The NGT in its order directed for enhanced monitoring with the results being uploaded on their websites. Also, the tribunal ordered the state to strictly ensure that no untreated sewage enters the

rivers during the Maha Kumbh and that the event should not suffer. Steps should be taken for other temporary measures like the advanced oxidation processes and geo-tube treatment for untapped drains.

The NGT emphasized the need for efficient operation of STPs and directed the authorities to ensure that treated effluent meets the prescribed standards, particularly for BOD and fecal coliform.

Therefore, NGT's order tried to balance the religious significance of the Mahakumbh with environmental sustainability. The tribunal ordered the state authorities to submit compliance reports for all the directions by enforcing strict monitoring and promoting awareness among the pilgrims by 31st January 2025 and 28th February 2025.

The recent report submitted by CPCB, NGT, in its order dated 17.02.2025, quoted that "*River water quality was not conforming with the primary water quality for bathing w.r.t. Faecal Coliform (FC) at all the monitored locations on various occasions. Huge number of people taking bath at Prayagraj during Maha Kumbh Mela in the river including auspicious bathing days which eventually leads to increase in fecal concentration.*"

On 17th February 2025, in an affidavit by CPCB to NGT, it was noted that:

With respect to Biochemical Oxygen Demand (BOD), river water quality was not conforming with the bathing criteria during monitoring carried out on 12-13 January, 2025, at most of the locations; however, after that, organic pollution (in terms of BOD) started to decrease due to freshwater intrusion at upstream locations.

After 13th January 2025, river water quality will conform to the bathing criteria w.r.t. BOD on most occasions, river water quality was not conforming with the primary water quality for bathing w.r.t. Faecal Coliform (FC) at all the monitored locations on various occasions. A huge number of people taking baths at Prayagraj during the Maha Kumbh Mela in the river, including auspicious bathing days, which eventually leads to an increase in faecal concentration.

Key Highlights:

- UPPCB vs CPCB dispute on the sampling points: NGT stated that there are no statutory requirements for the CPCB to inform SPCB before taking samples, and sample collection points did not matter.
- Sampling methods differ between CPCB and UPCB, as contended by UPCB in NGT. However, NGT noted that the comprehensive action taken report has not been complied with by the UPPCB. The Central Laboratory, UPPCB: it is reflected that a high level of faecal and total coliform has been found in various locations.
- FC increased during Amrit Snan days due to the influx of the huge population taking a dip.

6.2 The Economic Construct of the Maha Kumbh Mela 2025: Stakeholders, Interdependencies, and Strategic Insights

At the heart of it is a nested and complex economic organization of national, subnational, and local players driven by the religious and cultural passion of the Mela.

The national stakeholder space is made up largely of ministries and Government of India public sector undertakings. Ministries such as Tourism, Railways, Health, and Urban Development, and PSUs such as SAIL, ISRO, and BARC, introduce infrastructural and technical capacities required to handle such an assemblage. Their interventions are not marginal; they constitute the logistical and technological scaffolding upon which the Kumbh's religious and civic life hangs. The central government's role is shifting from simply providing services to orchestrating them, ensuring a seamless integration of broadcasting services (like AIR/DD), security systems, and rail mobility. Take Indian Railways, for example; it serves as a vital logistical lifeline, helping millions of pilgrims travel through specially coordinated trains that align with their ritual schedules. The contribution at the national level, particularly in security and transport, is of significant value hence this level is an important economic force.

In addition to the public infrastructure, private businesses, especially from the FMCG, media, infra, and advertising industries, position themselves strategically in the symbolic space of the Kumbh. Hindustan Unilever, Patanjali, Tata, and Reliance heavily invest in on-ground activation and branding, and estimates range between ₹3,000–₹3,600 crore in marketing spend (Dey, 2025) (Bhushan & Mukherjee, 2024). These companies use the religious and cultural symbolism of the Kumbh—specifically Akhara symbolism and Kalpavasi asceticism—to confer devotional legitimacy on consumer goods. Their activity places sacred space within a commercial space, where consumption is given religious meaning.

At the subnational level, the Uttar Pradesh Government is the primary facilitator. With an infrastructure budget of nearly ₹7,500 crore being allocated for the Mela, the contributions of the state are extended to sanitation, health, water supply, transport, and electrical grid management (TNN, 2025) (Express News Service, 2025). The role of the central government moves from provision to orchestration, with end-to-end integration of broadcasting services (AIR/DD),

security infrastructures, and rail mobility. Indian Railways, for instance, becomes a lifeline logistic artery, facilitating the movement of millions of pilgrims through specially coordinated trains in tandem with ritual schedules. Furthermore, the combined efforts of UP Tourism, IRCTC, and the hospitality industry yield a contribution of ₹2,800 crore, predominantly through accommodations and pilgrimage-related packages (PIB, 2025) (ET Hospitality World, 2025). The indigenous economic model is the closest interaction with the religious and cultural elements of the Kumbh. There are thriving but often unregulated markets consisting of vendors, craftsmen, local associations and small traders, who provide for the daily needs of pilgrims. CAIT (Confederation of All India Traders) estimates business (services and goods) of around 3 lakh crores with local trade at the Mela at ₹50,000 to ₹75,000 crore, including religious artifacts, attire, food, and handicrafts (ANI, 2025). Flowers worth Rs 800 Crore, other ritual items worth Rs 5000 crore and dairy products worth Rs 4000 crore has been consumed according to estimates (FE Business, 2025). The Prayagraj Municipal Corporation (PMC) and support NGOs manage the functional aspects of the temporary township—sanitation, signage, and waste disposal—adding another ₹1,000–₹2,000 crore in value. Besides, the rickshaw, auto-rickshaw, and state bus transport system provided intra-Mela movement. About 13,400 registered e-rickshaws ferried passengers in Maha Kumbh at about Rs. 1000 per hour (HT, 2024) (ET, 2025). Thousands of small and large organizations were providing food 24x7, with some of them like Akshaya Patra Foundation spending Rs. 5 Lakhs per meal feeding about 20,000 devotees at a time. Additionally, there were numerous street vendors and temporary food stalls around the Mela precincts making it a vital economic linkage of the event.

Interwoven throughout these economic layers are the religious-cultural actors who, while not economic producers in themselves, are the decisive drivers of economic activity. The 13 Akharas, which are coordinated through the Akhara Parishad, and lakhs of Kalpavasis—ascetic pilgrims who reside in camps for the length of time—dictate the rhythm and course of economic currents. Pandas and temple priests constitute the ritual fabric of the Mela, enabling sacred engagement, providing rituals, and nurturing pilgrims. Their estimated ritual economy amounts to about ₹1,000 crore, although the symbolic capital that they create is far larger. Most significantly, these actors set the very spatial and temporal organization of the Mela: Shahi Snan routes, public congregation timing, and settlement zone selection all determine where and when economic activity spikes.

An interdependence network sustains this complex layout. The PMA and Akhara Parishad rely on tent vendors for site planning and ritual timetables. Light and sound companies schedule deployments in synchrony with the timing of evening Ganga Aartis and Satsangs. Road construction companies must be sensitive to the sanctity of Akhara procession routes, and sanitation services are scheduled in synchrony with the movement and duration of Kalpavasi stays. These operational interdependencies make visible an economic ecology that is not merely multi-scalar but also ritually governed.

From this complexity comes a series of strategic observations. First, vendors and service providers represent the infrastructural backbone of the Mela. In spite of operating in informal circuits, their presence is crucial to the physical and functional success of the event. Second, cycles of demand and planning for goods and services closely follow the ritual rhythm of the Mela, specifically the Akhara calendar. Bathing dates such as Mauni Amavasya and Makar Sankranti become sites of logistical and commercial intensity. Third, the state plays the role of facilitator, leveraging religious momentum to legitimize large-scale infrastructural investment and permitting the market scale to organically develop. This contributes evidence to the thesis of a state-enabled, culture-driven economy.

Fourth, the Maha Kumbh is a temporary megacity—a pop-up urban phenomenon that, for 45 days, takes on the density, diversity, and dynamism of a city. This temporary urbanism places unprecedented pressures on utility supply chains, security apparatuses, and mobility networks. Lastly, spirituality itself is an economic force. Ritual participation is directly connected with consumption—of food, transport, housing, or religious commodities—so that there is a kind of symbolic consumption that imbues markets with a spiritual mission.

Briefly put, the Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 is a religious event but also a spectacular enactment of ritual economies, where holy space and holy time are utilized as templates to create economic value. With its stakeholder map, interdependencies, and strategic logics, it is obvious that the Kumbh is as much an economic event as religious—an embodied manifestation of the convergence of ancient practices and new governance and market forces.

Level	Stakeholder Group	Goods/Services Provided	Key Players	Estimated Value Generated	Interlinkages with Religious Cultural Stakeholders
National	Central Government (Ministries, PSUs)	Infrastructure funds, railways, broadcasting, defense services, security	MoT, MoRTH, ISRO, SAIL, BARC, AIR/DD, PMO	₹2–3 lakh crore returns (part of it transport, steel, media, security).	Ensures smooth logistics for Akharas, pilgrims, and PMA directives.
	Private Corporates (FMCG, Media, Infra, Advertising)	Branding, sponsorships, products, services	HUL, Patanjali, Tata Group, Reliance, media houses	₹3,000–3,600 crore (ad spending); indirect multiplier effect.	Use Akhara symbolism and spiritual imagery in marketing; support Kalpavasis.
	Indian Railways	Mobility of millions of pilgrims	Ministry of Railways	Major logistics component (₹10,000+ crore indirect impact).	Links remote Kalpavasi clusters to the main site; timed with bathing dates.
Subnational	Govt. of Uttar Pradesh	Infrastructure, sanitation, power, water, transport, health	CM Office, UPRNN, Jal Nigam, Urban Dev., UP Tourism	₹6,990–₹7,500 crore (Govt. allocation); ₹2–3 lakh crore returns.	Coordinates with PMA and Akhara Parishad for layout and logistics.
	State Tourism & Hospitality Sector	Accommodations, food, packages	UP Tourism, private hotels, OYO, IRCTC	₹2,800 crore (tourism/hospitality revenue)	Hosts pilgrims, Kalpavasis; proximity to key bathing ghats.

	Local Businesses (Traders/Artisans)	Religious items, handicrafts, textiles, food	CAIT, local unions	₹50,000–₹75,000 crore (retail trade)	Directly serve pilgrims and Akharas with spiritual and daily-use goods.
Local	Prayagraj Municipal Corporation	Sanitation, waste mgmt., signage	PMC, NGOs	₹1,000–₹2,000 crore (infra and operations).	Clean zones near Akharas and ghats; supports Kalpavasi camps.
	Transport Sector (rickshaws, taxis, buses)	Mobility within and around Mela	Local unions, UPSTRC	₹5,000+ crore.	Integral for pilgrim mobility; supports Akharas during Shahi Snans.
	Food & Beverage Vendors	Prasad, meals, snacks, water	Street vendors, Langar kitchens	Thousands of organizations performing Ann Daan and spending ~ ₹5-10 Lakhs per day.	Many serve Akharas, Pilgrims, and Kalpavasis; interfaith kitchens.
	Pandas, Temple Priests	Ritual services, guidance	Panda Samaj	~₹1,000 crore (ritual economy).	Core interface with pilgrims, Akharas, and Kalpavasis.
	Kalpavasis	Ascetic pilgrims staying for the full Mela duration	Not-for-profit, spiritual communities	Not revenue-focused; ~30–50 lakh attendees.	High spiritual capital; attract donations, create ripple effects for services.

7. Concluding Notes (*Work In Progress*):

NMCG has put significant effort into creating an ecosystem of participatory conservation efforts by supporting members of the local community (Ganga Praharis) who could engage with local-level institutions and mobilise communities at the grassroots level. One of the major objectives for nurturing a pool of local members is to create ‘belongingness among people towards the Ganga River’ and to link ‘livelihood’ with that of the river (NMCG). In this regard, the Kumbh Mela, with its unprecedented potential to mobilise people across the nation, has presented a strong case on how large river gatherings could be leveraged to create a sense of belongingness of the people with the river. This is more so for the Kumbh, which has proved to create a significant impact both in people’s imagination and their connection to the river ecosystem, and at the same time, both the state government and the local population benefitted in terms of economy and livelihoods. There are numerous factors that contributed to this—proactive outreach by state and non-state actors inviting people to participate in the gathering and the interaction between the state and the citizen, where the latter demanded clean and pollution-free river water and the former responded to it through various means. This model requires being studied more and emulated in the larger context of establishing ‘belonging’ to the river for the collective effort of the river rejuvenation.

Relating to the River Water Quality attributes, develop an argument on the effectiveness/shortfall of the river quality management. **Maha Kumbh 2025 → learnings → replaceability of river water quality management system.** Material practices or rituals lead to negligible pollution load. It is the people who come to bath and stay around the river that add to the pollutant load (FC). Pollution Load emanating from the sanitation practice from a large gathering also contributes significantly to the load ||Solid Waste Management has been efficient with regular cleaning, including mechanical and manual means in both the streams and the banks. Robust and Redundant Infrastructure and u/s water release for the dilution purpose on a regular basis constitutes an important component of the pollution management and further, it is critical owing to the need to maintain the water quality to avoid public health hazard and outcry. Downstream impact of the kumbh, post the event requires further study and assessments.

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Annexure 1

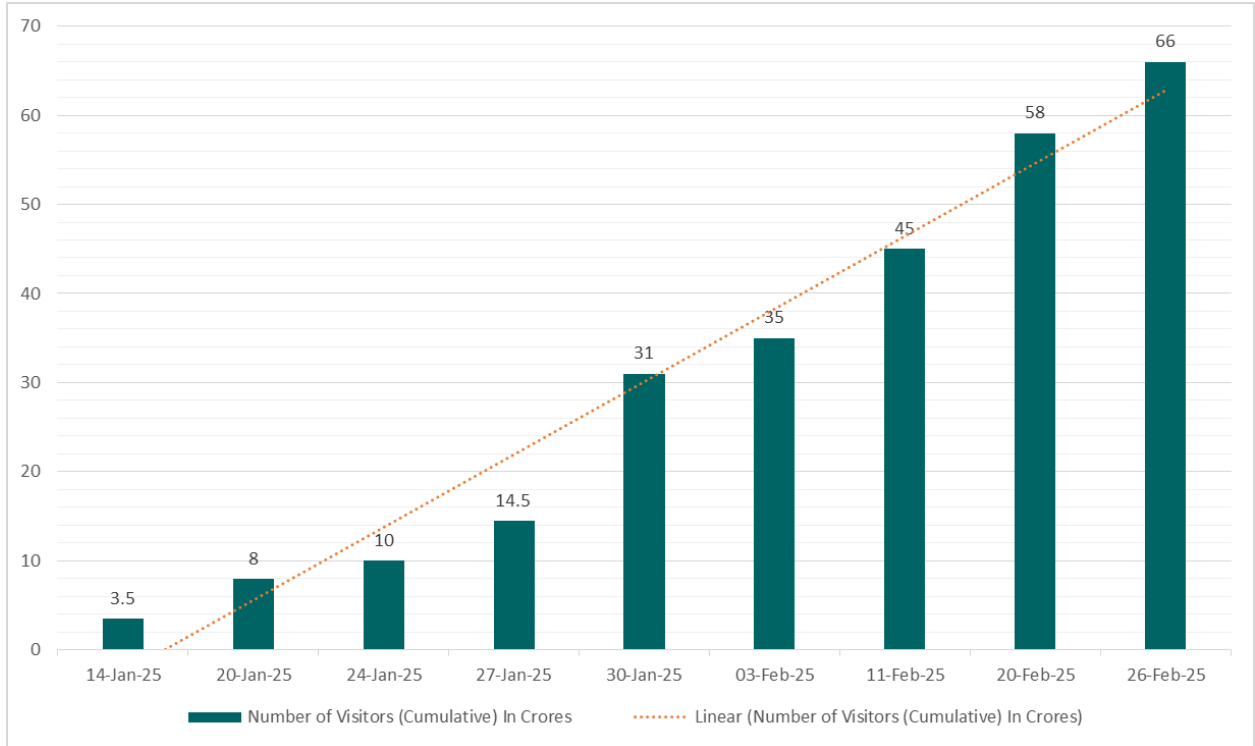


Figure: Number of visitors in Maha Kumbh

Source: Press Information Bureau (GoI)

Annexure 2

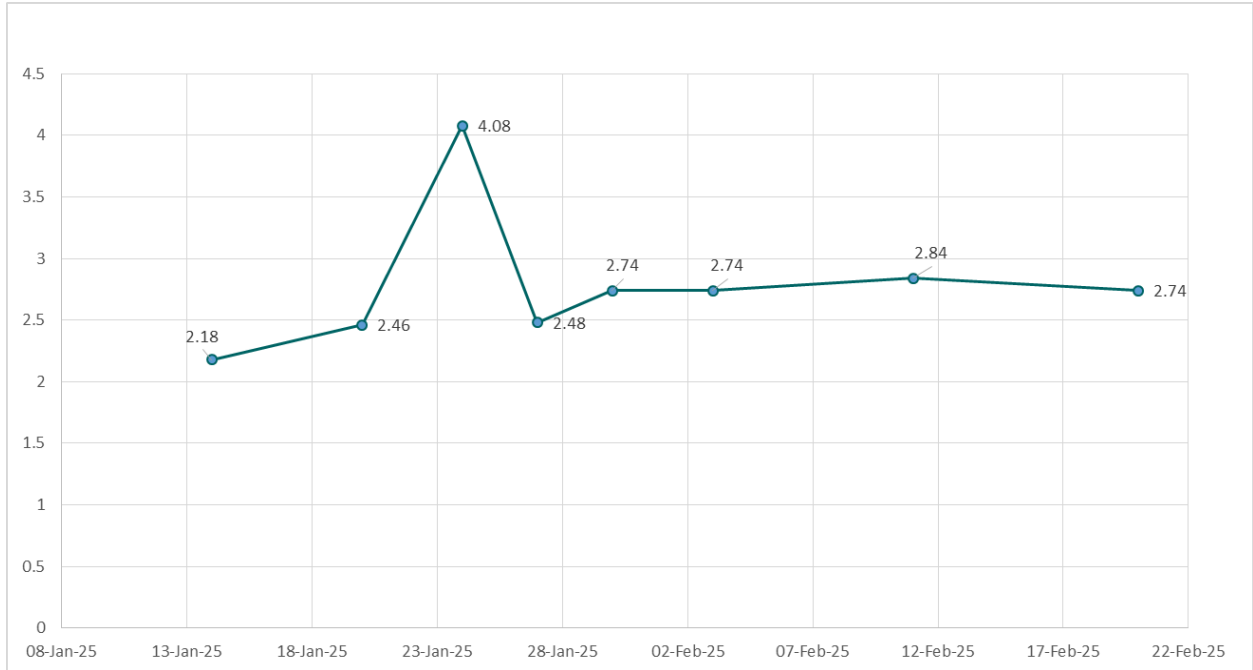


Figure: BOD (in mg/l) levels during key bathing dates in Maha Kumbh 2025 at Sangam

Source: CPCB

Annexure 3

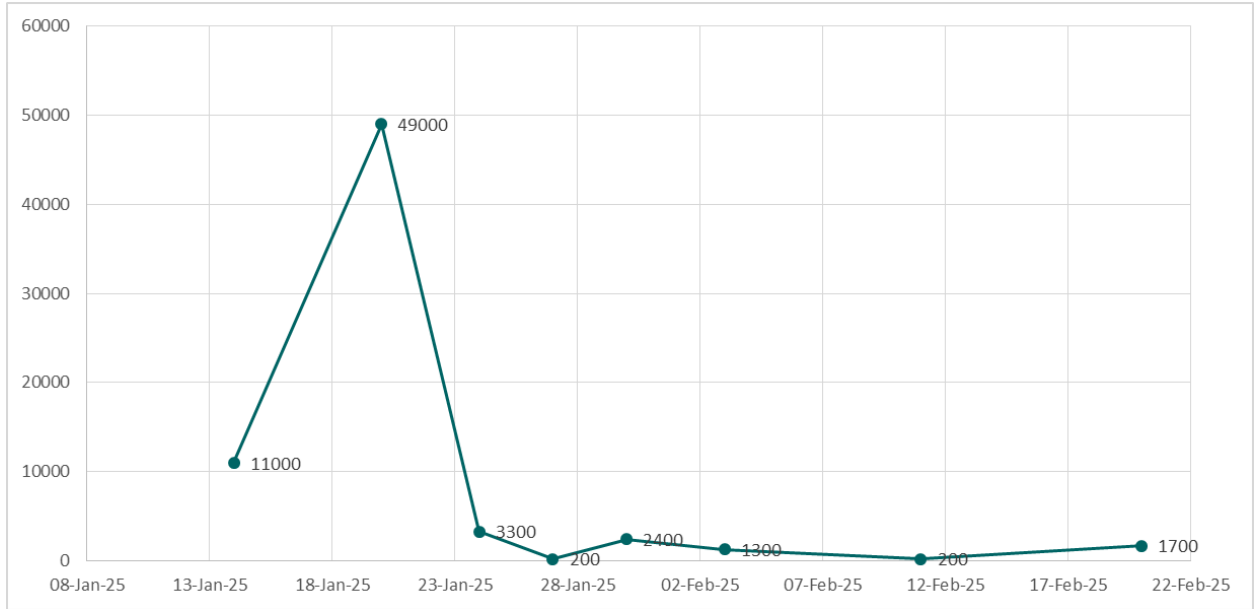


Figure: Fecal Coliform levels during Maha Kumbh 2025 at Sangam

Source: CPCB