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Maha Kumbh Mela Mythology, History, Astrology: What is the Kumbh Mela, and why is it held in four cities periodically? What is Ardh Kumbh and Maha Kumbh? What is the origin of this pilgrimage festival?

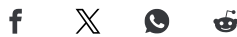
Written by [Yashee](#)

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The Kumbh Mela is being held from Jan 13 to Feb 26. (Express photo: Vishal Srivastav)



As kite festival draws near, 'terrace tourism' takes flight in Old Ahmedabad

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Uttarayan, or Makar Sankranti, is a widely celebrated festival in North India. In Old Ahmedabad, the festival has given rise to a new trend of "terrace tourism" where people can rent terraces to witness the intense kite fights and unique atmosphere in the walled city.

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EXPLAINED

Kumbh Mela, explained: Its mythology, history, astrology, and why millions flock to it



Maha Kumbh Mela Mythology, History, Astrology: It is cold in Prayagraj, foggy with a chance of rain. Yet, on Monday (January 13), [tens of thousands are expected to arrive in the city](#), to camp on the banks of the Ganga. They will stay in tents and bathe in the river, the most devout taking a dip at dawn while stars are still twinkling.

Prayagraj is hosting the Maha Kumbh this time, or the Poorna Kumbh, held every 12 years. Many myths are prevalent around the Kumbh Mela, many theories about its exact origin. Some believe the festival finds mention in the Vedas and Puranas. Some say it is far more recent, going back barely two centuries. What is known for certain is that today, it is one of the largest gatherings of devotees witnessed anywhere on earth.

What is the Kumbh Mela, and why is it held in four cities periodically? What is Ardh Kumbh and Maha Kumbh? What is the origin of this festival, and why do millions attend it?

The answers, as in many questions about Hinduism, lie in a mixture of myths, history, and the enduring faith of an ancient people, trusting as much in the munificence of invisible deities as in tangible life-givers like rivers.

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The mythological origins of the Kumbh Mela

The Sanskrit word *kumbh* means pitcher, or pot. The story goes that when Devas (gods) and Asuras (loosely translated as demons) churned the ocean, Dhanvantri emerged carrying a pitcher of *amrita*, or the elixir of immortality. To make sure the Asuras don't get it, Indra's son, Jayant, ran off with the pot. The Sun, his son Shani, Brihaspati (the planet Jupiter), and the Moon went along to protect him and the pot.

As Jayant ran, the *amrita* spilt at four spots: Haridwar, Prayagraj, Ujjain, and Nashik-Trimbakeshwar. He ran for 12 days, and as one day of the Devas is equal to one year of humans, Kumbh Mela is celebrated at these locations every 12 years, based on the relative positions of the Sun, the Moon, and Jupiter.

Prayagraj and Haridwar also hold the Ardh-Kumbh (ardh means half), every six years. The festival held after 12 years is called the Poorna Kumbh, or the Maha Kumbh.

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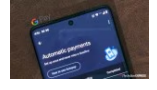
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All four places are located on the banks of rivers — Haridwar has the Ganga, Prayagraj is the sangam or meeting point of Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati, Ujjain has the Kshipra, and Nashik-Trimbakeshwar the Godavari.

It is believed that taking a dip in these rivers during Kumbh, amid the specific alignment of the heavenly bodies, washes away one's sins and accrues punya (spiritual merit).

Kumbh Melas are also the venue where Sadhus and other holy men gather — the *sadhu akhadas* attracting a lot of curiosity — and regular people can meet them and learn from them.



Evening prayers in progress at Panchayati Akhara, at the Mahaa Kumbh in Prayagraj, on Saturday. (Express Photo: Vishal Srivastav)

“While the importance of the Ganga in Hindu religion is well-known, the Kshipra is believed to have emerged from the heart of Vishnu in his *Varah* (boar) avatar. The Godavari is often called the Ganga of Dakshin (south),” Dr Dipakbhai Jyotishacharya, who runs the Parashar Jyotishalaya in Gujarat's Vapi, told [The Indian Express](#).

How is the site of a Kumbh Mela decided?

This depends on astrological calculations. Another reason for the 12-year gap in Kumbh Melas is explained by the fact that Jupiter takes 12 years to complete one revolution around the Sun.

According to the Kumbh Mela website, when Jupiter is in [Aquarius](#) or Kumbh *rashi* (whose symbol is the water bearer), and Sun and Moon in [Aries](#) and [Sagittarius](#) respectively, Kumbh is held at Haridwar.

When the Jupiter is in [Taurus](#), and the Sun and Moon are in [Capricorn](#) or Makar (thus, Makar Sankranti is also in this period) the Kumbh is held at Prayag.

When Jupiter is in [Leo](#) or Simha, and the Sun and Moon in [Cancer](#), the Kumbh is held at Nashik and Trimbakeshwar, which is why they are also called the Simhashta Kumbh.

Debate over Kumbh Mela's history

Many cite the Skanda Purana as proof of the Kumbh Mela's antiquity. Yet others mention the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang) describing a fair in Prayag in the seventh century.

Professor Girija Shankar Shastri, head of Banaras Hindu University's (BHU) Department of Jyotish, said, "No scripture can be definitively said to contain a reference to the Kumbh Mela as we know it today. While the Samudra Manthan is described in many books, the spilling of amrita at four places is not. The Skanda Purana is widely cited to explain the origins of the Kumbh Mela, but those references have not survived in the extant versions of the Purana."

Dipakbhai Jyotishacharya pointed out that a book published by Gorakhpur's Gita Press, called *Maha Kumbh Parva*, claims that the Rig Veda has shlokas mentioning the benefits of participating in the Kumbh Mela.

Many believe that it was 8th-century Hindu philosopher Adi Shankaracharya who established these four periodic fairs, where Hindu ascetics and scholars could meet, discuss and disseminate ideas, and guide lay people.

Kama Maclean, Associate Professor of South Asian and World History at Australia's University of New South Wales, has written that while Xuanzang does mention a fair, there is no way to ascertain he was describing the Kumbh Mela. She argues that an ancient bathing festival of Magh mela (fair held in the Hindu month of magh) was held at Prayag, which the pandits of the city rebranded as the "timeless" Kumbh sometime after the Revolt of 1857 to ensure the British did not meddle with it.

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However, not all historians agree with this. Prof. DP Dubey, retired Professor of ancient history at the University of Allahabad and General Secretary of the Society of Pilgrimage Studies, has studied and written extensively about the Kumbh Mela. He writes that the fair at Haridwar is likely to have been the first to be called Kumbh Mela, as Brihaspati is in Kumbh rashi for this fair.

"The origins of the Kumbh are linked to the worship of the Ganga as the great life force of the northern plains. Fairs on the banks of sacred rivers are indeed an ancient Hindu tradition. Gradually, travelling sadhus spread the idea of four Kumbh Melas on the banks of sacred rivers, where lay men as well as sanyasis could gather. Apart from pilgrimage, such huge gatherings also presented an opportunity to earn influence and followers," Dubey told *The Indian Express*.

In the book '*Kumbh Mela, Pilgrimage to The Greatest Cosmic Fair*', Dubey, citing records from the Mughal era to those kept by *sanyasi akhadas*, has written, "The Kumbha Mela came to be organised sometime after the twelfth century CE. The tradition of holding this religious festival possibly crystallised during the heyday of

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the Bhakti movement, a movement of the socio-religious reforms set on foot by a series of Hindu saints and reformers.”

What pilgrims do at Kumbh

While some come for only one ritual dip in the river to wash away sins, many, termed *kalpwasi*, stay at the riverbank, to take a break from the daily fight of earning material resources and earn spiritual credit instead. Many give daan, or donations of various kinds, here.

With any large crowd comes the chance of commerce, and the Mela has also served as a market crucial to local communities. Historically, there are records of Venetian coins and European toys being spotted at the Mela markets.

“The Kumbh Parva is an occasion for a layman to exist as part of a collective, a collective of people seeking punya. Some days are specially auspicious for the holy dip, such as Makar Sankranti, Vasant Panchami, etc. Donating a *kumbh* full of ghee or other things here can also bring punya. Devotees can meet holy men and get religious and spiritual guidance,” Dipakbhai said.

The various *sadhu akhadaas* set up camp. They go for baths, called *shahi snan*, in elaborate processions. In the past, tussle over which *sadhu akhadaa* is important enough to bathe first has led to bloody battles, so now, an order is generally pre-decided.



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“The Kumbh Mela has played an important part in history by mobilising and uniting society. These days, it is easy to advertise the time and venue of the next mela, but centuries ago, it was the *sadhus* that made astrological calculations and spread the word. People travelled to the venues without trains or motorised vehicles, without the option of luxury tents, driven only by faith. During the freedom struggle, the melas were a venue to spread nationalist thought,” Rakesh Pandey, retired History professor at BHU, said.

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