

We, Kumbh and You

(First of the 21st century in Prayag-Bharat)

With the blessing of God our dream was fulfilled and we were able to spend and celebrate our 30th marriage anniversary with 2.5 million people at Kumbh. We will explain this mela to you in a way that you will be able to see it through our narration.

First thing we have to say, it was huge and way beyond our imagination. Kumbh mela took place in Ten Kilometer long and six kilometer wide area, and there were 32 platoon bridges (temporary) and some of them were used only to let people (no vehicle) go only in one direction. Some of the vistas were 150 feet wide and there were eight such vistas going in two perpendicular directions. They were all named after the great rishies. The crowd was controlled very well. Any time with help of ropes and police any passage could be closed within minutes, as in past melas because of crowds mentality people had been trampled.

Water land and electricity were provided twenty four-hour by mela authority, free of charge to all big and small tenants equally. There were ration shops, where all essential commodities were sold at subsidized rates. With temporary ration cards issued. There were six thousand strong police and whole area was divided in twenty-four sectors with each having a Magistrate to take care of law and order.

Duration: It lasted for 45 days to sixty days, depending on your source of information, total attendance could be in range of 10-15 Millions who took bath in holy sangam. The Government of Uttar Pradesh spent some where around 200-500 crore rupees on the mela. People had to pay for their tents which were given on rent by a company established in Agra. The land was allotted to different sect and order or Akharas on first come first serve basis. Most of the people were going in the mela on daily basis but about 40% stayed there in the mela ground itself for full 45 to 60 days.

I will not go in details of why this Kumbh occurs. But it will not be out place to mention what scriptures say that the nectar which came out from Sager-Manthan (ocean churning), carried by lord Vishnu in the kalash, spilled over at four places. Those places are Haridwar, Prayag, Ujjain and Nasik. So every fourth year kumbh mela takes place in rotation in these places. Devotees from all over India have been coming to these places from ancient times to receive a portion of that nectar and wash away their sins by having a dip in holy waters of sangam. After 48 years such a constellation of stars reoccurs, which happened on January 14th 2001 and it is considered very auspicious. The last time it happened in 1953 my grand mother (Dadi ji) went to Allahabad and the way she explained to me about that mela, had a big impact on me. Right from my 8 years of age I wanted to go and I am glad we could. I feel lucky that Rashmi my life companion felt same way about this journey. There may not be any spiritual benefit in way of washing our sins but after seeing such a big gathering, man is forced to think what is his or her tiny size as compared to whole or some part of the universe. People come there not for material things but for God. They do lot of good things and serve their fellow human beings. We felt that taking a dip in the generosity and kindness of the vast ocean of humanity sure can purify our souls. We walked four days in mela and each day morning nine till eight in evening traveled over 20 kilometers each day, still we could not cover whole mela in four days. We might have covered only half of its contents. It is known as biggest religious gathering in the world, for a good reason and it lived up to it's name and fame.

Let us come back to more details about mela. Prayag Magh mela as it is popularly known locally, could be reached by Ikka, train, tonga, bus, cars, elephant, horse, on foot, bicycle, rikshaw, or the other on his/her back or shoulders can carry someone. Some even came by private airplanes. It was very intriguing to watch some Gerua (saffron) colored cars belonging to various sadhus. Sadhus wearing gerua clothes sitting in side or outside, on top of the cars, some times to show off, and loudspeaker blaring religious discourse or about the greatness of some sanyasies. Mela ground was situated on sandy island formed by Ganga and Yamuna sangam, in order for vehicle to ply on sand some 200 tones of steel plates were used. These plates were washed twice daily with water in order to remove dirt, sand gathered on it. This also helps to keep dust level down in general atmosphere of Mela and people can see mela up to a great distance. Special trucks were spraying disinfectants and mosquito guard twice daily to keep mela ground safe from infections and diseases.

We were amazed to see the cleanliness and disposal of garbage, a rare sight in India. You can drop any kulhar (earthen cups) paper or patta (leafy plate) and after few minutes you come back, it will not be there. My faith was reaffirmed that if people in India want to have cleanliness anywhere in neighborhood and on roads, they are capable of achieving it. My hats off to cleaning management and their whole team- kudos. They showed that Indians could work in-groups as well, which is contrary to existing belief. Large holes were dug and all the biodegradable disposable items were buried leaving the mela ground clean all the time. No foam cup, plates, plastic bags were allowed to be used in mela ground. There were toilets at every 100 yards for men and women side by side and were kept clean very well and we used them any time we needed.

Now we don't know how to describe what we saw in respect to seemingly infinite humanity present at the kumbh mela, which can not be seen anywhere else. There were people all around us as far as we could see and we had to take pictures piece by piece, and we had to travel a great deal on foot to be able to see everything. All sects and sections, mathadheesh, Sankaracharyas, Jagatgurus, sadus, akharas, sikhs all belongs to Sanatan Dharma and enrich it's heritage. This is beyond me to explain ecstasy of this powerful experience of just seeing them, hearing their views, hearing many times same day because every body wants to reach as many people as they can. Even in night people hardly sleep as discourses continue in early hours of next morning. Modern Hindus like Hare Krishna and Rajnish were also represented. All India sadhu Samaj were in full strength. Recitation of Ved mantras as in ancient times (we have read) was going on some places, some other place ritualistic offering to Ganges was conducted.

We could see orange color clothed sadhus with video cameras, riding over cars instead of on top of elephants as in past. Of course every one who is some big sadhu had a mobile phone. We saw technology penetrating Hindu religion so freely which proves that sanatan dharma is mobile religion, marching with time, not stagnant. People are ready to combine modern technology with eternal laws for the happy way of life. To describe the type of crowd, we have to say that there were people from all over the world. We met some from Germany, Venezuela, Mexico, USA, Britain, Nepal, Bhutan, etc. Few were there only to cheat others, and police was dealing with them harshly and strictly. There was 24 hours broadcast about missing persons, also children who wandered off from their group or family members, including some deaf and dumb or mentally challenged persons. There

were Five star tents for foreigners but no meat dishes were served on melal grounds. Few foreigners were seen meditating on sand beaches under the sun and cool breeze. There was continuous distribution of free food by many devotees to each and every one who cares to accept. As it was very cold from Indian point of view, Tea was served at many places.

Although there was free distribution of food snacks and tea, there were also some good stalls where one could buy quality vegetarian food and drinks. Bottled water, cooled fruit juices and cold milk was available every where. Most of the sadhus make their own food. There were beggars who were using all the tricks under the sky to collect money. But it was not easy because they could not ask money for food or tea as it was distributed freely. There were faith healers that were claiming that just by touching they could cure the ailments and fakes who were claiming to take care of your diabetes. Various medicinal plants to cure different ailments were displayed. Thousand and thousands were waiting to be cured and side by side allopathic medicines were sold without prescription. Hawkers were selling all sorts of things like kitchen gadgets, household odds and end items; towels, shawls, dhoties, bed-sheets, saris, copper puja items. People from rural area were buying them, as there may not be regular shops in their villages for all these special items. Traders were allowed sell and display their merchandise only in early hour and late evening when there is less chance of crowding. We also enjoyed haggling about price for couple of souvenirs we bought.

In some camps Katha Varta was going on 24 hours, in others Hawans, Raslila etc. In one place model of new Ram Mandir (Ayodhya) was being displayed under strict security, one had to pass through metal detector. Some sadhus inhaling opium, charas and ganja etc. with chilam. There were Hath-yogis doing their various penances. Taking bath at Sangam especially at the time of kumbh mela is not a joke, but it sure is lot of fun and if you were ready for adventure you would love it. We went in boat to Sangam point where three rivers meet. Boatman charged us 20 rupees each. Our fellow riders gave us prashad from Jagannath Puri (Orissa) to feed the fish first, which we did. Then they gave us some to eat. We learnt that it is old custom of pilgrimage. There was time and day allotted to different sects of religious groups to bathe in Holy Ganges, this rule was followed very strictly. If you are not very disciplined, you may miss the auspicious time to take a dip in water there. The water at Sangam was about 20-30 feet deep. There three rivers meet Yamuna with green water and Ganga with white and Saraswati invisible but can be seen as turbulence and eddy currents. The people take bath on bamboo's platform hanging from boats. There were divers on duty and watching all the people and with the result no body was drowned because of accident this time in Mela. That would be sheer waste of all the effort, made by the pilgrims, for some it was a chance of lifetime to come to the Kumbh. Big screen TV's were placed on the out skirts of mela, where they were continuously showing different views of the Mela. Many ashrams have news papers, table, chairs in there compound under the tents in order for people to have relaxed, quiet time for reading or meditating within when outside so much commotion.

As we are life members, we chose to take prashadam at 9:00 am and 3:00 PM at Hare Krishna pandals. As usual it was very delicious and freshly made, we may say heavenly. We stayed very near to mela ground in Jhunsi at the bank of Ganges in Kriya yog Ashram. We got hot water for bathing, washing machines to wash our clothes. We slept in soft beds with blanket. Breakfast Dinner and Lunch was provided. We decided to stay in Ashram because we wanted to be with our mother who was staying there to attend Yoga group classes given by Swami Satyam ji. We could also have stayed at Vishwa Hindu Parishad's tent. They were ready to provide cots inside tents and hot water to bathe inside another tent. We only had lunch with them once, which was very good and freshly prepared. Some of the big occupants were like mini cities. For example in Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Parmarth Niketan, Hare Krishna, where in one sitting thousands of people take food together or could listen to discourses.

Now we want to tell you about night view of Kumbh. There were artistic, aesthetically pleasing multi colored tents everywhere with colorful lights to enhance the beauty and appearance. Each tent was different in size and style. One can not miss the sight of beautiful, breath taking scene from Road Bridge, which was 100 feet high from mela ground. And of course every day we enjoyed the sunrise and sun set in back ground of kumbh mela in full swing. You can not see such a sight anywhere else in the world. We have some pictures and laminated news clips, if any body interested, is welcomed to view them. Another interesting sight was when people lined up their clothes for drying out in open sun. Miles together of colorful Saris and white dhotis were waving in breeze, like flags. In Open chulha people prepared food with the ingredients brought from home, carried on back of bicycles or on their heads. People sleeping under the open sky where ever they could find place on roadside, railway platforms, Dharamshalas tents. No where else in the world you can see that people can survive in least amount of material things and still be comfortable with out complaining about even the basic necessities. They were living it willingly and for a purpose; liberation – the ultimate goal of human existence every thing else was trivial. Vasudheva Kutumbkam (our world is Family) could be seen in reality, Rajasthani, Gujrati, Punjabi, Bangali, Tamil, Kashmiri, Telegu, Biharies, Haryanvi, Jharhandi, Uttranchalies, Assamies, Kannads, Oriya, Jainis, Sikhs, Malyali, Nepali, Bhutani, Maharastrians, etc; any one else who came there; all were hosted in a big way by Uttar Pradeshi. There used to shobha yattras of various Akharas and mahants were sitting on top of Cars or Trucks and people will be displaying their valor with lathies and other lethal arms in evening day time or morning evenings. Hare Krishna wer doing Kirtan every day and thousand of people will follow them throughout Mela routes.

In the end some miracles, facts seen, observed and felt, with out which this article can not be completed, are narrated as follows. One will be surprised to know that Prayag's own population is about one million but it was hosting ten to fifteen times more people on any given day during kumbh mela. There was not a single power outage during 45-60 days of kumbh, and 24 hour running drinking water was provided, this is another miracle because regular residents were in dark up to four hours and got two to four hours of running drinking water every day. Even a big drain, which used to carry sewage to Ganga, was diverted away from Ganga permanently, in order to keep Ganga clean. We should be proud of countless dedicated and reliable workers in India, who made Kumbh Mela a safe, pleasant and memorable experience for millions of people who attended the greatest event of 21st century.

There were exhibition from Krishi Sansthan and Cattle Protection Sansthan, where farmers who came to Mela could also learn about bullock driven mechanical plough, and electricity generator. And also how to grow more and cost effective and nutritious food, using only organic manure and pesticide. Over all, our experience was so positive that we recommend everyone who is thinking to go next time, must plan to go and do not miss it. Finally, Kumbh can teach us provided we are ready to learn. It showed us unique quality of Sanatan Dharma. It is as old as any thing you can find. It is vibrant, tolerant. Sanatan Dharm teaches us that life is a continuous cycle, unity in diversity, and coexistence. No body was denied admission to Mela on basis of his status, cast, religious sect or believes. God is one but can be reached by following different ways, all you need is Faith. For example all the band people were Muslims but doing their job with utmost devotion.