

Kumbh Mela 2013 - A resident's perspective

Kumbh Mela 2013 has loomed large in the horizon of Allahabad over the past couple of years. The pre-Kumbh preparations of the city had started over a year ago with construction of new over-bridges, laying of new sewer lines, repairing of roads, etc. But given the pace of work, even in October 2012, it was hard to believe that things would actually get completed by the time the Kumbh began. But the great indian 'jugaad' worked out finally and by January, everything was in place and the arrangements for the Kumbh at the Mela site had begun. This time, the Kumbh area covered a much larger area than it did in 2001, along the Ganga before it met the Jamuna and also after the two rivers merged into one (still called the Ganga). And we saw the new Kumbh city develop in just a matter of weeks, in quite an amazing and efficient fashion - the lights, the water, the sewage, the public toilets, the sectors and the roads, and the large number of pontoon bridges (around twenty) across the Ganga, over areas which had been submerged just a few months ago. Even for those of us who had seen this happen in 2001, it was still awe-inspiring, particularly since we are well aware of how the city functions in the remaining 11 years! The tents which were put up were of all kinds, from the simple staying arrangements for the ordinary folk to quite comfortable accommodation for those who could afford it, with attached bathrooms with hot water and western style toilets. Some of the tent colonies even had plants growing around the tents, transplanted from elsewhere! And besides the residential tents, there were the 'pravachan' or discourse tents, which competed with one another in having fancy 'architecture', lighting arrangements, etc. Many of us from the institute would go and walk around in the Kumbh area in the first couple of weeks in January, despite the cold winds, just to see these things getting done.

By the time of the first Shahi snan on Jan 14th where many of the ascetics would go for their ritual baths in processions with pomp and splendor, most of the preparations at the Kumbh area were ready, but the people who were expected in great numbers had not yet turned up. However, in early February, the numbers started increasing. On Feb 5th, our first personal guests started arriving and perhaps it was similar for everyone else. The number of 'official visits' to institutions would have also increased many-fold in this month, not only in our institute, but also in many other institutes in Allahabad. Besides, of course, there were the countless visitors who had no contacts in Allahabad, and had neither places to stay nor vehicles to either bring them or take them back. All they knew was that they wanted to have a dip in the Ganga on Mauni Amavasya which is considered the most auspicious day. But still until Feb 9th, the crowds were quite manageable. There were crowds moving towards the sangam area in an orderly and well-behaved fashion. At the sangam area, one could see people having their dips, people waiting to have dips and people who had already had their dips. There were also a lot of policemen, police-women and commandos, regulating the crowds and making sure that there was continuous movement, so that as many people as possible could be accommodated. The police had been trained well - they were polite and helpful to people and were busy trying to explain

to the public that the entire Kumbh area was 'sangam' area and that they could have their dip anywhere. In fact, arrangements for bathing had been done all along the Kumbh area and there were several notices and requests to people to bathe close to where they were staying rather than making a beeline for the main area. However, beliefs of people are hard to deal with and the majority wanted to queue up for their turn at the main area.

Besides, the bathing areas, roaming around the general area was also quite interesting, and one could see that people had come from all over india - many in big tour groups from different states. Some of them had gurus and would go to listen to their particular gurus, others would try out different tents. There were 'superstar' gurus with a huge number of followers whose tents were overflowing. There were those who were preaching to just a few faithfuls. There were young gurus out to make their names. To those of us familiar with scientific meetings, it was like a 'March meeting' on the subject of religion, with many parallel sessions! There were also tourists from all over the world - Allahabad is usually not a tourist spot and once sees very few foreigners, - but still given the huge Indian crowds, the foreigners were still very dilute! And there were people like us, not exactly tourists, since we are residents, but still those who were there not to have a ritual dip, but to see the spectacle.

We were all waiting for Feb 10th or Mauni Amavasya day - the most auspicious day - of the Mahakumbh - when more than 30 million people were expected in a small area of a city which has a normal population of less than 10 lakhs! And the day did not disappoint us. In the earlier days of the Kumbh, the 'HRI akhada' as we called ourselves often went for walks in the mela as a group, to see the sights, and eat hot jalebis! But by 9th, the crowds had increased so much that it became clear that it would be difficult for big groups to stay together, although many roads had been made one-way and there was a clear demarkation of the people going for the snan and those coming back. The actual sangam area was closed to the general public from about midnight to about 10-00 or 11-00 in the morning, because Mauni Amavasya is also the day of the second shahi snan of the ascetics, and the main bathing area was reserved for them. But that did not deter the continuous procession of people going towards and away from the sangam with the one-point agenda of having a dip in the sangam area and cleansing their sins! With the reports of all our colleagues, it looked like the numbers were even more than the 30 million who had come in 2001! What was amazing is that most of the people managed to have a successful dip and find their way back. Many of them had walked for miles and would have to walk for miles more before they found some way of getting back home. Many of them were resting and sleeping in the general pravachan tents, or even close to the roads on the Mela area. But not surprisingly in such a big gathering, despite the organization, there were people getting lost, losing relatives, getting separated from their groups, etc. Compounding the problem was the fact that many of them spoke no language, other than their native tongue. A young man from Andhra who spoke only telugu had lost his wife and child. One of our members who spoke telugu helped him and took him to the 'lost and found' centre in the Mela where they were allowing people to speak over the loudspeaker themselves in their own language. His story fortunately had

a happy ending when he got re-united with his wife and child after two frantic days, in Varanasi, where his wife had also managed to independently reach the Andhra Samaj. But the important point is that, by and large, the police were trying to be helpful, under quite difficult circumstances.

The stampede at the railway station was a real tragedy and an unforgivable lapse on the part of the administration. But before criticizing anyone, I would like to say that the mela administration, the police and the security people, the safai karmacharis who have kept the area clean and the local Allahabad administration have done an extra-ordinary job extra-ordinarily well. The scale of the operation which has been carried out has to be kept in mind, before indulging in blame games, and what has gone wrong cannot take away all that has gone right.