

# RSS-BJP's Electoral Hindutva Turned Maha-Kumbh into a Maha-disaster

They were sleeping—the pilgrims of Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj (erstwhile Allahabad). In the wee hours of 29 January last, there was suddenly an announcement on the public address system in a high-pitch tone: "The auspicious hour which is back after 144 years is imminent! If you want to bathe in the *Amrita* (elixir), wake up and move towards the holy confluence." The police and guards on duty also virtually chased the pilgrims to rush to the 'holy' spot. Devotees, many elderly and frail, had travelled from across India and beyond, seeking 'divine blessings' in the sacred waters of the Sangam at Prayagraj. So, they hurriedly rushed towards the bank of river Ganga. From the other side, there was a stream of the people who were returning after taking their bath. The path was narrow and fenced by barricades. The dual flow of devotees into opposite directions soon culminated in a rushing, then jostling crowd and finally stampede. Countless people were squeezed into dangerously tight spaces, and when panic set in, the weakest among them had no escape. Eyewitness accounts paint a grim picture: a surge triggered by barricades erected for VIPs created a human funnel, trapping devotees. When the crowd broke through, the force of the stampede was unstoppable. In a matter of minutes, hundreds were crushed beneath a stampede of panicked people, with survivors recounting the horror of feeling the breath crushed out of them. As a result, *Mauni Amavasya Snan* (bathing on an auspicious moment during new moon) proclaimed by the religious leaders, the Sangh Parivar leaders, as one of the most auspicious bathing rituals in Hinduism, endowed with spiritual transcendence, instead turned for common people into sheer horror leading to the loss of hundreds of innocent lives, with grievous injuries to thousands. Many more are reported missing. Even the rescue attempts by the survivors of their relatives miserably failed. No policemen were there, nor any administrative persons. People were parted from their kins. Minors lost their parents and the aged who came to get the touch of divinity, met with hell. The bells of the temples were suppressed by the yells of the wounded and bereaved. The siren of the ambulance made the chant of prayers of the 'auspicious' occasion inaudible. Thus, was registered one of the deadliest tragedies in the history of the world's largest religious gathering. It is pertinent to mention that there have been repeated incidents of fire. Before the stamped tragedy, a fire broke out on 20 January near the Kinnar Akhara camp, and 15 camps were burnt. Then just a day after the devastating stampede, another fire broke out in the tent city near Nageshwar Ghat. And even on 7 February last, there was one more fire in Sector 18 of the Maha Kumbh Nagar area. The state government allegedly did not issue death certificates of the deceased to obfuscate casualty figures.

## Was it divinely ordained or man-made?

Whether there was any divine intervention in orchestrating such a tragedy can be answered by the votaries of Hindutva who claim to be talking with god, having established communion with the Almighty through meditation, holy dips, offering salutation by lying prostrate in temples and chanting mantras, all in media glare. But to the earthly human beings, this tragedy was no freak an accident, but an avoidable tragedy exacerbated by systemic failures. At the heart of the chaos lay a deeply entrenched culture of political privilege that prioritizes the elite over the masses. The UP Government has designed a roadmap for 'Maha Kumbha Mela-2025' long back in 2022. The event's staggering budget of Rs 5010 crore, was / has been supported by a Rs 2010 crore grant from the central government. These are the officially declared figures. Unofficial spending is anybody's guess. Yogi Adityanath, the saffron-clad Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister had remarked, "*This year's Kumbh is not just a religious event but a global spectacle. The increased budget reflects our commitment to creating world-class infrastructure for devotees from across the globe.*"

So, all government resources were harnessed to the full, pliant media was pressed into ceaseless campaign to create a hype and all other works were relegated to the back. RSS-BJP camp claimed that 40-50 crore people (meaning 1/3rd of the country's population) would congregate at the Maha Kumbh venue—an absurdity par excellence! In fact, such a weird assertion was propelled by the agenda of glorifying Hindutva by resorting to a surfeit of counterfeit claims as well as a slew of neatly woven concoctions. But for the vote-merchants, show-offs are indispensable. Thus, was Maha Kumbh highlighted as a mega event. PM Modi and his colleagues often boast of spectacular technological advancement of the country and its emerging as a global 'super-power'. By technological advancement, they mean India's military power armed

with nuclear weapons and inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBM), space technology like launch of artificial satellites up above the blue firmament, successful lunar expeditions, or future 'Solar Mission' etc. Earlier also, the Prime Ministers of either the Congress or the BJP parroted the same story of success. But the same leaders have been preaching for 'holy' dips on a specific cosmic alignment eluding the question of scientific basis of the 'holiness'. Hence, the question arises—was it any religious festival or a politically engineered religious spectacle designed to buttress the arch communal Hindutva agenda of the Saffron brigade and serve the ruling BJP's electoral ambitions?

A UP minister talked of 'world class arrangements'. Was it in place or just customarily bragged of? Is it not poor crowd control, inadequate emergency measures, and the notorious VIP culture that resulted in a catastrophic stampede? Security personnel, instead of managing the common devotees, were deployed to clear paths for ministers, bureaucrats, and select Hindu seers—the VVIPs. On the other hand, lakhs of pilgrims were left to navigate an over-congested and ill-planned space without sufficient exits. The government painted the stampede as the result of an overwhelming turnout rather than a failure of crowd control and logistics. Yet, multiple reports indicate that inadequate infrastructure, poor coordination, and VVIP mismanagement were the real culprits. Bouts of fire incidents also raise serious question about safety measures. The tragedy that unfolded was not merely an administrative lapse; it was a damning indictment of a state apparatus more concerned with optics than lives.

### Science behind unique planetary constellation

Fact is that the occasion marks a unique planetary alignment which occurs every 12 years in keeping with the experimentally proven scientific laws of cosmology and astrophysics. This is primarily due to the complex orbital periods of planets, especially Jupiter, which takes roughly 12 years to complete one orbit around the Sun. When this 12-year cycle aligns with the cycles of other planets like the Sun and Moon, this is a rare alignment that happens approximately every 144th year. But the scientific cause behind this unique natural phenomenon was not known in yester years. Amazed at such an occurrence, the then protagonists of Hindu religion gave a spiritual colour to this occasion calling it an 'auspicious time' for purifying the self through bathing at the Kumbh site and attain salvation. It was then presumed, albeit based on subjective supposition, that confluence of the rivers Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati known as *Sangam* in Prayagraj become charged with divine nectar (Amrit). But now when science has unravelled the truth, its disavowal means projecting theocratic postulates and blind religious faiths as gospel truths, and thereby foment obscurantism and superstitions.

### Pollution of the Ganga and the Yamuna

Besides loss of so many human lives, so many injured, so many missing, another issue seriously concerned with people's health and even life needs to be brought to attention. It was only recently that the Yamuna was frothing with toxic foam because of overdose of industrial and city waste. More than 800 million litres of largely untreated sewage are pumped into the Yamuna every day. Another 44 million litres of industrial effluents are also discharged daily into the river. Sewage that is treated before being released into the river accounts for only 35% of the total estimated sewage discharge. Once blue Yamuna is now turning blackish. Likewise, the Ganga is severely polluted with regular disposal of human sewage and animal waste as well as industrial waste. Moreover, traditional Hindu religious belief is that being cremated on the banks of Ganga and flowing down the river washes away a person's sins and takes them directly to heaven. Every year, an estimated forty thousand remains are burned and deposited in Varanasi alone. One would recall that during Covid pandemic, hundreds of dead bodies were seen floating down the streams of the Ganga. Besides, lakhs of people bathe in the Ganges during festival seasons. Some goods, such as food wastes, rubbish, plastic bags, flowers or leaves, are regularly dumped in the Ganga to add to the menacing pollution. The situation is so dire that the sight of dead fish floating in the Ganga and the Yamuna is common now. So, bathing in the Ganga is also linked with dysentery, cholera, hepatitis, acute diarrhoea and such other water-borne diseases.

Despite various National Green Tribunal orders against the discharge of untreated sewage water in the river, there is no change in the situation. Rather, the human-initiated pollution has increased manifold. One wonders what happened to the Rs 40,000 crore spent on the Namami Ganga programme in the past decade with Narendra Modi as Prime Minister. The public relations exercise has failed to clean the river. Far from cleaning the Ganga, the BJP government appears hell bent on further damaging it by allowing hydel projects on the tributaries, thus destroying the ecosystem.

## **Water pollution will multiply several times after Maha Kumbh**

But what will be the consequence of this 'Maha Kumbh'? As lakhs of Indians and also huge number of foreigners flock to the Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj, stay in make-shift arrangements and offer 'puja' with a basket of disposable items, one needs to take into cognizance pollution level of both Ganga and Yamuna rivers.

The health of the rivers is beyond fragile due to contamination and pollution in Prayagraj . The city is ill-equipped to tackle its own sewage waste. Therefore, one wonders what would happen once lakhs of people congregate at Kumbh Mela. Moreover, the Bullua ghat to Rasoolabad ghat of Kumbh Spot has been having many sewage creeks entering the river, which bore untreated waste. Most of these sewage lines are right next to the designated bathing areas. If one looks at the Aarel ghat on the other bank of the river, it tells the same tale. Countless sewage drains also enter the river right before the Triveni Sangam of the Ganga and the Yamuna. Can the river ecosystem take the shock of so many millions of people living in and bathing in it? The answer is pretty straight forward. The confluence and mostly the Ganga beyond the city of Prayagraj will suffer another major blow to its ecosystem. This will end up endangering plants, riverine communities and fishes. The city of Prayagraj would have to suffer more from the pollution and a diseased river system.

## **Sparkle of humanness**

The Hindutva doctrine of the RSS-BJP-Sangh Parivar is based on Hindu religious fanaticism and anti-minority, particularly, anti-Muslim hatred. This has been systematically exacerbated to such an extent that not only the religious minorities get persecuted and lynched and their religious shrines facing attacks, they are debarred from earning their livelihood from small shops or food outlets if those are situated on the roads through which Hindu religious processions would pass. Just the other day, the BJP-led UP government had directed that food shops along the route of Kanwar Yatra to Haridwar must have 'name plates' displaying the names of the owner(s) and employees. This was done with a view to prohibiting the pilgrims to take food in or buy anything from outlets owned by the Muslims. While most of the Muslim-owned dhabas were thus closed down, dhabas run by the Hindu owners were asked to terminate the service of their Muslim workers. The decision was stated to have been taken to maintain the purity of the faith of Kanwar pilgrims since, according to Hindutva zealots, the religion of Kanwariyas would have got corrupted by eating food in the dhabas owned by Muslims. The Muslim community in Prayagraj has historically played an active role in Kumbh Mela, which has benefited both Hindus and Muslims socially and economically. The event had long provided business opportunities for Muslim shopkeepers, transporters and labourers. This year calls for their boycott from certain religious figures and abetted by the UP government led to their exclusion from trade and services at the event. Even Muslim shopkeepers who attempted to operate discreetly were targeted and harassed.

But then, human feelings transcends beyond the barrier of communalism-fundamentalism. Despite the boycott, the local Muslims have disregarded their exclusion and have provided food, shelter, and medical aid to stranded pilgrims after the stampede, displaying an unshaken commitment to humanitarian values. Moreover, Muslim volunteers have set up food stalls and medical aid stations to assist the injured and hungry. A community-run 'bhandara' (free meal service) has been organized, serving hundreds of devotees irrespective of religion. Videos and pictures circulating on social media depict local Muslims distributing essential supplies and aiding the pilgrims, defying efforts to sow division. This, in fact, has given a snubbing to the hate campaign of the Hindutva brigade.

## **Why then this Maha Kumbh?**

This tragedy raises fundamental questions about India's priorities. Can religious faith continue to justify human sacrifice on the altar of incompetence? Will the government finally take real steps to modernize event management, or will another stampede a few years from now be met with the same excuses? Why is this Kumbh Mela organized with so much fanfare and spending of huge money from the public exchequer? The BJP is in power for the last 11 years. Previously the Congress also ruled this country for more than 54 years in different slots. The BJP also ruled earlier for 6 years from 1999-2004. Poverty, hunger, unemployment, price-rise—all are insurmountable. Lack of healthcare and proper education continue to plague the common people, while, on the contrary, the corporates are reaping super-profits. The economic inequality is growing. Hence, anger is brewing among all sections of the population. The peasants are in revolt against anti-farmer policies. The workers are demonstrating against anti-labour codes. The students and teachers are protesting against the disastrous education policy. The youths are demanding jobs. So, in

the bourgeois class interest the government besides precipitating communal hatred and mutual animosity to keep the toiling millions disunited, is also fanning up and misdirecting religious sentiment of the people to divert their attention from the actual problems and thwart a possible mass upsurge. So, they are creating hype centring religious festivals.

When the issue of building Ram-mandir in Ayodhya did not yield desired mileage, the BJP leadership has fallen back on 'Maha Kumbha' to serve their narrow sectarian electoral, political and economic interest. Does one find any true religious sense in their conduct, any religious values? Their pursuit is only of the outer shell of religion. It once again shows how capitalism and its servitors are leading civilization to the precipice of utter ruination. Also, there is a business angle. UP CM has claimed that such religious tourism is expected to generate business of around Rs 1.5 lakh crore to Rs 2 lakh crore.

Many experts have also predicted a significant economic boost for the region due to the large influx of pilgrims and associated spending on services like transportation, accommodation, food, and retail. So, it is a double benefit for both the RSS-BJP and their masters, the ruling bourgeois class.

The Maha Kumbh is not a simple testament to India's spiritual resilience, it is a politically engineered religious spectacle designed to serve the ruling BJP's electoral ambitions and the ruling bourgeoisie's mandate for accentuating divide among people along religious line to thwart possible united upsurge against capitalist misrule.