Evolution of the Maha Kumbh Mela

Why in News?

Maha Kumbh Mela is scheduled to be held in Prayagraj from January 13 to February 26, 2025.

What is Maha Kumbh Mela?

- **Kumbh Melas**- It is the is a major pilgrimage and congregation festival in Hinduism held every three years with a 12-year cycle for the Maha Kumbh.
- **Origin** - 8th century Hindu philosopher Adi Shankaracharya promoted regular gatherings of spiritual leaders and ascetics, and also instituted the monastery system and the 13 akharas (warrior-saint sects).
- **Location**- They commence along the riverbanks in Haridwar, then Ujjain, Nashik and culminating with the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj.

Allahabad was officially renamed as Prayagraj in 2018.



- **Ardh Kumbh**- It is celebrated at the six-year mark in Haridwar and Prayagraj.
- **Dates of the event** – They are decided based on the movements of the moon, sun and Jupiter as recorded in the Hindu calendar.
- **Story of the 4 sites** - According to Hindu legend, Lord Vishnu, in the guise of Mohini, carried the pot of amrit (nectar) during the Samudra Manthan (churning of the ocean).
- Then, a scuffle ensued leading to four drops falling at Prayagraj, Haridwar, Nashik and Ujjain – creating four Tirthas (holy sites).

- **Belief** - Devotees believe that a dip in the rivers flowing through these Tirthas
  - Ujjain – Narmada
  - Nashik – Godavari
  - Haridwar – Ganga
  - Sangam at Prayagraj - the confluence point of rivers Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati) will lead to salvation.
- **Shahi Snan** - Since the eighth century, a large gathering of sadhus from various akharas have been seen at Prayagraj to perform the Shahi Snan (holy dip) at a stipulated time on auspicious days.
- **Traditioanl procession** - Led by the Naga Sadhus, the sadhus from various akharas hold traditional processions to the river for bathing.

Naga sadhus are ascetics who smear ashes over their naked bodies and sport weapons like tridents, swords, and lances, as well as conches and drums.

13 Akharas			
Shaivite akharas	**Vairagi akharas**	**Udasin Akharas**	**Nirmala Akhara**
1. Atal 2. Anand 3. Agni 4. Awahan 5. Juna 6. Niranjani 7. Nirvani	8. Digambar Ani 9. Nirvani Ani 10. Nirmohi	11. Naya 12. Bada	13. Nirmala Akhara
14. In 2019, a 14th sect, the Kinnar Akhara — a group of 15-20 transgender saints with Mahamandaleshwars (chief monks) from Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Assam, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Maharashtra and others were included in the Shahi Snan order.			

- **Organization** - From the 9th to the 18th centuries, Akharas organised the month-long Kumbh festivities.
- **Clashes** - Several violent clashes occured between akharas over this hierarchy, even resulting in fatalities.
- **Institutionalization** - While the order is still decided by the akharas, it has been institutionalised by authorities.
- During the Shahi Snan, the Mahamandaleshwars (chief monks) of the akharas, seated on guilded chariots, palanquins, elephants, and/or horses lead the Shahi Snan.
- General devotees participate in the holy dip on any of the auspicious days during the month-long Kumbh festival.

How the Kumbh Mela was managed during British rule?

- **Impact of British** - With the arrival of the British on Indian shores, control over and logistics pertaining to the event transferred to the colonial administration.

The first reference to the Kumbh Mela by the British was in an 1868 report which

said a ‘Coomb Mela’ was to be held in Allahabad in 1870, for which logistic support and sanitation facilities were sought.

- **Freedom movement** - During the British Raj, the festival saw a large gathering of citizens from all walks of life apart from the sadhus, and it was used to galvanise support for the freedom movement.

  Mahatma Gandhi participated in the Maha Kumbh mela in 1918 and interacted with other attendees.

- **Imposition of pilgrim tax** – British imposed tax on pilgrims for during Kumbh mela.
- **Rapid expansion of railway infrastructure** – It facilitated more people from across the Indian sub continent to participate in the mela.
- **Institutionalisation of the Shahi snan** – With the involvement of British in administering the kumbh mela in preparation of housing, sanitation, and food facilities for the pilgrims and policing, government became one of the organizer of the event.

How has it changed after independence?

- **Post independence**- The first Maha Kumbh Mela organised by Indian authorities after Independence was in January 1954.
- **Initial hurdle -** Despite prior planning, the Army and Public Works Department faced the hurdle of constructing and maintaining five new pontoon bridges over the constantly changing course of the Ganga.
- **1966 Kumbh** - Over seven lakh pilgrims took the holy dip on Magha Purnima – the 5th important bathing day.
- **1977 Kumbh** - It marked the completion of 12 Kumbh Mela cycles –i.e. 144 years, and was also unique as the flow of the river Ganga in two streams had created two ‘sangams’ (confluences).
- **During Emergency** - Fourteen bridges on the two streams of Ganga were erected, as one crore people gathered in Prayagraj, creating a world record for the largest crowd gathering.
- **1989 Kumbh** - The Kumbh area was expanded to 3,000 acres, with more pontoon bridges fabricated by the Army over the Ganga.
- **Millenium Kumbh** - In 2001, U.P. government commissioning Aastha Television Channel and Doordarsan have broadcasted the Kumbh mela event.
- **Satellite capture** - India’s remote sensing satellite (IRS-ID) captured the landscape of the Kumbh area, including the confluence of the two rivers Ganga and Yamuna.
- **Security arrangements** – Deployment of security personnel, air surveillance, ,monitoring militant and terrorist activities were arranged to held the event safely.

What are the Political links and features of the Kumbh?

- **IEC campaign** – During 1977, Information about Prime Minister’s 20-point programme and Sanjay Gandhi’s five-point programme were broadcasted.
- **Social reform** - A special conference of the Bharat Sadhu Samaj was held with

government participation in 1977 urging them to remove superstitions among people to aid the country's progress.

- **Implementation of government program** - Conference passed a resolution favouring the government's programme targeted to alleviate poverty by providing basic amenities like food, clothing, education, and shelter.
- **Political campaign** - In 1989, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) capitalised on the increase in the number of visitors, unveiling the blueprint of the proposed Ram Mandir in Ayodhya at its annual religious conference.
- **Inclusivity** - In 2013, 100 women manual scavengers took a dip in the Sangam and later shared a meal with 150 priests from the akharas.
- **2014 Election** – The Kumbhmela ground was used by political parties to propagate their election agenda.
- **2019 Kumbh** - Kinnar Akhara were included in the Shahi Snan .
- **Swachh Bharat** - 10,000 sanitation workers who worked in keeping Kumbh premises clean were felicitated by Prime Minister at a public event.
- **Clean Ganga** - Ganga remained clean throughout the Kumbh with new sewage treatment plants, the use of bio-filters, and the temporary shuttering of polluting industries in Kanpur.

What are the challenges in organizing Kumbh mela?

- **Fire accidents** – In 1954, some huts were burnt down in Kumbh Nagar after a cooking mishap, leaving pilgrims stranded and injured.
- **Stampede** – The crores of people visiting the kumbh , makes it highly vulnerable to stampede if left unorganized.
- **Traffic** – High inflow of pilgrims jams the entire traffic network , making the city paralyzed.
- **VIP guests** – Arrival of personalities divert the security forces and further attract crowd to particular focus point, increasing the disaster risk.
- **Overcrowding** – High concentration of people in bathing areas, on the pontoon bridges, causes panic and trampling.
- **Infrastructure failures** – City infrastructures were constructed for normal population and footfalls.
- Sudden onset of high usage collapses the infrastructures like bridges, transportation systems.

How has the current year's kumbh been planned?

- **New district** - The U.P. government has declared the event's area as a new district - the Mahakumbh Mela District.
- **Public personnel regulation** – It has invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) to ban strikes by government employees in all State government departments and corporations for six months.
- **Combat fake news** - It has also roped in social media influencers and college students as "digital warriors" to combat the circulation of fake news about the event.
- **Use of AI -** Security will be aided by Artificial Intelligence (AI)-enabled cameras and drones to surveil the area for rogue drones or militants and search for missing

persons.

- **Headcount tracking** - The government will use person attribute search cameras, Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) wristbands and mobile app tracking to track the headcount of pilgrims.

Reference

[The Hindu| Maha Kumbh Mela]

