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Holy Baths as Attractions in Religious Tourism: A Study of Ritualistic Bathing Fairs in India

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Much of what marks the contemporary Hindu ritual scene finds its origin in the activities of Indus Valley Civilisation. There has been, without doubt, a corrosion of religious faith with the progress of modernity, but surprisingly the bathing tradition for ritual ablution spanning across centuries of time has not faded, despite the passage of so many ages and despite changes all around. Hinduism has a strong and ancient tradition of pilgrimage, widely recognised as *Tīrtha-yatra* (tour of the sacred fords), which involves holy baths in water bodies as a symbolic purification ritual. Most of the Hindu pilgrimage places are along rivers or river confluences or next to lakes, or temple pilgrimages with pools or wells, indicating a strong association with water. At a pan-India level, religious events like Kumbh Mela, Gaṅgā Sāgar Melā in West Bengal, Mahamaham festival at Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu and many other local or regional fairs have seen a mass congregation of pilgrims during a particular astrological conjunction for a holy dip in the river or sacred water bodies. A quick survey of the historical and tourism-related literature shows that, no serious attempt has been undertaken for promoting these ritualistic bathing sites as points of religious tourist-attractions. Given the magnitude of this bathing practice, an exploration of water *tīrthas* as pilgrimage centres and the implication of such mass congregations from the perspective of tourism needs academic attention. This paper examines the beliefs and rituals associated with the bathing tradition and provide a brief account of the bathing fairs in India. The paper also shows how sacred literature, using the language of myths and allegories shaped and reaffirmed the deified status of such sites.

Key Words: ritual bath, Kumbh Mela, Ganga Sagar Mela, Mahamaham Festival

Introduction

Travel conditioned by religious reasons to holy places is not a new phenomenon and is usually considered as one of the oldest travel forms fuelled by non-economic motives (Jackowski & Smith, 1992). Every year people, in their millions, driven by their religious urge, travel to major pilgrimage destinations around the world. Collins-Kreiner (2016) pointed out that while modern tourism is regarded as one of the newer phenomena in the modern world, when its origins are considered, it is actually rooted in pilgrimage and

the study of the relationship between religion, pilgrimage, and tourism has generally focused separately on either religion or tourism, depending on the case in question, with little equal or comparative treatment of the two together. This is surprising, as the development of leisure, and therefore tourism, cannot be understood without a study of religion and a grasp of the practice of pilgrimage in ancient times (Collins-Kreiner 2016:6).

Likewise, Griffin and Raj (2017) consider religious / faith-based / spiritual / pilgrimage tourism as

a significant and constant element of the tourism industry. Many industry-focused publications talk of how religious tourism is a 'rapidly growing segment within the tourism industry' (Griffin & Raj 2017:ii).

In fact, religious motives are still one of the most common reasons for travel around the world (Soljan & Liro, 2021). There has been, undoubtedly, considerable studies concerning the multifunctional nature of traditional pilgrimage destinations as pointed out by Durán-Sánchez et al. (2018), where tourists have multiple motives for travelling, even within a single journey. They can be moved by their religious beliefs or interested in their historical heritage or architectural, cultural, or artistic value. Yet, not all who journey to a particular site are motivated for religious reasons.

To make comparison and elucidate significant differences among the various forms of religious journeys, Stoddard

(1997) argued that scholars were in need of both an acceptable definition of pilgrimage and a workable classification scheme. To this end, he offered three distinct criteria: the length of the journey, the pilgrimage route, and the frequency of pilgrimage. Other criteria include the pilgrims' destination, the importance of the pilgrimage site in question and the motivation of the pilgrim. Thus, true pilgrimages are seldom places which are visited by only a few individuals and pilgrimage must be differentiated from trips to local places of worship. In attempting to establish the importance of movement, Stoddard (2011) stresses the travelling component of pilgrimage as an important ingredient in the religious experience.

Interestingly, this is not in line with most Hindu pilgrimage beliefs and pilgrimage texts which emphasise the salvific space (arrival at the site), rather than the journey per se; that is, on performing the rituals and visiting the important sites at the sacred place, or even living or dying at the sacred place (Jacobsen, 2013). Moreover, in Hinduism, rituals are traditionally presented to ordinary people seeking to gain something from their voluntary participation (Kawano, 2005). Thus, religious rituals themselves represent a central force of community cohesion as they can attract broad community attention and participation (Wang et al., 2020). One such ritual of community cohesion is the nation-wide bathing congregation of Kumbh Melā where millions of pilgrims from all walks of life assemble by all sorts of means: trains, aeroplanes, cars, buses and walking half-clad and half-fed from remote corners, just to bathe in one particular spot at a specified time (tithi).

Most Hindu pilgrimages are performed on propitious occasions (puṇya tithi) that are often defined in terms of astronomical-astrological conjunctions, which underpin their associated qualities of holiness and merit-giving capacity (Singh, 2013; Goswami, 2016). Likewise, bathing in the holy rivers has been deemed meritorious considering certain astrological correspondences, not to mention the emphasis of many tīrtha sites regarding the efficaciousness of a holy bath on certain auspicious days of a month (Jacobsen 2013:119). A bath in the Ganges, for instance, on the full-moon days of Āṣāḍha, Kārtika, Māgha and Vaiśākha brings great merit (puṇya) whilst one acquires sanctity on the seventh of the bright-half of Māgha, on Amāvāsyā, on Akṣayatithi, on the day of Sankrānti and on the days of solar and lunar eclipses.

Hallowed Water in Hinduism

What remains central to the understanding of such ritual processes for worship is the importance of the holy bath for ritual purity as separate from the concept of cleanliness on secular grounds of hygiene and sanitation (Srinivas, 2002). Given the eminence of this ritual ablution, there is a direct line of embodied praxis from the Indus Valley Civilisation to the present moment. The establishment of the Great Bath of Mohenjo-daro and the concrete signs of importance placed on water by the Indus communities, cannot be overlooked and to hypothesise this is more than just on grounds of hygiene and sanitation is certainly not beyond doubt (Mackay, 1935; Zimmer, 1946; Possehl, 2002; Kosambi, 2006; Mukherjee, 2012). On this topic, Jansen (1989) states:

water played a special role in the consciousness of the Harappans as the latter attributed mystical powers to the river and considered its water to be sacred, much as the Ganges became personified as goddess Gaṅgā in later Hinduism (Jansen 1989:182).

Water, therefore, continues to remain an important means for the removal of both physical dirt and moral impurities.

Yudhishtira [the eldest of the Pandavas] said, 'It has been said that sojourns to sacred waters is fraught with merit; that ablutions in such waters is meritorious; and that listening to the excellence of such waters is also meritorious' (The Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva, 25.129).

As a result, Sanatana Dharma (also referred as Hinduism - which is not a religion but a way of life), has a strong and ancient tradition of pilgrimage, widely recognised as Tīrtha-yatra (tour to the sacred river fords), which formerly connoted pilgrimage involving holy baths in water bodies as a symbolic purification ritual (Singh, 2006). In the wider Hindu tradition, places associated with water, are often called tīrthas and pilgrimages to such tīrthas is still one of the most important aspect of Hindu religious life (Eck, 1981). At the pan-India level, there are 1820 main sacred sites associated with Hindu gods and goddesses and out of this, 1362 are linked to water attributes (Singh, 2020). This means that 74.8% of the Hindu pilgrimage places are along rivers, riverbanks, river confluences or next to lakes or temple pilgrimages with pools or wells, indicating a strong association with water.

Sources of the holy rivers such as Gaṅgā and Yamunā are sthavar tīrthas, i.e. places that have religious or spiritual importance in the Indian subcontinent as they are believed to be naturally endowed with spiritual powers since time immemorial (Bansal, 2008). When a tīrtha is associated with water, bathing becomes an important ritual, for it is symbolic of cleansing the soul and the basis of pilgrimage in Hinduism is centred on belief in the purification of the soul; most Hindu pilgrims seek the solution to problems of everyday life by transcending the mundane (Goswami, 2016). Ritual bathing, therefore, is often a fundamental aspect of a Hindu pilgrimage (Jacobsen 2013:47).

Although the tradition of tīrtha ran sharply athwart the Vedic discourse, reverence for rivers and worship of them as deities is of course an important aspect of Hindu notions and the idea of tīrtha is thought of as an extension of the practice of seeing divinity (gods and goddesses) in nature. Thus, undertaking geographical descents, descents at specific locations, and these manifestations of gods associated with permanent locations gained increased popularity and appeal (Jacobsen 2013:43-44).

Even the most cursory reading of a variety of texts reveals that the conventional priests initially discarded the cult of images in temples; in doing so they defined the sacredness of a site primarily in terms of the physical site itself, often a river, lakes and from time to time human-made or divinely made ponds and tanks. The texts of course discuss the god believed to reside at the site, presumably in an anthropomorphic image (Granoff, 1998). Therefore, Jacobsen (2013:44) describes the major difference between Vedic religion and contemporary Hinduism, which is the placelessness of Vedic gods as against the fixed location of deities in the later Hindu pantheon. The popularity of the latter is the result of their association to particular localities, which gave them dominant presences and the festival culture that developed at the sites.

Many scholars have suggested that the significance of bathing as an important ritual emanated from the forces of regionalism (Bhardwaj, 1973; Upadhyay, 1976; Eck, 1981; Nath, 2001; Arya, 2001). The Matysa Purāṇa, for instance, exalts that Gaṅgā is sacred at Kanakhalā, Sarasvatī in Kuruksetra and Narmadā in all places where it flows. The comparative holiness of several tīrthas is evident in the waters of the Sarasvatī which can purify a person after a bath in three days, those of Yamunā in seven days, those of Ganges at once, whilst the water of the Narmadā purifies a person even in a glimpse.

The efficacy of water sites for bathing is in fact considered greater than Vedic sacrifices (Singh, 1994) - ritual bathing drew a comparatively larger group, becoming more popular among the masses, in all parts of India, than the sacrifices. Furthermore, the concepts of gift-making (*dāna*), openness and accessibility during bathing in holy water, in addition to the process of urban settlement, are all important contributing factors that augmented the significance of ritual bathing (Paul, 2021).

Indian Ritual Bathing Festivals: Genesis and Subsequent Developments

Offering reverence to rivers and sacred tanks / pools takes place is undertaken in a number of festivals. Praying to water, for instance to invoke rains or showing gratitude to gods for good rain, is celebrated across India. This study however, focuses on the festivals linked with ritual bathing in hallowed water. Many of India's great water-tīrthas that have a pan-India appeal were once more-regional in focus, but now they constitute hugely popular Hindu pilgrimages (Aukland, 2017). Among the most popular bathing sites are the four cities of Haridwar, Prayag, Nasik and Ujjain where Kumbh Melā is held, in addition to Mahamaham in Kumbhakoṇam, Gaṅgā Sāgar Melā in Sagar Island, West Bengal, and several other regional and local sites. Figure 1 shows an example of a regional bathing site in North-eastern India where people in their millions, on the thirteenth lunar day in the dark fortnight of the month of Chaitra (March-April) of the Bengali Calendar in the Catabhisa lunar asterism, or the twenty-fifth lunar asterism, congregate for a holy bath in the river Barak.

The list of ritual bathing festivals at the national, regional and local level is vast. Countless festivals are concerned, thus, this study considers three prominent ritualistic bathing festivals:

Kumbh Melā which occurs in Hardwar, Prayag, Nasik and Ujjain,

Ganga Sagar Melā in Sagar Island, West Bengal and

Mahamaham Festival in Kumbakonam.

These festivals were chosen because of their historical value in terms of aetiological and cosmogonic perspectives. Also, all three sites are well-established on a pan-India level, attracting both domestic and international pilgrims / tourists in their millions.

Figure 1: Badarpurghat Baruni Bathing Fair in Assam, India, 2021

Source: Author

Kumbh Melā

Kumbh Melā is a Hindu bathing festival that is the largest religious congregation on earth, attracting millions of both domestic and international tourists for a holy dip. It is celebrated at four different pilgrimage sites: Hardwar, Prayagraj (old name Allahabad), Ujjain, and Nasik, usually at twelve-year intervals. The time of the festival is preordained as per astrological considerations, particularly the position of Jupiter, which cycles through the zodiac in about twelve years. The contemporary significance of the Melā, however, is warped by astoundingly scarce historical data, much of which points to a relatively recent formation (Lochtefeld, 2004). Historical records, hitherto, clearly reveal large, well-established bathing festivals, some of which were annual such as Hardwar's Baisakhi Melā and Prayag's Magh Melā whilst others were determined by Jupiter's twelve-year cycle- Hardwar's Kumbh Melā and Nasik's Sinhastha Melā, which Lochtefeld (2004) points to be of independent origins due to differing charter myths.

Roy and Devi (1955) proposed that the first account of the Kumbh Melā in recorded history was 643–4 AD, possibly due to the account of Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang who left a graphic account of a bathing festival after witnessing it during the reign of Emperor Harsha Vardhan. It is suggested that the Emperor, rather than

initiating the festival, adopted it in order to promote religious fervour among the people. Singh (2006) describes the perpetuation and reinforcement of this periodic assemblage of saints and laypeople at sacred places on the banks of the holy rivers as creating an environment of mutual understanding among different religious sects between the ninth and twelfth centuries as speculated by Indologists. An important aspect of this festival is that it gave masses the opportunity to obtain benefit from their association with the normally cloistered sages and yogis. Over time, what was originally a regional festival, became an unrivalled pan-Indian pilgrimage congregation.

Maclean (2003) and some other academics have raised doubts, whether it was a Kumbh that Tsang described in his travel accounts. Supporting her work with astrological authority and scholarly works, she argues that the Kumbh Melā originated in Hardwar as it is the only Kumbh Melā of the four cities to be celebrated featuring Aquarius (Kumbha). The three other Melās apparently had Kumbh traditions fixated upon local bathing festivals, and these have been used as a *palimpsest* (Maclean, 2003), to establish the historicity of the Purāṇic legend which has been forcefully entrenched in the Kumbh Melā in order to confirm Purāṇic authority over it. She even argues against some of the common proclamations about sea-churning ceremonies (*amṛta manthan*), which are mentioned

Figure 2: Hardwar Kumbh Melā of 1850 (by J.M.W. Turner)

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Haridwar_Kumbh_Mela_-_1850s.jpg

in several Sanskrit texts (including the Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa and several Purāṇas) regarding the fall of nectar (amṛta) drops in four places which designated the Melā sites. However, she is cautious enough to state that:

to simply dismiss a belief will not do because belief accounts for a considerable portion of what holds together the Kumbh Melā (Maclean 2003:875).

Another contemporary source ascribes the Melā's origin to the philosopher Shankaracharya, who is believed to have established this festival to combat the spread of heterodox sects like Buddhism and to reinstate the Hindu religious life with a common meeting ground of learned and ascetics to which Lochtefeld (2004:114) states:

The truth of the Shankara story lies not in its content, but its underlying meaning – the language of struggle versus outsiders, and of worries about a threatened Hindu identity ... Although the Shankara story reflects the particular circumstances in the early twentieth century, in a larger sense it has been true throughout the Kumbh Melā's history.

Nevertheless, the myths and allegories attached to its historicity perplex one as to the Melā's origin. Reflecting on this, it is remarkable in its timelessness. Attributes are widely attached to the Melā, and these are important components in how pilgrims perceive it. People seek in the sacred something transcending history from a

primordial mythical time, which in Mircea Eliade's dictum is sacred time. In addition to pilgrim beliefs, the meaning attached to the place by the epics and Purāṇas is another important element in reinforcing the sanctity of the Melā.

Section 25 of *Anusasana Parva* of the *Mahābhārata*, for instance, mentions that by bathing in Hardwar (old name Gangadwara – where the Ganges descends from Heaven), one is sure to become cleansed of all one's sins and then ascend to heaven. Goswami (2016) informs:

According to verses in Agni Purāṇa, Brahma Purāṇa and Matsya Purāṇa, bathing at the Sangam [Prayagraj] during the month of Magha is as meritorious as donating a crore cows, performing Aśvamedhā yajna and visiting ten crore tirthas, respectively (Goswami 2016:20).

Also, the Tīrthakalpataru of Laksmīdhara devotes two-thirds of their work to Prayāga. As a result, the agelessness of the Melā in combination with place significance and extolled Purāṇic origins has laid the foundation of the festival's sanctity for pilgrims.

Travellers have long been attracted to the Kumbh Melā to experience the unique assemblage of people. Maclean (2009) broadly classifies the participants at the Kumbh Melā into two: Sadhus (Hindu holy men) and pilgrims.

Sadhus are renunciants who, through their yogic practices, continue to display indifference to pain, proclaiming their transcendence from bodily sensations, for which they are considered to be inherently powerful beings capable of bestowing blessings on the seeking pilgrims. Pilgrims, on the contrary, attend the Melā to congregate in the holy water at auspicious occasions for a holy dip, to perform religious rituals and perhaps meet with saints to listen to their *pravachans* (spiritual discourses).

Certainly, the main motivation of visiting the Kumbh is often bathing in the holy waters (Figure 3), especially for lay pilgrims (Gäbel, 2018). Whether it is in the *sāhī snāns* (royal baths) or other bathing days, the ghāts (river bank) are almost always filled with bathing people: sādhus, lay pilgrims, and sometimes even foreigners. During the month of the Kumbh Melā, it is considered meritorious to take special ritual baths daily. Gäbel cites Llewellyn's observation of the 1998 Hardwar Kumbh during which pilgrims affirmed that they simply came to take a bath, put on their clothes, and then leave the area without visiting the festival itself which Mehrotra and Vera (2015) vividly describe:

for the pilgrims, bathing is the climax of the journey, the culmination of a process that is healing and meditative for the individual and motivating for the collective in religious terms (Mehrotra and Vera 2015:14).

Gangasagar Melā

The Gangasagar fair is the second largest congregation after the Kumbh Melā (Chakraborty *et al.*, 2020), held in Gangasagar or Sagar Island, an island in the Ganges delta, lying on the continental shelf of the Bay of Bengal about 100 kilometres (fifty four nautical miles) south of Kolkata. The area of the island is approximately 300 sq km spread over 43 villages and it has a population of over 185,600 (Basak, 2004). Gangasagar is among the most popular Hindu pilgrimage places in the country where people come to earn religious merit. Each year on Makar Sankranti (mid-January), large numbers of devotees from all over the nation, congregate at Gangasagar for a sacred dip at the confluence of the river Gaṅgā and the Bay of Bengal. After the sacred dip, the pilgrims worship at the Kapila Muni Temple or Ashram (Figure 4).

Bathing at the confluence where the river Ganges reaches the sea and offering reverence to sage Kapila in his ashram are the two important aspect of pilgrimage to Gangasagar (Eck, 2012). Testimony to this is reflected in the chants of *Ganga Mai ki Jai* and *Jai Kapil Muni* that fills the air near the ashram and the bathing ghats. The importance of Gangasagar as a site of religious importance cannot be more emphasised than in the proverb in local vernacular- *Sab tirtha bar bar, Gangasagar ek bar*, which literally translates as 'all religious sites may be visited several

Figure 3: Present Day Kumbh Melā in Hardwar



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=23384082>

Figure 4: Kapil Muni Ashram at Gangasagar



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Gangasagar#/media/File:Kapil_Muni_Temple.jpg

times but visit to Gangasagar is worth a lifetime' (Department of Tourism- West Bengal, 2018).

The historical background to Kapila Muni Temple is related to King Sagar, the thirty-eighth king of the Solar Dynasty, who performed ninety-nine times the great horse-sacrifice (*aśvamedhá*) to win over the entire universe. When the king drove out a horse for the hundredth time, Lord Indra stole the blessed horse and tied it up in Pātāl (the under-world) near the place where Sage Kapila was meditating. King Sagar's sixty thousand sons thought Kapila to be the culprit and disturbed him when he was thoroughly engrossed in meditation, and thus were burnt to ashes in consequence of the sage's curse. Then Bhagirath, the only grandson of King Sagar, mediated over years to persuade Brahmā to grant him a boon for bringing the river Gaṅgā from heaven (Brahmā Lok) and wash the mortal remains of his ancestors and bless them with salvation (Allen *et al.*, 1857).

A dip in the water at this place, during Gangasagar Melā, is considered to be extremely sacred. On the day of Makar Saṅkrānti (January 14), when the sun makes a transition to Capricorn from Sagittarius, it is said that bathing in the Gangasagar becomes a holy source of salvation. Gangasagar is associated with salvation goals for two pertinent reasons: because Kapila performed tapas here and was a teacher of mokṣaśāstra (*on how to*

attain mokṣa as interpreted by Jacobsen), and because the sons of Sagar attained *mokṣa* from this place. The water is thought to be extremely pure because the *śrāddha* ritual performed with the water at this site could bring salvation to the sons of Sagar (Jacobsen, 2013). The place is, thenceforth, associated with the purifying role of water, the ritual of bathing and *mokṣa*. Ancient texts also extol Gaṅgā as *swarga-sopāna-sariṇī* (flowing ladder to heaven), and those who dip in her holy waters are helped to cross over the ocean of life.

The popularity of this fair can be understood from the fact that without any formal or informal invitation, advertisement or organising authority, more than a million pilgrims come here every year with ardour, from different parts of India, just to take a holy dip in the Ganges. Other than the general pilgrims, the assemblage of Naga Sādhus here gives a unique identity to this festival. A large fair is also held, consisting of makeshift stalls (*dala mala dokan*) installed with items related to offering worship to Sage Kapila (Dasgupta *et al.*, 2006). There are exhibitions of fancy items such as pearls and shell items. Though the primary interest of the visitors is the holy dip in the Ganges, there are several other spots of attraction such as Sagar Light House, Deer Park, Solar Park, Wind mill etc. Also in Gangasagar there are several temples, ashrams, maths and other religious centres of the Hindu pantheon which attract pilgrims.

Figure 5: Holy Dip at Ganga Sagar Melā

Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal: <https://wbtourism.gov.in/destination/place/gangasagar>

Mahamaham Festival at Kumbakonam

The heritage town of Kumbakonam in the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu has been a sacred centre of Hindu pilgrimage for over a millennium. The term Kumbakonam first appeared in a fourteenth century inscription with its antecedent name *Kudamukku*, which literally means mouth of the pot (Nanda, 1999). As per legends, Brahmā, the creator, placed the Hindu scriptures and the seed of creation in a golden pot to keep them safe from destruction. This eventually floats to the south, to be later rescued by Lord Shiva after a cosmic deluge shatters the pot and releases the nectar (*amṛta*). Kumbakonam is famous for its temple complexes such as Adi Kumbeswarar Temple, Sarangapani Temple, Someshwara Temple, Nageswaran Temple, Kasi Vishwanath Temple, and Chakrapani Temple, and its sacred water tanks such as Porthamarai Theertham tank and Mahamaham tank; it is believed that the this nectar congealed to form Kumbakonam's luminescent topography of sacred tanks and temples.

The place where the nectar pooled together is known as the Mahamaham tank where millions of pilgrims take a holy bath during the Mahamaham festival. The Mahamaham tank is a great square tank of about twenty acres, perhaps the most sacred site in Kumbakonam. It is skirted by many temples and other religious institutions and is symbolic for its convoluted multi-layered mythology involving the creation myth of the town, the nine holy rivers, the twenty springs of Hindu mythology and the sixteen endowments of kingship, elevating it to the status of a pan-Hindu tīrtha. The holiness of the Mahamaham

tank has been praised by Nayanmar saint-poets of the seventh century (Nanda, 1999). It is said that if there is a tank held to be more sacred than the Ganges, it is only the Mahamaham tank at Kumbakonam.

The tank is famous for probably the greatest south Indian festival, the Mahamaham (also spelled, Mahamakha or Mahamagam or Mahamakam) festival occurring once every twelve years; the last festival was celebrated on 22 February 2016, during which over a million people participated in the holy bath from all over India and abroad (Kiruthiga & Thirumaran, 2017). During the festival, the pilgrims first take a holy dip in the Mahamaham tank and then in the tank of the Golden Lotus (Pon thamarei thadagam) and finally, in the river Kaveri. The temple tank is not far from the banks of the river Kaveri, but the festival occurs in the tank rather than on the Kaveri itself. The date of the festival is decided based on certain astrological positions, such as full moons, the conjunction of the sun in Aquarius with Jupiter, and the conjunction of the moon in Leo (the Mahamaham star), which is considered very auspicious (Bansal, 2008).

Legends affirm that in the Mahamaham tank the purifier comes to be purified (Burgess, 1873). There are accounts that the Mahamaham tank possesses miraculous power on this particular occasion as the goddess Ganga (the purifier) is said to visit the tank once in twelve years to cleanse her from the pollution contracted by her as a result of hundreds of thousands of people bathing in her waters leaving their sins behind. This festival is similar to the Kumbh Melā Festival in North India or the Ganga

Sagar Melā in East India, but unlike those two which are celebrated in rivers, the Tamil Nadu festival is celebrated in a tank (Mahamaham tank).

Literary works contain laudatory statements regarding the holiness of the waters of the Mahamaham. Sekkizhar, the author of *Periya Puranam*, for instance, mentions:

*Pūmaruvum Gaṅgai muthat puṇithamām perun
tīrttam
ma maham tāṇ āṭutaṭku vantu vali paṭum kōyil*

This means a holy bath in the tank on the Mahamaham festival is as sacred as the river Ganges. In fact, the seventh-century Saivite saint poet Thirunavukarasar (widely addressed as Appar) mentions the presence of holy rivers like the Ganges in the Mahamaham tank in Tiruthandakam (Selvakumar & Thangaraju, 2017). The Bhavishya Purana also refers to the importance of Mahamaham festival as an account of Lord Shiva to all celestial deities:

*Let all of you this very day go to Kumbakonam,
a spot dear to me and to Viṣṇu and bathe there
in the nectar full tank created by the directions
of the Parabrahman. Do bathe in the presence
of Kumbeswara in Vrishabha lagna on this
Mahagam day, the full-moon day combined*

*with Magha star with Jupiter in the sign of Leo.
Thereby you will get rid of all your accrued
sins and regain power to wash away the sins of
others.*

The origins of this festival can be traced back to the 13th century (Vriddhagirisan, 1995). During the reign of Nayaka rulers, the religious topography of Kumbakonam underwent transformation from Shaivism of the Chola period to Vaishnavism and consequently changes appear in the Nayaka intervention. The Mahamaham tank was also reconstructed with sixteen elaborately carved pavilions and steps descending into the water (Vriddhagirisan, 1995; Nanda, 1999).

The Mahamaham tank is currently located at the town centre. It has twenty one wells, and has an area extending to 6.2 acres. Among these wells, nine represent the Holy River that flows across India, whilst the other wells are named after their associated deities. It is believed that the deities of nine sacred rivers of India meet together in this tank during the Mahamaham Festival and a purificatory bath will absolve Hindu pilgrims of their sins and they will reap the benefit of the coalesced effect of dips in all the holy rivers of India (Gajrani, 2004). Thus, the Mahamaham bathing festival participates in the associative linking of the revered Ganges, the *kumbha* and the *amṛta* (Eck, 2012).

Figure 6: Mahamaham Festival 2016



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mahamaham4.jpg>

Conclusion

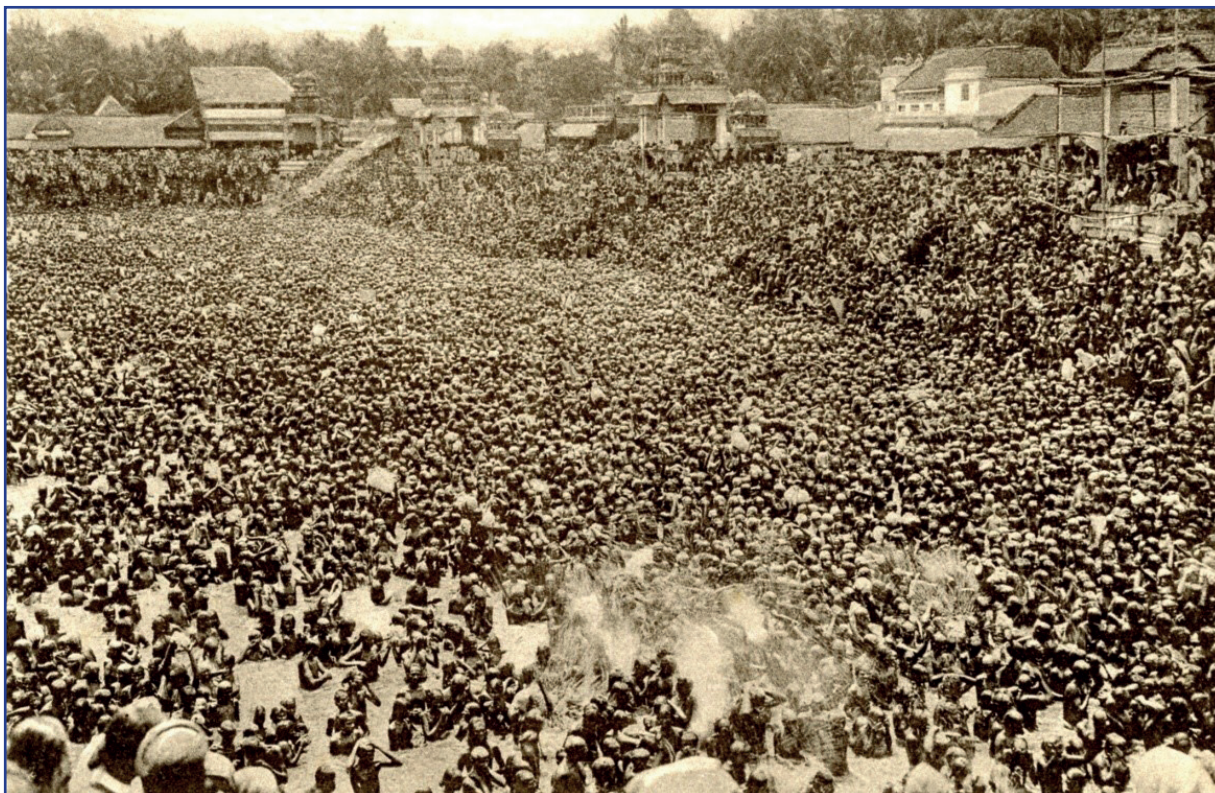
Much of what marks the contemporary ritual landscape of holy baths finds its origin in the activities of early Indus Valley Civilisations. Modernity's progress has resulted in a corrosion of religious faith and practice and the subsequent relegation of religion. However, the bathing tradition spanning across centuries of time continues to thrive. The cultural and religious linkages of the bathing destinations and their long-time existence have rendered such sites attractive and the resulting events / congregations, have huge implications from the perspective of growth and potential for the religious / pilgrimage / cultural / heritage tourism industry.

The religious environment within which such festivals take place consists of festival which are full of rituals that transmit and preserve continuity of religious and cultural traditions. These are also festivals which act as economic events poised for tourism: this combination of religion, culture and economy are all essential for the

bathing festivals (Shinde, 2010). Therefore, religious fairs and festivals can make immense contributions to the economic development of a region while also reinforcing the cultural roots and values (Jauhari & Munjal, 2015).

Unfortunately, the significance of bathing sites as religious tourism destinations has been quite understudied. Thus, there is little understanding as to how economic and social values can be enhanced through such events. Therefore, it is essential to gain a better understanding of why tourist / pilgrims are motivated to travel to such religious bathing places, what is their perceived level of service and satisfaction, and what drives their loyalty to become frequent participants in such religious mass events. This paper is an attempt to convey the importance of bathing rituals in the Indic tradition and further empirical study may provide much needed data which, in turn, will help in improving and generating more understanding and appreciation in the future regarding pilgrimage / religious tourism at these important bathing sites.

Figure 7: A Nineteenth Century Pictorial Representation of Holy Bathing at the Mahamaham Festival



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahamaham_stampede#/media/File:Mahamaham_Festival_in_Kumbakonam.jpg

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