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**World's largest religious gathering** At the Kumbh Mela, a Hindu pilgrimage, the faithful flocked to wash away their sins at the spot where the Ganges and Yamuna rivers converge in Prayagraj, India. This year's festival, the most expensive ever, was expected to draw 150 million people from January to March. **PAGE 3**

BRYAN DENTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

# World

## Millions in India flock to wash away sins

INDIA DISPATCH  
PRAYAGRAJ, INDIA

Hindu pilgrimage unites the faithful amid a festival of cleansing and 'glamping'

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT  
BY BRYAN DENTON

The holy man had seen a lot in his day. It was evident in his long, white beard and naked, skeletal frame.

The ascetic, Naga Baba Prayagrajgiri, had twice before joined the throngs of Hindu worshipers who flock to Prayagraj every six years to pray and bathe at the confluence of India's great rivers — two of them worldly, the third divine.

Over the years, he has seen the pilgrimage, known as the Kumbh Mela, swell from tens of millions of people to over a hundred million — the largest religious gathering in the world.

But this year's festival — the biggest and most expensive ever — was different, Mr. Prayagrajgiri said.

"I give it a zero," he said.

For centuries the faithful have come here to wash away their sins at the spot where the Ganges and Yamuna rivers converge with the invisible and mythic tributary known as the Sarasvati.

This year, 150 million people were expected to attend the Kumbh Mela from January to March.

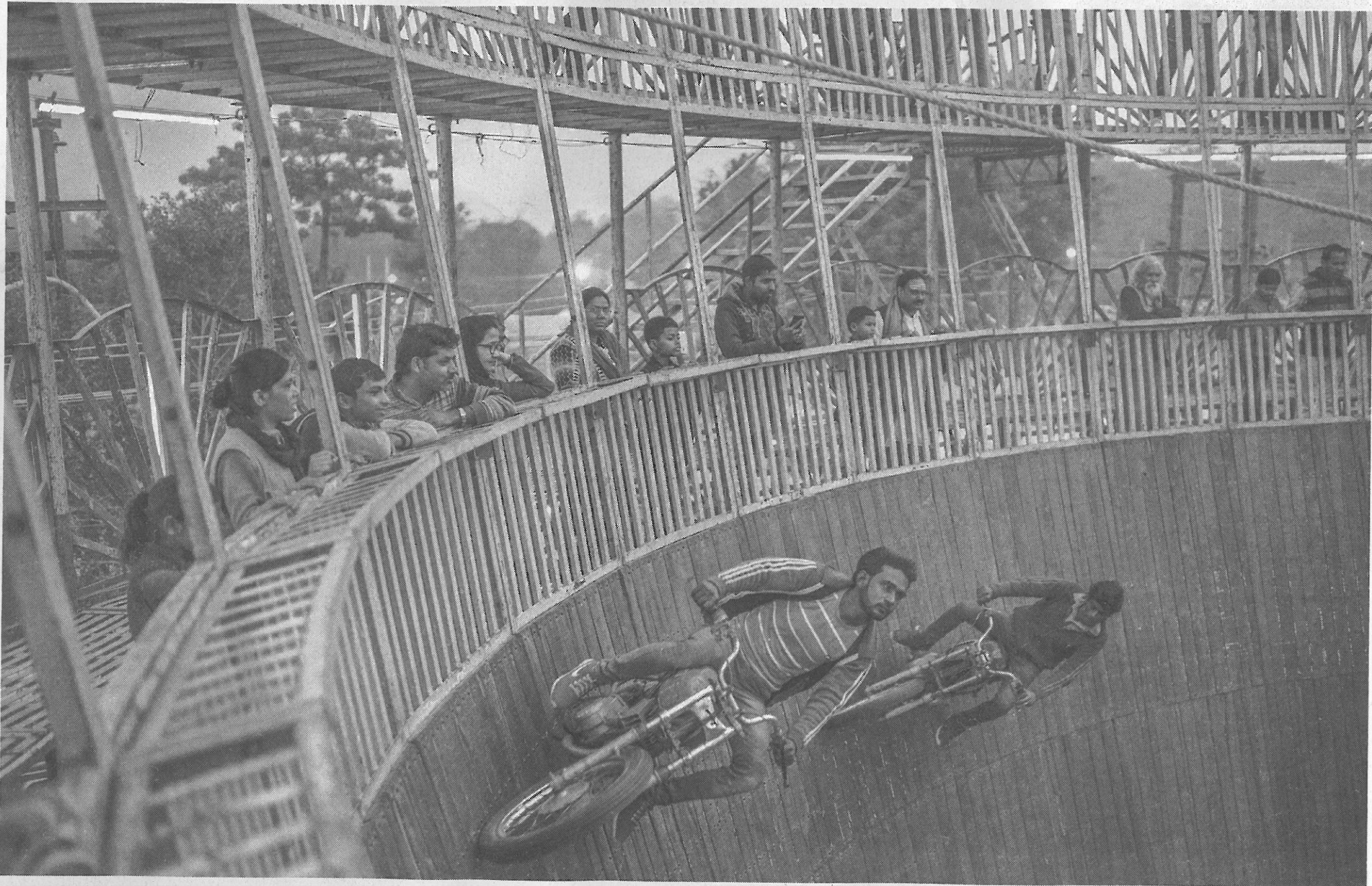
Traditionally, ascetics like Mr. Prayagrajgiri, known as sadhus, were the primary attraction at the festival, setting up tents to greet the faithful.

**For some, the accumulation of modern services changed the tenor of the event: "This time it has more of a corporate style."**

There, the holy men, many of whom have renounced all material possessions including clothing, sat around fires, lectured on the Hindu faith, beckoned passers-by for blessings in exchange for alms and provided their tents to lodgers.

Mr. Prayagrajgiri would not reveal his age. And he cautioned that asking a sadhu his age would result in surrendering one's remaining years to the holy man.

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An event at the Kumbh Mela, the world's largest religious gathering, in Prayagraj, India. This year's festival, which was expected to draw 150 million people from January to March, was more orderly than usual, attendees said.



tenor of the event. "Kumbh wasn't like this before," said Dr. Pradeep Sinha, 70, the chief administrator of the PPM Hospital, a free clinic. "This time it has more of a corporate style."

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"At past Kumbhs, people used to come to live with the gurus and pay a donation of 500 to 2,000 rupees," or \$7 to \$28, for lodging and food, Mr. Prayagrajgiri said. "This is how it was, and this is what the gurus wish."

But Mr. Prayagrajgiri's tent was empty, as were many others in the Juna Akhara, one of 13 sadhu camps hosting ascetics at the festival.

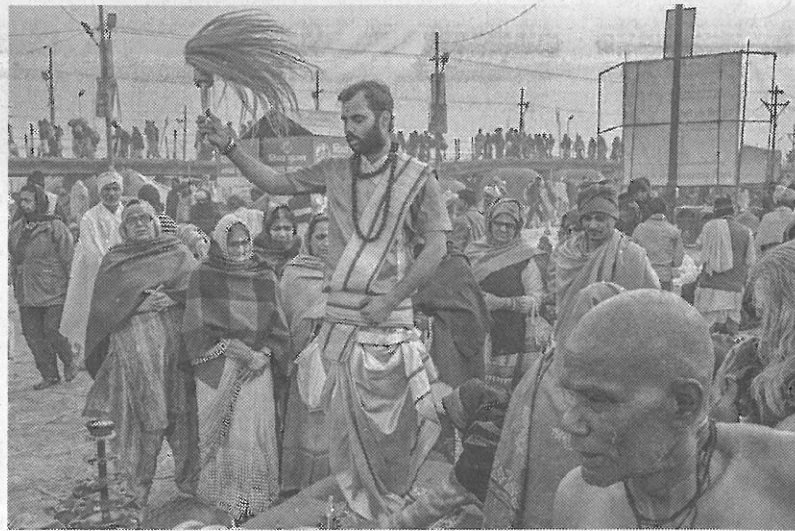
If faith drove pilgrims into the sadhus' tents in the past, it was politics this year that kept them out.

The pilgrimage this year has coincided with a national election. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose party is rooted in Hindu nationalist beliefs, saw the pilgrimage as a campaign opportunity.

So the budget for the festival and the nearby temporary city ballooned to \$600 million, three times the cost of the 2013 festival.

As is customary, in a matter of months, a city was built from scratch on the dry, sandy banks of the rivers. The

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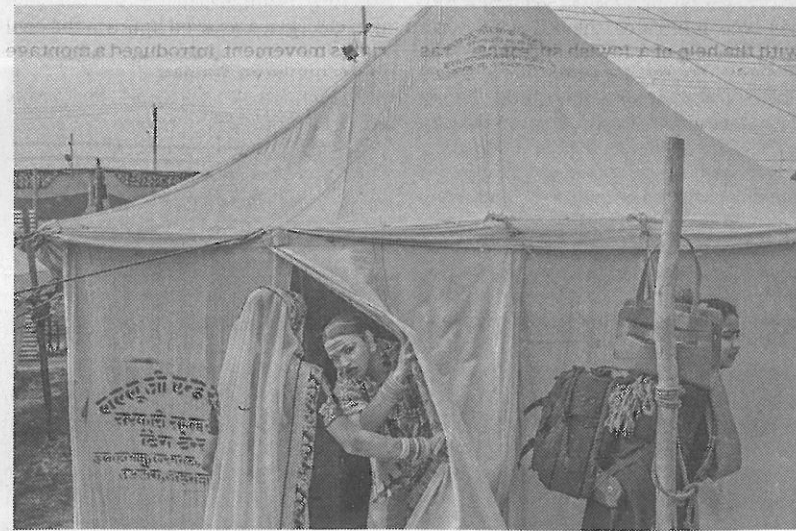
A Hindu priest, above, performing his morning prayers. Right, a tent in Kumbh Nagari, a makeshift city that was built along the riverbanks to accommodate the faithful.

city is called Kumbh Nagari.

This year's Kumbh Nagari was more orderly than in past years, many attendees said. There were toilets. And transportation options. Round-the-clock access to electricity and water. Art exhib-

its and carnivals. Police officers who enforced regulations.

And at an event that has historically been short on places to sleep, there were also more accommodations — including lodgings more upscale than the ascetics'



smoke-filled tents.

The government also marketed the festival abroad in the hopes of attracting Indian expatriates and tourists, in addition to the middle-aged devotees who typically attend.

A significant number of new accommodations were built, including previously unavailable luxury "glamping" options, or glamorous camping.

For some attendees, the accumulation of modern services has changed the

tenor of the event. "Kumbh wasn't like this before," said Dr. Pradeep Sinha, 70, the chief administrator of the PPM Hospital, a free clinic. "This time it has more of a corporate style."

At one of the new riverside luxury camps, the Indraprastham Tent City, guests sipped on barista-crafted lattes outside of tents that cost as much as \$500 per night to stay in.

Three miles from the smoke and dust of Kumbh Nagari, the upscale tents offered a rare commodity at the festival — quiet.

On a nearby stretch of riverbank, a group of Indian expatriates, who live in Shanghai and were visiting with Chinese friends, splashed and practiced yoga in a private area solely for the use of the luxury camp's guests.

Girja Shankar Pandey, 53, a merchant from Allahabad who sells clothes and textiles to the visiting pilgrims, said this year's festivalgoers were younger and more family-oriented.

"The younger generation is coming to buy clothes, to eat good food," Mr. Pandey said. "At the same time, they bring faith in their heart, because they know they will attain nirvana in their life."