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The ‘Spectacle’ of the ‘Mahakumbh’

By: Alok Rai

The “MahaKumbh” is crafted to secure the consent, not only of the traditional pilgrims who went following the truly sanatana seasonal rhythm, but also that of the well-heeled “holy-dippers”, who flew in and out, and waxed eloquent about the wonderful “management” of their elegant enclaves.

It is only too easy to puncture the hype that was built up around the 2025 Kumbh Mela – the so-called MahaKumbh, allegedly happening after 144 years, although I suspect it might be reborn, with new adjectival attributes, when the next Big One comes along. Thus, 2019 saw something that was called “Bhavya-Divya-Kumbh”, but this year’s was simply MahaKumbh, duly certified by compliant “saints”.

Origins

It is difficult to decide how far back one should go in order to start exposing the lies. Thus, the Kumbh at Allahabad – now sanctified as Prayagraj – is itself, scholars believe, a bit of a lie (See Maclean 2008.) There is, in fact, a seasonal Mela that happens every year, and probably has for centuries, probably millennia. This is the Magh Mela. It marks a slack time in the agricultural cycle – the Diwali harvest is done, and done with; the Holi harvest is still some weeks away. The Magh Mela starts on Makar Sankranti when the sun, on its northward trajectory – Uttarayana – enters a particular constellation, Makar, or Capricorn – and winter is drawing to a close. This day is marked in different ways, all over India – it is Lohri, and Pongal, and Khichdi. Agricultural people from the hinterland, flush with their Diwali gains, have traditionally trudged to the banks of the life-giving rivers all over the country; trudged also to the sacred confluence of the Yamuna and the Ganga, and camped out on the banks of the suddenly-singular river. This was all innocent stuff, complete with saffron-clad hucksters, liberally dispensing wisdom and miracles. Folk entertainment, as it were, a Magh Mela that would typically wind down after Basant Panchami. After a brief respite, the pilgrims would gather their meagre belongings, and trudge back to their modest, hard-working lives.

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Well, that was then – although that Then now seems a long time ago, even a little like - When? Evidence suggests that the traditional Kumbh Mela – the one associated with the myth of the sacred pot, and its splashings – happened at Hardwar, and possibly at Nashik. The Allahabad Kumbh was conceived, the historian Anirudh Kanisetti argues – following Maclean – in the latter half of the 19th century, in the emerging post-1857 order. Enterprising pandas, canny politicians, and even cannier colonial bureaucrats, all saw a golden opportunity to farm (and weaponize) the traditional Magh Mela gathering, for their diverse nefarious purposes (Kanisetti, 2025). The Kumbh Mela at Allahabad – traditional, eternal, sanatana – was born under such auspicious (also suspicious) circumstances.

The numbers question

But these originary fictions are only, so to speak, the beginning. The fabled “management” of the MahaKumbh, that has been so extolled by the jet-setting “holy dippers” – flying in and out, with a transient stay in extravagantly luxurious, synthetic “cottages” – breaks down around two very simple yet crucial issues. The first has to do with the matter of waste, the kind of stuff that people secrete and excrete and generally leave behind. I don’t wish to do this with numbers, although that is easily imaginable and has been done, competently, by others, in particular by the Central Pollution Control Board. But consider the oddly embarrassing subject of human waste. “Oddly”, I say, because the matter of faecal waste is, to put it delicately, inescapable whenever and wherever human being gather, irrespective of their exaltation. After all, as Jonathan Swift wrote of the beautiful, the divine Celia – why, even Celia shits. And the s*** goes into the river – it did in Swift’s time, it did in Dickens’s 19th century London, and I’m afraid it does – and did – even in saintly “Prayagraj”. And if a gathering of somewhat liberally counted millions – of which more later – does one thing, it produces a lot of it – in addition to the bovine kind. And so, while they might have created sanitised “dipping pools” of Bisleri for the VIPs, the rest of the gathering millions would have emerged from their “holy dips” sinless of course, but covered in faecal coliform

bacteria. (Readers interested in the relations between science and governance may well Google the drama of the CPCB report about the human waste in the river – which they had to recant under pressure from the Government, so that the relevant minister could declare that the water in the river was just as good as tap water. Which probably tells us something about the tap water! (See the [first CPCB report](#), subsequently [modified](#)).

The matter of the wildly labile numbers – tens of millions, hundreds of millions, sometimes even increasing by a few millions in the mere space of a few minutes – these were a large part of what the “management miracle” was about (Pujara 2025). Well, those numbers also have a direct connection with the public monies that were budgeted for this “largest spiritual gathering” – so there are, in this fallen land, rather more cynical explanations for these exploding numbers. More people means more gravy.



Except, of course, in the unfortunate matter of the Stampede – tragic, avoidable with better management, and unforgivable no matter how you look at it. (Avoidable, it should have been avoided; if unavoidable, the Mela should have been aborted.) Millions of pilgrims were counted within a matter of minutes – AI-enabled, we were told, the government had acquired face recognition software, it was all very high-tech. But in the matter of the Stampede, the poor fellows found it difficult even to count the number of the stampedes – one at Sangam, one at Jhusi, one rumoured to have happened at Phaphamau – let alone count the number of people who were killed in the stampedes. Now, it is incontestable that the dead offer one advantage over the living – since the dead don’t move, they are rather more countable than the living, milling, swirling, thronging, millions – even without AI. Plain old intelligence will suffice. And yet, the number of the dead, even at the one acknowledged Stampede at Sangam Nose on Amavasya night, continues to be an abiding, evolving mystery.

These matters of management (and mismanagement) are, I would suggest, a distraction from the main event. One could expend words and emotions on the way in which the city itself was besieged for over six weeks, with the predictable but unprepared shortages of essential supplies – medicines, fresh produce – and on how the residents of perhaps three-fourths of the city spent the entire duration under, effectively, house-arrest. Still, there was an air of melancholy when the tawdry, papier-mache replications of the calendar art-enabled imaginations of the glories of ancient India, began to be pulled down. Inevitable, then, the Tempest echo – except that, mysteriously, the “revels” had become “travails” – “our travails are now ended”. Provided that one kept the car windows fully rolled up, and kept out the festering smells of the rotting waste.

The new ‘Constitution’

Still, the main event for me, beyond the defeated longing for the simple, exuberant, promiscuous chaos of Melas Past, was revealed by the loudly proclaimed theme of this MahaKumbh – Sanatani assertion. After all, the deepest and most ominous mystery of our time is

the meaning of that oft-repeated formulation – Hindu Rashtra. And here, in the MahaKumbh there were hoardings declaring – *Santon ki garjana/Hindu Rashtra banega*. Further, there was the promise that on Basant Panchami, the Constitution of this Hindu Rashtra would be revealed. After all, the few trailers of this Hindu Rashtra that we had been granted were, often, innocent enough. There were the daily gleanings from the wisdom of semi-literate leaders with which we were edified regularly. There was an unforgettable image of ageing gentlemen, politicians with sagging breasts and bellies, frolicking in the filthy river. Of course there was violence at the margins – horrific, performative violence, duly recorded and broadcast – but we were persuaded to believe that such lynchings were a deviation from the main, even noble, mission of the Hindu Rashtra. And even the Constitution, when it was finally revealed, was bland enough, predictable and boring.

The enlightened ones – Dharmaraj Yudhishtira – seek to know dharma, seek to identify a moral path through the infinite complexity of circumstance and indeed, of being itself. This dharma has to be, by its intrinsic nature, accommodative and consensual.

Thus, the franchise was to be restricted, and only followers of Sanatana Dharma would be eligible to contest elections. Thus, Arya Samajis, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs etc. would be barred – or would they? There were some cheeky commentators who derived ironic pleasure from the fact that under some constructions of the historically variable meaning of “Sanatana Dharma”, the present chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, belonging as he does to the Gorakhnath Panth, would also become ineligible (See Pande2024). But in the main, and unsurprisingly, genuflecting as it does to Manusmriti etc., this Constitution is an unabashed codification of the savarna-Brahminical ideal, in which caste remains the deep organising principle. Caste is sought to be invisibilised in the collective discrimination against Muslims of course. But since “sanatana” is itself a flexible concept – so the exclusionary principle can be invoked variably, and tactically. And with a confident reliance on the ignorance (and/or complicity) of the constituencies they seek to manipulate and influence.

The meaning of Dharma

All this is nonsense, of course. All the problems that the historically-evolving practice of Sanatana Dharma has produced over the millennia – untouchability and its toxic ramifications – are simply ignored. Thus, Sanatana Dharma has meant different things at different times in its history. To take a recent example – the Arya Samaj of Dayanand Saraswati, seeking to restore Vedic dharma at the turn of the 20th century, was vigorously contested by the Sanatana Dharma Sabhas, energetically defending Pauranik Brahminical Hinduism. It may well be argued – see the writings of Chaturvedi Badrinath on Dharma (Badrinath 2019) – that there is indeed a Dharma that is truly sanatana, i.e. eternal – it is the order that sustains all of creation. But this “order” is not static, it is the dynamic equilibrium of an infinity of diverse elements, living and indeed, “non-living”. Thus, it is of the intrinsic nature of Dharma that it is elusive. The enlightened ones – Dharmaraj Yudhishtira – seek to know Dharma, seek to identify a moral path through the infinite complexity of circumstance and indeed, of being itself. This Dharma has to be, by its intrinsic nature, accommodative and consensual.

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But the “Dharma” that has sought to pass itself off as “sanatana” at different times in the past – and in the present – is an entirely different thing, as seen in the louts at the CR Park Market, enforcing their dietary norms on fish-loving Bengalis. The adherents of this Sanatana Dharma are not seekers. They know exactly what Dharma is, and seek only to enforce it with the threat of violence. Thus, “Sanatana Dharma” has often been the preferred appellation of conservative assertions against perceived challenges – and that “Dharma” is, inevitably, far from “sanatana” i.e. eternal. It is in fact firmly embedded in histories of contestation. That is why it is always worth asking what any particular assertion of Sanatana Dharma means in any particular context. Thus, all the “reform” movements that sought to cleanse and to confront Sanatana Dharma – all the way from Buddha and Mahavira to Dayanand and Ambedkar – are simply ignored in this neo-Hindu Constitution, and are sought to be conflated within some paradoxically revisionist-but-also-sanatana “Hindu community”. But Islam, with its deeply subversive ideologies of equality and collectivity is, following Savarkar, simply cast as the forever-foreign enemy, always and everywhere, an invader. This crucial ideological manoeuvre yields, retrospectively and as if by magic, the oddly sanatana and simultaneously trans-caste “Hindu community”. It is a miraculous, and politically brilliant, conflation of “Hinduism” and Sanghi “Hindutva”.

The deep savarna-Brahminical identity of this ideological formation is evident, and may be revealed in all kinds of matters. Thus, the nominal dietary prejudices (and pretences) of “cow-belt Brahmins” are all rendered normative – in the face of actual dietary practices, not only of other castes and other regions, but also, anecdotally, of the actual diet of the savarna Brahmins themselves in many other parts of the country. But for all that, not only are the poor – irrespective of their beliefs, needs and practices – deprived of the affordable protein provided by beef, but schoolchildren in Madhya Pradesh, must be denied even eggs in their midday meals, in order to assert the normative dominance of this Brahminical ideal. Take that in – Pandit Moteram Shastri’s normative vanities must be appeased, even though the child grows up stunted. Likewise, the “normalization” of social and behavioural norms, pretending to be “sanatana” but actually Victorian, and widely different from the practices that have been followed in this vast and diverse country over millennia. What else can explain the farcical and dangerous legislation against live-in relationships in Uttarakhand; or the enforcement of cow-belt Brahminical norms – no meat, no booze – in so-called sacred spaces – like Hardwar and Varanasi – during “sacred” times of the year, like Navratra.

It might well be urged that one needn’t make such heavy weather about something that clearly gratifies such undeniably large numbers of people – even if it happens more frequently than once in 144 years. It is, after all, merely a Hindu version of the Roman “bread and circuses”. And there are indeed the free rations for the hungry millions, miraculously lifted out of “poverty”, but somehow still unable to buy even bare rations. So, bread. And the hideously expensive “MahaKumbh” is the circus for the well-heeled, in as much as it goes way beyond the mendicants and the miracles of the traditional Mela. Thus, symptoms of the “MahaKumbh” are inescapable, and extend even to “sacred” murals on all available surfaces, and even some alleged “art” at traffic roundabouts and strategic locations. All this really calls for a photographic essay, but that lies beyond the scope of the present exercise.

Silence of the well-heeled

My fear is that this circus analogy obscures – camouflages – something that is far more sinister. And that is the manner in which something like the “MahaKumbh” is crafted to secure the consent, not only of the traditional pilgrims who came here following the truly sanatana seasonal rhythm, but also that of the well-heeled “holy-dippers”, who flew in and out, and waxed eloquent about the wonderful “management” of their elegant enclaves – far from the unwashed multitudes, pushing and shoving in their millions, and even trampling each other to death. Arching over and above this whole morbid and sordid spectacle, there is the elaborate fiction of a great civilizational assertion by a people who have, after millennia, come into their own.

Thus, the recently-concluded MahaKumbh – as distinct from the traditional Magh Mela – was an elaborate exercise in restoring the tattered legitimacy of the present dispensation which, while it is secure in its legal armour, looks threadbare after ten years of lacklustre governance. Naturally, this exercise must work differently for different constituencies. Thus, the “pilgrims” who travelled in overcrowded buses, and stewed on jammed highways – and often had to walk long distances therefor – these might well be aware of the collapse of the present regime along all the traditional metrics of governance, more exposed to the cost of living and the scarcity of employment, than the jet-setting “holy dippers”. But perhaps their “seduction” works by way of the spectacle confected to represent and affirm their collective identity, which is otherwise so cruelly neglected. So, circus.

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But it is the revelation (crystallization?) of the class of jet-setting, management-enamoured “sanatani” loyalists that is, for me, the biggest gain from this expensive farce. Their luxuriously catered, cosmetically curated “spirituality” is the mode, the ritual of reconciliation to the present dispensation, which visits the cost of maintaining their obscene privilege upon the poor, in a variety of ways that are an integral part of Hindu Rashtra. Thus, there is the spectacle of traditional religious practice – unwashed and exotic “saints”, performing their zoned-out sanctimony. But there is also the carefully – and forcefully – preserved distance – a distance both physical and also mental – whereby this class of well-heeled person is rendered immune and distant from the casual violence that is exercised upon countless million others, both sanatani and, of course, non-sanatani. Mere participation in such “holiness” renders one innocent. Having “dipped”, one is cleansed of the taint of complicity in the injustice and violence that is an integral part of the system that safeguards their privilege.

The “German question” – brought into focus once again by last year’s Auschwitz film, “Zone of Interest”, cannot be avoided. The consent of countless “good Germans” to Nazi atrocity was secured in large part through sundry “civilizational”, “Aryan” rituals,

consensual acts of mass self-deception. So what of these good folk, flying in and out for their “holy dip”? Do these people not know what is the flip-side of this sanctimonious farce? Or is it that they are aware, and are consequently grateful in as much as it provides a minimal veneer of legitimacy to the current dispensation? Can one – can they? - really “un-know” the fact that it is a quasi-criminal “arrangement” between hollowed-out constitutional institutions: electoral bonds, electoral rolls, hate speech, censorship, engineered “defections”, tactical detentions ... it is a long list. Could it be that the “Mahakumbh” – now threatening to ramify into a year-long circuit of religious “tourism” that binds Prayagraj, Varanasi, Ayodhya and Chitrakoot in one holy merry-go-round – really be a crucial part of the apparatus of necessary “un-knowing”, bathed in the glowing light of our glorious, “sanatani” civilisation? The metaphor of the dipping ritual that cleanses all sins, might well be unexpectedly appropriate – so long as one also includes in the frame, as we were urged to do, something called Hindu Rashtra. with its dire implications for those that are deemed to lie outside the fold. So, entertainment, and violence, and absolution, in one cosmetically-curated package!

The American journalist Lincoln Steffens, returning from a visit to the Soviet Union in 1919, two years after the Revolution, famously said – “I have seen the future, and it works.” (Ironically, his words have endured longer than the Soviet Union!) Still, recovering from my recent experience of the Hindu Revolution, I too can say: I have seen the future. Actually, perhaps more precisely, I have smelt the future - and it sure smells.

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