

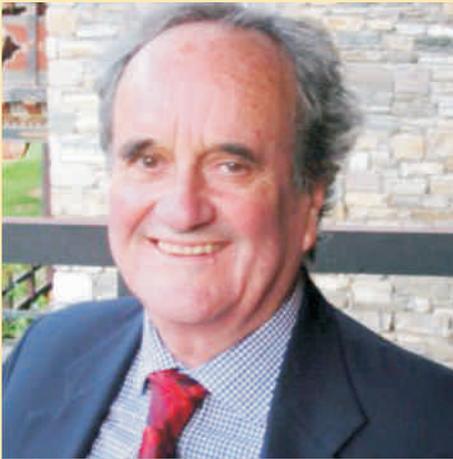


# WRITE CHOICE

Write Choice features excerpts direct from the important books of distinguished writers. It is hoped that readers will be enthused to broaden their perspectives by reading the original works from which the excerpts have been gleaned.

## “The Kumbh Mela is an awe-inspiring demonstration of simple piety...”

- Sir Mark Tully



Sir Mark Tully

Sir Mark Tully KBE, (born William Mark Tully in 1935) is "best-loved Englishman." The former Bureau Chief of BBC, New Delhi. He worked for BBC for a period of 30 years before resigning in July 1994. He held the position of Chief of Bureau, BBC, Delhi for 20 years. Tully was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1985 and was awarded the Padma Shree in 1992.

### The Kumbh Mela

*Excerpts from The Kumbh Mela by Mark Tully Published by Viking, New Delhi 1991 and by Penguin Books Ltd, London in 1992 as Chapter 3 of the book No Full Stops In India. It narrates his experiences of the Kumbh Mela 1989 held at Allahabad.*

Where the Ganges and the Yamuna meet people from many, many, different traditions of Hinduism come together. It is a religion so diverse that scholars often deny it can be classified as one faith, and yet in Hinduism you don't find the hostility between different schools of theology, different sects, which

has been such a feature of religions of the Semitic traditions. This is because the Indian tradition has always been profoundly suspicious of certainty, has accepted that God is indefinable, and that many roads lead to salvation, so no one can claim a monopoly of the truth...

The Kumbh Mela also brings together people of very different backgrounds. There will be well-educated and prosperous pilgrims, and those who have come to ply their trade – barbers and boat men will be in big demand. Politicians will come to do their business too. There will be many genuinely holy men, some charlatans, and some obscurantists.

But the majority of those who will come to bathe in the Sangam will be villagers. Many will have travelled long distances in overcrowded trains; they will have nothing but the barest necessities with them and may have nowhere to sleep except the banks of the rivers. Their faith is based on custom and tradition, and at the last Kumbh Mela they were dismissed by many journalists and commentators as superstitious. But one person's superstition is another person's faith. Throughout the ages it has been the simple piety of faithful people who have not had the chance to be educated, or the to reflect deeply, which has been the bedrock of all religions. Of course the Kumbh Mela is a magnificent spectacle too. Millions of people gathered in one place, colorful holy men, naked sadhus, wondrous feats of asceticism, piety on a scale unparalleled anywhere else...

From the jetty I could see the Sangam,

where the blue waters of the Yamuna mixed with the muddy brown Ganges and then flowed away, sadly more brown than blue, towards Varanasi...

When I got talking to D.I.G Mishra I found that he had been a senior officer at the last Kumbh Mela. His predecessors had left inadequate notes about their arrangements and the problems they faced and so he set out to make a close study of the Mela and to record his findings meticulously. That had led to a book on the Kumbh Mela which was on sale this time.

D.I.G Mishra helped me to find my way through the maze of religious organizations attending the Kumbh Mela – more than 800.

'The akharas' he told me, 'are the focal point of the Kumbh Mela – the big draw, with their naked sadhus. They are the gymnosophists, the warriors of the faith. They have the right to march in procession to the central point of the Sangam to bathe on the big days, and they guard that right jealously.'

That is not surprising because the Kumbh Mela is the most important gathering of Hindu holy men. The akharas are monastic orders of militant sadhus. Historians are not entirely clear about their origins, but they are related to the ascetic orders founded by the great Hindu reformer Adi Shankaracharya. He lived in the eighth or ninth century and is often credited with the final defeat of Buddhism in India, although some scholars argue that Buddhism was already on the way out. Adi Shankaracharya learnt from his enemies and introduced the Buddhist

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tradition of monasticism to strengthen the sinews of Hinduism.

The akharas are said to have defended ascetics against attacks from militant Muslim fakirs. Some of them also hired out their services as mercenaries. As with all good soldiers, there was considerable rivalry between the different regiments, which often lead to fights. The British administration put strict restrictions on the movement of the akharas' naked sadhus, or nagas, but even Victorian prudery could not prevent them marching at Kumbh Mela. The administrator of the 1906 Kumbh Mela had had to order a cavalry charge to break up a battle between the nagas. D.I.G. Mishra was to have his own difficulties with these quick tempered ascetics, although he had taken the precaution of separating the camps of the akharas who followed Lord Shiva from those of their long-standing enemies who followed Lord Vishnu.

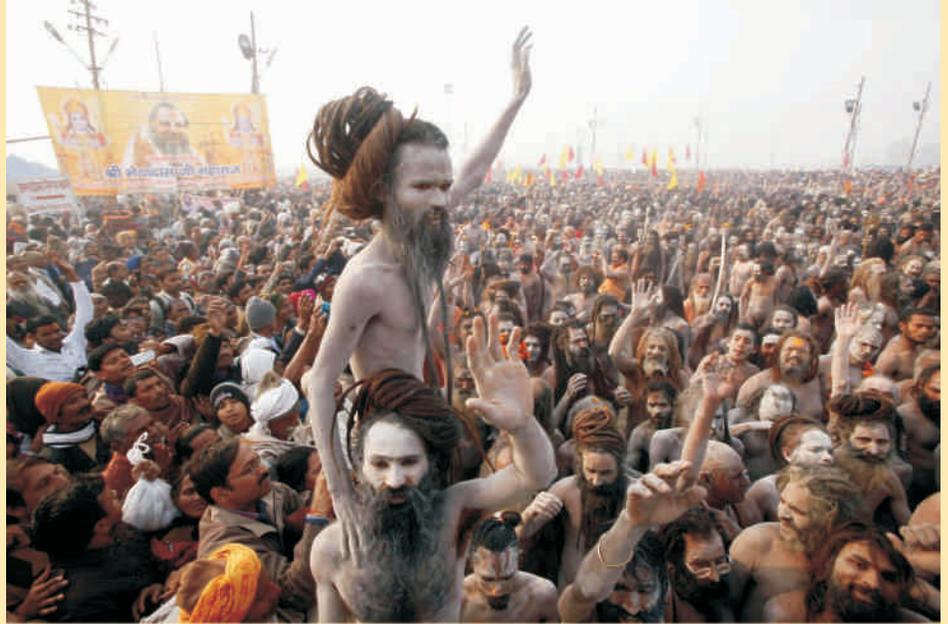
The akharas were now changing, as Mishra explained to me. 'Most of the sadhus now wear clothes. They are also out to recruit a better class of person. For many years now there has been intense rivalry between them to attract good scholars, because they realize now that faith must be tempered with reason. They are also anxious to get older people with influence. Everyone has to deal with government – even sadhus – and for that you need influence.'

'But do many influential people take sannyas [renounce all worldly ties] nowadays? Surely they don't want to give up their modern lifestyle.'

'Oh yes, plenty do. I think I will take the robe when I have finished with the police.'

'I think I will go for one of the modern organizations'

The great reformer Adi Shankaracharya formed four monasteries – one in the north, one in the south, one in the east and one in



the west – to be bastions of the faith. Each is still headed by a Shankaracharya, and three of them had come with their followers to the Kumbh Mela. A fifth Shankaracharya, whose claim to enjoy the Hindu equivalent of apostolic succession is disputed, was also there.

There were hundreds of other holy men and organizations whose pedigrees were not as good as the akharas' and Shankaracharyas' but who all had their disciples. Gurus known in the West, like Maharishi Yogi, were well represented, and so was the Hare Krishna movement. One thousand seven hundred other religious organizations applied for places at the Mela for the first time. Mishra said, 'We decided the best way to deal with them was to say we would charge for all the facilities they got. We didn't hear from them again. The Kumbh Mela is, of course, a wonderful opportunity for religious organizations to recruit and raise funds, but the competition is very stiff.'

Mishra also had to deal with the wandering sadhus, the mendicants who were not attached to any akharas or other religious group. They camped near the free kitchens set up by some of the organizations. Mishra was rather dismissive of the mendicants: 'They normally become viraktas or wandering sadhus', he said, 'because they have lost their families or are frustrated with life. But there are some genuinely spiritual people among them.'

According to Mishra most of the pilgrims came for only one of the big days, but he estimated there were also some 100,000 kalpvasis, pilgrims who came for a longer stay and who took a vow to bathe three times a day in the Ganges, to eat just one meal a day – and that uncooked or coked by their own hands – and to spend their time meditating and reflecting on the state of their soul.

It is very hard not to be cynical about the Brahmin priests who attend to the immediate physical and spiritual needs of those who come to bathe in the Sangam. The lesser priests are known as ghatias. They set up stalls on the river edges, or ghats, where they look after the clothes of the bathers help them with their toilet when they come out of the river and say a brief mantra to complete the process of purification.

Shri Ram Mishra was an elderly ghatia who said his family had been ghatias here for generations. He claimed to have looked after Mrs Gandhi when she bathed in the Sangam. He sat cross-legged on a low wooden platform. A piece of sacking draped behind him kept out some of the sand and the dust. He had small bowls of the powders and pastes necessary for replacing the tilkas and sindoor washed away in the river. There were mirrors and combs too. A woman bather put twenty-five paise into a basket in front of the ghatia and gave him a

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handful of potatoes. He gave her a piece of sacred grass to hold, poured a teaspoonful of Ganges water over her hand and mumbled a brief blessing.

A hundred yards or so behind the ghatias were the pandas, who are big businessmen. Each panda was identified by a huge flag. These Brahmins act as family priests, maintain their clients genealogies, arrange for their stay at the Kumbh Mela and perform ceremonies for the souls of their dead. Rajesh Kumar Panda was writing up the latest developments in the family of a peasant from central India. The family trees are kept in long, thin notebooks whose yellow pages are bound in red.

'Ram Swarup had two sons, so what were their names?' he asked brusquely.

'Omprakashand Shivram.' The priest scribbled hurriedly.

'Have they married?' Do they have any children?' Hurry up. Can't you see how busy I am?'

When he had updated the genealogy, he

turned to me and asked my business. After getting through the inevitable rigmarole, he demanded twenty-five rupees for explaining the role of the pandas. When I agreed, he told me that this was a family business of the ghatias. All pandas have a district of India in which they ply their trade. Rajesh Kumar's was Jabalpur, in central India. He visited his client's there, selling Ganges water to those who had not visited Allahabad recently and encouraging them to be more regular in their bathes.

At the back of his stall was a capacious tin trunk full of his client's registers of birth, marriages and death, each one wrapped carefully in a cloth. Rajesh Kumar took me outside his stall to see his flag, which depicted Hanuman trampling on a demon. Many of the pandas had chosen one or another member of the Hindu pantheon for their flags, but there were secular emblems flying above the stalls too – there was a steam engine, a train complete with a guard carrying a green flag, a fish, and a plough and oxen.

'Now you see how my clients will recognize me.' He said. 'They ask where the Hanuman panda is, and they are directed to my flag. Now pay me my twenty-five rupees quickly – I must get back to my clients.'

I made my way back to the press camp with

the pilgrims who had bathed and were on their home. I had never been in such a peaceful crowd. There was no frenzy, just the calm certainty of faith: the knowledge that what had to be done had been done.

The vast majority of the pilgrims were villagers. Their faith gave them the courage to ignore the ugly rumors and the fortitude to travel in overcrowded trains and busses, to walk for many miles and sleep in the open. The elite for the most part ignored the Kumbh Mela, but those who did come travelled in cars and slept in tents.

No other country in the world could provide a spectacle like the Kumbh Mela. It was a triumph for the much maligned Indian administrators, but it was a greater triumph for the people of India. And how did the English language press react to this triumph? Inevitably, with scorn.

The Times of India, the country's most influential paper, published a long article replete with phrases like, 'Obscurantism rules the roost in Kumbh', 'Religious dogma overwhelmed reason at the Kumbh', and 'The Kumbh after all remained a mere spectacle with its million hues but little substance.' The Times of India criticized the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's politics, but made no attempt to analyze the piety of the millions who bathed at the Sangam. ■

