

Kumbh Mela at Prayagraj: Continuity and Transformation from the British Era to the Present

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Abstract : *The Kumbh Mela is a hindu pilgrimage that takes place at an interval of 3,6, and 12 years. Recently, the government has declared it as a rarest and spiritually significant event to be held after 144 years and considered it as a celebration of India's history, traditions and cultural identity. In this paper sincere effort has been made to trace the documented facts of the Kumbh Mela which was available since 1868 in a lucid style. The transition from suspicion to celebration has been expressed through comparisons made between the colonial and post-colonial period. Thus, it was an attempt to see how the government has played a constructive role towards shaping India's soft diplomacy and global image.*

Key words: *Kumbh, Shahi Snan, Millennium Kumbh, Pilgrimage, Oriental Discrimination.*

Introduction

The earliest reference of bathing pilgrimage at Prayagraj is found in Rigveda in verses 10.89.7 and 1.8.9 and it is also found in Atharvaveda Matsya Purana, Skanda Purana, Padma Purana, Vishnu Purana, Bhavishya Purana, Kurma Purana, Garuda Purana, and Valmiki Ramayana also. Some believe that it is 1000 year older than Harappan and Mohenjo-Daro Civilization. In Brahma Vaivarta Purana, it has been mentioned that, “by taking a bath in Prayagraj in the month of Magh, one is free from all sins and his ancestors are pleased.”

One finds a mention in Mahabharat which contains references to the sacredness of rivers and pilgrimages. The 7th century Buddhist Chinese traveler Hsuan Tsang had also mentioned about the bathing rituals at Prayag. According to James Lochtefeld, “the historical texts clearly reveal large, well-established bathing festival.” (Lochtefeld, 2002) But there is no record of Kumbh Mela with a 12-year cycle at Prayag before 19th century.

The early British records contain detailed information about the Magh Mela at Prayag but, none of these records call the mela by the name “Kumbh” nor do they have suggested any specific significance to it which is held every 12 years.

Magh Melas during Company Era

The British East India Company gained control of Prayagraj area in 1765 after the *Treaty of*

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Allahabad. From the traces of the early records about the information about the annual Magh Mela have been collected for tax-related and administrative purposes the company-era Magh Melas were held in 1790, 1801, 1806, 1808, 1812, 1833, 1836, 1840. In the beginning, the company outsourced the tax collection to a native just to escape the complexity and accusations of profiting from the non-Christian practices.

Later in 1806, the company itself started to collect tax. It imposed a tax of ' 1 for pilgrims who wanted to bathe at the Mela and ' 3 to Brahmins sitting at the river side for charity and gifts. (Hamilton, 1820). In 1808, the Britishers tried to strengthen the loyalty of the native soldiers towards them just by waiving off the pilgrim tax for those soldiers who wished to bathe. (Kame 2009).

In order to gain popularity, the British took a calculated measure by abolishing pilgrim tax in 1840. As a result, huge number of pilgrims attended the mela. Due to lack of facilities and unpreparedness on the part of the company stampede occurred.

Apart from this, it had a mercantile component also but, on a small scale as mentioned by European traveler Charles James and the wares for sale were of low-value items, "usually found in all Indian fairs". (Davidson, 1843).

Missionaries Attack on Hinduism

Gradually, the Christian missionaries treated the Prayagwals and the pilgrims as "ignorant co-religionists" meaning that the people shared same religion but lacked knowledge, understanding and awareness. Therefore, they aggressively tried to convert the Hindu pilgrims to a Christian sect (Kame, 2008). In this process, the missionaries distributed literature in Indian languages. The literature attacked hindu "devotional practices", the idolatry and Hindu rituals. Even some missionary literature accused the Prayag pilgrimage as a "mere superstition", which is not mentioned in the higher sacred books of the Hindus. (Kame, 2003).

The Prayagwals and other Hindus found this offensive. If the hindus were not allowed to enter Christian premises, set up camps, preach and distribute their religions materials to the Christians than how could the Christian missionaries under government protection do exactly that to the hindu community. It was a kind of *oriental discrimination*. Despite such aggressive proselytization methods used by the Christians, they had little success in converting any Hindu. This helped the Hindus to develop vibrant Hindu-owned printing press to distribute pro-Kumbh mela, pro-hindu and anti-colonial literature. (Kame, 2008)

Transformation Process (from Magh Mela into Kumbh Mela)

No exact year can be mentioned when Magh Mela was first celebrated as a Kumbh Mela. However, the Kumbh Mela is a deeply indigenous tradition that existed since antiquity. (Ray, 1996)

The first British mention of the Kumbh Mela was in 1868 report detailing “Coomb Mela” to be held in 1870. It was submitted by G.H.M. Richetts, who also mentioned that he witnessed a huge crowd at an “Ad Coomb” (Ardh Kumbh) four years earlier. According to the then Commissioner of Allahabad (1874), the fair became more sacred every seventh year and attracted a large number of pilgrims and merchants. Further, he wrote that the administration had very little knowledge of the factors that resulted in rise and downfall of attendance at the fair in a year. (Maclean, 2008).

The Colonial era *Imperial Gazetteer of India* reported that in 1796 and 1808 between 2 and 2.5 million pilgrims attended the Kumbh Mela respectively. Between 1892 and 1908 in an era of famines, cholera and 1857 uprising, plague epidemics the pilgrimage dropped to between 3,00,000 and 4,00,000.

In 1870, the then Commissioner J.C. Robertson also mentioned this fair as “Koombh”. In his report, he mentioned about procession of sadhus at Allahabad and also said that this procession occurs only during a Kumbh Mela. However, Kame Maclean (a famous historian) hypothesized that the 1870 mela was the first mela to be called “Kumbh Mela”. Further believed that the Kumbh legend of Haridwar was co-opted by the Prayagwals for this ancient annual Prayag Magh Mela due to the socio-political circumstances in the 19th century. (Kame, 2002)

However, fair was held in Prayagraj in 1858, due to the disturbances from the 1857 revolt. As mentioned in the colonial archives, the Prayagwal community indirectly helped the rebellions. Colonel Neill targeted the Kumbh Mela site and shelled the region where the Prayagwals lived. Maclean has described it as “*a notoriously brutal pacification of Allahabad*”. Later large tracts of Kumbh Mela lands near the Ganga-Yamuna confluence were confiscated and annexed into the government cantonment. After 1857, the Prayagwals and the Kumbh Mela pilgrim crowds carried flags with images alluding to the rebellion and the racial persecution. (Kame, 2008). The British media reported these pilgrim assemblies as “strangely hostile”.

Table 1: Kumbh Mela During British Period

Year	1796	1808	1870	1882	1894	1906	1918	1930	1942
Mela	M M	M M	K M	K M	K M	K M	K M	K M	K M

Source: Compiled by the Author

* MM – Magh Mela, KM – Kumbh Mela

Mela during British Rule

Until the East India Company rule, the Kumbh Mela was managed by the Akharas. Due to the repetitive clashes in the 18th century, the Company took the administrative responsibilities in their own hand. They laid the camps, trading spaces and established bathing order for each Akhara. Thus, the British tried to control the Kumbh Mela by improving sanitation and traffic

management. However, they officially organized the first Kumbh Mela in 1870, and the then Secretary of North West Provinces, J.R. Rad issued an order to organize the fair successfully which was implemented by the then Commissioner of Prayagraj, J. Samson. However, the next five melas were also organized under their supervision in 1882, 1894, 1906, 1918, and 1930. The British government collected taxes, as well as managed the camping sites and mela services. They even allowed the missionaries to camp and distribute their literature; appointed Muslim officials to manage the festivals; and also gave official licenses to gambling carnivals, The Hindus objected it but was of no use. Later communal sentiments intensified and it became an ideal place to promote Hindu interests. However, the mela festival remained peaceful.

During 1882, Kumbh Mela, British appointed Hussain as the Kumbh Mela manager who organized flotilla of festooned boats for the pleasure of European ladies and gentlemen and entertained them with dancing girls, liquor and beef as they watched the pilgrims bathing. However, in 1942, no official order was issued by the NWP because of the *Quit India Movement*. Due to the bomb threats by the Japanese in 1942, the Britishers restricted the sale of railway tickets within the radius of 100 miles from Allahabad. As per records, the British were very much scared of the movement and so did not recognize the fair nor provided any facilities. Hence, the 1942 Kumbh Mela was a very limited affair. (Khanal, 2016)

Earlier, Magh Mela has been an important source of income for the Prayagwals Brahmins of Allahabad. The British soon realizing this and attempted to earn profits by imposing a hefty religious tax on the pilgrims.

Table 2: Highlights of First Official Kumbh Mela during British Period (1870)

Particulars	Year	Actions Taken
Early Documentation	1868	British got aware of the festivals' significance
Administrative Focus	1870 onwards	On managing the logistics and sanitation aspects of the festivals
Social Focus	1870 onwards	Served as a significant cultural and religious gathering for Hindus across the country
Pilgrim Tax	1870 onwards	Imposed on pilgrims (rupee one per person before taking holy dip)
Infrastructure Development	1870 onwards	Develop Railway infrastructure to facilitate more people from across the Indian subcontinent to participate in mela
Barber Enclosures	1870 onwards	3000 barbers, enclosures for the devotees
Institutionalizations of <i>Shahi Snan</i>	1870 onwards	Systematically order was given to different Akharas for Shahi Snan

Source: Compiled by the Author

In terms of impact, the Kumbh Mela was a hub of revenue generation, a hub of nationalism and also a hub of revolution. The Britishers grabbed the business opportunities by imposing pilgrim tax, traders tax and barbers to pay service tax. In other words, the British saw the Kumbh Mela as a major source of income, actively controlled event to maximize tax collection from various vendors and services within the mela.

Table 3: Revenue Generation

Year	Amount Earned	Amount Spent
1870	41,824	Development & beautification of Alfred Park Museum, State Public Library and Colvin Dispenser
1882	49,840	Used in further development and beautification of the city

Source: Compiled by the Author

During the British period, the Kumbh Mela became a hub of nationalism and a base for revolutionary activities. In other words, the Britishers feared political and religious patronage. Traditionally, the Kumbh Mela was a religious congregation. But during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. (Sarkar, 1983) it was more than just a spiritual platform for revolutionary activities due to the following reasons.

- Platform for mass mobilization

The mela was attended by millions of pilgrims so it became a strategic venue for nationalist leaders and revolutionaries to spread political awareness Bal Gangadhar Tilak and others distributed pamphlets, speeches and promoted swadeshi goods.

- Revolutionary activities and underground networks

The 1910 Kumbh Mela at Allahabad became a key movement. Many revolutionary groups used the fair to spread anti-British propaganda. Secret meetings were organized amidst the crowds to avoid British surveillance. (Pandey, 1990)

- Involvement of Arya Samaj and other Reform Movements

Reformist groups tried to promote Hindi and Sanskrit as national languages over English and Urdu.

- British Intelligence Surveillance

Seeing this, the British began intensive surveillance during these events as they feared that the events were breeding grounds for sedition.

Thus, the Kumbh Mela was a spiritual event but, during the British rule it transitioned into a dual-purpose space of spiritual pilgrimage and political awakening. Due to mela's huge

attendance, the Nationalist leaders tried to spread anti-colonial sentiment, mobilize support and plan revolutionary activities. In other words, they tried to make it a subtle yet powerful tool in India's freedom movement. Due to this the social and cultural landscape was one of transition and awakening. It also triggered a resurgence in Indian identity. Thus, the Kumbh Mela became a reflection of this shift – a confluence of tradition, reform and revolution. (Sarkar, 1983)

Mela during Independent India

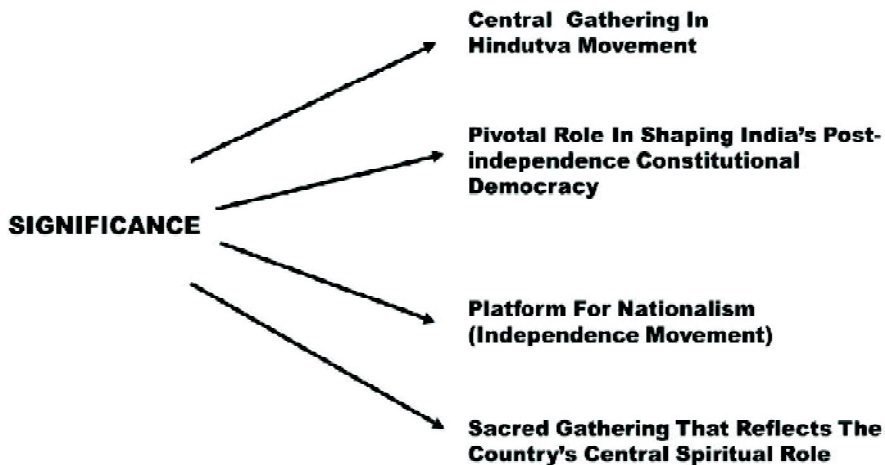


Fig. 1: Pre-Independence Impact

After Independence in 1947, the Kumbh Mela has witnessed significant transformations in terms of increased government involvement; improved infrastructure; technological advancements; and greater global recognition. In one of the confidential documents presented in the Regional Archives of Prayagraj it reads. *“This will be the first Kumbh Mela after independence and many people are contemplating to visit the mela. Information has been received that various organizations of Sadhus are intending to bring large number of their followers along with them in the coming mela.”*

Further in the report, it has been said that the political organization intended to exploit this opportunity. Focus was on efficient and fuller scale arrangements for the mela so that, the government may not be defamed. However, one can categorize Kumbh Mela into following phases since the independence for better understand of the steps taken by the government.

Phase – I First Kumbh Mela in Independent India – 1954

- It was the first major celebration and hence a landmark event.
- It was organized by the government of India.

- It marked the beginning of a new era where the Indian Government took a proactive role in ensuring the safety and smooth organization of the event.
- Effect of inflation was there as compared to 1930 and 1942 mela. Purchase of commodities was 3 to 4 times higher.

Phase – II Expansion and Institutional Support (1960s – 1980s)

- Government focused on developing better infrastructure.
- In 1965, first large-scale use of railways and road transport to manage the movement of the devotees.
- In 1977, permanent structures were introduced which included bridges, bathing ghats and sanitation facilities.
- In 1989, one witnessed mela as an era of the largest gatherings of that time.
- Government started to consider the economic and cultural significance of the Mela and hence increased funding. It also tried to improve infrastructural facilities also.

Phase – III Era of Globalization (1980s – 2000s)

- Due to economic liberalization policy the Kumbh Mela was more commercialized and globally recognized for a huge peaceful gathering of humanity.
- In 1995, international media coverage increased and electronic communication was used to control the crowd.
- The 2001, Maha Kumbh Mela or the millennium Kumbh was the largest religious gathering of the time.
- For the first time satellite imaging system was used to manage crowds and IRS-1D captured the landscape.
- New benchmarks were set for event management, security and global recognition.

Phase – IV Era of Digital and Technological Advancements (2010s – till date)

- Due to rapid technological integration into Kumbh Mela management the event became more safe, more efficient and more globally accessible.
- In 2013, live streaming of religious ceremonies began.
- AI-driven crowd management was introduced.
- In 2019, Kumbh Mela was rebranded and modernized (UP government rebranded the event as simply Kumbh Mela instead of Ardh Kumbh).
- The government promoted Kumbh Mela as a global tourism event.

Phase – V Future of Kumbh Mela: 2025 and beyond

- Use of advance technology, AI and internet of things to monitor crowd density and prevent stampedes.
- Expansion of eco-friendly initiatives.
- Deployment of autonomous drone for security and surveillance.
- Use of blockchain technology for digital payments.
- Expansion of digital broadcasting to provide a virtual Kumbh Mela experience.

For more than a month, millions of pilgrims from the four corners of the sub-continent take part in the Kumbh Mela which is one of the biggest ever religious gathering, with origins that goes back to antiquity. It is the world's largest public gathering and collective act of faith. Thus congregation, primarily includes ascetics, saints, sadhus, sadhvis, kalpavasis and pilgrims from all walks of life.

Planetary Configuration for Kumbh

The Kumbh Mela follows a 12-year cycle based on the celestial position of sun, moon and Jupiter. When this 12-year cycle occurs 12 times ($12 \times 12 = 144$) the 12th Kumbh Mela is called Maha Kumbh, which is celebrated in an exceptionally grand manner. The 12 years interval between Kumbh Melas is linked to Jupiter's orbit as it takes 12 years to complete one revolution around the sun.

The Kumbh Mela is a Hindu pilgrimage that takes place in cycles of 3, 6, 12 and 144 years held in rotation of four sites viz., Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nasik. The site of mela is determined by the alignment of Sun, Moon and Jupiter.

- When Jupiter is in Taurus and the Sun and moon align in Capricorn, the Kumbh Mela takes place at *Prayagraj*.
- When Jupiter is in Aquarius and the Sun and Moon align in Aries and Sagittarius, the Kumbh Mela is held at *Haridwar*.
- When Jupiter is in Leo and the Sun and Moon align in Cancer, the Kumbh Mela is held at *Nasik*.
- Similarly, when Jupiter is in Leo, the Sun and the Moon in Aries, it is the perfect alignment for Kumbh Mela to be celebrated in *Ujjain*.

In each site celebration dates are calculated in advance according to a special combination of zodiacal positions of Jupiter, the Sun and the Moon. (See Table 4)

Table 4: Kumbh Mela Celebration

Mela Type	Frequency	Location	Significance
Magh Mela	Annual	Prayagraj	
Kumbh Mela	Every 3 years	Rotates among 4 places Prayagraj, Ujjain, Haridwar, Nasik	Frequent gathering for spiritual purification
Ardh Kumbh Mela	Every 6 years	Haridwar & Prayagraj	Smaller scale event between Purna Kumbh Mela
Purna Kumbh Mela	Every 12 years	At all 4 sacred sites depending on planetary configuration	Major event with millions for sacred rituals
Maha Kumbh	Once every 144 years (as expressed by the government)	Exclusively at Prayagraj	Rarest and most spiritually significant

Source: Compiled by the Author

Impact of Kumbh Mela in Post-Independent India

Even after Independence, the Kumbh Mela retained its significance as a sacred gathering. It played a pivotal role in shaping post-Independence constitutional democracy in India. The 1977 Kumbh at Prayagraj significantly influenced the political landscape of the country also. However, the significance of this unique mela in the pre and post-Independence era has been great (See Fig. 1 & 2).

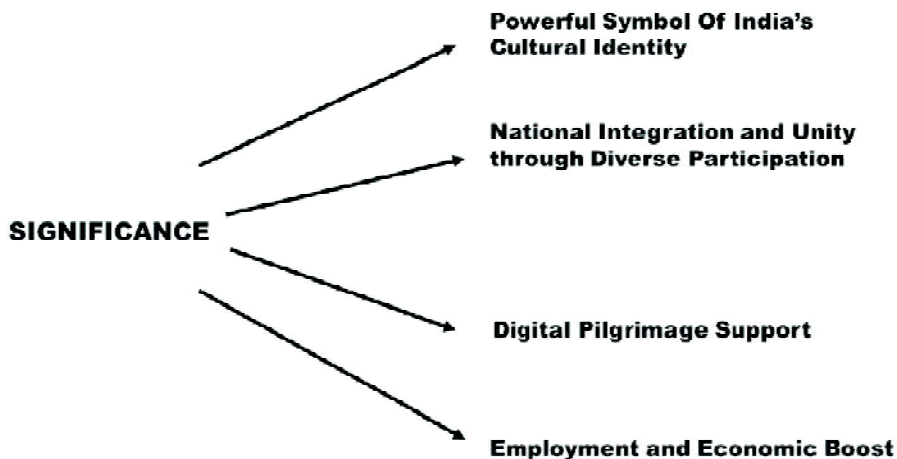


Fig. 2: Post-Independence Impact

The financial footprint of the Kumbh Mela is immense because it attracts millions of pilgrims and tourists, which creates a cascading economic impact across multiple sectors. Massive revenue is driven by spending on transportation, accommodation, food retail and other services.

Table 5: Investment and Revenue Generation

Kumbh Mela	Investment	Earnings	Job Creation
2013	₹ 1300 crore	₹ 12000 crore	100,000 direct jobs
2019	₹ 4200 crore	₹ 1.2lakh crore	600,000
2025	₹ 7000 crore	₹ 2 lack crore (approx.)	800,000 (expected)

Source: Compiled by the Author

Beyond the immediate benefits, the Kumbh Mela contributes to the long-term economic development of the region. The infrastructure upgrades and global exposure associated with the event enhanced Prayagraj's profits in terms of amenities and connectivity, and is expected to attract investments and sustain economic growth in future.

The Kumbh Mela has significantly upgraded the profile of the city. Once Prayagraj was known for its historical and religious importance but in the post-2010 era, it has gained national and international attention due to the scale, management and modernization associated with the hosting of the Kumbh Mela. The upgradation process includes:

- *Global Recognition*
- *Massive Government Investing for infrastructural development*
- *Establishment of permanent exhibition centers cultural parks, etc.*
- *Temporary and permanent jobs*
- *Improved Civic Amenities*
- *Technological Modernization*

Outcome and Discussion

- The global perspective was administrative crowd controls, sanitation and taxation.
- Religious and cultural continuity existed despite of colonial interventions,
- The mela was a site of political mobilization for freedom fighters in organizing anti-colonial movements.
- It also became the platform for social reform also.

- After Independence, one witnessed modernization of the event, government involvement in infrastructure, tourism, and branching of Kumbh as a global event.
- Impact of technology and media is evident in terms of digital outreach, security and infrastructure development.

The Kumbh Mela under the colonial rule witnessed spiritual devotion and underground political activities and in post-Independence India, the mela became a national project of tradition, strength and administrative capabilities. However, a comparative analysis has been depicted below.

Table 6:

[A] Nature and Purpose of Mela

Aspect	British Period	After Independence Period
Primary role	Religious and emerging political hub	Religious, cultural economic and diplomatic event
Religious Role	Stress on ritual bathing and spiritual merit	Maintained traditional rituals and also integrated National festivals and tourism
Political Significance	Convert platform for Nationalism	State supported event openly endorsed by the government for political outreach

[B] State Involvement and Governance

Aspect	British Period	After Independence Period
Government Role	Limited to maintain law and order	Full-fledged planning, funding and promotional role
Surveillance VS Support	CID monitored activities fearing rebellion	Governments investment in infrastructure, crowd control, health and security

[C] Infrastructure and Organization

Aspect	British Period	After Independence Period
Facilities	Basic sanitation, temporary shelters and limited health services	High tech amenities
Scale and Management	Largely unplanned	Massive planning

[D] Cultural and Social-Political Role

Aspect	British Period	After Independence Period
Cultural Identity	Platform to resist colonial cultural hegemony	Used to export Indian soft power
Nationalism	Convert nationalist messaging through religious symbolism	Open celebration of cultural nationalism

[E] Global Visibility and Tourism

Aspect	British Period	After Independence Period
Foreign Recognition	Minimal mostly covered in colonial reports	UNESCO recognition International tourism media coverage
Tourism	Primarily local pilgrims	International pilgrims, spiritual tourists, researchers, etc.

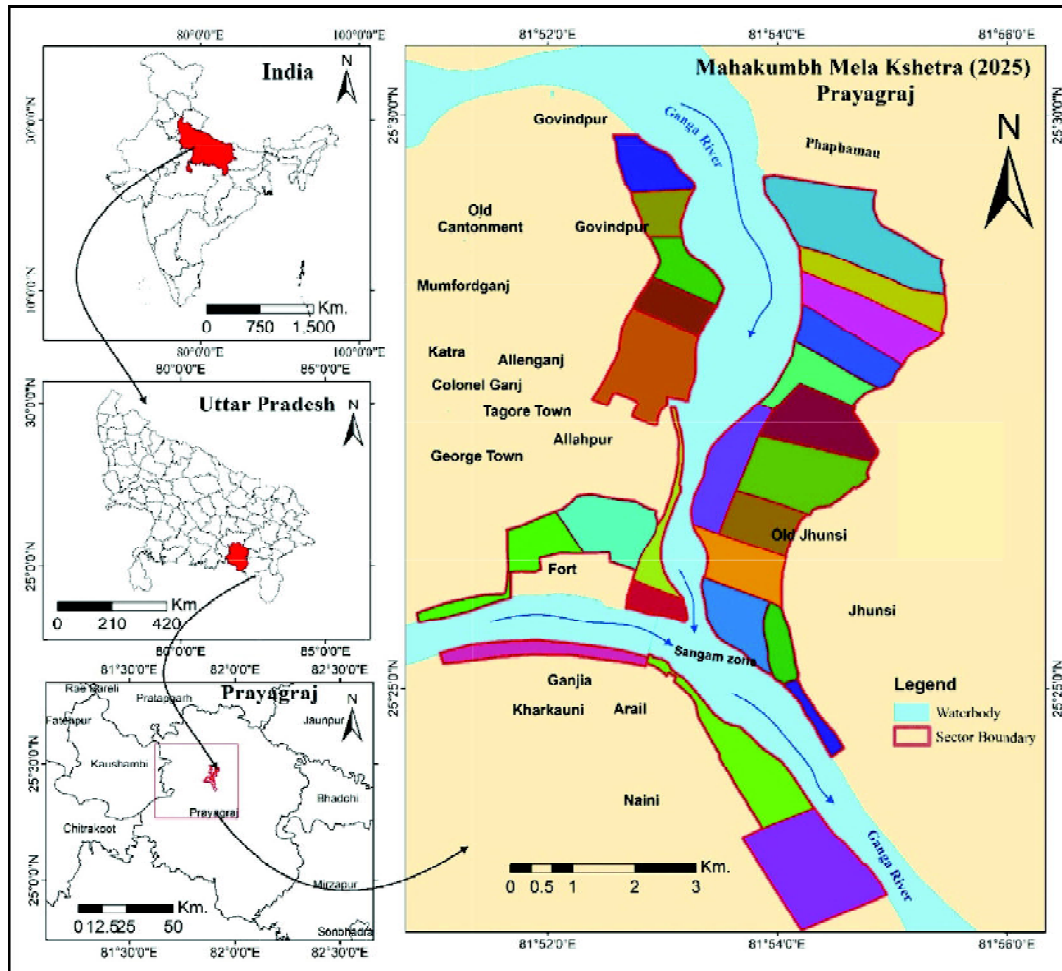


Fig. 3: Shows the Present Kumbh Mela Site of 2025 at Prayagraj

Thus, a comparative study of pre-colonial and post-colonial era Kumbh Mela celebration has witnessed a great change. In fact, the Britishers managed administratively and perceived mela as a business opportunities and religious conversion platform. After independence, the government took over this role and provided infrastructural facilities. Initially government had to face some unsaid hurdles, but with the passage of time, technology advancement, digitalization reshaped the melas' significance. In 2017, UNESCO recognized it as 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity'. During the post-Independence India, Kumbh Mela became a symbol of India's living heritage, fostering cultural pride social cohesion and economic opportunity rather than a purely religious congregation. Thus, it stands as a unique blend of tradition and *modernity, spirituality* and *governance*.

Conclusion

Thus, the Kumbh Mela continues to be a sacred event for millions of Hindus world-wide, as it seems as a platform for spiritual discoveries attracting saints, philosophers and global religious leaders. Political leaders often use this mela as an opportunity to connect with the masses. Government welfare schemes are also promoted during this event which includes health checkups, voter awareness and sanitation drives. The festival also contributes billions of rupees to the Indian economy, boost tourism, hospitality and local business. It also exemplifies how cultural religious events can drive economic development on an extra ordinary scale. Thus the event remains a testament to India's ability to blend tradition with modern economic opportunities. In fact, the transition from colonial-era suspicion to modern day celebration is clearly evident. It reflects broader changes with includes political freedom, cultural expression and global confidence.

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