

Contemporising Kumbh: Ancient wisdom, modern relevance

By **Acharya Prashant** - January 19, 2025



Social dimension of Kumbh festival

Can we go beyond the ritualistic dip and honestly observe life as it is, within and around us? Can we see how desperately we want the one beyond time and death?

Amrit—that is at the essence of the story behind the Kumbh festival. Where does the Amrit come from? It comes through self-reflection. What does one see when one honestly looks at himself? Nothing but that which is changing all the time, nothing but that which has been absorbed from the time-dependent world. On seeing the real nature of what we are inwardly attached to, the attachment weakens. This is freedom from that which changes and deceives and disappoints. In other words, this observation of one's inner reality is freedom from death.

What is death? A result of what we mistakenly consider ourselves to be. The more we observe ourselves, the clearer it becomes that the "self" is a thing dependent on the world. Our moods, desires, body, identities, birth and death are all dependent on the world. One is not independent at all. One is continuously dependent on stuff that is perishable—money, gender, prestige, body. Since I am dependent on that which is perishable, hence I will always be in fear of death. Amrit means being free from death. Whoever stops at poison symbolizing suffering will never be freed from death. And whoever stops at jewels symbolizing wish-fulfilling objects—temporary rewards and happiness—will never be freed from death. Anyone who remains stuck in any false identity and desires that arise from it will be trapped in death. This is the essence of the story of Kumbh.

The first thing is that anything you associate yourself with, any desire you have, is something that is constantly changing. Secondly, things never remain the same in the next moment as they appear in the present moment. That is death. That what is here

today will not be here tomorrow. And whatever subjects we associate ourselves with, they are the same—what appears today will not be the same tomorrow. What appears now is not even the same as it seems to be today. So, cutting through our ignorance is the Amrit. Cutting through all the beliefs we hold about ourselves and the world is the pursuit of the Amrit, and this pursuit can only happen when there is more devotion and love for truth than for the self.

Can we go beyond the ritualistic dip and honestly observe life as it is, within and around us? Can we see how desperately we want the one beyond time and death? Equally, can we see that what we call life is one with death, would we still continue to live the same way we do? Realizing that our thoughts and plans are not adequate to fulfil our innermost desires, won't we instantly shrug off our drowsy, dreamy demeanour? Won't we rebel against our self-sanctioned sleepwalk through life?

We have been thirsty for a long time. The time given to a human body is short. Man's energy too is limited. And the task is onerous. Nothing short of total immortality, total security and total rest would satisfy man. What we want is available, and we have as much claim over the nectar as the lords and demons. The magical thing is: the great pot of divine nectar is so much our own that we don't even have to steal it away from others. That is the real message of Kumbh.

The celebration of Kumbh and the narrative of the Samudra Manthan (churning of the ocean) are reminders of this journey. They urge us to remove these distractions and allow the nectar of life—the truth, the ultimate reality—to descend into our lives. The Kumbh festival is not merely a festival but a spiritual message, encouraging us to reclaim the immortal essence within ourselves.

SOCIAL DIMENSION OF KUMBH FESTIVAL

Philosophical and spiritual clarity expresses itself in bringing about the right change in society. Kumbh festival started with helping us understand the essence of immortality but the understanding of the same led to the right change in mortal matters only. Kumbh festival used to be a place of dialogue and exchange of ideas on societal and spiritual matters.

What were such dialogues important? When you live in your small region, you begin to believe that what you are doing, what happens in your area, what you think, the traditions followed in your community, or your family practices are the ultimate truth. This is because everyone around you is doing the same, and there is a danger of being trapped in an echo chamber. And when these traditions were created, there was no internet, no means of communication, no TV, no phone—nothing. You couldn't know what was happening elsewhere. Soon, echo chambers become ego chambers because they reinforce what one already believes in.

But when gatherings like the Kumbh occur, people come from here, there, every corner of the country. Thus there is an open and liberal exchange of thoughts and cultures. This leads to a reality check, a sense of tolerance, accommodativeness and resultant learning. It shows us that the way we live is not the only way to live. Someone else lives differently, yet their way of living is also beautiful. Seeing this, one might think, "Why not

learn something from them?" And even if we don't adopt their ways, at least our ego softens to the extent that we stop considering our way as the ultimate and superior one.

Otherwise, a person sitting in their village might think, "There's nothing better than what's happening in my village." Back then, as I mentioned, there were few and feeble means of communication. There's a saying that in India every few miles, food, habits, culture, and language change. Imagine how many different kinds of people must have been meeting and interacting. And they didn't just meet in one place; they met in four different places every four years. They travelled as far as they could, meeting others.

This certainly had a significant social aspect, which was very beneficial. The tolerance, intellectual openness, and liberal spirit that has been a part of Indian culture owe a lot to such gatherings and assemblies. They emphasized meeting and engaging—not for domination but for dialogue. If someone had a differing opinion, we didn't abuse them or silence them; we debated through Shastrartha (Philosophical debates). Moreover, we understood how to find harmony. If we liked the other's perspective, we said, "This isn't just their idea; it's ours too." We began to see our own truth in the other's truth. This wasn't an artificial unity but one rooted in understanding. If truth exists in both my perspective and another's, why not embrace them as one? Such a dialectical approach has driven India forward—meeting, conversing, understanding, and learning.

You can compare it with Socratic dialogues happening among millions of Indians in small groups. Imagine the beauty of this festival and the inner richness it would have brought to its participants.

HOW SHOULD WE CELEBRATE THE KUMBH FESTIVAL TODAY?

First of all, we need to show respect and compassion towards our rivers. Whether it's climate change, industrial waste, or human waste, our rivers are already in a dire state, particularly in India. At this critical juncture, we do not want further to harm our rivers for religious or any other reasons. If our rivers are indeed like our mothers, then it is not appropriate for their children to cause pain to an already ailing mother.

What should be done? Symbolically, people can sprinkle a few drops of water on themselves instead of engaging in harmful practices of further making the river dirty.

Keeping the real essence of Kumbh in mind, the sites of the Kumbh festival should host programs focused on intellectual exchanges and activities that promote the inner cultivation of wisdom. The festival must organize discussions to explore the deeper philosophical meanings of the Pauranic stories that are ingrained in folk culture and traditions. These stories are not just myths; many of them carry profound Vedantic significance, and we need programs to enable people to discover that. The programs could centre on addressing everything within us that leads toward "death". Here, "death" symbolizes fear arising from association with the perishable—no one has ever truly seen death, yet everyone lives in its shadow. It is a manifestation of fear, and within us lies everything that keeps us scared and bound. How can we remove this fear and the causes of it? Once the fear arising from ignorance is gone, one lives in the fullest and most loving way possible. The efforts at Kumbh should focus on this.

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True progress arises from dialogue and the exchange of ideas, not from rigid adherence to one's beliefs or traditions. Those ensnared by their own opinions stifle growth, while open exchanges foster understanding and transformation. This is evident in the journeys of great spiritual teachers like Adi Shankaracharya, Guru Nanak, Gautama Buddha, and Lord Mahavira. Their travels exemplify the importance of engaging with others, broadening perspectives, and embracing growth through dialogue. They remind us that refusing to remain trapped in self-centred beliefs is essential for progress.

The Kumbh festival has the potential to become a great centre for dialogues on social reform, addressing the pressing challenges India faces across multiple dimensions of life. Given the urgency of these issues, such a platform could be instrumental in sparking meaningful discussions and actionable solutions. India is grappling with multifaceted challenges across health, education, employment, and the environment, highlighting the urgent need for platforms like the Kumbh festival to foster dialogues on social reform. The country ranks 134 out of 193 in the 2023-24 Human Development Index (HDI), with millions struggling for basic survival as 81 crore Indians rely on free food grains.

How we should celebrate the Kumbh Mela today.

Nutritional deficits are alarming, with only 16% consuming adequate diets, while 75% face serious health risks due to poor nutrition (FAO 2023). Unemployment, particularly among youth, is staggering, constituting 83% of the unemployed population (India Employment Report 2024). Education standards are concerning, as none of India's 5,288 universities rank in the global top 100, and secondary school dropout rates hover at 12%, aggravated by a shortage of trained teachers (NSSO). Social issues persist, with

India accounting for one-third of the global total of 142.6 million missing females and ranking 17th globally in adverse sex ratios at birth. Meanwhile, environmental degradation looms large, with 80% of Indians residing in districts highly vulnerable to climate change. From January to September 2024, extreme weather events occurred on 93% of days, and 81 of our rivers exceed toxicity limits (CWC 2024). India was ranked the third-most polluted country in 2024, with an average PM2.5 concentration of 54.4 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. These pressing issues demand urgent attention, and leveraging events like the Kumbh festival for social reform discussions could catalyse transformative change.

As time progresses, we need to assign new and deeper meanings to our festivals and celebrations. Otherwise, everything will become distorted and meaningless—wasteful, both in terms of resources and energy. This leads to the loss of opportunities, diminishes the sanctity of religion, and tarnishes its reputation. Let Kumbh become a beacon of consciousness, self-reflection, and renewed purpose rather than a practice that burdens the very rivers it claims to honour.

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