



The Kumbha Mela Festival

The Kumbha Mela Festival, rooted in ancient Vedic traditions and cosmic philosophy, is the world's largest peaceful spiritual gathering, where millions seek purification and liberation through sacred river baths, reflecting India's deep cultural unity in diversity.

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The Kumbha Mela Festival (KMF) is well known for drawing millions of pilgrims, ascetics, and visitors from all walks of life, creating a massive, yet remarkably peaceful, gathering. It is unique as the world's largest peaceful gathering, a Hindu pilgrimage festival, where millions converge for ritual bathing in sacred rivers, seeking spiritual cleansing and renewal, and showcasing a vibrant blend of cultures and traditions. The core belief is that bathing in the holy rivers during the Kumbha Mela washes away sins and purifies the soul, helping one attain Moksha (liberation from the cycle of birth and death). The timing of the Kumbha Mela is guided by the movement of planets and stars, particularly the alignment of Jupiter, which is believed to enhance spiritual energy. The Kumbha Mela takes place at four different sites in India: Haridwar on the Ganges, Ujjain on the Shipra, Nashik on the Godāvari, and Prayāgraj (the holy site of confluence of rivers Ganges, Yamuna, and Saraswati).

The Maha Kumbha Mela (a great Kumbha Mela as distinguished from the normal KMF) held in Prayagraj every 12 years, is the most significant and the largest of the Kumbha Melas. The Maha Kumbha Mela of 2025 in Prayagraj is unique because it is a once-in-144-year event, marking a rare alignment of celestial bodies, specifically the Sun, Moon, and Jupiter. An estimated total of 45 million devotees are reported to have



attended this festival. The KMF event is linked to a legend in Hindu mythology, where drops of the divine nectar of immortality, or Amrit, spilled at four locations during a cosmic battle between Gods and demons, giving these sites their holiness. The Kumbha Mela has been recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage, acknowledging its immense historical and cultural value.

Although in practice for more than a thousand years and although the KMF continues to draw increasingly large crowds of pilgrims from all over the world, frustration has been expressed that there is so little known and written about the history of this festival [1]. Role of 'religion' has been discussed [1] and new words such as *communitas* and *liminality* have been invoked by anthropologists to explain its longevity [2]. However, in the view of the author, such explanations have not been very convincing.

The goal of this article is to provide a summary of efforts carried out in ancient India during a course of more than two thousand years that led to this festival and identify some lasting concepts that were developed which have helped to draw huge crowds. The reader should note that, despite the author's best efforts, because of its longevity, and because the concepts were developed during oral times of communication, this summary may not be exhaustive.

One of the key motivating factors for founding of the Vedic Civilization is summarized in a quote from the Shatapatha Brahmana (1.7.2.1 – 1.7.2.6):

“Verily, whoever exists, he, in being born as (owing) a debt to the gods, to the Rishis, to the fathers, and to men.”

Each human is born with debts and the quote exhorts us to attempt to repay them as a way of having a fulfilled life. These rinas or debts are not to be taken as a burden but as an expression of indebtedness for all that we receive in this world. There has been a significant amount of discussion on this concept and as a result Vedic Literature is replete with examples of its importance and interpretations.

A key difference between the West and Hindu way of life as described above is that the Western philosophical tradition places a strong emphasis on individual rights and freedoms. This perspective is rooted in the ideas of thinkers such as John Locke,



Immanuel Kant, and John Rawls, who argue that individuals have inherent rights and dignity that should be respected and protected.

The Indus Valley Civilization (IVC, *circa* 3300- 1300 BC) flourished in the basins of the [Indus River](#). Unlike other civilizations, in which large temples were a central key element of cities and religious imagery abounded, there were no monumental palaces present in the IVC, even though excavated cities indicate that the society possessed the requisite engineering knowledge. Only the [Great Bath](#) at Mohenjo-Daro is widely thought to have been so used, as a place for ritual purification [3]. It is a well-accepted thesis that “there is some form of continuity between the IVC and later Hinduism” [4]. Scholars agree that the IVC was a far egalitarian society with some kind of clan rule. Although finer details await the decipherment of the IVC script, it is fair to write that no evidence of wars and weapons has been found.

The Vedic Civilization (*circa* 1600 BC – 500 BC) followed the IVC. Veda means knowledge. The Vedic civilization may be called Cosmo centric. It places the cosmos at the center of individual and societal spiritual, intellectual, economic and practical life. It belonged to the days of oral communication. Four Vedas were composed whose contents form a canon of Hindu scriptures. The distinguishing feature of Vedic compositions is that they have no author; they are believed to be a divine recording of the ‘cosmic sounds of truth as heard by the seers or Rishis’ and revealed to humans. The Vedas represent the ultimate canonical authority for all the Hindus. The oldest of the Vedas is the Rig Veda (in Praise of Knowledge) was composed in about 1200 BC in Sanskrit following metering rules. The manuscripts of the [Rigveda](#) have been included in UNESCO’s [Memory of the World Register](#) in 2007 as a significant piece of documentary heritage. The other main scriptures are: The Yajurveda, the Samaveda, and the Atharvaveda. Since there was no script developed yet, they were composed orally and maintained by families making use of memorization techniques.

What are some unique features of the Vedic Civilization?

We start with the Creation Hymn from the Rig Veda (10.129) which describes the creation of this universe in a big bang and states that the ‘poets’ seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence. The hymn goes on to assert



that *the gods came only after the creation of this Universe* [5]. This puts into serious question the viability of dogmatic views proposed on the all-powerful god as being the creator of this Universe. The hymn also asks to know where the Creator was standing while creating the universe and what ‘wood’ (material of construction) was he using. The above skepticism of the Rig Veda has been repeated in subsequent Hindu compositions such as the Taittiriya Brahmana. The Rig Veda’s Purusha Sukta hymn (RV 10.90) describes Purusha as a primordial being whose sacrifice created this universe and established social order. The thinking during the Vedic Civilization helped in conceiving the beauty and order present in the universe as follows.

The Purusha Sukta hymn provides a cosmic perspective by linking human life to the universal essence. Details have been proposed on how different parts of the universe were born from different parts of the cosmic “Person” (Rig Veda X.90).

Dharma and rta were introduced in creating order in the universe. The word dharma should not be compared with the conventional meaning of the word religion. There is no single word for religion in Sanskrit and hence Hinduism. The equivalent term, dharma, does not have a single, clear translation but conveys a multifaceted idea. Etymologically, it comes from the Sanskrit dhr-, meaning to hold or to support, thus, referring to law that sustains things—from one's life to society, and to the Universe at large. Dharma refers to an individual's moral responsibilities or duties: it denotes behaviors that are considered to be in accord with [Rta](#)—the "order and custom" that makes [life](#) and Universe possible. This includes duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues and the “right way of living”. Because of this, Hinduism is preferred to be called a way of life instead of a ‘religion’ [6,7]. When one follows dharma and ṛta always, one achieves Sanātana dharma, meaning "eternal dharma", or



eternal cosmic order.

In addition to introducing the concepts of dharma and ṛta, important factors critical to the survival and success of civilization were identified and raised to the levels of divinity in a long process of deification. Some of them are rivers, plants, agni (fire), spices, and planets. The Rig Veda includes a good account of such efforts. We give a summary here.

In Hinduism, rivers frequently represent life, purification, and rejuvenation. Continuously flowing, they reflect the cycles of existence—birth, death, and rebirth—underscoring that life is perpetually in motion. Numerous Hindu scriptures and myths depict rivers as goddesses possessing human characteristics, emotions, and heavenly abilities. Rig Vedic hymn numbers 2.41.16 and 1.164.49 are examples of heaping praise on the river goddess Saraswati. Immersion in these hallowed rivers is thought to absolve sins, purify the spirit, and confer spiritual illumination. Saraswati is celebrated both as a river deity, as her name and as the goddess of knowledge and ‘vak’-speech personify. She is so identified because of her act of “flow” (Rigveda 10.71, and 10. 125). It is believed that important Vedic scriptures, including the Rigveda, were composed on its banks.

Rig Veda equates Agni (fire) to Saraswati, as both are illuminators. Agni drives away the darkness so also goddess Saraswati, who with the power of knowledge drives away the darkness of the mind.

The work carried out by ancient Hindu seers in investigating and identifying useful plants is commendable. Their efforts in deification of plants, flowers, trees and Nature have been well documented in the ancient scriptures and have resulted in a healthy Worldview of Nature. Such efforts have translated themselves in various devotional and ritualistic practices. Those of us who are familiar with Ayurvedic medicine know that Ayurveda ("science of longevity") assumes that everything in the universe is connected; health and wellness depend on a delicate balance between the mind, body, spirit, and environment. The focus, therefore, is on promoting good health and preventing disease by using herbal medicine. Most of the Hindu diet and medicine are plant based. Many of us may not be aware that a sister-branch of Ayurveda,



Vrukshāyurveda (plant or tree-Ayurveda) was developed as a way of deification of plants. Śhākambhari (the one who bears vegetables) is the mother or Hindu goddess of nourishment and she is worshipped in the Hindu Navarātri festival as a tied bundle of nine plants. The Puranas state that the trees [experience happiness and sorrow](#), have a conscience, and are living beings. Just like humans, trees are a part of [samsara](#), also known as the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Bael tree, Banana tree, Tulasi, Banyan tree, and Peepal are five of the most holy trees mentioned in the scriptures. In Hinduism, flowers symbolize the bridge between earthly and divine realms, representing the universe's grandeur. Some of the flowers mentioned in the scriptures are Jasmine, the Lotus (the national flower of India), Kanak Champa, Madhavi Lata, Kewda, Neel Kamal, and Marigold. Tulasi, which means immeasurable, is known in the Vedas and puranas as *Vaishnavi* (belonging to Vishnu). It is a sacred plant for the Hindus, is planted in almost all the Hindu houses and every part of the tulasi plant is revered and considered sacred, including the leaves, stem, flower, root, seeds and oil.

The process of deification between planets and humans is exemplified in the association between sage Brahaspati and the planet Jupiter (Guru). Brahaspati is mentioned in the Rig Veda as a sage and a deity who counsels the gods and is revered for his knowledge and character. He is described as a sage born from the first great light and who drove away darkness and carries a special bow whose string is Ṛta or "cosmic order" (Rig Veda, Book 4, hymn 50). The later texts such as the Puranas and astronomical texts like the Aryabhatiya and Surya Siddhanta refer to Brahaspati as the planet Jupiter.

The symbolic parallel between body and cosmos is articulated ritually in the construction of the Vedic fire altar in which the body of Purusa is reconstructed from the various parts of the cosmos. A similar reconstruction of the body-cosmos occurs in the construction of the Hindu temple. The temple is the condensed image of the cosmos. The construction and consecration of a temple is carried out according to the architectural portions of the Silpasastras. It is to be noted that the building of a temple is not left to the creativity of the architect or craftsmen. Instead, it carefully follows canons of building and is completely a ritual activity. Starting from the stretching of



the cord, or the drawing of the lines of the mandala, every one of the movements is a rite and sustains the sacred building [8].

Darshan is a powerful Sanskrit word that was introduced during the Vedic times. It refers to the knowledge acquired through vision or through what is seen. *It refers to a path by means of which the God principle is seen and realized.* In the Rig Vedic hymns “to see” often means a “mystical, supranatural beholding” or “visionary experiencing” [9]. The term darshan was used later to describe the six systems of philosophy that were developed in India [10]. Darshan was one of the concepts that helped to signify India as a visual and visionary culture in which the eyes have a prominent role in the apprehension of the sacred. According to the Bruhadaranyak Upanishad, what the eyes see is the truth factual. In exploring the nature of the divine image, we look to the images of the gods, the Hindu temple and the Hindu place of pilgrimage. The tīrthas (sacred “fords” or “crossings”), dhāms (divine “abodes”), or pīṭhas (the “seats” of the divine) are concepts associated with the pilgrimage. “Seeing” is part of our learning and knowing.

There are two aspects of the KMF festival. The first part describes what all the participants do when present. This is simple to understand. However, it is difficult to summarize the response of Westerners to such concepts. In the West such traditions of pilgrimage were often attacked by those who did not “see” the symbolic significance of images and who, like Erasmus, denounced the undertaking of pilgrimages as a waste of time. According to the concept of darshan, it is not only the worshipper who sees the deity, but the deity sees the worshiper as well. The eyes help establish contact between devotee and deity [5]. Casting one’s eyes upon a person and touching him were related activities. According to Ingalls, “One must suppose that the language of the eyes was more advanced in ancient India than it is with us.” This language of the eyes pertains to the dharmic context which later became part of rites and religious customs. This language provided a means of participating in the essence and nature of the person or object looked at [11].

A good starting point to describe the differences between the East and the West is a quote from Rudyard Kipling’s *The Ballad of East and West*: Oh, East is East and West



is West, and never shall the twain meet. When the first European traders and travelers visited India, they were astonished at the multitude of images of the various deities which they saw. They called them “idols” and greeted them with fascination as well as repugnance. For example, Ralph Fitch, who traveled as a merchant through northern India in the 1500s writes of the images of deities in Banaras: “Their chiefe idols bee blacke and evill favoured, their mouths monstrous, their eares gilded and full of jewels, their teeth and eyes of gold, silver and glasse, some having one thing in their hands and some another” [12]. When M. A. Sherring lived in Banaras in the middle of the 1800s, he wrote of “the worship of uncouth idols, of monsters, of the linga and other indecent figures, and of a multitude of grotesque, illshapen, and hideous objects [13]. When Mark Twain traveled through India in the last decade of the nineteenth century, he brought a certain imaginative humor to the array of “idols” in Banaras, but he could not place the visible data of India in a recognizable context. Of the “idols” he wrote, “And what a swarm of them there is! The town is a vast museum of idols — and all of them crude, misshapen, and ugly. They flock through one’s dreams at night, a wild mob of nightmares” [14]. Worshiping as God those “things” which are not God was put down in the Western traditions as “idolatry,” a mere bowing down to “sticks and stones.” No people would identify themselves as “idolators,” by faith. Thus, idolatry can be only an outsider’s term for the symbols and visual images of some other culture [13]. Theodore Roszak, writing in *Where the Wasteland Ends*, locates the “sin of idolatry” precisely where it belongs: in the eye of the beholder.” The Western world has had difficulty in accepting not only the image-making capacity of the Hindu imagination but the bold Hindu polytheistic consciousness [13]. According to Eck, even those Westerners who consider themselves to be secular, participate in the myth of monotheism: that in matters of ultimate importance, there is only One — one God, one Book, one Son, one Church, one Seal of the Prophets, and one Nation under God. Psychologists have written that this “monotheism of consciousness” has shaped Western habits of thinking so that the autonomous, univocal, and independent personality is considered healthy; single-minded decision-making is considered a strength; and the concept of the independent ego as “number one” is considered normal. With this background, one confronts a way of thinking which one might call



“radically polytheistic,” and if there is any “great divide” between the traditions of India and those of the West, it is in just this fact [13]. India’s affirmation of Oneness is made in a context that affirms with equal vehemence the multitude of ways in which human beings have seen that Oneness and expressed their vision. At virtually every level of life and thought, India is polycentric and pluralistic. India, with what E. M. Forster called “her hundred mouths” [15], has been the very exemplar of cultural multiplicity. The Rig Veda has summarized this in a hymn, there is one reality, but the names and forms by which it is known are different [5]. Westerners seem to have seen only chaos in India’s diversity and have found it difficult to recognize in India any underlying unity. This is summarized in a quote from the British civil servant John Strachey: “There is no such country, and this is the first and most essential fact about India that can be learned. ...” [16]. According to Eck [13], Strachey failed to see his criteria for signs of unity in India, namely, common language, unifying religion, shared historical tradition [13]. In part, the unity of India, which Strachey and many others like him could not see, is in its cultural genius for embracing diversity, so that diversity unites, rather than divides. For example, there are the six philosophical traditions recognized as “orthodox.” But they are not called “systems” in the sense that is normally used. For the Hindus they are darshans in the sense that the term means not the “seeing of the deity, but the “seeing” of truth. There are many such darshans, many “points of view” or “perspectives” on the truth as exemplified by the Rig Vedic hymn [5]. These “ways of seeing” share a common goal of liberation. Philosophical discourse, therefore, takes the form of an ongoing dialogue, in which the views of others are explained so that one can counter them with one’s own view. Any “point of view” implicitly assumes that another point of view is possible. Thanks to darshan one can imagine what all a KMF participant may be enjoying.

Eleventh century Islamic scholar Al Biruni, who spent several years traveling in India, had in mind Islam’s views on idol worship as against those of the Hindus when he wrote that “the Hindus entirely differ from us in every respect” [17].



In Indian philosophy, this universe as well as all living beings are made up of five elements, called the Pancha Bhutas in Sanskrit. They are: Prithvi (Earth), Āpas (Water), Agni (Fire), Vāyu (Air), and Ākāsha (Space or Ether).

Five major temples were built in southern India for the above five elements. These temples, created for a specific type of yogic sādhanā, represent the five elements as described above and are in southern India as follows:

1. Earth: [Ekāmbareśhwarar Temple](#) in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nādu.
2. Water: [Jambukēshwarar Temple](#) (also known as Thiruvanaikaval temple) in Trichy, Tamil Nādu.
3. Fire: [Arunāchaleshwarar Temple](#) in Thiruvannāmalai, Tamil Nādu.
4. Air: [Srikalahasti Temple](#) (also known as Kalāhastēshwarar Temple) in Srikālahasti, Āndhra Pradesh.
5. Ether/Sky: [Nataraja Temple](#) in Chidambaram, Tamil Nādu.

One might say that these temples provide opportunities for darshan with the Pancha Bhutas.

A movement worth mentioning here is the [Bhakti movement](#). The Shaiva Nayanars and Vaishnava Alvars in South India introduced it around the seventh century AD. It was a period of religious and social reform in India which stressed devotion to a personal god, devotion being much more important than rituals. Although a part of Hinduism in the beginning, the movement is known for introducing secular concepts such as seva (selfless service), dāna (charity), belief in non-violence, and promoting folk culture. It emphasized the unity of all the different Hindu gods, equality and brotherhood of all people, and rejected the caste system. Some of the well-known proponents of the Bhakti movement are: Alvars and Nayanars (Tamil Nadu and Kerala), Basavaṇṇa, Akkamahādevi, and Allama Prabhu (Karnataka), Jnānadev, Nāmdev, and Tukārām (Mahārāshtra), Mīrābāi, Chaitanya Mahāprabhu, Guru Nānak, Kabir Dās, and Ravi Dās (Northern India). The devotees are known for traveling to various places, singing hymns in praise of their Gods. A review of the names of



proponents above indicates that some of these proponents went on to found their own religions which are in practice even today.

Professor Morgan recognized the need for the study of the religion of the Hindus to better understand the people and culture of India. Many of the misunderstandings which arise between East and West come “from our inevitable tendency to describe and judge the people of India by our own standards. The religious, social, and speculative patterns of India have been built on assumptions and beliefs so different from ours that it is difficult for a Westerner to describe them without distortion” [6]. Feeling that such a study should be based on materials written by the Hindus themselves, he went on to edit a book [Preface to [6]].

This article illustrates that a good appreciation of the KMF is helped by a good understanding of several areas that were addressed and developed by ancient Hindu rishis and seers some four thousand years ago while the Vedic Civilization was under development (*circa* 1500 BC – 500 BC). Some of these areas are, Kalpa (the ritual science), ‘siddhantic astronomy’, decimal math, astrology and Panchang (Hindu Calendrical science), cyclical concept of time, and the ‘Hindu creation myth’. We plan to cover these areas in a forthcoming article.

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