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Allahabad Kumbh Mela

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Coordinates: 25.431°N 81.885°E﻿ / ﻿

The **Allahabad Kumbh Mela** is a *mela* held every 12 years at [Prayag](#) (Allahabad), [India](#). The exact date is determined according to [Hindu astrology](#): the Mela is held when [Jupiter](#) is in [Taurus](#) and the sun and the moon are in [Capricorn](#).^[1] The fair involves ritual bathing at [Triveni Sangam](#), the meeting points of three rivers: the [Ganga](#), the [Yamuna](#) and the mythical [Sarasvati](#). The latest Allahabad Kumbh Mela took place in 2013 and became the largest religious gathering in the world with almost 120 million visitors. The next one is scheduled for 2025, with an Ardh Kumbh Mela scheduled for 2019.

The Mela is one of the four fairs traditionally recognized as [Kumbh Melas](#). An annual fair, known as **Magh Mela**, has been held in Allahabad since ancient times (early centuries [CE](#)), and is mentioned in the [Puranas](#). However, the earliest mention of a Kumbh Mela at Allahabad occurs only after the mid-19th century. The Prayagwals (local [Brahmins](#) of Allahabad) are believed to have adopted the *kumbha* myth and the 12-year cycle of the [Haridwar Kumbh Mela](#) for their annual Magh Mela around this time. Since then, every 12 years, the Magh Mela turns into a Kumbh Mela, and six years after a Kumbh Mela, it turns into an **Ardh Kumbh** ("Half Kumbh") Mela.

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Allahabad Kumbh Mela

प्रयाग कुम्भ मेला



2013 Kumbh Mela

Status	active
Genre	Fair
Frequency	Every 12 years
Venue	Banks of Ganges
Location(s)	Allahabad (Prayag), Uttar Pradesh
Coordinates	25.431°N 81.885°E﻿ / ﻿
Country	India
Previous event	2013
Next event	2025
Participants	Akharas , pilgrims and

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Dates [edit]

The Kumbh Mela at Allahabad is held in the month of **Magh** when **Jupiter** is in **Aries**, and **Sun** and **Moon** are in **Capricorn**; or Jupiter is in **Taurus**, and Sun in Capricorn.^[2] However, at times this astrological combination (*Kumbh Yoga*) does not coincide with the month of Magh. In such a case, the mela is still held in Magh. For example, the 1989 Kumbh Mela should have begun in mid-March according to astrological calculations; however, it started in January.^[3]

There have been multiple incidences of Hindu astrologers disagreeing over the exact condition that ushers in a mela. As a result, fairs claimed to be Kumbh Melas have been at the same place in successive years. For example, 1941 and 1942 in Allahabad; and again, 1965 and 1966 in Allahabad.^[3]

History [edit]

According to **Hindu mythology**, **Vishnu** dropped drops of **amrita** (the drink of immortality) at four places, while transporting it in a *kumbha* (pot). These four places, including Prayag, are identified as the present-day sites of the Kumbh Mela. The river-side fair at Allahabad is centuries old, but its association with the *kumbha* myth and a 12-year old cycle dates back to the 19th century. The priests of Prayag borrowed these concepts from the **Haridwar Kumbh Mela** and applied it to their local Magh Mela, an annual celebration. The Magh Mela probably dates back to the early centuries CE, and has been mentioned in several **Puranas**.^[4]

Early records of the Magh Mela [edit]

The writings of the Chinese traveler **Xuanzang** (Hiuen Tsang) possibly contain a reference to an ancient version of this fair in 644 CE. Xuanzang mentions that Emperor **Shiladitya** (identified with **Harsha**) distributed his wealth among the public once every five years; his treasury was then replenished by his vassals. He describes such a ritual at a site located at the confluence of two rivers, in the kingdom of Po-lo-ye-kia (identified with Prayaga). He also mentions that many hundreds take a bath at the confluence of two rivers, to wash away

their sins.^[5] According to some scholars, this is earliest surviving historical account of the Kumbh Mela or its predecessor.^{[6][7][8]} However, Australian researcher Kama Maclean notes that the Xuanzang reference is about an event that happened every 5 years (and not 12 years), and might have been a Buddhist celebration (since Harsha was a Buddhist emperor).^[9]

A common conception, advocated by the [akharas](#), is that [Adi Shankara](#) started the Kumbh Mela at Prayag in the 8th century, to facilitate meeting of holy men from different regions. However, academics doubt the authenticity of this claim.^[10]

There is no record of a Kumbh Mela or a 12-year cycle at Allahabad before the 19th century. The *Prayag Mahatmya* section of the [Matsya Purana](#) states the exalted holiness of Prayag in the Magha month, but does not mention any "Kumbh Mela".^[11] Bengal's prominent spiritual leader [Chaitanya](#) visited Prayag in 1514, and participated in a bath on the [Makara Sankranti](#). The Bengali language source [Chaitanya Charitamrita](#) mentions that he visited a Magh Mela (and not a Kumbh Mela). The 16th century [Ramcharitmanas](#) of [Tulsidas](#) mentions the mela in Allahabad as an annual one, but does not contain any reference to a 12-year cycle. *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* (c. 1590s) of [Nizamuddin Ahmad](#) also mentions that the mela as annual. It states that after the [rabi](#) harvest, Hindus came to the Triveni Sangam in such large numbers that the jungles and the plains were not sufficient to hold them. *Ain-i-Akbari*, also from the 16th century, mentions that Prayag is especially holy in the month of [Magha](#). *Khulasat-ut-Tawarikh* (c. 1695-1699) uses the term "Kumbh Mela" to describe only the Mela at Haridwar; it only mentions the existence of an annual Mela at Allahabad. *Yadgar-i-Bahaduri* (1834 CE) similarly mentions that the mela at Prayag is held every winter in Magha, when the sun enters the Capricorn.^[3]

The [British East India Company](#) gained control of the Prayag area after the [Treaty of Allahabad](#) in 1765. The early British records contain detailed information about the annual Magh Mela at Allahabad, collected for tax-related and administrative purposes. But none of these records call the mela by the name "Kumbh", nor do they suggest any specific significance (such as larger crowds) to a Mela held every 12th year. In contrast, there are multiple references to the name "Kumbh Mela" as well as a 12-year cycle for the [Haridwar Kumbh Mela](#). There are several records of applications from Hindu princes seeking tax-free attendance at the Mela at Allahabad. Again, all of these describe the mela as an annual one. Bholanath Chunder (1869) of [Asiatic Society](#) also mentions "the especial great mela" at Allahabad as an annual one, held in January.^{[3][12]}

Some of the Company-era Magh Melas include:

1790

A letter from [Scindia](#) praises a Muslim named Mir Muhammad Amjad for rendering good service to Hindu pilgrims from the Deccan. Amjad was an officer of Asaf-ud-daula.^[13] [Asaf-ud-Daula](#), the [Nawab of Awadh](#), greatly reduced the pilgrim tax this year.^[14]

1801

The Company outsourced the tax collection at the mela to a native to escape the complexity of the tax system as well as the accusations of profiting from the non-Christian practices.^[3]

1806

The Company took over the pilgrim tax collection, and imposed a tax of ₹ 1 for anyone who wanted to bathe at the Mela. Fanny Parkes wrote that the tax was severe: in those days 1 rupee was enough to keep a man "in comfort for one month".^[15]

1808

The Company announced waiving of pilgrim taxes for native soldiers wishing to bathe at Allahabad. This move was intended at strengthening their loyalty to the British government.^[16]

1833

Bishunath Singh, the prince of Rewa, refused to pay tax on the grounds that he did not take a bath. However, the local British Collector sent Rewa a tax bill of ₹ 5,490 (a hefty amount in those days), on the basis that he had employed Prayagwals, and people in his retinue had their heads tonsured.^[17]

1836

The Raja of Rewa requested the British to grant an tax exemption for his 5000-strong retinue. The British agreed to grant an exemption only for 1000 people. An angry Raja abandoned his trip to Allahabad.^[17]

1840

The British abolished the pilgrim taxes as "a measure calculated to augment the popularity of Government... in these disaffected times".^[16]

A huge number of people attended the Magh Mela that year. A stampede occurred, in which 2 people were killed and another 2 were injured.^[18]

Like the Haridwar mela, the Prayag mela also had a mercantile component, but on a far smaller scale. European traveler Charles James C. Davidson visited the fair twice, and described it in his book *Diary of Travels and Adventures in Upper India* (1843). According to him, the wares put up for sale at the mela were low-value items "usually found in all Indian fairs".^[19]

Transformation of the Magh Mela into Kumbh Mela [\[edit \]](#)

It is difficult to determine the exact year in which the Magh Mela was first celebrated as a Kumbh Mela. The 1870 fair at Allahabad is the earliest fair that is described as a "Kumbh Mela" by contemporary sources. The previous Kumbh Mela would have been scheduled in 1858; but that year, no fair was held in Allahabad because of disturbances resulting from the 1857 uprising. Before that, a Kumbh Mela

would have been held in 1846, but there are no records to suggest this. In 1874, G. H. M. Ricketts — the Commissioner of Allahabad — wrote that the fair became more sacred every seventh year, and attracted a larger number of pilgrims and merchants. Beyond this, he wrote, the administration had little knowledge of the factors that resulted in increased or decreased attendance at the fair in a given year.^[3]

The earliest reference to a Kumbh Mela at Allahabad is from a British report of 1868. In this report, G. H. M. Ricketts (then the Magistrate of Allahabad) discusses the need for sanitation controls at the "Coomb fair" (Kumbh Mela) to be held in 1870. He also mentions that he had witnessed huge crowd at an "Ad Coomb" (Ardh Kumbh) four years earlier. In his report on the 1870 Magh Mela, the Commissioner of Allahabad J. C. Robertson also stated that this year's fair was a "Koombh". This report is also the earliest extant source that mentions a [procession](#) of sadhus at Allahabad; this procession occurs only during a Kumbh Mela, and not during a Magh Mela.^[3]

Historian Kama Maclean hypothesizes that the 1870 Mela was the first fair at Allahabad to be called a "Kumbh Mela". Historically, the Magh Mela has been an important source of income for the Prayagwal Brahmins of Allahabad. The British attempts to profit from the Mela brought the Company into direct conflict with the Prayagwals. Even after the Company abolished the pilgrim tax in 1840, it continued to levy taxes on traders and service providers (such as barbers) at the Mela. Besides, the Prayagwals disliked the presence of [Christian missionaries](#) at the Mela. Before the outbreak of the 1857 uprising at Allahabad, they had been contributing to the unrest in Allahabad by spreading propaganda that the British aimed to convert Indians to Christianity. In June 1857, when soldiers of the Sixth Native Infantry mutined, the Prayagwals joined them. They destroyed local churches and the mission press. When [General Neill](#) entered Allahabad, he attacked Prayagwal settlements; several Prayagwals were hanged, and many others were forced to flee the city. After the rebellion was crushed, the British government confiscated their lands. Under these turbulent circumstances, no fair was held at Allahabad in 1858. The Prayagwals, in their bid to revive the importance of their *tirtha* and attract more pilgrims, could have adapted the "Kumbh" concept from Haridwar and applied it to their own Mela. Thus, the first known Kumbh Mela was held at Allahabad 12 years later, in 1870.^[3]

British Raj [\[edit \]](#)

Mid-19th century onwards, the expanding road and [railway](#) networks helped increased the attendance at the Mela.^[3] Many newly prosperous villagers started attending the Mela a status symbol, and documented their claimed lineages in the registers of the Prayagwals. Many also documented their land ownership claims in these registers, so that these could be used in court cases, in case of any disputes.^[20]

Ardha Kumbh Mela, 1888

A Christian missionary asked the government not to get involved in organization of Kumbh Mela as it made them complicit in idolatry. However, the Magistrate of Allahabad refused to oblige, arguing that the British involvement was necessary to keep the militarized Sadhus under control.^[16]

Prayag Samachar, a newsletter, blamed Muslims for lighting a fire at the mela.^[13]

District Magistrate Porter tried to ban nudity, arguing that no Hindu scriptures authorized it. He was supported by the Commissioner of Allahabad, but Lieutenant Governor Auckland Colvin rejected the idea. Colvin, a former Magistrate of Allahabad, argued that there was no need to interfere in a Hindu ceremony which only the Hindus needed to attend.^[21]

Kumbh Mela, 1894

According to [Paramahansa Yogananda](#) in his work the *Autobiography of a Yogi*, it was during the Kumbh Mela in January 1894 at Prayag that his Guru [Sri Yukteswar](#) met [Mahavatar Babaji](#) for the first time.^[22]

Kumbh Mela, 1906

In 1905, a group of prayagwals ceased eating at a charitable feast due to presence of a Muslim police officer. *Prayag Samachar*, which frequently voiced anti-Muslim sentiments, urged the government to ban Muslim police from the area. The British officials believed that Muslim officers were more effective in controlling the mela, because of their indifference to holy men and superstitions found at the festival.^[13]

A clash between the Naga Sadhus occurred at the 1906 Mela. The police ordered a cavalry charge to break up the conflict.^[23]

Kumbh Mela, 1942

In 1941, the Government banned sale of tickets intending to travel to Allahabad during 4 January - 4 February 1942. Due to Japan's entry into the [World War II](#), the Government wanted to keep the number of attendees low. There were rumours that Japan was going to bomb Allahabad.^[24]

Also, in 1941, Daraganj-based Mahanirvani Akhara asked the Government to ban the presence of non-Hindus (Muslim police and Christian missionaries) at the mela. The Akhara also expressed displeasure with granting of official licenses to "gambling carnivals" at the mela.^[13]

Independent India [\[edit \]](#)

Kumbh Mela, 1954

Around 800 people were killed in the [1954 Kumbh Mela stampede](#) on 3 February 1954. Around 5 million pilgrims had visited the festival that year.^[25]

Ardh Kumbh Mela, 2007

More than 70 million people visited Ardh Kumbh Mela at Prayag during a 45-day period.^[26]^[dubious – discuss]

Kumbh Mela, 2013

An estimated 120 million people visited Maha Kumbh Mela in 2013 in Allahabad over a two-month period,^[27]^[28] including over 30 million on a single day, on 10 February 2013 (the day of Mauni Amavasya).^[29]^[30]^[dubious – discuss]

Ardh Kumbh Mela, 2019

Around ₹2,500 crore will be allotted by the state government for the Ardh Kumbh 2019, over two times more than it had spent on the last Kumbh held in 2013. About 199 projects of 16 government departments are underway under four phases which includes a six-lane bridge over the Ganges and a four-lane railway over-bridge worth ₹275. The Public Works Department has to execute projects worth ₹430 crore including building an inner ring road in the city. ₹210 crore would be spent on safe drinking water facilities and ₹60 crore to electrify the Kumbh area. Focus is also laid on solid waste management to ensure that Ganga water is not contaminated and putting up LED lights.^[31] Moreover, widening and beatification of 18 roads and 25 road crossings is being done with the deadline of October 2017.^[32]



Procession of sadhus at the 2001 Kumbh Mela ↗

Stampedes [edit]

Several stampedes have occurred at the Allahabad Kumbh Mela, in 1840, 1906, 1954, 1986 and 2013. The deadliest of these was the 1954 stampede, which left 800 people dead.^[33]

See also [edit]

- 1954 Kumbh Mela stampede
- 2013 Kumbh Mela stampede
- 2019 Allahabad Ardh Kumbh Mela

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External links [edit]

- [Official website](#)^[↗]
- [Everything You Need To Know About Allahabad Kumbh Mela 2019](#)^[↗]



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