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THE KUMBHA MELA : A FESTIVAL OF RENEWAL

Introduction

Religious festivals play a central role within the life of the religious traditions of humankind. From the little festivals that are part of family practice to the larger festivals of the whole tradition, humankind across the planet has gathered to celebrate in festivals the meeting of divine and human life, or what Mircea Eliade has called "the manifestation of the sacred."¹ Religious festivals include a seemingly bewildering array of practices, ritual gestures and symbolic actions which become more transparent as one grasps the sacred morphology of the festival in question. Likewise, there is seemingly no limit to the diversity of transcendent purposes that can occupy the heart of festivals. Adherents of different traditions have gathered at special places and times throughout their long history to celebrate, for example, the renewal of creation in festivals of the new year; to reenact and relive the dramatic events that are foundational to a tradition or part of its mythology; to give thanks for the harvest and the gifts of nature; to mark the passages of life from one stage to another. Religious festivals have social, archetypal, and cosmic dimensions that are all combined in remarkably compressed gestures and actions or elaborately dramatized in extended performative acts.

Yet religious festivals have not received the attention deserved from those engaged in the study of religion. In the West one reason for this tendency has been the focus on belief as the keynote of religious life, a fact that betrays the impact on the study of religion of Protestant culture with its characteristic emphasis on belief over ritual. One consequence of that tendency is that the ritual, performative, and symbolic actions of the religious traditions of humankind have only recently begun to receive their due in the study of religion. It is noteworthy, for example, that the *Journal of Ritual Studies* in North America began publication only in

1: See Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1963, pp. 1ff.

1987.² However, even the most cursory survey of the religious life of humankind makes clear the prevalence and persistence of religious festivals. Many festivals are linked with pilgrimage as, for example, in the Islamic tradition and the pilgrimage to Mecca (Mekkah) or in the Festival at the Grand Shrine at Ise. John Blofeld reports that Buddhists used to travel for months, even years, to participate in the festivals held at the sacred mountain of Wu T'ai in Northern China.³ And we are also aware of the linking of pilgrimage to religious festivals in the healing centres of Lourdes and Fatima in the Christian tradition and the pilgrimages to the Lha-moi La-tso Lake south of Lhasa in Tibet.

The discipline of the study of religion is greatly in need of more attention to the phenomenon of religious festivals. Such study must be rooted in the sympathetic description of these events, their structure and meaning. This is a modest attempt in that direction.

The Kumbha Mela: A Methodological Caveat

One of the most remarkable religious festivals of humankind is the Hindu festival known as the Kumbha Mela. This great festival is held at Allahabad every twelve lunar years, at the juncture of the sacred rivers Ganges, Yamuna, and the invisible Saraswati. This is perhaps the largest religious festival held on our planet, if not simply the largest human gathering, yet the scholarly literature on the Kumbha Mela is scarce, almost non-existent. I went to the Kumbha Mela in 1989 at the invitation of Sri Shrivatsa Goswami, a member of a hereditary priestly family in the Caitanya Sect, that strand of the Hindu tradition that traces its origins to the 15th century Bengali, Caitanya, reviver of devotion to Lord Krishna. Shrivatsa Goswami lives with his family in Vrindaban, the heartland of Krishna devotion. For as long as the family can remember, they have been making the pilgrimage to Prayag (Allahabad since the sixteenth century) for the Kumbha Mela.

2. The *Journal of Ritual Studies* was founded in 1987 by a colleague at Wilfrid Laurier University here in Waterloo, Professor Ronald Grimes. It is available through the Department of Religion & Culture, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, N2L 3C5.

3. See John Blofeld, *The Wheel of Life*, Boston: Shambhala, 1988, pp. 114-155. Blofeld writes beautifully of the Festivals held at Wu T'ai, now only a memory since the destruction of the communities and monasteries at Wu T'ai after 1949.

It is important methodologically to understand something of my reasons for going to the Kumbha Mela since they may have an impact on what I saw and what I report here. My reasons for going to the festival were not wholly disinterested. They grew out of a longstanding interest in the dialogue between men and women of different faiths and the challenge to those involved in that dialogue that had been issued by Sri Goswami. He had reminded me in our conversations in India in 1986 that dialogue between men and women of different faiths could not be confined to the dialogue about beliefs; it had to include the other dimensions of one's tradition as well. It should even, Shrivatsa argued, include sharing in one another's religious rituals and festivals. I had agreed that this was an experiment worth pursuing. At the same time, I was simply fascinated, as a student of religion, with the opportunity to be at this festival and to see what I could see. Thus I went to the festival as, simultaneously, a student of religion and as a Christian involved in dialogue with men and women of other faiths.⁴ How that affected my perception, I must allow others to decide, but I will later offer my own comment on this issue.

What follows is not the full scale study the Kumbha Mela deserves, but a rather more modest contribution. These are some observations, notes, and reflections on this extraordinary event – the largest religious festival to take place on our planet. My notes and observations follow the chronology of the five days I spent at the Kumbha Mela. I have interwoven my observations, reactions, and questions with the perspectives on religious festivals raised in the introduction. The resulting genre is not, I trust, wholly undisciplined but neither does it pretend that what I saw is what everyone would see, since "seeing" is in part a function of "knowing" and "expectation" as well.

The Festival of the Pitcher : A Kumbha Mela Notebook

In the weeks prior to my departure, I had attempted to read everything I could find on the Kumbha Mela. I was surprised at how little

4. Some of these issues are discussed in my forthcoming study *Religion in a New Key: Three Lectures* which will be published in India in 1991.

there was to read.⁵ Aside from an occasional reference or brief account, I could find little. I had learned that the Kumbha Mela meant "The Festival of the Pitcher." Its name derives from the mythological story of the churning of the oceans, which appears in a number of different sources. But all agree that the churning resulted finally in the production of a pitcher of the nectar of immortality. In the version we find in the Bhagavad Purana, the churning of the oceans also brings forth a horse "radiantly white like the moon" (VIII.8.3) and an elephant with four tusks that "eclipsed the splendour and beauty of the snowy mountain, Kailasa" (VIII.8.4).⁶ But when the pitcher appeared, it created such a fuss, with everyone clambering for it, that, according to the Bhagavad Purana, it was seized by a divine messenger and returned to the heavens. However, before the Lord "flies away on Garuda," (VIII.10), Mohini, the Lord in a feminine form, is able to distribute, due to her beguiling ways, some of the nectar to the "gods" thus bestowing on them immortality (VIII.9). Enroute and as battle erupts, some drops spilled on the earth, according to one of the several versions of the story, and these sites became the places of the Festival. (There are other locations for the Kumbha Mela too, but the Allahabad site is pre-eminent.)

One of the spots where the nectar of immortality touched the earth is at the junction of the sacred rivers: Ganges, Yamuna, and Saraswati. It is here, outside Allahabad, that the Festival takes place every twelfth lunar year. The precise dates are determined by a certain astrological conjunction. The Festival lasts over a lunar month, and in 1989, the most auspicious day was February 6th, the day of a new moon.

I arrived in Allahabad on the third of February as the sun was setting. I was met by Venu Goswami, Shrivatsa's brother. With charac-

5. Typical is the single line one finds in Ninian Smart's *The World's Religions*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, p. 100. "We see India drawn together by great pilgrimages, at Banaras and at the vast Kumbha Mela fair at Prayag, where the rivers Yamuna and Ganges meet the invisible river Saraswati." An exception is the moving contemporary interpretation of the Festival found in Sehdev Kumar's *The Lotus in the Stone, An Allegory for Explorations in Dreams and Consciousness*, Concord, Ontario: Alpha & Omega Books, 1984, pp. 159-190. I had read it prior to going to India, for the Kumbha Mela but I had forgotten it. I reread it after my return and gained much from it.

6. The *Bhagavad Purana* is volumes seven through eleven in the Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology Series, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987 rpt. The quotations here are from volume IX and indicate the book and verse.

teristic good humour, Venu gave me an introduction to what lay ahead as we drove to the Kumbha Mela. This was essential, as I do not speak any of the Indian languages, and thus my communication with Festival participants was limited to those who spoke English. (There were enough of those to keep me occupied for many hours each day.) In the hour-long journey, we found ourselves increasingly in the midst of a human flood of humanity moving, in a variety of ways, towards the same destination. From Venu, I learned that the Festival would be closed to vehicle traffic for the coming four days as the Festival was reaching its high point, both in numbers and in terms of the auspicious moment. As we neared the camp, the road was choked with pilgrims on their way to the Kumbha Mela, their worldly goods balanced atop their heads as they resolutely made their way to the banks of the sacred rivers. We finally came out through the city walls only to be confronted by a vast network of street lights that stretched as far as we could see over the camped city. Venu informed me that the grounds covered a 20 square kilometer area, and at this hour it was shrouded in the smoke of camp fires but alive with the booming microphones and loudspeaker systems that would be a constant feature of my five days at the Kumbha Mela.

As we inched our way across one of the nine pontoon bridges that linked the Allahabad side of the river with the camp that spread out on the sandy flood plain beyond, we were engulfed in a human river of pilgrims entering the camp. Besides the occasional car there were also a few bicycle rickshaws trying to make their way. But the dominant mode of transportation was by foot. People of all ages jammed the bridges in what I was to discover over the next days was a seemingly endless flow of pilgrims into and out of the camp. Day or night over the next days, I would never see the bridges empty, and the flow began to subside only by the day we left. Everyone seemed to be carrying something on their heads, balanced in that remarkably graceful Indian way, as they made their way towards their destination. The sound/noise was overwhelming: a veritable cacophony of words, music, and mantras all vying with one another to be heard. Horns honked, whistles blew, bicycle bells clicked, and beneath it all the steady rustle of feet slapping the sand underneath. We finally arrived at the Gambhira Ashram, the camp of Jagadguru Srimanmadhvagaudesvaracharya Sri Purushottam Goswami, Shrivatsa and Venu's father, and the spiritual head of the Chaitanya Sect, a community of 30 to 40 million. The ashram was located

at the far outskirts of the camp, but the din of the Mela was heard there too.

As we entered the ashram, I was greeted by Shrivatsa with a graceful "Namaste" and shown to a tent, one of the ten in the ashram. We had arrived in the midst of the evening meal, so I quickly washed up and joined the others on the ground at the front of the camp. Seated on the sandy ground, with rice and dal served on the woven lotus leaf dishes and water served in clay cups, I was quickly drawn into the life of the camp. Across the flickering lights of the fires and some torches stuck into the sand, I was introduced to others, devotees and disciples of Purushottam who were staying in the ashram. Venu urged us to join him for a trip, by car, through the camp in order to get oriented. Given the darkness, that purpose was probably not fulfilled, but we did get a sense of the vastness of the camp. We made our way past the huge camps that belonged to different streams of Hindu tradition: Shivaite, Vishnuvite, Vedantist, Hare Krishna, etc. and the smaller camps that gathered around particular swamis, gurus, and holy men and women. It was, as Shrivatsa remarked later, "a spiritual supermarket, displaying all the goods and wares of Hinduism." We saw plays being enacted in some camps, heard discourses in others, and watched the swirl of it all until the scenes began to induce a sense of vertigo. We made our way to the sangam, the confluence of the rivers Ganga, Yamuna and the invisible Saraswati. Here, the millions would gather on the 6th of February for a bath, a "dip" in the sacred waters at the most auspicious moment. On the way back, I bought a shawl, as the evening was quite cool.

We drove along street-lit roads through the sand. And when we returned, I took leave of everyone and headed for bed. I had arrived at the Kumbha Mela.

February 5th : Day Two at the Kumbha Mela

I had quickly fallen asleep the night before, exhausted by the camp, the sounds, the continents I had crossed. But the next morning, I awoke shortly after five a.m., eagerly anticipating what lay ahead. In India, before, I had come to appreciate the early morning hours as the world seemed to rise up to meet the coming of the sun. So on this morning, I went out to greet the sun too. I was unsure of my surroundings, so I headed east, straight down the road that ran in front of our camp. I was

reluctant at that point to be unsure of where I was, so I just followed the street to the edge of the camp where I encountered some water, but obviously not the mighty Ganga, "the Mother," as the Indians refer to it. But even here, people were doing their morning ablutions. As I walked along, I was again in a crowd, not nearly so packed as on the bridge the evening before, but not nearly the empty streets that I know at this hour of the morning in Elmira, the small town in Southern Ontario where I live. The noise had been reduced several decibels, but it was not quiet. Occasionally, a flute being played somewhere would cut through the noise with its plaintive welcome to the new day. I also heard the blowing of a conch. The fiery red ball of the sun began to peek over the horizon, shedding its multicolored hues through the haze and smoke that hung over the camp. By the water, pilgrims went in and out, many with their lips moving in the rhythms of a silent mantra as the new day began. Some placed sticks of incense in the sand and it wafted across the stirring camp. As I sat by the water watching the rising sun and the increasing bustle around me, I found myself meditating on the wonder and beauty of it all. But my mind could not find words to understand what I was seeing and experiencing. I tried to just let that be and to simply be present to what was unfolding. A sharp but joyous laugh brought me out of my reverie and I turned to see several children running, engaged in some game, on the sands behind me. I turned to watch their game, and then slowly made my way back to the ashram.

By this time, the smoke from the morning fires was out in full force, and my eyes smarted as I drew my shawl across my nose trying to block out the smell of smoke. People, pilgrims, made their way along the sandy streets carrying their ever present jugs and cans as they made their way towards the river or back from it. Swaddled in cloth, some with Western suitcoats over their dhotis, they made their way to their various destinations, their minds seemingly fixed on something not immediately obvious, but palpably present. I began to realize more and more that people had come to participate in this Festival for reasons that I could not yet grasp. Knots of people gathered here and there around the tea shops that had been quickly constructed for the occasion; food was being bought, wood chopped, and an occasional camel or elephant made its way along the road. But it seemed that my obviously Western presence drew more attention than did the camel, as pilgrims turned to watch me as I passed.

Back at the Gambhira Ashram, I joined Shrivatsa and his wife, Sandhya, for a time of meditation in the temple area. Throughout the day, life in the ashram was punctuated by periods of worship as we all gathered on the blanket on the ground in front of the thatched temple. A group of musicians and singers played the drums, khol, harmonium, and cymbals as the hymns to Lord Krishna were sung. Later, I went out to explore the camp in the full light of day. This time I headed in the opposite direction and came to the river Ganga/Ganges, about fifteen minutes away. Here a constant stream of men, women and children entered the river, chanting and praying. Garlands of flowers were offered to the river along with tiny clay vessels of oil that were lit and placed in the river. As I was sitting on the banks of the river, a pilgrim came up to me and asked where I had come from. "Canada," I replied. I then asked him where he had come from. He told me that he had walked for fifteen days from his village in Assam, together with five others from his village, to be part of the Kumbha Mela. This encounter encapsulated for me the extent to which this was a popular religious festival, one that drew ordinary believers from villages far and near, from across India. I was beginning to see something of the devotion that motivated the pilgrims and had brought them to this place.

While the city of Allahabad traces itself back to the fifteenth century, the banks of the rivers Ganges and Yamuna had been the site of the Hindu city of Prayag for centuries before. There is the story of a Chinese visitor, Hsien Tsang, to India in the sixth century A.D. who wrote in his account that the Buddhist king of the area had fed crowds of 100,000 during the Kumbha Mela Festival. Obviously, the modern day pilgrims were part of an ancient stream of piety that reaches back to times that we cannot easily identify. Now the pilgrims gather to perform their acts of piety, to hear the discourses of different teachers and acharyas that gather for the event, and to watch the performances of time-honoured stories from the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the beloved tales of Krishna and other dieties. As I criss-crossed the camp, I was being drawn into this extraordinary event, watching the ceaseless flow of human beings, stopping to observe a sadhu seated before a fire with his trident, sign of Shiva, placed beside him, bemused by children gathered around a spigot washing some clothes and throwing water at one another, noting the colourful saris being dried while held by two human clotheslines, witnessing countless acts of puja (worship).

It is, of course, impossible to share the myriad events that passed before my eyes or the many thoughts they prompted. But the strongest impression this first full day created in me was a sense of the manifold forms of piety and devotion that had come together in this Festival. It was unlike anything I had ever witnessed before. I had a sense of the seemingly impossible tumble of movement, of sound, of motives, of energies beginning to create a pattern of expectation that focused on the coming day, February 6th. Or, at least, all that I witnessed seemed to reach beyond the people themselves to something that remained invisible while yet being palpably present.

February 6th : Day Three, The Day of Days

After considerable discussion of whether or not we, myself and others staying at the Gambhira Ashram, wanted to try to endure the crowds that would gather at the Sangam as the sun rose the following morning, we went to bed planning to rise at 4.00 a.m. to make our way. Most of those staying at the Gambhira Ashram had made their way with Sri Jagadguru Purushottam Goswami to the Ganga at dusk the previous day for their auspicious plunge into the river, a discourse, and the singing of hymns. According to Sri Purushottam, the auspicious day stretched from the afternoon of the 5th through the afternoon of the 6th. Thus their action was certainly consistent with Sri Purushottam's interpretation of the Festival. Nevertheless, some of us wanted to witness the events at the Sangam. And as we awoke, I could feel the buzz, a new level of intensity, that seemed to be spread over the whole camp. We had not walked for more than five minutes from our ashram at the edge of the camp when we found ourselves in crowds that were shoulder to shoulder as far as we could see. Everyone was on the way to the Sangam, the confluence of sacred rivers. The loudspeakers blared out the names of people who had been lost, and officials tried, relatively successfully, to keep the flow moving. Occasionally, a group of villagers, hands joined tightly to one another, attempted to cross the flowing crowd at an intersection. One could sense their concern not to be separated from one another, as the crowd flowed around them like rocks in a stream. Here a man carried his young son on his shoulders and a mother carried her daughter as we all moved towards the Sangam. It was dark, but street lights lit our way. I was grateful to be as tall as I am, for even in the midst of the crowd, I could always see my companions and what lay ahead. After more than an hour and a half of being carried along one of the many streets that ran

to the Sangam, we arrived. It was wall to wall people. A murmur of chant mixed with the ever-present loudspeakers to create a blanket of sound over the Sangam. The shores across the rivers were also filled with people, and long wooden boats plied back and forth carrying pilgrims out into the fast flowing waters. Along the banks, people could be seen in the soft light of pre-dawn taking their sacred dips.

Earlier, Sri Jagadguru Purushottam Goswami had shared with us a discourse on the Kumbha Mela in which he explained that the Festival was a *ritual of purification and renewal*. Through the centuries, believers had gathered on the banks of these sacred rivers to be renewed in their spiritual life by offering their puja to Mother Ganga and listening to the discourses of their teachers. He was opposed to the spectacle of carrying the leaders of various communities down to the waters for their dips, but deeply sensitive to the renewal that could come to those whose devotion was authentic. For him the Festival was a retreat, a time for self-examination and meditation, for reading the sacred writings, for performing acts of devotion and worship to Lord Krishna. I thus tried to see what was unfolding before me in this way: as a *ritual of renewal*. And it was possible to sense it as one watched the pilgrims make their way to the water's edge and enter a river that was, for them, more than a river. It was a living symbol of divine grace that flows and renews constantly those who enter its transforming waters. Many of the men were newly shaven – as an act of purification – and their heads glistened as they caught the first rays of the morning sun.

Then, off in the east, the bright ball of the sun inched up the horizon and a roar went up from the crowd: the human world rose up to greet the sun that spread its crimson rays on this new day. As the sun rose, one could feel the mounting energies. A rush of joy seemed to ripple through the surging crowds. And the sunrise was beautiful: that ball of flaming red rose through the dust and haze like a jewel to refract its light on all. It revealed a humanity that spread as far as I could see along the banks of the rivers and beyond. And, for a moment, the moving waters and the ebb and flow of the humanity gathered there seemed to dance with one another in perfect harmony as the sun rose over it all.

We managed to talk our way into a press tower from which we could watch the unfolding drama. Just after the sun rose, the naked sadhus came down to the Sangam, in a pathway marked by a wooden fence to

restrain the crowds, to make their morning ablutions. Covered only with the sacred ash, they made their way to the waters and then back. Next came the leaders of the many strands of Hindu religious life, each surrounded by their devotees and disciples. The parade was endless. But around these events were the pilgrims, nameless and numberless, making their ways to the waters, entering those waters, then returning to the banks and there changing their clothes, visiting with others, then making their way to those countless places they had come from. Had they been renewed? Cleansed? Freed from sin? Strengthened on their road to moksha or liberation? I could not judge; I could only wonder as I stood there transfixed by this sea of humanity in motion in response to promptings that could not be seen but could be felt. And what I felt was not easily transformed into words. So, I just stood and watched as the pilgrims, dressed in saris that ran the full range of the colours of the rainbow, and dhotis, and covered in shawls, passed before me. I had never seen so many people gathered in one place in my life, and I doubt I ever will again.

After several hours, we made our way back to the ashram on the opposite edge of the camp. All the way back, we moved against the flow of the crowd, but there were also signs of people moving in other directions as well. On some of the streets, the crowds were so thick and moving so relentlessly in a direction we did not want to go that we had to turn and find other routes. At one point, we ran into what was obviously part of the line-up still waiting to make its way into the central concourse that ran down the middle of the Sangam, for swamis and gurus and archaryas sat in splendor atop vehicles and the shoulders of disciples that bore them along. Yet, in the midst of all this, there was no sense of hurry, certainly none of panic, but just of persistent movement as the crowd surged on and on and on.

Back in the ashram, we met Shrivatsa who shared with us his reflections on the Kumbha Mela and its significance. I remember in particular two points that he made that seemed especially helpful for understanding the event that I found myself in the midst of. First, Shrivatsa argued that in Hinduism, "you transcend by being pulled into the mass; the way of transcendence is the way of immersion." Here, in the Kumbha Mela, one sees this principle at work: by immersion in humanity one attains to something divine. We had just come back from seeing this paradox

manifest. At the Sangam, Shrivatsa remarked, we saw "the whole of humanity, wall to wall humanity" which is "the image of Divinity . . . Surging humanity is a manifestation of the Divine."

Secondly, at the Kumbha Mela you witness, Shrivatsa continued, the "earthiness of Hinduism." Here, "everything is present." It is all being "merged into infinite consciousness," into a "vision that exceeds vision." The pilgrims, rich and poor, people from all parts of the country, fakirs, sadhus, non-believers, all partaking of the spectacle, every spiritual leader showing his or her wares, all the singing and shouting, the coming and going - yet in the midst of it all, something profound is occurring. But to get to it, one "needs to penetrate the outer form, the externals, and enter the holy of holies!" For that "inner spiritual realm" that "exceeds all categories" is its goal. But its way is through "all this." I cannot say that I fully grasped then - or even now - all that is spoken in his words, but they did seem to me to point in a fruitful direction for meditating on this event. They still do.

Later that day, more than a hundred sadhus, wandering holy men, appeared in our camp for a meal, as they had each day of the Festival. But today I began to see something that I had not noticed before as they squatted on the ground, sang their litany of thanksgiving before eating and ate. It was something of the paradox that Shrivatsa had pointed me towards. These men, clothed in a single piece of cloth, with their long hair, their wandering lives, were not rightly seen if one stayed on the surface. One had to look deeper. But how could one? Could one see the spiritual drama in a gesture? In their eyes? In the rhythms of their walk? I watched, but could I see? It was with this same sense that I returned again to the river, upstream from the Sangam, and watched again the pilgrims there performing their puja on the banks of "Mother Ganga." The river flowed by, flowers were cast on its endless currents, incense was stuck in the bank, pilgrims entered and dipped themselves the ceremonial three times, the ritual continued. It went on as it has for centuries. I found myself wondering if I was watching an eternal drama, one that would continue as long as humanity remains aware of its need for renewal, for purification, for the revival of the spirit. I wondered as I watched again as the streaming waters of the Ganga met the streaming masses of humanity in the wonderful dance where outer meets inner and becomes a living symbol of something more.

As the sun went down that evening, one had a sense that the moment had come and was now waning. The Festival would continue for another week, but one could sense that the energies had shifted and were now flowing outward. We had all met at the Sangam : the mighty rivers Ganga and Yamuna, the even mightier Saraswati, and those millions who had come to participate in the rendezvous. The sun had shed its light on all. But now thoughts and energies began to turn in other directions as the march began to return us to the places from which we had come.

February 7th : Day Four

Even though the most auspicious day of the Kumbha Mela had come and gone, the rhythms of the camp continued even though the energy had shifted. From dawn on, pilgrims made their way to and from the waters. Outside tents, children played while older men sat lost in meditation or repeating to themselves the words of sacred scripture. Crowds gathered at tea stalls and groups of women passed by singing bhajans, dressed in their colourful saris. Sadhu's joined the hawkers at busy corners, and on the main routes to the river, beggars lined the way. From the camps came the sounds of mantras repeated over and over again, the words of the discourses of countless teachers and swamis, the echoes of the drums and cymbals that led the devotees in song. And the still-flowing crowds across the pontoon bridges were now headed out rather than in.

After a morning spent trying to digest something of what I had witnessed over the previous days – not very successfully – I made my way into the city of Allahabad in the afternoon. Here I found myself caught in the exodus of the pilgrims from the Kumbha Mela. Again, many were in carts pulled by a water buffalo or oxen, some were in bicycle rickshaws, a few were in cars, but most were on foot. When I walked back into the Kumbha Mela late that evening, a street-lit tent city stretching out to the edges of darkness, I was aware that the tide had turned. The bridges, at that hour, were quite empty, the streets not as crowded, especially as I moved away from the center of the camp. Back at the Gambhira Ashram, I stretched out in my sleeping bag for our last night at the Kumbha Mela.

February 8th : Day Five

Exhausted by the excitement of the Kumbha Mela, I slept until 7.00 a.m. when I made my way to the river for my final farewells. This was my last day at the Festival, and I would be departing in the late morning. But I felt I wanted to be at the river one last time, to see once again the cycle of pilgrims coming to and from the river, performing their acts of worship, continuing the rhythms that mark this extraordinary event. Most of the questions that were with me at the beginning remain, but now I feel I have some sense of what it is all about, even though I continue to find it difficult to articulate. I can see that Mother Ganga is more than just another river. It is the living presence of the mystery of life's origins and continuities as it ceaselessly flows towards its destiny. It is moving to watch the reverence with which it is approached, entered, and acknowledged through time-honoured rituals. The river is, as it were, an endlessly flowing symbol of grace that renews as it cleanses, that transforms as it receives. For the pilgrim, it seems to have a power, presence, and a persona that is difficult for me to grasp, though I can glimpse it in their acts of devotion. And I find it very moving. There is even a moment when I feel caught up in the archetypal drama as the endless round of pilgrims meet and enter its endless flowing waters. But then it draws away. And so I am left as an uncertain witness to what I have seen and experienced over these days, trusting that the coming weeks and months will help to bring this extraordinary event into clearer focus.

As we pulled out of the camp and made our way across the pontoon bridge for the last time, we found ourselves caught up in that movement of pilgrims now returning to their homes and villages throughout India. Rickshaws, carts, cows, cars and people slowly inched their way along the narrow, twisting streets of Allahabad as the exodus from the Kumbha Mela flowed through the streets, onto the roads, and into the villages and cities of India.

The Festival and the Sacred

Earlier we recalled the approach to religious phenomenon that Mircea Eliade has outlined in his numerous books.⁷ For Eliade,

7. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, New York: Harper & Row, 1963, especially pp. 39-54, *Man and the Sacred*, New York: Harper & Row, 1974, pp. 77-115, and *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, New York: Harper & Row, 1965.

the task of the student of religion is to grasp something of the "manifestation of the sacred" that is present in religious life considered in terms of its own inherent structures. But as my notes and observations here indicate, it is often difficult to place oneself within the faith of others so that one might see the event as they see it, within their own terms. Frederick Streng, in his book *Understanding Religious Life*, argues that "the claim that a myth or ritual has power to transform life rests on the capacity of the myth or ritual to reveal the truth of life."⁸ How do we ever, as outsiders to a tradition, put ourselves in a position to make that judgment? I certainly do not know. But from the believers and devotees that I was able to talk to at the Kumbha Mela this was a common conviction that ran through the accounts they shared with me of how their lives had been affected, even transformed, through the Festival. And something of that spirit was, as it were, in the very ethos of this remarkable gathering.

What is more obvious is the connection of the Festival with the waters of the Ganga and Yamuna. Water has always had a primordial significance within the religious life of humankind. It is a multivalent symbol. It is, in the words of the Bhavisyottarapurana (31, 14)) "the source of all things and all existence." It is, at the same time, experienced as the source of all and *the renewer and purifier of all*. It is a living water. When this rich symbolism of water is combined with the symbolism of immersion in the water, then we are moving closer to a central feature of this Festival. Eliade remarks that:

... in water everything is "dissolved", every "form" is broken up, everything that has happened ceases to exist; nothing that was before remains after immersion in water... Immersion is the equivalent, at the human level, of death, and at the cosmic level, of the cataclysm which periodically dissolves the world... Breaking all forms, doing away with all the past, water possesses this power of purifying, of regenerating, of giving new birth; for what is immersed in it "dies", and, rising again from the water, is like a child without any sin or any past, able to... begin a new and real life."⁹

When seen in this light, the sacred "Mother Ganga" begins to disclose her place in the religious life of the Indian people, a place

8. Frederick Streng, *Understanding Religious Life*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1976, p. 87.

9. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns of Comparative Religion*, p. 194.

that is a challenge for those of us more alienated from the living voice of creation to discern and acknowledge. In this Festival, the waters of the rivers are at once the living waters of grace, renewal, and transformation. And immersion in the "Mother," which is at once the visible Ganga and Yamuna and the invisible Saraswati, is the ritual action that transforms. The pilgrimage to this sacred place coupled with the transforming power and presence of the sacred waters combine to make the Festival of the Pitcher a remarkable festival and a testimony to the continuing "manifestation of the sacred" in our midst.

Earlier, I acknowledged that I had gone to the Kumbha Mela as part of an experiment in the possibility of extending dialogue between men and women of different faiths to participating in each other's rituals and festivals. Some may feel that such a motive compromises my account of the festival. But it is my opinion that such a motive only enhances one's willingness to see, to the extent one is able, the religious and sacral dimensions of the festival. Thus the capacities of the participant/observer are, or at least can be, enhanced. More field study of the Kumbha Mela is clearly called for, and I hope that such study will be part of my future. But for now, these notes and observations may be of some value.

Reflecting on the event nearly two years later, I still carry with me a sense of the devotion or bhakti that pervaded the whole event and was evident in the countless acts of puja that filled each day. It is such a wonderfully popular event, an event of the people in all their diversity and simplicity. I think of the words of Ram Sharma who had walked for fifteen days to be at the Festival—"I've come to bathe in the Ganga"—and remember the devotion they conveyed. I remember a school teacher from Rajasthan who had taken a month-long leave to be with his guru in his camp at the Kumbha Mela and to listen to his discourses twice each day. I think of that group of women, gathered in a circle singing, that I passed three times over four hours one day, and each time I passed, I found them still singing. I remember the rapt attention people gave to the performance of an event in the life of Krishna as young dancers moved across the makeshift stage. And I remember the river as it flowed on and on, reflecting the light of the sun's rising and setting, and carrying with it the offering of devoted hearts—flowers and oil-lit lamps—as it silently continued its endless journey.