

# MASS TOURISM IN INDIA: CASE STUDY ON KUMBH MELA

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**Abstract.** The term "mass tourism" has been a fixture in tourism research for decades, yet a universally accepted definition remains elusive. Fundamental mass tourism involves significant numbers of travelers converging on a single destination for leisure or recreation. While acknowledged for its potential to stimulate local economies, create employment, and foster cultural exchange, mass tourism also carries inherent risks. Environmental degradation and the disruption of local communities are among the well-documented concerns. The Kumbh Mela, a profoundly significant Hindu pilgrimage occurring at intervals of 6, 12, and 144 years, provides a compelling case study. Correlated with the astrological positions of Jupiter, it stands as the largest human gathering on Earth. Analyzing the Kumbh Mela offers valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of mass tourism, its socio-economic impacts, and the challenges of managing such immense human congregations. By examining this unique event, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities and consequences of mass tourism, ultimately informing more sustainable and responsible tourism practices.

**Key words:** Leisure, Local Economy, Human Gathering, Community Disruption

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Mass tourism refers to the movement of a large number of organized tourists to popular holiday destinations for recreational purposes. It is a phenomenon which is characterized by the use of standardized package products and mass consumption. Conceptually, this type of tourism features standardized leisure products and experiences packaged for mass tourist consumption. Religious tourism is an integral part of the tourism industry. Several developing economies offer religious tourism activities on a larger scale and religious destinations attract more than 300 million visitors each year worldwide (Gayathri, Gulhare, & Verma, 2020). The 2025 Prayag Maha Kumbh Mela, also referred to as the 2025 Prayag Kumbh Mela, is the ongoing iteration of the Kumbh Mela, a Hindu pilgrimage festival celebrating a full orbital revolution of Jupiter around the Sun. It is scheduled from 13 January to 26 February 2025, at the Triveni Sangam in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, India. It is the world's largest gathering, with official data released on 12 February counting 48.83 million people taking a dip in the river so far. This event marks the completion of a 12-Kumbh Mela cycle and is officially termed a Maha Kumbh Mela, spanning 45 days. The Kumbh Mela has been organized since many years with its commencement date unknown (Onnela & Khanna, 2015). As per astronomical calculations, the 2025 edition is unique since the constellation alignment seen is witnessed once in 144 years. The site of each Kumbh Mela is decided by the astrological alignment of Jupiter, the Sun and the Moon. The Kumbh Mela has been recognised as part of Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Mass tourism refers to large-scale travel where tourists experience staged attractions rather than authentic local culture, often staying within a tourist bubble. The beginning of mass tourism is largely related to various changes, which occurred in the industrial societies in the second half

of the 20th century. In fact, history of mass tourism begins from 1851 when Thomas Cook led a mass of tourists to the Great Exhibition to London. Mass gatherings, including concerts, religious pilgrimages, sports events, and political rallies, have been widely studied for their various social, economic, environmental, and public health impacts (Barnett, Khanna, & Onnela, 2016). The existing literature provides insights into the challenges and benefits associated with these large-scale events.

## **2.1 STUDY ON KUMBH MELA**

The Kumbh Mela is recognized for its ability to bring together people from diverse backgrounds, fostering a sense of social unity and cohesion. Research highlights its role in reinforcing cultural and religious identity. The Kumbh Mela's profound socio-cultural impact. They examine the event's role in strengthening social bonds by bringing together devotees from diverse backgrounds. The Mela fosters community spirit through shared rituals and cultural exchange, creating a temporary yet vibrant social space (Sridhar, Gautret, & Brouqui, 2015). There are huge pedestrian's movements in form of crowd during Mela period. Managing the movement of people in a hassle-free manner, managing crowds on peak days, ensuring the safety and security of pilgrims, and effective crowd management planning, should be the key focus areas to ensure an incident-free mass gathering events. Large-scale human activities in the form of mass gathering event have become more frequent especially massive entertainment events, religious gatherings, sports events, political rallies, product promotions, etc. Crowd safety, security and surveillance have become a critical and challenging (Dwivedi & Cariappa, 2015). During Kumbh Mela (the festivals of the sacred Pitcher), pilgrims take bath or take a dip in a sacred river. Devotees believe that by bathing in the river, one is freed from sins liberating her/ him from the cycle of birth and death. Millions of people reach the place without any invitation. The festival is held at Prayagraj (Allahabad), Haridwar, Ujjain and Nasik every four years by rotation and is attended by millions of people irrespective of caste, creed or gender. There are four type of kumbh melas: purna Kumbh , ardh kumbh , Maha kumbh and Kumbh Mela. Currently in the maha kumbh was held in prayagraj. Which was coming after 144 years.

## **2.2 TOURISM IN INDIA**

India is a large and growing market for tourism, offering a diverse range of experiences, including cultural, religious, adventure, and wellness tourism. India's tourism sector, while experiencing robust growth, faces challenges like infrastructure deficits, seasonal fluctuations, and the need for sustainable practices (International Society for Infectious Diseases, 2016), while also presenting opportunities for niche tourism products and economic growth. There's increasing interest in niche tourism products like cruises, adventure, medical, wellness, sports, MICE, eco-tourism, film, rural, and religious tourism. Domestic tourism is a major driver of the sector, with increasing numbers of Indians traveling within the country. India attracts international tourists, particularly for its cultural heritage and spiritual tourism. The tourism sector is a significant contributor to India's economy, generating foreign exchange and creating employment. Religious tourism is a significant aspect of India's tourism industry, drawing millions to sacred sites and locations of historical spiritual significance, with destinations like Ayodhya, Varanasi, Tirupati, and Shirdi being popular pilgrimage sites. Many tourists seek a deeper connection to their faith and a chance to experience spiritual growth. Visiting religious sites allows travelers to explore India's rich cultural heritage and historical past. Witnessing religious rituals and festivals can be a meaningful and fulfilling experience for tourists.

## **2.3 ENVIROMENTAL IMPACT**

### **WASTE MANAGEMENT:**

The Kumbh Mela presents significant waste disposal challenges due to the massive influx of pilgrims, generating large quantities of solid and liquid waste, including non-biodegradable materials, which strains local infrastructure and poses environmental risks (Kanauiya & Tiwari, 2025). The Kumbh Mela attracts millions of pilgrims, leading to a surge in waste generation, including food packaging, waste is non-biodegradable, such as plastic, which poses a long-term environmental threat. Pooja offerings, often left in the river or on the banks, are difficult to clean manually and contribute to pollution and ecosystem disruption. The influx of pilgrims also leads to increased sewage generation, which can contaminate the river water and pose health risks.

Waste dumped in rivers and the surrounding environment causes severe pollution, harming aquatic life, contaminating water sources, and impacting human health and ecosystems through the spread of diseases and the degradation of habitats. Waste, including industrial and domestic sewage, chemicals, and plastics, directly pollutes rivers and waterways, making them unsafe for drinking, swimming, and supporting aquatic.

### **WATER RESOURCES**

Mass gatherings can significantly impact water quality and availability, especially in areas with inadequate infrastructure, leading to pollution from sewage, waste, and increased demand, potentially causing waterborne diseases and straining local water resources (Tiwari, 2025). Mass gatherings generate large amounts of human waste, including sewage and solid waste, which can contaminate nearby water sources if not managed properly. Religious activities, like mass bathing or offering flowers, can introduce pollutants like soap, detergents, and organic matter into water bodies, affecting water quality. A sudden influx of people can strain existing water infrastructure, leading to shortages and potentially impacting the quality of the water supply. Contaminated water can lead to the spread of waterborne diseases, posing a significant health risk to attendees and local populations.

The Maha Kumbh Mela, a massive religious gathering, presents significant challenges to providing clean drinking water and sanitation due to the sheer scale of the event and the temporary nature of the infrastructure, potentially leading to water pollution and sanitation issues. The Kumbh Mela attracts millions of pilgrims, far exceeding the capacity of the local infrastructure, leading to strain on water resources and sanitation systems. Lack of adequate sanitation facilities and hygiene practices during the event can lead to the spread of waterborne diseases and other health problems.

### **AIR POLLUTION:**

The Kumbh Mela, a massive religious gathering, exacerbates air and water pollution due to increased vehicular traffic, waste generation, and religious practices, leading to challenges in sanitation and public health. The influx of millions of pilgrims results in a surge in vehicular traffic, leading to congestion and increased emissions of pollutants like carbon monoxide, particulate matter, and nitrogen oxides. The use of firewood for cooking and other purposes, along with religious rituals like "hawans" and "yajnas," contributes to smoke and particulate matter pollution. Illegal dumping and burning of waste, including plastic and garbage, further worsen air quality. The combination of vehicular emissions and smoke from burning fuel can lead to the formation of smog, a type of air pollution that can negatively impact respiratory health.

The Kumbh Mela, a massive religious gathering, presents significant public health challenges, including increased risk of respiratory and other infections, due to high population density, poor sanitation, and environmental pollution, particularly air pollution (Som, Gupta, Mishra, & Shivani, 2025). The large crowds and dust from the ground, along with potential burning of waste, contribute to high levels of particulate matter in the air. Exposure to these pollutants can lead to respiratory problems like cough, cold, fever, and exacerbation of conditions.

## **2.4 SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS**

### **ECONOMIC BENEFITS:**

The Kumbh Mela, a massive Hindu pilgrimage, generates significant economic benefits for local businesses and communities through increased tourism, job creation, and infrastructure development, with projections for 2025 estimating a ₹2 lakh crore economic impact. The Kumbh Mela attracts millions of pilgrims, leading to a surge in demand for accommodations, food, transportation, and other services, benefiting hotels, restaurants, and local businesses. The event creates numerous temporary and permanent jobs in various sectors, including hospitality, transportation, retail, event management, and sanitation. The Kumbh Mela often triggers infrastructure upgrades, such as improved roads, bridges, and sanitation facilities, which can have long-term benefits for the host city and region. The event generates substantial revenue for the local economy through tourism, retail sales, and government taxes. Local artisans, vendors, and small businesses benefit from increased demand for religious items, handicrafts, and local products. The Kumbh Mela can position the host city as a tourism hub, attracting future investments and promoting cultural exchange. Enhanced infrastructure and renewed cultural pride can sustain economic momentum post-festival.

These festivals enrich the cultural capital of Uttar Pradesh and at the same time provide an impetus to the economic activity in the region. The Kumbh Mela has been a huge success, attracting lakhs of visitors and creating considerable income for the state exchequer. Tourism generates jobs in transportation, including taxi drivers, tour bus operators, and airport staff. Hotels, resorts, and guesthouses employ a large workforce in roles like receptionists, housekeeping staff, chefs, and restaurant staff.

### **INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT**

For the Maha Kumbh Mela, temporary infrastructure includes roads, bridges, health facilities, and security measures, with a focus on managing large crowds and ensuring the safety of devotees. Temporary roads have been extended, and new Road Over Bridges (ROBs) and flyovers have been constructed. Pontoon bridges are used to facilitate access across the river and key areas (Kumar et al., 2025). A total of 92 roads have been renovated, with 17 major roads undergoing beautification. A comprehensive health arrangement is in place, including a 100-bed central hospital, two 25-bed sub-central hospitals, eight 20-bed sector hospitals, and two 20-bed infectious diseases hospitals. Bamboo and fabric structures are erected, and metal plates are laid down for roads. Temporary ghats and riverfront roads are constructed. The infrastructure is designed to facilitate smooth and fast movement of devotees, especially during the peak periods of the festival.

The Maha Kumbh Mela, a large religious gathering, necessitates significant infrastructure development, which can have long-term positive impacts on the host region, including improved connectivity, urban amenities, and economic growth, but also potential negative impacts like environmental degradation and increased health risks. The Maha Kumbh drives substantial economic activity, attracting pilgrims, boosting tourism, and creating jobs in various sectors like hospitality, transportation, and retail. The event often triggers investments in infrastructure, including roads, bridges, sanitation, and water supply, which benefit the local

population even after the event concludes. Improved infrastructure, such as new roads and public transportation, can enhance connectivity and make the region more accessible for tourism and business.

### **SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IMPACTS:**

The Kumbh Mela, a massive religious gathering, significantly impacts local culture and traditions by serving as a melting pot of Indian culture, reinforcing religious practices, and fostering unity and spiritual exchange, while also presenting challenges like environmental impact and overcrowding. The Kumbh Mela acts as a platform for cultural exchange and learning. Scholars, researchers, and tourists from around the world visit the festival, not just as observers but as participants (Buzinde, Manuel-Navarrete, Kalavar, & Kohli, 2022), eager to learn about and experience the cultural and spiritual traditions of India. This exchange fosters mutual respect and understanding, bridging cultural gaps and promoting global harmony.

The Kumbh Mela, a massive Hindu pilgrimage, significantly impacts the daily lives of local residents in Prayagraj, India, with both positive and negative consequences, including economic opportunities, increased traffic and sanitation challenges, and a temporary disruption of normal routines. The influx of pilgrims boosts local businesses, creating jobs in tourism, hospitality, transportation, and retail. The Mela fosters a sense of community and cultural exchange, bringing people from diverse backgrounds together (Udachan, 2025). The event often leads to improvements in infrastructure, such as roads, sanitation facilities, and public transport, benefiting the local population in the long run. The sheer volume of people at the Kumbh Mela creates fertile ground for opportunistic crimes, particularly theft and snatching. Data from the 2025 event, as reported by The Wire, indicates that over 315 First Information Reports (FIRs) were filed at two police stations—Daraganj and Kumbh Mela Kotwali—since the festival began on January 13. The overwhelming majority of these cases involved theft and snatching, with victims losing mobile phones, cash, jewelry, and bags. This aligns with historical patterns; for example, during the 2013 Maha Kumbh in Allahabad, similar petty crimes spiked due to crowded conditions and distracted pilgrims focused on rituals like bathing at the Sangam.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

The research on mass tourism in India, focusing on the Kumbh Mela, took a deep dive into the subject using a bunch of different approaches. They didn't just stick to one method—they mixed it up with focus groups, on-the-ground observations, official government reports, and even checked out the environmental impact. The team got chatting with pilgrims from all over India and beyond, asking them what drew them to the Mela, what they got up to while there, and how it all felt for them.

To really get the full picture, some researchers went all-in and lived in the temporary camps at the Kumbh Mela site. They soaked up the atmosphere, watching the religious ceremonies, seeing how people interacted, and getting a front-row seat to how everything was run. On top of that, they dug into reports from the Prayagraj Mela Authority and other government sources to get the lowdown on stuff like crowd management, healthcare setups, and security plans.

A big part of the study was figuring out what this huge gathering does to the environment. The researchers rolled up their sleeves and tested the water quality, sifted through the waste, and looked at how things like mass bathing, offerings, and just millions of people being there affected the surroundings. They also zoomed in on the economic side of things—how the flood

of visitors boosted local businesses, shifted tourism trends, and put pressure on the area's infrastructure. It was a real hands-on effort to see the Mela from every angle!

## CONCLUSION

The Kumbh Mela is an incredible blend of faith, culture, and the sheer spectacle of millions of people coming together, making it a fascinating case study of mass tourism in India. It's more than just a religious gathering—it's a vibrant celebration of heritage that brings economic boosts and a deep sense of spiritual connection for those who attend. But with all that energy and devotion comes some real challenges. Picture this: millions of pilgrims flooding into one place, putting a massive strain on things like sanitation and clean water. Efforts to manage waste and upgrade infrastructure are underway, but the scale of it all is so huge that it's tough to keep everything under control. Then there's the issue of safety—crowd management and security are no small feat when you're trying to prevent stampedes or other risks. Thankfully, technology like surveillance and crowd monitoring has stepped in to help organizers stay on top of things. The event draws people from across India and the world, which is amazing, but it also sparks some debate about whether this sacred tradition is becoming too commercialized. The way the media frames the Kumbh Mela shapes how it's seen globally, adding another layer to its story. At its core, it's a beautiful mix of devotion and logistics, but keeping it sustainable means finding a balance—holding onto its spiritual roots while tackling modern issues like environmental impact, safety, and responsible tourism that honors both the faith and the land it's built on.

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