

## How overt religiosity became cool in India

*The Maha Kumbh Mela shows how tradition has become trendy*

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“Next month I’m planning to spend a couple of weeks in London.” It is commonplace for such declarations to be made in Delhi’s posh clubs and cafés. Banyan, however, overheard this plan on a packed flight from Delhi to Prayagraj. His fellow passengers, adorned with designer jewellery and carrying Louis Vuitton bags, were heading to the city in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh for the *Maha Kumbh Mela*, a massive Hindu gathering (before, presumably, travelling to London).

The festival marks an auspicious alignment of the planets every 12 years, during which taking a dip at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers is believed to wash away one’s sins. The prospect of salvation has always drawn millions of pilgrims from across India. But the latest edition of the

*Maha Kumbh*, which came to a close on February 26th, captured the country's imagination in new and interesting ways.

The journey, which has traditionally been perceived as the preserve of India's poor, is now embraced by elites. Where once they may have balked at dipping in polluted waters (Indian regulators said there was faecal matter in it) and jostling alongside millions (a stampede on January 29th claimed dozens of lives), this time they delighted in it. Actors, cricketers and business honchos all took the plunge. Tour operators offered luxury packages, promising a "seamless fusion of opulence and cultural richness". Faith has never been so fashionable.

Some of the zeitgeist reflects enduring belief mixing with increasing wealth. According to one survey, around 80% of Indians consider religion an important part of their daily lives—a share that has hardly wavered even as the country has modernised. Indeed economic growth has opened up new ways for Indians to practise their faith.

Religious travel, for instance, has surged in recent years, propelled by a boom in civil aviation. All India's big airlines laid out special daily flights for the *Maha Kumbh*. Similarly, rising car ownership allowed thousands to drive to Prayagraj (and clog up its roads). On his boat to the confluence, Banyan met a family of eight who had driven 1,200km in an SUV from the western city of Surat to take part in the *mela*.

But while growth has helped make Hindu celebrations grander, other factors have made them aspirational. The confluence in Prayagraj had the air of both temple and theme park. Some devotees performed the dip in solemn reverence, a few splashed about in revelry, and, inevitably, nearly everyone recorded the moment on their phones. The family from Surat said they felt compelled to make the pilgrimage after seeing images on social media.

The ultimate influencers, though, are India's political leaders. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has assumed the role of Hinduism's custodian. Promoting Hindu causes is a public-policy priority. Living in this era, many Indians believe that piety is no longer merely a sign of faith, but a symbol of patriotism and progress. In 2021 nearly two-thirds of Hindus, who make up around 80% of the population, said they believed that being truly Indian

means being Hindu, according to a survey by Pew Research Centre, an international pollster.

For a party that champions Hindu nationalism, the *Maha Kumbh Mela* was the perfect stage to flex muscle. Politicians have always used the festival to demonstrate their Hindu credentials to voters, but this time the BJP co-opted the event. Throughout Prayagraj, and indeed India, posters extolling the virtues of the *mela* featured towering images of Narendra Modi, the prime minister, and Yogi Adityanath, the monk-turned-leader of Uttar Pradesh.

The government fuelled the hype by boasting of an estimated attendance of 400m; that projection has since been bumped up to 700m, implying implausibly that half of all Indians made the pilgrimage. In other *Kumbh*-related matters, however, counting has remained more conservative. Officials said 30 people had died in the stampede last month; other sources suggest the real number was much higher. The cordoning-off of huge areas for elites did not help with managing the crowds.

Despite the tragedy, the BJP is trumpeting the event as a triumph. And by one measure it will be. After taking the dip, Banyan's fellow boat-riders were basking in positive vibes. Credit for some of that joy, they said, must go to Mr Modi and Yogi for organising such a wonderful event. For the BJP that, perhaps, is what salvation looks like. ■

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