

Name of the Element: Kumbh Mela

Community: Kumbh Mela (fair) is a congregation of pilgrims (visitors, aspirants-*kalpavasis* and *sadhus*) mostly Hindus. But the legitimate bearers are the holy men, the ascetics, saints, the *Sadhus*, *Sadhvis* and the *Sants* who have renounced the worldly life to follow exclusive life of the religious. These ascetics either belong to religious organisations-*Ashrams* and *Akhadas* or are individuals living on alms. There are 13 *Akhadas* in India with their own respective President or *Mahants*. The respective Presidents of these *Akhadas* are the first ones who take the dip or bathe in the holy river during the Kumbh and with their bathing the Kumbh Mela proceedings initiates. These ascetics are generally male. Though women ascetics or *Sadhvis* belonging from various ashrams and *Akhadas* are also present in large numbers in India, who participate in the Kumbh Mela with equal zest and enthusiasm, but its generally the *Sadhus* who lead the congregations.

As the upholders of the element there are also the various Temple Trust organisations like Trimbakeshwar Temple Trust of Nashik, Organisations or *Sabhas* like Ganga Sabha of Haridwar, Civil Societies or Non Governmental Organisations like Godavari Gatarikaran Virodhi Manch of Nashik, who not only assist in facilitating the festival but are major contributors in making the festival a success.

Apart from the Mela being attended by millions of devotees and visitors, government and administration of the respective state and city is also an integral and important part of the Mela. They involve themselves for the efficient working and convenience of the festival. They may not be the spiritual bearers and practitioners of the element but their role in conducting and managing such a humongous festival, with crowd management, hospitality etc, makes them worthy of being the upholders of the Kumbh as well.

Region: The geographical location for the Kumbh Mela spans over four cities within India. They are held at Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh state, Haridwar in uttarakhand state, Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh state and Nashik in Maharashtra state. With the site of the observation being on the four sacred rivers: at Haridwar on the river Ganga, at Ujjain on Shipra river, at Nashik on the Godavari and Allahabad it is held on the banks of the rivers Ganga-Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati.

Brief Description: Kumbh Mela or Kumbha Mela is a mass congregation of generally Hindu pilgrims in which people gather to take a bath/dip in a sacred river. It is considered to be the largest peaceful gathering in the world. A ritual bath at a predetermined time and place is the major event of the festival, called the *Shahi Snan*. It is celebrated four times every 12 years, the site of the observation rotating between

four pilgrimage places on four sacred rivers: at Haridwar on the river Ganga, at Ujjain on Shipra river, at Nasik on the Godavari and Allahabad/Prayag it is held on the banks of the rivers Ganga-Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati. *Ardha* ("Half") *Kumbh Mela* is held at only two places, Haridwar and at Allahabad, every sixth year. And a *Maha Kumbh* is held after every 144 years. At Nashik and Ujjain, the Kumbh Mela which is held when the zodiac position of Jupiter is in Leo (Simha in Hindu astrology); then it is also known as *Simhastha*.

A great fair is held on these occasions on the banks of these rivers with a huge congregation of devoted pilgrims. The festival of Kumbh or *Ardh Kumbh* is not a festival of market or fair instead it is the festival of knowledge, asceticism and devotion. People from every religion and caste are present in the festival in one form or the other, and it takes the shape of a Mini India. Different types of language, tradition-culture, dresses, food, way of living, can be seen at the festival and the most important speciality is that millions of people reach the place without any invitation.

Kumbha is a Sanskrit word for Pitcher, referred to as *Kalasha*, it is also a zodiac sign in Indian astrology, the sign under which the festival is celebrated. Kumbh is also the human body; the sun, earth, sea and Vishnu (Hindu God) are its synonyms. The elemental meaning of Kumbh says that it's a confluence of all cultures, and is a symbol of spiritual awakening. While Mela means a 'gathering' or 'a meet' or simply a fair.

To understand the significance of the Kumbha Mela and the important role that it plays in the spirituality of India, it is imperative to know the background of the sacred Ganges River. The devout believe that simply by bathing in the Ganges one is freed from their past sins (karma), and thus one becomes eligible for liberation from the cycle of birth and death. Of course it is said that a pure lifestyle is also required after taking bath, otherwise one will again be burdened by karmic reactions. The pilgrims come from all walks of life, travelling long distances and tolerating many physical discomforts, such as sleeping in the open air in near freezing weather. They undergo such difficulties just to receive the benefit of taking a bath in the sacred river at Kumbha Mela.

Kumbh Mela- Inscribed in 2017 on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, UNESCO