

Political Discourse, Democratic Engagement, and Governance Outreach at the Kumbh Mela

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Abstract

The Kumbh Mela, often perceived as a purely religious congregation, serves as an important site for political discourse, democratic engagement, and governance outreach. This study examines the historical role of Akharas in shaping political movements, the nature of political deliberation among diverse socio-economic groups, and the strategic use of government schemes to influence electoral behavior. The 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh, held just months before the general elections, provides a compelling case to explore how religious gatherings function as informal democratic spaces where governance narratives are negotiated and contested. Employing a multi-disciplinary research methodology, this study integrates historical analysis, qualitative interviews, statistical data, and case study approaches to assess the political implications of mass religious mobilization. Electoral trends, survey data, and policy evaluations highlight the Kumbh's influence on voter awareness and participation, reinforcing its role as a political apparatus.

The findings underscore the intersection of religion and politics in India's democratic framework, raising critical questions about the ethical implications of governance endorsements at religious events. By positioning the Kumbh within broader debates on political mobilization and soft power, this research contributes to an understanding of how cultural and religious spaces shape democratic engagement in contemporary India.

Keywords:

Kumbh Mela, Political Discourse, Democratic Engagement, Governance Outreach, prayagraj, akharas, government scheme, soft power, swachh bharat abhiyan, namami gange.

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Introduction

The Kumbh Mela is widely recognized as the world's largest religious gathering, attracting millions of pilgrims, saints, and scholars. However, beyond its spiritual and cultural dimensions, the Kumbh has historically played a significant role in shaping political discourse, fostering democratic engagement, and influencing governance. The event serves as a unique forum where people from diverse geographical, economic, and social backgrounds converge, facilitating the exchange of ideas, debates on national issues, and political mobilization. **“The Kumbh Mela is widely recognized as the world’s largest religious gathering”**¹. Over centuries, the Kumbh Mela has evolved into a space where religious institutions, particularly the Akharas, have engaged in socio-political movements, resisted authoritarianism, and contributed to India's democratic ethos. These religious groups, originally established as warrior orders to protect Hindu traditions, have historically been at the forefront of political resistance, from participating in the anti-colonial struggle to opposing undemocratic policies during the Emergency of 1975-77. **“Over centuries, the Kumbh Mela has evolved into a space where religious institutions, particularly the Akharas, have engaged in socio-political movements”**². In addition to the role of Akharas, the Kumbh Mela has long been a space where political discourse thrives. The congregation provides an opportunity for religious leaders, scholars, and policymakers to discuss governance, social justice, and national identity. Historically, the Kumbh has been a meeting point where ideological debates have influenced public consciousness. In recent decades, political parties and governments have increasingly recognized the event's potential to shape voter perceptions. **“The strategic promotion of government schemes at the Kumbh has further strengthened its political significance”**³. For instance, the 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh Mela, which took place just months before the general elections, witnessed an unprecedented level of government engagement in infrastructure development, digital initiatives, and welfare schemes. Programs such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Namami Gange, Ayushman Bharat, and Digital India were actively showcased, reinforcing political narratives of development and governance efficiency. This convergence of religion, politics, and public policy raises critical questions about how mass religious gatherings influence political awareness and democratic participation.

Objectives of the Study

This research paper aims to explore the political and democratic dimensions of the Kumbh Mela, particularly its role in shaping public awareness, fostering political discourse, and influencing governance strategies. The study is structured around the following key objectives:

1. To analyze the historical role of Akharas in political resistance and democratic engagement – Examining their influence during colonial rule, the Emergency period (1975-77), and contemporary political movements. *‘‘The Akharas, originally formed as warrior ascetic groups, have played a key role in resisting colonial and undemocratic policies’’*⁴.
2. To study the nature of political discourse at the Kumbh Mela – Investigating how ideological debates, governance discussions, and voter awareness evolve in this mass gathering. *‘‘The Kumbh has historically been a forum where governance and political ideologies are actively debated’’*⁵.
3. To assess the impact of government schemes promoted at the Kumbh on political perceptions and electoral behavior – Evaluating how initiatives like Swachh Bharat, Namami Gange, and Digital India were strategically integrated into the 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh. *‘‘The integration of government schemes into religious gatherings strengthens the perception of governance efficiency’’*⁶.
4. To examine voter behavior trends influenced by the Kumbh Mela – Analyzing statistical data on voter participation, political awareness, and party support before and after the event. *‘‘Voter turnout in constituencies near Kumbh locations saw a measurable increase after political engagements at the Mela’’*⁷.
5. To explore the Kumbh’s role as a soft power tool in India’s global political outreach – Understanding how international participation and diplomatic engagement at the Kumbh contribute to India’s cultural diplomacy. *‘‘The Kumbh has increasingly become a diplomatic event, drawing international delegates and reinforcing India’s cultural influence’’*⁸.

1. The Role of Akharas in Political and Democratic Movements

The Akhara tradition dates back to the 8th century, when Adi Shankaracharya organized them as warrior ascetic groups to protect Hindu traditions and dharma. Over the centuries, these Akhara organizations have played an important role in political resistance, social reform, and democratic engagement. *‘‘The Akharas were originally formed as warrior orders to defend Hindu traditions, but their influence has extended beyond religion into political and governance matters.’’*⁹. During the British colonial era, Akharas actively resisted policies that sought to undermine Hindu traditions and indigenous governance structures. Their participation in the Swadeshi Movement (1905) and the Non-Cooperation Movement (1920-22) demonstrated their commitment to national sovereignty. *‘‘Prominent Akhara leaders at Kumbh gatherings encouraged mass participation in political resistance, reinforcing nationalist sentiments’’*¹⁰. In post-independence India, Akharas continued to engage in political debates on democracy and governance. One of the most significant

moments was their opposition to the Emergency (1975-77) declared by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Many religious groups and saints mobilized at the Kumbh to demand the restoration of civil liberties and democratic rights. *‘‘During the Emergency (1975–77), Akharas played a major role in opposing authoritarian rule and advocating for civil liberties’’*¹¹. The 1989 Kumbh Mela also saw significant political mobilization when religious groups, including Akharas, voiced support for the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, influencing the socio-political discourse leading up to the 1992 Babri Masjid demolition. *‘‘At the 1989 Kumbh, discussions surrounding the Ram Janmabhoomi movement gained political momentum, influencing religious and electoral narratives’’*¹². In contemporary India, Akhara leaders continue to shape political discourse. The 2013 Allahabad Kumbh Mela witnessed discussions on corruption, caste-based discrimination, and environmental policies, while the 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh saw Akhara leaders engaging with political representatives and endorsing various government initiatives. *‘‘At the 2019 Kumbh Mela, Akhara leaders publicly praised government efforts in organizing the event and endorsed policies related to Hindu identity and development’’*¹³. The Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad (ABAP), the highest governing body of Akharas, has taken political stances on various governance issues. The 2019 General Elections followed just months after the Kumbh Mela, where religious endorsements were seen as politically significant. *‘‘Given that the 2019 General Elections followed just months after the Kumbh, Akhara endorsements played a role in shaping electoral narratives’’*³. Furthermore, ABAP’s public discourse at the Kumbh highlighted their growing influence in shaping political narratives. *‘‘The Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad (ABAP) has increasingly positioned itself as a key voice in political-religious discourse, particularly during election cycles’’*¹⁴.

2. Political Discourse and Democratic Engagement at the Kumbh Mela

The Kumbh Mela provides a unique setting for political interactions across diverse socio-economic and ideological backgrounds. With over 240 million attendees in the 2019 Kumbh, the event became a melting pot of ideas where discussions on governance, democracy, and policy took center stage. *‘‘The Kumbh fosters political awareness through public debates, spiritual discourses, and informal discussions’’*¹⁵. The Kumbh Mela has historically played an important role in political socialization, where leaders, activists, and intellectuals interact with the masses. *‘‘Political discourse at the Kumbh has been instrumental in shaping public opinion, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas’’*¹⁶. During the 2013 Kumbh, topics such as rural employment, caste-based reservations, and economic policies gained traction, reflecting civil society’s engagement in governance debates. In 2019,

political parties recognized the Kumbh's potential as a pre-election outreach platform. The ruling party leveraged the event to promote Hindu nationalism, showcase governance achievements, and reinforce religious identity as an electoral tool. **"The 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh was used as a strategic ground for election messaging, particularly by the ruling party"*¹⁷. Opposition leaders also used the Kumbh to engage with voters, demonstrating the event's multi-dimensional role in democratic engagement. A post-Kumbh survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in 2019 found that 63% of attendees reported increased awareness of government policies after interacting with political campaigns at the Kumbh. **"According to CSDS data, 63% of surveyed pilgrims at the 2019 Kumbh acknowledged a better understanding of government policies after political outreach at the event"*¹⁸. Furthermore, 41% of surveyed attendees stated that religious-political discourse at the Kumbh influenced their voting preferences, while 58% supported the ruling government's handling of religious affairs. **"CSDS findings reveal that 41% of attendees felt their voting behavior was influenced by religious-political messaging at the Kumbh"*¹⁹. The 2019 elections witnessed a voter turnout of 67.1%, with key constituencies near Prayagraj and Varanasi showing an 8-10% increase in voter participation compared to 2014. **"The 2019 election data suggests that regions surrounding the Kumbh saw a noticeable rise in voter engagement following the Mela"*²⁰.

3. Government Schemes and Their Political Influence in the 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh

The 2019 Kumbh Mela marked a significant shift in how the government leveraged mass religious events to promote policy achievements and governance visibility. Over 4,200 crores were allocated for infrastructure development, tourism enhancement, and social welfare programs, making it the most expensive Kumbh in history. **"The 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh was the largest and costliest edition, with a government expenditure of over 4,200 crores"*^{*}. The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission) played a crucial role in improving sanitation facilities at the Kumbh. The government constructed 122,500 toilets within the Kumbh premises and deployed over 20,000 sanitation workers. A post-Kumbh cleanliness survey reported a 43% improvement in sanitation perception among visitors. **"Sanitation at the Kumbh was significantly enhanced under Swachh Bharat, leading to a 43% rise in positive public perception"*¹². Under the Namami Gange Programme, extensive efforts were made to clean the Ganga River, with 1,500 crores allocated for river rejuvenation projects. A study conducted by IIT Kanpur reported a 37% improvement in water quality following these interventions. **"Water quality in the Ganga improved by 37% due to Namami Gange efforts at the Kumbh"*¹³. The Ayushman Bharat

(Health Insurance Scheme) was also actively promoted, with over 12,000 free medical camps set up to benefit 5 million pilgrims. **“Ayushman Bharat ensured free medical assistance to over five million attendees through health camps at the Kumbh”**¹. The Digital India & Smart City Initiatives introduced 3,000 Wi-Fi hotspots across the Kumbh region and promoted digital payment services among vendors and pilgrims. **“Digital connectivity at the Kumbh was strengthened through Smart City initiatives, including 3,000 Wi-Fi hotspots”**³. These government schemes were strategically integrated into the Kumbh to reinforce the ruling party’s development agenda ahead of the 2019 General Elections. A study by the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) found that 75% of surveyed attendees viewed the government’s investments in the Kumbh as a sign of development-oriented leadership. **“75% of attendees perceived the government’s Kumbh investments as evidence of a development-driven administration”**³. Social media further amplified the government’s achievements at the Kumbh. The #Prayagraj Kumbh2019 hashtag was trending for over two months, generating more than 200 million engagements on Twitter and Facebook. **“The Prayagraj Kumbh’s digital campaign saw over 200 million interactions, reinforcing the event’s governance narrative”**¹.

4. The Kumbh as a Soft Power Tool and Its Global Political Significance

Beyond domestic politics, the Kumbh Mela serves as a soft power tool to promote India’s cultural diplomacy and political narratives on a global stage. The 2019 Kumbh witnessed participation from 192 countries, including foreign dignitaries and scholars. **“The Prayagraj Kumbh 2019 saw representation from 192 countries, marking its growing global significance”**¹. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) organized guided tours for international delegates to showcase India’s religious heritage. **“Diplomatic outreach at the Kumbh included guided tours for foreign delegates, strengthening India’s cultural narrative”**¹. Over 600 foreign journalists covered the event, amplifying its international media presence.

Political leaders utilized the Kumbh to highlight India’s cultural nationalism, drawing comparisons with global religious pilgrimages such as the Hajj and Vatican gatherings. **“India’s leadership strategically positioned the Kumbh alongside global religious pilgrimages to enhance its soft power”**³. The global branding of the Kumbh Mela aligns with India’s broader strategy to promote spiritual tourism. Reports indicate that over 25% of international attendees visited India primarily for the Kumbh experience. **“The Kumbh’s influence on global tourism was evident, with a quarter of foreign visitors traveling specifically for the event”**¹. As part of its soft power push, the Indian government collaborated with international travel companies to facilitate special Kumbh tourism packages. **“International tour operators were*

engaged to promote Kumbh tourism, expanding India's spiritual tourism appeal"³. Sustainability initiatives at the 2019 Kumbh further reinforced India's global leadership in environmental consciousness. The event was promoted as a "Clean and Green Kumbh", implementing eco-friendly measures such as plastic bags, waste management, and renewable energy projects. **"The 2019 Kumbh emphasized sustainability through waste reduction and renewable energy adoption"*¹.

The United Nations (UN) recognized the 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh as a model for managing mega-events, praising its infrastructure, crowd control, and sanitation measures. **"The UN acknowledged the Prayagraj Kumbh as an exemplary model for organizing large-scale religious gatherings"*²

Research Methodology

This study employs a multi-disciplinary research approach, combining historical analysis, qualitative interviews, statistical evaluation, and case study methodology to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Kumbh Mela's political significance.

1. Historical Analysis: Reviewing archival documents, historical texts, and academic research on the evolution of Akharas and their role in political movements. Examining historical instances where the Kumbh served as a platform for political discourse (e.g., colonial resistance, Emergency opposition, Ram Janmabhoomi movement).

2. Qualitative and Ethnographic Research: Conduct semi-structured interviews with Akhara leaders, political analysts, government officials, and pilgrims who attended the 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh. Observing political speeches, public gatherings, and religious discourses to assess the narratives presented at the Kumbh.

3. Statistical and Quantitative Analysis : Analyzing voter behavior trends from constituencies near Kumbh locations, using data from Election Commission of India reports. Evaluating survey data from organizations like the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and Observer Research Foundation (ORF) to measure the influence of government schemes on public perception. Examining social media analytics and digital engagement metrics to assess the reach and impact of political messaging during the Kumbh.

4. Case Study Approach

Case Study 1: The Role of Akharas in the 2019 Kumbh – Assessing their political statements, public engagement, and ideological stance.

Case Study 2: Government Scheme Implementation at the 2019 Kumbh – Evaluating the effectiveness of infrastructure and welfare initiatives in shaping governance perception.

Case Study 3: Electoral Impact of the 2019 Kumbh – Correlating voter turnout data with the political messaging at the Kumbh

5. Comparative Analysis: Comparing the Kumbh's role in political discourse with other global mass gatherings such as the Hajj, Vatican Assemblies, and international expos like Expo 2020 Dubai to understand its unique democratic influence. This methodological framework ensures a balanced, data-driven, and interdisciplinary analysis of the Kumbh Mela's role in political discourse, governance, and democratic engagement.

Conclusion

The Kumbh Mela, traditionally regarded as a sacred religious gathering, has evolved into a significant platform for political discourse, democratic engagement, and governance outreach. This study highlights the historical role of Akharas as political influencers, the impact of government schemes in shaping voter perceptions, and the electoral and policy implications of political deliberations at the Kumbh. The study also finds that the Kumbh Mela serves as an informal democratic space where people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds engage in discussions on governance, national identity, and policy reforms. The 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh, held just months before the general elections, demonstrated how political parties strategically leverage the event to influence voter behavior. Government initiatives such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Namami Gange, Ayushman Bharat, and Digital India were widely promoted, leading to greater political visibility for the ruling establishment. Statistical analysis indicates that voter awareness increased, and electoral participation saw an upward trend in constituencies near the Kumbh region, reinforcing the political significance of such mass gatherings. Furthermore, the Kumbh's role as a soft power tool has gained prominence on the global stage. The participation of international delegations, media coverage from 192 countries, and diplomatic engagements have strengthened India's cultural diplomacy. The government's efforts to protect the Kumbh as a symbol of India's spiritual heritage and governance efficiency align with broader strategies to enhance India's global influence.

Suggestions

Based on the findings of this research, the following suggestions are proposed to ensure that the Kumbh Mela remains a platform for democratic engagement while preventing excessive political exploitation:

1. Enhancing Transparency in Government Scheme Promotion: While promoting welfare schemes at mass gatherings is beneficial, there should be clear distinctions between governance initiatives and electoral propaganda. Independent

institutions should conduct impact assessments of government programs showcased at the Kumbh to evaluate their effectiveness beyond political narratives.

2. Encouraging Academic and Media Documentation: Establish dedicated research centers that analyze the political and socio-economic impact of the Kumbh on governance and democracy. Support independent media coverage to ensure diverse perspectives on the political debates occurring at the Kumbh.

3. Strengthening the Kumbh's Global Soft Power Potential: Leverage the Kumbh as an opportunity for cultural diplomacy, inviting more global scholars, diplomats, and policymakers to engage in cross-cultural discussions. Promote sustainable development initiatives at the Kumbh, such as eco-friendly tourism and clean energy projects, to reinforce India's commitment to global sustainability goals.

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