

Beyond The Holy Dip: Pilgrimage, Youth Perspectives, And Environment Challenges in Maha Kumbh Mela

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Abstract

The Maha Kumbh Mela, one of the biggest religious gatherings in the world, is a complex fusion of modernity, tradition, and faith. This study investigates the religiosity and spiritual experiences of young adults (ages 20 to 30) attending the 2025 Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj, employing a qualitative research approach grounded in social constructionism. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 39 participants, including students, professionals, and self-employed individuals, and analysed thematically using NVivo software. Findings reveal diverse motivations for participation, ranging from curiosity and personal spiritual quests to cultural continuity and ancestral loyalty. Interactions with ascetics, engagement in ritualistic practices, and the role of digital technology, such as virtual darshan and social media that emerged as significant theme. The study emphasizes how religious experiences are dynamic and how modern forms of spiritual expression collide with traditional faith practices. This study adds to larger discussions on pilgrimage, religious identity, environmental challenges and the evolution of faith in the digital era by offering nuanced insights into young adults' impressions of religiosity and spirituality at the Maha Kumbh Mela.

Keywords: Maha Kumbh, spirituality, religion, rituals, holy dip, environmental challenges.

INTRODUCTION:

Religiosity and spirituality are deeply ingrained in the fabric of Indian society which brings along celebrations and performances of rituals. Religion is composed of beliefs and rites that are centred on sacred things, while sacredness is the foci for defining beliefs and rites on the other hand religious beliefs are representations of the sacred and rites determine human conduct with respect to the sacred (Kumbh Mela, Kriti Sharma, n.d.). Ghats, being one of the most integral centres for many of these rituals. According to the Hindu religion, some rivers are described as sacred rivers, and it is believed that performing various purposes, including religious rituals, bathing, and cremation, can lead to God's place in heaven. Majority of the rituals performed in ghats aims to seek purity of inner soul, manifesting vividly in festivals such as the Kumbh Mela (Sakshi, Wagh, and Kohli 2024).

Kumbh is a riverside celebration, this is a celebration of bathing, drinking, and worshiping the sacred rivers, Ganga, Yamuna, and its confluence (Saraswati). This Hindu pilgrimage location is one of the oldest religious gatherings along the river, rather than a temple. The Kumbh Mela is a massive Hindu pilgrimage and festival, considered the world's largest peaceful gathering which takes place every twelve years at the confluence ("Triveni Sangam") of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the legendary Saraswati rivers in Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad), is an unsurpassed celebration of faith and devotion. This event draws millions of pilgrims, ascetics, and spiritual searchers, all enticed by the promise of liberation ("moksha") (Bhagawata Purana). The Mela takes place every three years at four pilgrimage sites on four sacred rivers, resulting in a twelve-year cycle. Melas are multi-week celebrations that feature ceremonial bathing, festivals, religious lectures, and monastic meetings. The Kumbh Mela combines faith, community, and culture, making it a significant event in Hinduism. The individual host cities have their own set of priorities while organizing and planning for the Kumbh Melas, depending on various factors such as availability of funds, expected footfall, duration of the festival and also political and administrative will. This results in each Kumbh being slightly different from one another specially the way in which expenditure for organisation is considered. While one city might focus only on the conductance of the Kumbh - spend majorly in the temporary tent city (like Allahabad), other cities might spend evenly across the whole city (like Nasik). Prayagraj (Allahabad) is one of the oldest cities in India. According to the Skund Puran, Brahma, the creator God of the Hindu trinity, conducted "Prakrista Yagna" here at the beginning of creation, resulting

in the name "Prayag." Prayag is known as the "Tirathraj" of pilgrimages due to its location at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati rivers. This is why it is often referred to as "Triveni".

Background and Mythological Context of Maha Kumbh

Maha Kumbh's roots are deeply intertwined with Hindu cosmology and mythology. The idea of "Kumbha" ("pot") is pivotal, referring to the fabled Samudra Manthan (churning of the ocean), as mentioned in the Bhagavata Purana, Vishnu Purana, and Mahabharata. In this paper, an effort is made to understand and explain the religiosity and spirituality present in the Maha Kumbh by focusing on scriptural literature and the experience of the Maha Kumbh mela participants.

The most detailed account appears in the Bhagavata Purana (Skandha 8, Chapters 5-12), where the narrative begins with the verse:

“manthanam mandaram krtva utsavam krtva tu vaasukim |
mathananti sam sura devaah saagaram ksheeramuttamam | |” (BP 8.6.22)

Translation: "Using Mount Mandara as the churning rod and Vasuki as the rope, the devas and asuras together began churning the supreme ocean of milk."

According to the Bhagavata Purana (8.6.15-16):

“Deva-asura-sangrame... amritam samupādadhuh.” (“In the battle between the gods and demons, the nectar of immortality was retrieved.”)

The gods, aided by Lord Vishnu, secured the nectar in a kumbha, spilling drops at four locations: Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nashik. These places became sanctified as pilgrimage sites where the Kumbh Mela is cyclically celebrated.

The Vishnu Purana (Book 1, Chapter 9) provides another significant account:

“ksheerabdhimathane mandaro mathyate girih |
mathyamaane tadambhodhau bahuni ratnaani jagyire | |”

Translation: "Then in the churning of the milk ocean, Mount Mandara was used as the churning stick. As the ocean was churned, numerous jewels emerged." (V. Purana)

The Samudra Manthan, or the churning of the ocean, is rich with symbolic elements that reflect profound cosmological and philosophical interpretations. At the heart of this narrative lies the **Cosmic Ocean (Kshirasagara)**, which symbolizes the primordial state of existence and the potential for unmanifest reality. Emerging from this ocean is **Mount Mandara**, representing the axis mundi, symbolizing stability even amid the dynamic forces of cosmic change. The serpent **Vasuki** embodies dynamic energy and signifies the **kundalini** force in yogic philosophy, illustrating the transformative potential within creation. From the churning arise **fourteen ratnas** (jewels), each with significant symbolic weight. For instance, **Amrita**, the nectar of immortality, stands for spiritual enlightenment, while **Halahala** (the cosmic poison) highlights the destructive aspects of creation. The narrative further embodies key philosophical concepts such as cosmic dualism, represented through the interaction between **devas** and **asuras**, and divine intervention, particularly through **Vishnu's** multiple manifestations, emphasizing the role of divine grace in the evolution of the cosmos (Dwaipayana; A. Purana, Vishnu, Purana; Rudra). Different theological interpretations, such as the **Advaita** perspective and the **Vaishnava** interpretation, offer insights into the underlying unity of existence and the divine play of Vishnu. In contemporary discourse, the ocean symbolizes ecological balance, representing creation and destruction, while psychological analysis reflects the inner churning of consciousness, pointing to transformation through spiritual practice. Thus, the Samudra Manthan serves as a multifaceted narrative, illustrating the interplay of creation, destruction, and spiritual evolution within the cosmos.

Concept of Mela

Types of Kumbh mela:

Kumbh mela: (Occurs every 3 years)

The Kumbh Mela is one of the most important Hindu pilgrimages, held every three years in four sacred locations: Haridwar (Ganga River), Prayagraj (Allahabad) at the Triveni Sangam (the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati), Ujjain (Shipra River), and Nashik (Godavari River),

(Anthony, 1998). This grand event is thought to be spiritually transformative, with millions of devotees flocking to the sacred rivers for a holy dip (Shahi Snan) in search of purification and divine blessings.

Ardha Kumbh mela: (Occurs every 6 years)

The Ardha Kumbh Mela, which occurs every six years, is only celebrated at Prayagraj and Haridwar. It serves as a link between two Purna Kumbh Melas, attracting millions of pilgrims to participate in religious rituals, discourses, and sacred baths. The last Ardha Kumbh was held in 2019 at Prayagraj, and the next will be in 2028 at Haridwar.

Purna Kumbh mela: (Occurs every 12 years)

The Purna Kumbh Mela is celebrated every 12 years in Prayagraj, where the Triveni Sangam is regarded the holiest confluence. This celebration is marked by extensive spiritual activities, including the presence of saints, scholars, and ascetics from many Hindu sects.

Maha Kumbh mela: (Occurs once in every 144 years)

The Maha Kumbh Mela, the most rare and sacred of them all, takes place in Prayagraj once every 144 years, following 12 cycles of Purna Kumbh Melas. It is regarded as a supreme religious event, with unparalleled spiritual benefits and the highest form of moksha (liberation from the cycle of rebirth). The latest Maha Kumbh took place in 2013, and the next one is slated for 2157.

Each Kumbh Mela, regardless of its style, is firmly entrenched in Hindu mythology and astrological alignments, affording a chance for spiritual purification, self-reflection, and social devotion, making it one of the largest and most respected religious gatherings in the world.

Occurrence and Significance of Planetary alignments

The timing of each Kumbh Mela is determined by the relative positions of celestial bodies, specifically the Sun (Surya), Moon (Chandra), Jupiter (Brihaspati), and, on occasion, Saturn (Shani). In accordance with Hindu astrology, these alignments result in a highly favourable time for spiritual purification (Macleane, 2003).

1. **Prayagraj (Allahabad):** Jupiter in Aries, Sun in Capricorn.

When Jupiter (Brihaspati) enters Aries (Mesha Rashi) and the Sun enters Capricorn (Makar Rashi), Prayagraj hosts the Kumbh Mela.

2. **Haridwar:** Jupiter in Aquarius, Sun in Aries.

When Jupiter enters Aquarius (Kumbha Rashi) and the Sun enters Aries (Mesha Rashi), the Kumbh Mela occurs in Haridwar.

3. **Ujjain:** Jupiter in Leo, Sun in Aries.

When Jupiter enters Leo (Simha Rashi) and the Sun enters Aries (Mesha Rashi), Ujjain celebrates the Kumbh Mela.

4. **Nashik:** Jupiter in Leo, Sun in Leo.

When Jupiter and the Sun both enter Leo (Simha Rashi), the Kumbh Mela takes place in Nashik.

Table 1: Various Host Cities of the Kumbh Mela through the years

Year	Allahabad	Nasik	Ujjain	Haridwar
1992			Kumbh	Ardha
1995	Ardha Kumbh			
1998				Kumbh
2001	Kumbh			
2003		Simhastha		
2004			Kumbh	Ardha
2007	Ardha Kumbh			
2010				Kumbh

2013	Purna Kumbh			
2015		Simhastha		
2016			Kumbh	Ardha
2019	Ardha Kumbh			
2022				Kumbh
2025	Maha Kumbh			

Source: Kohli, 2024

The first mention of Kumbh Mela at Prayag is attributed to the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang, who attended the mela in 635 AD. Adi Sankara, a Hindu guru, was the first to organize the Kumbh Mela. He also established the first religious organizations, akharas, in the ninth century, dividing ascetics into two broad categories: astradhari, or weapon-holders, and shastradhari, or scripture-holders (Prada, 1999). He popularized mela among the general public, and asceticism and faith have grown in popularity year after year (Penciu 2014). According to Hindu mythology, these planetary placements signify the times when devotees can most easily obtain "Amrit" (nectar of immortality). Bathing in holy waters during certain celestial alignments is believed to wash sins and previous karma, resulting in moksha (freedom). The Kumbh Mela is closely linked to the narrative of Samudra Manthan (the churning of the ocean), in which drops of amrit fell at four sacred spots during a divine struggle between Devas (gods) and Asuras (demons).

Maha Kumbh mela 2025, January 13 to February 26

The Maha Kumbh Mela is an important Hindu celebration founded on ancient customs and celestial alignments. The festival, held at the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna, and legendary Saraswati rivers in Prayagraj, represents spiritual purification and the pursuit for salvation. The 2025 festival, which runs from January 13 to February 26, is expected to be the largest to date, involving extensive planning across various areas.

The 2025 iteration is anticipated to attract over 400 million pilgrims over six weeks, presenting unparalleled challenges in organization, housing, and crowd management. The purpose of this study is to understand peoples perceptives of religion and spirituality of Maha Kumbh mela through narratives of the respondents.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research design

The study used a qualitative research design (Kansal, 2023), informed by a social constructionist perspective (Ishtiaq, 2019). It suggests that using this perspective can help researchers better understand how individuals interact with society by sharing their lived experiences.

2.2. Participants and recruitment

Individuals in their twenties are often at the forefront of cultural shifts, providing valuable perspectives on societal changes (Carmichael, Reis, and Duberstein 2015; Golo and Lassander 2022; Klingenberg, Sjö, and Moberg 2022). The age group 20-30 was chosen as it represents young adults who are in a transitional phase of life, exploring deeper spiritual meanings while also being influenced by modernity and technology (Carmichael, Reis, Duberstein 2015; JASMINE 2014). Hence, this demographic is likely to have diverse perspectives on traditional spiritual practices, making their insights valuable for understanding the evolving role of faith and cultural heritage in contemporary society. Convenience as well as snowball sampling techniques were employed to recruit participants in Maha Kumbh mela.

2.3. Development of interview guide

Based on the research arm and a review of literature, an interview guide comprising open-ended questions (Timmins, 2016) was designed to explore young adults' view about the Maha Kumbh mela and their personal beliefs in their religion and spirituality (Carmichael, 2015; Golo Lassander 2022; Klingenberg, Sjö, and Moberg 2022). Pilot interviews were conducted with five members prior to verify the face validity of the interview guide. The questions presented to the respondents are listed in Table 2.

2.4. Data collection

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted between 20 to 24 February, 2025. Two interviewers conducted the interviews in the local language i.e. Hindi. Prior to commencement of the

interviews, a brief explanation about the purpose and procedure of the study was provided. Permission to audio-record the conversation was elicited, and the participants were assured that the collected data would be treated anonymously. To minimize social desirability bias, interviews were conducted at different time period between 20 Feb to 24 Feb. Also, we did not use any leading questions during the interview. RR and HR met on a daily basis to review collected data and decide on data saturation (Kansal, 2023). At the 34th interview, data saturation was attained as no new ideas or concepts emerged. Nevertheless, five more interviews were conducted to confirm data saturation. Interview durations varied from 10 min to 16 min with an average of 13 min. At the end of each interview, the participants were provided with fresh seasonal fruits (i.e. banana, apple, orange) for their contribution to the study.

Table 2

Interview guide
➤ What motivated you to visit the Maha Kumbh Mela?
➤ Have you interacted with ascetics (sadhus) at the Maha Kumbh? If yes, what was your experience like?
➤ Can you describe your personal understanding of spirituality?
➤ How do you practice spirituality in your daily life?
➤ What role does faith or religious belief play in your life?
➤ How do you think modern technology (social media, virtual darshan, live streaming) is changing the Maha Kumbh experience?

2.5. Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim by the third author while the first and the second author (RR & HR is both fluent in both Hindi and English) re-checked the transcripts and corrections were made if required. All the study participants were invited to review their transcripts in Hindi but none of them showed any interest in doing so. For analysis, the transcripts were translated to English by the third author. Along with manual coding, NVivo qualitative data analysis software (trial version) was employed to code data and examine plausible relationships between themes. Thematic analysis was informed by the Template analysis technique which involves both deductive as well as inductive coding. The execution of both these coding approaches demonstrates rigor in a qualitative inquiry (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane 2006). All authors reviewed the codes for each transcript, validating the trustworthiness of the coding. Differences in viewpoints were resolved through discussion and alterations were made in the coding framework until agreement was reached (Ishtiaq, 2019). The emerging themes along with direct narratives have been reported in the Results section. Data visualization, focusing on thematic analysis are done through a word cloud and mind map.

3. Results

Thirty-Nine participants aged 20–30 years participated in this qualitative inquiry. Out of these 39, with a gender distribution of 25 males and 14 females. The majority of participants are students (33%), indicating a strong representation of individuals in the academic phase of their careers.

Table 3:

Participant ID	Age (years)/Gender	Occupation
P1	21 / F	Student
P2	29 / M	Self employed
P3	20 / M	Student
P4	26 / F	Freelancer
P5	28 / M	Government Employ
P6	27 / F	Student
P7	25 / M	Private employee
P8	24 / M	Vendor
P9	28 / F	Private employee
P10	23 / F	Student

P11	28 / F	Housewife
P12	21 / F	Student
P13	24 / M	Freelancer
P14	27 / M	Private employee
P15	22 / F	Student
P16	25 / M	Vendor
P17	22 / M	Student
P18	23 / F	Student
P19	30 / M	Government employee
P20	22 / F	Not employed
P21	24 / F	Private employee
P22	21 / M	Student
P23	25 / F	Student
P24	20 / F	Student
P25	26 / M	Not employed
P26	29/M	Self employed
P27	21 / M	Student
P28	25 / M	Self employed
P29	29 / F	Private employee
P30	30 / F	Housewife
P31	27 / M	Not employed
P32	23 / F	Student
P33	29 / M	Businessman
P34	28 / M	Private employee
P35	23 / M	Student
P36	21 / M	Student
P37	20 / M	Student
P38	28 / F	Private employee
P39	27 / M	Businessman

Source: Primary survey

Self-employed individuals, including freelancers, vendors, and businessmen, make up 13%, while 21% are engaged in private or government jobs. The presence of 5 individuals categorized as not employed or homemakers suggests variability in economic participation within the cohort. The data indicates a diverse occupational landscape, with an emphasis on education and self-employment, characteristic of emerging professional pathways among young adults. This demographic composition provides a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic diversity within the study group. The varied backgrounds—ranging from students and professionals to self-employed individuals and homemakers—contribute to diverse perspectives on spirituality and the Maha Kumbh Mela. This diversity enriches the study, making the interpretations more nuanced and insightful while also introducing complexity in analysing differing spiritual beliefs and experiences.

3.1 Theme 1: Motivation for visiting Maha Kumbh mela

The Maha Kumbh Mela is a unique socio-spiritual event that draws millions of people seeking religious purity, cultural immersion, and personal transformation. Pilgrims seek spiritual benefit by taking holy dip in sacred waters, guided by long-held Hindu beliefs in moksha and cosmic alignment.

“I have been told that taking a dip in holy river (confluence of Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati referred as Triveni Sangam) during Maha Kumbh cleans sins for a life time. I want to start afresh, purify my soul, and seek divine blessings....” (P26, 29years, M, Self-employed)

“I am suffering from depression (also known as depressive disorder It involves a depressed mood or loss of pleasure or interest in activities for long periods of time). ... been lost lately, I hope taking a holy dip

will help me find clarity and inner peace..." (P15, 22 years, F, Student)

Some of the participants were influenced by their family traditions or cultural influence

"My family has been attending Kumbh Mela for generations, and I wanted to continue the tradition... experience the energy and devotion that people speak about..." (P12, 21years, F, Student)

"For me, it's about faith...being part of something so ancient and powerful." (P5, 28years, M, Government Employ)

The event fosters diverse interactions between saints, scholars, and seekers, offering a platform for religious discourse, ascetic traditions, and self-reflection. Beyond devotion, it serves as a cultural confluence, featuring rituals, processions, and holistic healing practices.

"Maha Kumbh is the world's biggest spiritual retreat... meeting yogis and saints here is an excellent opportunity to deepen my spiritual journey." (P31, 30 years, F, Housewife)

"I wanted to see and interact with the ascetics (naga sadhu, sanyasi, aghori) The visuals are breath taking, ascetics covered in ashes, interested in their lifestyle." (P1, 21 years, Student)

While many people attend the Maha Kumbh Mela to seek spiritual enlightenment, others are motivated by personal or financial gain. They explore methods to invest and profit from the event, which occurs only every 144 years in a specific alignment. Entrepreneurs, sellers, and investors look for ways to expand their businesses, taking advantage of the large influx of pilgrims. From setting up kiosks selling religious items, food, and lodging to networking for long-term commercial deals, these people regard the Mela as a moneymaker. For them, the Maha Kumbh is more than simply a sacred gathering; it is also a bustling marketplace where faith and finance collide, making it a one-of-a-kind platform for both spiritual seekers and businesspeople.

"I came here because of the crowd... Selling prasadam and snacks to devotees is a great way to earn, and the demand never stops. This is a once-in-a-lifetime business opportunity!" (P8, 24 Years, M, Self-employed)

"I came here to earn money by selling datoon (A teeth-cleaning twig, an oral hygiene tool made from a twig from a tree) and fulfil my financial needs...." (P16, 25 years, M, Self-employed)

3.2 Theme 2: Personal spiritual beliefs

Many participants view spirituality as more than just rituals; it is an interior journey for self-discovery and long-term peace. The Maha Kumbh Mela provides a unique environment in which people can disconnect from worldly distractions and focus on understanding their true selves beyond material life. The hallowed surroundings, the presence of saints and sages, and the rhythmic chanting of hymns all contribute to a sense of deep introspection. Pilgrims use meditation, Satsang's, and spiritual talks to investigate the meaning of existence, karma, and liberation (moksha). Many people feel that by immersing themselves in this experience, they can purify not just their bodies but also their minds and souls, resulting in greater clarity, purpose, and emotional equilibrium. This process of personal realization transcends religious rituals, and people from various.

"Ummm (thinking).... for me, spirituality is understanding who I really am beyond my name, work, or family. Sitting by the river and meditating here has given me a sense of calm I've never felt before." (P33,29 years, M, Businessman)

"I believe in expressing spirituality through art. The sights, the energy, and the devotion I see around me at Maha Kumbh inspire my creativity and give me a sense of profound peace." (P4, 26 years, F, Freelancer)

Theme 3.3: Spirituality in Daily life

Spirituality is a vast and dynamic concept that encompasses the search for meaning, transcendence, and a deeper connection with something more than oneself. It is frequently described as an introspective voyage into fundamental issues about life, purpose, and the universe (Springer, 2024). Spirituality differs from religion in that it is more personal and subjective, concentrating on individual experiences, beliefs, and ideals. Scholars also underline that spirituality is dynamic, evolving as people seek deeper understanding (PMC, 2020). It has a substantial impact on personal development, well-being, and perceptions of the ultimate limits of existence (ResearchGate, 2011).

Spirituality is a deeply personal experience that people incorporate into their daily lives in many ways. Visitors to Maha Kumbh Mela explain how they practice spirituality outside of religious ceremonies, such as meditation, selfless service, gratitude, dedication, and awareness. Some people discover spirituality in daily prayers and scripture reading, whilst others prefer yoga, charity, or acts of compassion.

“Despite my hectic schedule, I start my day with 10 minutes of meditation and a short prayer. It helps me stay grounded and face challenges calmly.” (P19, 30 years, M, Government employee)

“I believe in karma, so I practice honesty and kindness in my business.... Every morning, I recite the **Bhagavad Gita** (Hindu scripture) to remind myself of my duty (dharma) without attachment....” (P33, 29 years, M, Businessman)

“I incorporate spirituality through **yoga and pranayama**.... It’s not just physical exercise but a way to connect with my higher self and live mindfully...” (P24, 20 years, F, Student)

“I may not know scriptures, but I chant ‘**Ram Naam**’ every day while working in the fields. It keeps my mind pure and focused...” (P2, 29 years, M, Farmer)

Theme 3.4: Interaction with Ascetics

The Maha Kumbh Mela is more than just a pilgrimage; it is also a gathering place for sadhus, ascetics, and spiritual searchers who have abandoned their worldly lives in search of enlightenment. Many tourists connect with these holy men, looking for insight, advice, or simply to feel their remoteness. Some conversations result in profound spiritual insights, while others demonstrate the simplicity and discipline of an ascetic's life.

“I asked a wandering monk why he left everything behind. He smiled and said, ‘What you call sacrifice, I call freedom.’ His words stayed with me.” (P6, 27 years, F, Student)

“Once a yogi showed me breathing techniques to calm the mind. He said, ‘The breath is your bridge to the divine.’ Since then, I’ve practiced pranayama daily.” (P11, 28 years, F, Housewife)

While many pilgrims discover deep wisdom and inspiration from their experiences with ascetics during the Maha Kumbh Mela, others leave disappointed. The presence of phony sadhus—those who misuse faith for money, fame, or material gain—makes tourists sceptical. Some pilgrims saw discrepancies in their teachings and lifestyles, while others witnessed ascetics demanding money for favors or participating in actions that appeared to contradict renunciation.

“I approached a sadhu hoping for spiritual guidance, but he was more interested in negotiating a ‘special blessing’ for ₹500. It felt more like a business transaction than a divine encounter.” (P17, 22 years, M, Student)

“A so-called baba offered me a mantra to fulfil all my desires—if I donated generously.... Isn’t spirituality about detachment, not wish-fulfilment for a price?” (P34, 23 years, F, Student)

“I met a group of ascetics who were drinking and smoking while claiming to be spiritually enlightened. It made me sceptical about who the real saints are.” (P22, 25 years, M, Student)

Theme 3.5: Challenges and Problem faced by the visitors.

While the experience of many pilgrims is deeply edifying, pilgrims face several problems due to the event's sheer scale. Overcrowding and sanitary challenges, as well as food shortages and personal safety concerns, make it difficult for many guests to traverse this large congregation.

“The struggle to take a holy dip in the Ganga was overwhelming. Thousands pushed and jostled to reach the water, making it a terrifying experience.” (P17, 22 years, M, Student)

“The sanitation facilities were terrible. Public toilets were either too dirty or unavailable, making it difficult for women, especially during long hours at the venue.” (P30, 30 years, F, Housewife)

“As we approached the Sangam ghat, the crowd surged forward. I was trapped between people pushing from all sides. For a moment, I couldn’t breathe. It was terrifying.” (P21, 24 years, F, Private employee)

These experiences highlight the intensity of Maha Kumbh, where devotion and faith are tested not just spiritually, but physically. While the event offers divine experiences, it also underscores the urgent need for better crowd management, safety measures, and emergency response systems to prevent disasters like stampedes.

Theme 3.6: Influence of Modern technology

Modern technology has reshaped the Maha Kumbh Mela by enhancing accessibility through social media, live streaming, and virtual darshan. While it allows a global audience to witness rituals remotely,

“My mother has health issues so she can’t come to Sahi Shann, I video called her to show the rituals...” (P24, 20 years, F student)

While, many feel it dilutes the spiritual essence, as physical presence offers a deeper, transformative experience. Social media spreads awareness but also commercializes the event, sometimes reducing it to a spectacle. Virtual darshan benefits those unable to attend, yet it cannot replace the immersion of being there. Technology is bridging gaps but also challenging the authenticity of spiritual connection.

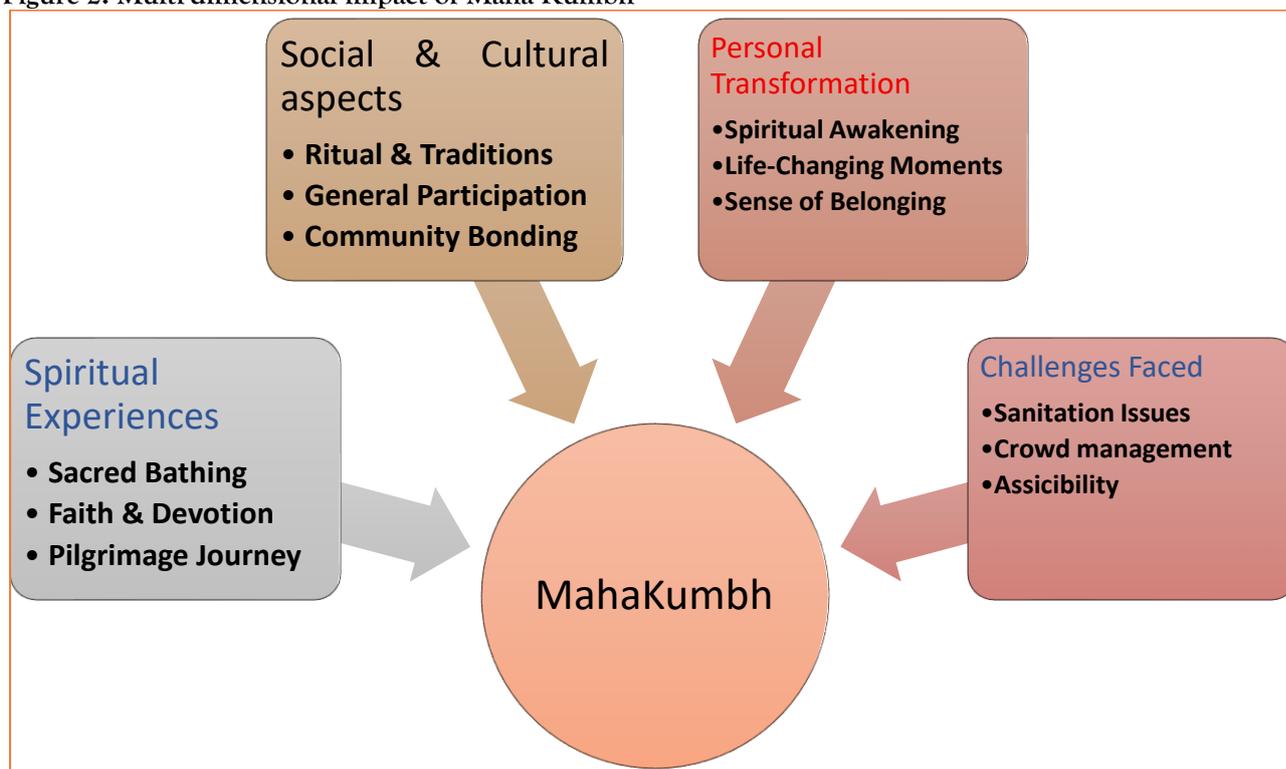
Word Cloud Interpretation

A word cloud was generated to visually represent the most frequently mentioned words in the respondents' narratives. The larger words in the visualization indicate higher frequency and greater relevance. Prominent terms included “pilgrimage,” “rituals,” “spiritual,” “sacred,” “devotion,” and “faith”, reflecting the central themes of the research.

- **Spirituality and Faith:** The emphasis on words such as "sacred" and "devotion" highlights the strong religious sentiments associated with Mahakumbh.
- **Cultural Traditions:** Terms such as "rituals" and "generations" indicate the historical and cultural continuity of the event.
- **Challenges and Logistics:** Words like "crowd" and "sanitation" suggest practical concerns and the lived experiences of attendees.

Pilgrims encountered a wide range of challenges. Overcrowding has arisen as a major worry, with millions congregating in confined locations, causing navigation difficulties and separation from family members. Sanitation difficulties were common, notably in terms of public restrooms and trash management, and they disproportionately affected women and the elderly participants. Food and water scarcity were also mentioned, with pilgrims having to obtain reasonable meals or safe drinking water due to increased demand and inflated costs(Anthony 1998; Baral 2023; Mausom, Choudhary, Prasad). Many people were compelled to sleep in open locations under adverse weather conditions due high price and lack of adequate housing.

Figure 2. Multi-dimensional impact of Maha Kumbh



Source:

Prepared by the researcher

The mind map visually represents the multi-dimensional impact of Maha Kumbh, capturing the spiritual, cultural, social, and personal experiences of participants. This research offers a structured approach to interpreting respondents' narratives, highlighting both the enriching features and the practical obstacles involved with the event.

Perhaps the most serious risk was stampede situations, which several pilgrims witnessed firsthand. The overwhelming number of attendances, combined with poor crowd control, resulted in fear and dangerous stampedes, raising concerns about safety precautions during large-scale religious gatherings(Alley 1992; Mela. 2022). These instances highlight the need for improved infrastructure, planning, and crowd management measures(Conditions. 2015; Mausom; Mela 2013; Nmc 2015).

Despite these challenges, Maha Kumbh remains an unparalleled religious and cultural event that strengthens communal ties, promotes devotion, and offers a unique spiritual experience. The findings of this study emphasize the necessity of improved organizational efforts, better facilities, and more efficient safety measures to ensure that pilgrims can focus on their spiritual journey without unnecessary hardships.

Strengths and limitations

This study provides unique insights into pilgrims' experiences, motives, and obstacles during the Maha Kumbh Mela. A key strength is its comprehensive approach, examining religious, social, and logistical aspects, while combining varied perspectives that depict the pilgrimage's complexities. The study's qualitative depth adds a humanized perspective, making it more relatable and compelling.

However, there are certain limitations to this study. One significant issue is sample size and selection bias. Given the large number of pilgrims attending the Maha Kumbh, it is hard to record every experience, and our sample may not accurately reflect all social and economic backgrounds. Furthermore, the dependence on self-reported narratives raises the possibility of subjectivity and exaggeration, as people may recollect events with personal biases or emotions. Another limitation is the lack of longitudinal data, as the study only documents events at a specific point in time. A more detailed study of pilgrims before, during, and after the Mela would yield additional information about the pilgrimage's long-term impact. Furthermore, logistical constraints such as time constraints and access to restricted regions hampered a more thorough investigation of all facets of the event.

Nonetheless, Qualitative researchers often utilize deliberate sampling approaches, such as convenience and snowball sampling, to provide in-depth information about the topic under investigation rather than generalizing. This study adds to our understanding of religious pilgrimages and their effects on individuals and society. Future study could overcome these limitations by integrating bigger, more representative samples and use mixed-method approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the Maha Kumbh experience.

6. CONCLUSION

The Maha Kumbh Mela continues to attract millions of pilgrims looking for spiritual fulfilment and is a powerful symbol of faith, tradition, and group commitment. Rooted in history and mythology, its connection to the Samudra Manthan underscores its sacred significance, reinforcing the belief that participation brings divine blessings. This study explored the diverse motivations behind pilgrimage, revealing a blend of religious purification, self-discovery, economic interests, and cultural engagement. Both periods of disenchantment and life-changing spiritual experiences are highlighted in the collected anecdotes. Interactions with ascetics provide many pilgrims with comfort and enlightenment, yet some run into dishonest activities that cast doubt on their beliefs. The socioeconomic range of attendees—particularly those from low-income rural areas—further highlights the complexity and inclusion of the Mela. The study clarifies important logistical and infrastructure issues in addition to spiritual ones. overcrowding, poor sanitation and stampede was the main factor of issue for the pilgrims. In the end, the Maha Kumbh Mela is a representation of India's larger social, cultural and economic climate as well as a hallowed haven.

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Declaration of competing interest

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