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I was fortunate to be invited by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), India to visit Prayagraj for a day trip to observe the arrangements made for Kumbh Mela, by the Prayagraj Mela Authority, which functions under the State Government of Uttar Pradesh. Being a Buddhist, to integrate my thinking in the lines of believers of Hinduism was not difficult, though I was not previously exposed to this experience in Prayagraj.

Anyway, I was happy to be in Prayagraj within 45 days of arrival in India as High Commissioner of Sri Lanka. Many thanks are due to the MEA and its dynamic State Minister V K Singh, who has initiated a Diplomats' Visit, on the instructions of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

As I understand, Kumbh Mela- also called Kumbha Mela, is a religious festival celebrated four times over the course of 12 years. The site of the observance rotates between four places on four sacred rivers—at Haridwar on the Ganges River, at Ujjain on the Shipra, at Nashik on the Godhavari, and at Prayag (modern Allahabad) at the confluence of the Ganges, the Jamuna, and the mythical river Sarasvati.

My inquiries on Kumbh Mela for the chronology revealed that it is referred to in the Rigveda, Shrimad Bhagavat, and various Puranas and in epics like the Ramayana, the Mahabhaaratha. Recorded history states that it has been in vogue from the Gupta Period. Chinese traveller and scholar Hsuan Tsang has in the 7th century has also described the congregation at Kumbha

and the rituals of Sadhus.

The pilgrims attending Kumbh Mela come from all walks of life, from all parts of India. According to many sources (one being quoted here), at the sacred confluence of rivers or Sangam, "huge multitudes filled with sense of devotion move like waves in the ocean. 'Shahi Snaan' of Akharas, chanting of Vedic mantras and elucidations of religious hymns in the Pandaals, proclamations of knowledge, Tatvamimansa by rishis, spiritual music, mesmerizing sounds of instruments, holy dip in the Sangam with utmost devotion fills the heart of devotees with immense joy. Also, prayers are offered at many divine temples exhibiting the greatness of Prayagraj Kumbh." This is the piety that is reported.

On a query made at the presentation it was stated that the estimated foreign devotees at Kumbh Mela is around one million. The pilgrims sometimes are Sadhus (holy men), who it is told undergo year-round most severe physical discipline and leave their isolation only for these pilgrimages. We were told that vast crowds of disciples, tourists and spectators join the congregation. In fact, the MEA of India inviting us to visit Prayag was perhaps meant to give publicity to the Kumbh Mela event to foreigners and even to attract and increase foreign guests for this national event, paving the way to be an international cultural event, since Kumbh has been recognized an UNESCO Heritage Site.

My writing here is a silent response to the intentions of the MEA in the interest of relationship building through religious activity. In a way our commitment to support the intentions of the MEA, as diplomats was endorsed with a flag hoisting ceremony where the national flag of the participating country was hoisted by the relevant Ambassador/ High Commissioners (68 in number) on the banks of the confluence area on 15th December 2018. The National Flags will be so hoisted until 4th of March 2019.

As explained by State Minister V K Singh, origins of Kumbh Mela go back to mythological times. The origin is attributed to the Puranas that recounts "how the gods and demons fought over the pot (kumbha) of amrita, the elixir of immortality produced by their joint churning of the "milky ocean." How the churning of the Ocean of Milk by gods and demons who were arch rivals took place has its mythological versions.

The generally accepted version is that having reached a temporary truce to churn the great ocean (the Samudra Manthan) God Vishnu turns in to a giant tortoise which acts as a the pivot on which is placed the Mount Mandar, the churn. The great snake Vasuki agrees to be the rope

to churn. The demons held the tail and Gods held the mouth of the snake. Fourteen items were discovered after stirring and were shared between the two parties and the amirtha (elixir) fell in to the hands of the demons.

Tempted to solve the crisis, it is said the Lord Vishnu assumed the avatar of Mohini the temptress and tricked the demons. He delivered the elixir to Jayantha, son of Lord Indra who flew to Heaven with the elixir. According to such literature, when carried by air, drops of the amrita fell on the Kumbh Mela's four earthly sites mentioned earlier, "and the rivers are believed to turn back into that primordial nectar" giving pilgrims the chance to bathe in the essence of purity, auspiciousness, and immortal Gods.

The Kumbh Mela has attracted millions of pilgrims, and in 2019 it is expected to be more than 120 million people congregating in an area of 3,200 hectares at an average of two million people plus a day, through the Kumbh Mela Season commencing on 15th January 2019 to 4th March 2019. Major bathing days Makar Sankranti (15th January), Paush Purnima (21st January), Mauni Amavasya (4th February), Basant Panchami (10th February), Maghi {Purnima (19th February) and Maha Shivarathri (4th March).

The officials of the Prayagraj Mela Authority and the representative Ministers (Hon Siddhartha Nath Singh, the State Cabinet Minister of Health of Uttar Pradesh and Hon VK Singh, State Minister of External Affairs) who attended the observation tour with Diplomats of 68 countries stated that it is a world record of attendance beating every religious congregation anywhere in the world.

Literature records that the Kumbh Mela at Prayag is very different as compared to Kumbh at other places due to many reasons, which I quote.

- (a) The tradition of long-term Kalpvas is practiced only in Prayag.
- (b) The Triveni Sangam is considered as the centre of the earth in some scriptures.
- (c) It is believed that Lord Brahma performed the Yajna here for creating the universe.

(d) Prayag is called the shrine of pilgrimages.

(e) The most important reason adduced is that the significance of performing rituals and tapas at Prayag is of highest among all pilgrimages and provides one with the highest virtue.

(f) Maharishi Markandeya in 'Matsya Purana' has told Yudhishtira that this place is specifically protected by all the Gods.

(g) Residing here for a month and practicing complete asceticism, remaining celibate and duly performing oblations for this deity and ancestors fulfills all desires.

(h) It is believed that an individual who takes the holy dip in the sacred waters relieves his/her ten generations from the cycle of rebirth, and hence, achieving salvation. Moreover, it is said that just by providing services to pilgrims at Prayag during Kumbh will help an individual to gain redemption from temptation.

The Kumbh Mela- 2019 at Prayag takes place for more than 50 days. The Sangam area becomes a hive of activity with the commencement of the Mela. The administration has planned its activities and divided the 3,200 hectare Mela area to 20 sectors.

More focus was drafted to Kumbh Mela after Independence and various rules were framed resulting in few changes in organizing Kumbh Mela and the Government made arrangements for providing basic amenities to the pilgrims. At present the Prayagraj Mela Authority has been established to perform the supply of the requirements of massive number of pilgrims visiting the Mela. These facilitations spread over a large number of areas.

(a) Since millions congregate during the approximate period of 50 days on a continuous basis human security becomes essential. On our visit we saw the arrangements that have been made with Police units being established giving coverage to a large land area that will support the event with various essential service rendering, inclusive of a digitally managed "loss and found"

system. Construction and development of multiple Police Stations is costing INR 840 million. The Police Force will have three Police lines, 40 Police Stations, three female Police Stations, 58 Police Outposts and security will be supplemented with 40 firefighting centers, 15 fire outposts and 40 watch towers.

(b) It was clear that the State Government has taken steps to build nine overhead bridges (INR 4,350 million), strengthened and widened 140 roads (INR 10,610) to accommodate the large number of traffic. Thirty four city roads have been strengthened and widened. Such development will require redesigning, refurbishing and beautification with budget allocation of nearly INR 3 billion. It will bring the need to have traffic management systems in place and a new traffic management action is pursued by the Authority. There will be 95 parking lots in 1,253 hectares, parking lots with a combined parking capacity for 563,000 vehicles and 18 parking areas are being developed in satellite towns.

(c) Although we found that there were electric wires hanging in a disorganized manner in certain areas, alternate lighting and power generation will be provided according to Prayagraj Mela Authority officials. Various lighting arrangements are to be made on the banks including façade lighting that will engulf the pilgrims in diverse colors and these have been already completed. A budget allocation of INR 810 million had been made to upgrade and strengthen the power infrastructure. Electricity works in the Kumbh Mela area according to Mela Authority calculations is LED lights 40,700, Low Tension lines 1,030 kms, Hypertension lines 105 kms, high masts 175, Temporary Sub Stations 54 and camp connections 280,000.

(d) The large crowds will require expanded and concentrated health and sanitation facilities that are being catered by the relevant health authorities, well under the care of planned management. For augmentation of water supply system and improvement of drainage and sewerage system a budget of INR 810 million is utilized. The Mela Authority has planned for 5,000 Stand Posts, 800 kms of pipelines, 200 water bowsers and 100 hand pumps. They will do 24/7 water supply with ensured check on quality.

(e) A 100 bed hospital has been already established to take care of serious ailments and emergencies, handled by expert medical practitioners. Renovation of many hospitals in the area and even and upgrading of equipment is attended to with a budget of INR 730 million. For sanitation there will be 122,500 temporary toilets that will be provided. One can imagine the action for sanitation when the Mela Authority engages 11,000 sweepers and use 20,000 dustbins for solid waste management.

(f) In a presentation made by Mela Authority officials officers and State political authorities who combined a Question and Answer Session, the responsibility for these amenities were explained very satisfactorily. A law has been passed for this purpose and the responsibility of providing the basic facilities lies with the government. . /

(g) For the Kumbh 2019, modern technologies are being deployed to enhance the 'Divyata' (purity) and 'Bhavyata' (grandeur) of the Kumbh. Gates based on various themes will welcome pilgrims and information boards will guide them to their destinations. Already the authorities are constructing huge pandals and tents to facilitate the stay of pilgrims and visitors. Also, different cuisines and gourmet food in the food courts shall satisfy the appetite of the pilgrims and we experienced "a rehearsal" of it during our stay in Prayag. It is notable to see that modern banking and telecommunication systems are adapted to service visitors.

Prayagraj offers other religious exposures too. For example, one main place of worship is the Hanumanji Temple. The usual pose of Hanuman is changed in the posture seen inside the temple located in an underground temple. Here the bright orange hued Lord Hanuman lies in a reclining or sleeping position in the temple of the Hanuman Kund. It is said the river flood water reaches the feet of Lord Hanuman. Among a large number of pictures of Lord Hanuman in the Google there is not a single picture depicting him in a reclining position.

In publicity literature the other religious places mentioned in the area are the Mankameshwar Temple (a Shiva shrine), Lalita Devi Temple and Kalyani Devi Temple (representing the two avatars of Sati), Patalpuri Temple and the Akshayavata (the immortal banyan tree, which is considered by some as the oldest remaining tree, which is to be secured with a glass made fence soon, the Nagvasuki Temple (dedicated to Nagraj) etc. In addition a Ganga Pandal with a capacity to accommodate 10,000 people will be used for organizing over 200 cultural, spiritual and official programmes.

Kumbh Mela has allowed for Tourist Walks numbering four. They are the Heritage Trail (historical and architectural interests), Religious Trail (covering major temples while elucidating the religious and spiritual aspects), Food Trail (culinary interests of Allahabad and neighboring areas) and Sangam walk (guided tours to pilgrim locations in the Mela area).

The Kumbh Mela and related experiences of such difference may be especially appreciated by the Hindu community in Sri Lanka and will be an opening for building close cultural and religious links, which had been a main pillar of old historical relationships between Sri Lanka and India.

This will be an experience that will be remembered by any Hindu for its religious relevance and by those interested in exploring the devotional experiences, irrespective of religious biases. Hence, I wish there will be groups from Sri Lanka who commit to participate in Kumbh Mela this year. I believe with what we have heard and seen already, it will be an unforgettable religious and exploratory event. Thus it will remain in our hearts and minds for a long time.

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