

SACRED CONFLUENCE, LOCAL CONSEQUENCES: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF MAHAKUMBH MELA 2025 ON THE LOCAL INHABITANTS OF PRAYAGRAJ

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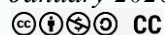
ABSTRACT:

The Mahakumbh Mela, one of the largest religious gatherings in the world, brings significant cultural, spiritual, and economic attention to the host city of Prayagraj. This paper explores the multifaceted impact of the mela on the local residents through a structured questionnaire-based survey of 100 respondents residing primarily in the Nehru Park and Preetam Nagar areas of the Prayagraj city. The study reveals that while the event enhances the city's infrastructure, boosts tourism, and reinforces its cultural heritage, it simultaneously imposes substantial challenges on the daily lives of its residents. Key findings highlight widespread awareness and participation in the mela, with 81% of respondents having visited the event. However, major issues such as overcrowding, traffic congestion, lack of accessible transport, unpredictable barricading, and inflated prices for essential goods and services were reported by a significant portion of the population. Although 84% of respondents appreciated the support provided by administrative bodies, over one-third felt that local needs were not adequately considered in policy and planning decisions. The mela contributed positively to city development, revenue generation, and social service initiatives, yet its benefits were not evenly distributed among the local population. The study concludes that while the Mahakumbh Mela brings spiritual and developmental gains to Prayagraj, its execution must be made more inclusive and resident-sensitive. It offers policy recommendations aimed at balancing the needs of pilgrims and local inhabitants to ensure more equitable urban planning during future events.

KEYWORDS: Mahakumbh Mela, Prayagraj Local Population, Cultural Pride, Infrastructural Improvements

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Mahakumbh Mela, held once every twelve years in Prayagraj, India, represents one of the most significant religious congregations globally, attracting millions of devotees, ascetics, and tourists. Beyond its religious centrality within Hindu tradition, the Mela functions as a large-scale socio-cultural phenomenon with profound implications for the urban landscape and daily life of its host city. While existing literature has largely emphasized the spiritual, logistical, and infrastructural dimensions of the event, less attention has been paid to the lived experiences of local inhabitants who must navigate the accompanying transformations within their immediate environments.

This study investigates the multifaceted impact of the Mahakumbh Mela on the local population of Prayagraj, focusing specifically on residents of the Nehru Park and Preetam Nagar localities. Drawing on data collected from 100 respondents through structured interviews and surveys, the research aims to critically assess how the Mela affects key aspects of urban life including mobility, access to essential services, economic activity, and environmental quality. The findings reveal a dualistic impact: while residents report a sense of cultural pride, infrastructural improvements, and heightened visibility of the city on a national and global scale, they also express concerns over increased congestion, inflated prices, limited accessibility, and inadequate prioritization of local needs during the planning and execution phases of the event.

Notably, although 87% of respondents acknowledged visible infrastructural development and 84% found administrative support to be generally helpful, nearly half felt that their specific needs as residents were marginalized. Furthermore, many reported negligible personal economic benefit, indicating that the broader economic gains associated with the event were unevenly distributed. Environmental degradation, overcrowded transport systems, and inconsistent public service delivery further compounded the challenges faced by the local population.

In examining the interplay between large-scale event planning and urban inhabitant well-being, this research contributes to a growing body of scholarship calling for more inclusive and participatory approaches to mega-event governance. By centering the perspectives of residents—often overlooked in top-down planning frameworks—the study underscores the importance of equitable policy design that balances the spiritual and cultural objectives of events like the Mahakumbh Mela with the everyday realities of urban life in contemporary India.

2. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

To assess the impact of the Mahakumbh Mela on the local inhabitants of Prayagraj, a structured questionnaire survey was administered among 100 local residents. The demographic profile of the respondents is presented below to provide context for the study findings.

- **Age Distribution:** - A majority of the respondents (52%) belonged to the age group of 18–36 years, indicating a predominance of young adults in the sample. The second largest group (19%) was aged between 36–54 years. Respondents under 18 years constituted 12%, while only 4% were above the age of 72. The relatively lower representation of children and elderly individuals may be attributed to restricted movement due to heavy crowding and barricading during the event, which primarily affected working individuals and school-going children.
- **Gender Composition:** - The gender distribution among the respondents was evenly split, with 50% male and 50% female participants. While the sample reflects gender parity, it does not align with the overall sex ratio of Prayagraj, which stands at 901 females per 1000 males, according to the Government of Uttar Pradesh (2025).
- **Educational Qualifications:** - Educational attainment among the respondents was relatively high. Approximately 52% held a graduate degree, while 16% had completed post-graduate education. This trend reflects Prayagraj status as an important educational center in Uttar Pradesh. The city houses major educational institutions including the Department of Higher Education (UP), the

Board of High School and Intermediate Education Uttar Pradesh, a Central University, three Deemed Universities, and an Open University.

- **Employment Status:-** Employment data revealed that 52% of respondents were employed, whereas 48% were unemployed, most of whom were students preparing for competitive examinations. Among the employed individuals, 20% held government positions, 75% were engaged in private employment or self-owned businesses, and 5% worked as laborers. Notably, a majority of those involved in private businesses had been residents of Prayagraj for over ten years.
- **Duration of Residence:-** A significant portion of the sample (67%) had resided in Prayagraj for more than ten years, with many of them being lifelong residents. The remaining respondents had lived in the city for a period ranging from one to five years. This latter group mainly consisted of government officials who had relocated to Prayagraj due to professional postings.
- **Proximity to the Sangam Area:-** The survey was predominantly conducted in the Nehru Park and Preetam Nagar areas, both located near Dhoomanganj Police Chowki. These areas are approximately 11 kilometers from the Sangam. Consequently, most respondents reported that their residences were situated within 10–15 kilometers of the Sangam, placing them in proximity to the main event site and directly exposing them to the logistical and social effects of the Mahakumbh Mela.

3. AWARENESS REGARDING THE KUMBH MELA

The Kumbh Mela is one of the most prominent religious gatherings in the world, and its cultural significance in Prayagraj is deeply embedded in the local consciousness. According to the survey conducted, 100% of the respondents were aware of the Kumbh Mela. This complete awareness can be attributed to the fair's strong historical roots, extensive government promotion, and its recent recognition by UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The event's deep cultural resonance, combined with heavy media coverage and public announcements, has ensured widespread familiarity among the city's residents. When asked about their participation in the Kumbh Mela, 81% of the respondents reported that they had visited the Mela, while 15% indicated that they had the opportunity to attend but chose not to visit the mela. Several factors contributed to the latter group's decision not to visit. These included:

- Overcrowding at the Sangam area, which made access physically challenging.
- Heavy barricading and transportation difficulties, especially affecting the elderly and disabled residents.
- Some long-term residents expressed a sense of familiarity with the Mela, noting that they had participated in previous editions and wished to give space to out-of-town visitors who had traveled long distances to attend the event.

This pattern of participation highlights not only a high level of engagement with the Mela but also a nuanced understanding among locals of its broader significance and logistical challenges.

4. ADVERTISEMENT AND ACCESSIBILITY OF THE KUMBH MELA

The Mahakumbh Mela was heavily promoted through various advertising campaigns led by both government and non-government bodies. Survey results indicate that 92% of respondents had seen advertisements related to the Kumbh Mela, demonstrating the extensive reach and visibility of these campaigns. Notably, 67% of respondents stated that they had encountered advertisements across multiple platforms, including television, radio, newspapers, billboards, and digital media. Only 7% of the surveyed population reported no exposure to such advertisements. The data reveal a clear correlation between advertisement exposure and the decision to attend the Mela. Respondents acknowledged that advertisements played a significant role in shaping their decision to visit the Sangam

area during the festival. Promotional content likely reinforced the spiritual importance and scale of the event, motivating people to make at least one visit during the Mela period.

However, despite this influence, most residents visited the Sangam area only once throughout the event duration. This limited frequency was primarily due to practical concerns such as overcrowding, long walking distances, and restricted access caused by barricading.

The primary motivation for visiting the Mela was religious, especially for the purpose of taking a Holy Bath at the Sangam, reflecting the deep-rooted spiritual beliefs of the local population. Secondary reasons included entertainment, official duties, and educational interest. A notable observation is that 72% of respondents stated that neither they nor their family members participated in the Kalpwaas, a form of spiritual retreat practiced during the Mela. This is attributed to the fact that most participants were permanent residents of Prayagraj and thus did not require accommodation in the temporary tent city. Accessibility to the Kumbh Mela, particularly the Sangam Ghat—the central site of pilgrimage—was a significant factor influencing the experience of local residents during the event. The survey responses revealed a mixed perception regarding ease of access, largely influenced by crowd density and transportation restrictions. Respondents reported using private transportation to reach the Sangam area, particularly on non-peak or non-Snan (non-bathing) days. On such days, when crowd levels were relatively low, private vehicles were permitted to enter areas closer to the Ghat. However, on major Snan days, due to heavy footfall and crowd control measures, roads were blocked and private vehicles were not allowed. As a result, many residents had to resort to a combination of walking and available transport options. The survey indicated that most participants found reaching the Sangam Ghat to be moderately easy to very difficult. The primary challenge identified was the long walking distances required due to traffic restrictions and security barricades. These barriers were particularly burdensome for the elderly and those with mobility issues, limiting their participation during peak days of the event. Due to the necessity of walking, many residents incurred minimal or no travel expenses, especially those who lived nearby. Others reported moderately expensive travel costs when forced to combine multiple modes of transport, such as rickshaws, shared autos, or longer-distance private vehicles, especially when parking far from the event site.

5. OVERCROWDING AND BARRICADING IN THE CITY

The Mahakumbh Mela draws millions of pilgrims from across India and the world, transforming Prayagraj into a densely packed religious hub. While the event holds immense spiritual and cultural significance, it also presents logistical challenges—particularly for the city's permanent residents. The survey revealed that 100% of respondents observed a significant increase in crowd density throughout the duration of the Mela. Notably, 90% reported that the crowd level was "very high" compared to normal days. The intensified population pressure during the event period disrupted daily routines, with 70% of respondents stating that they faced challenges in commuting within the city, even for essential activities such as work, education, and healthcare. This highlights how the influx of visitors during the Mela significantly affected the city's livability for locals. A critical issue raised by residents was the unpredictable and frequent barricading of roads. 90% of respondents reported experiencing barricading during the Mela, not only near the Sangam area but also throughout various parts of the city. The barricades were often erected or removed without warning; as one respondent noted, a road that was open just five minutes earlier could be blocked upon return. Such inconsistency in traffic control measures created widespread frustration, as locals found it difficult to plan even short commutes. Importantly, these restrictions were not limited to pilgrims—residents who were not visiting the Mela still faced movement limitations within their own neighborhoods. In terms of infrastructure and support, feedback on facilities provided to local residents was mixed. While some respondents acknowledged the availability of dedicated facilities to help locals access the Mela area, an equal number felt that such facilities were inadequate or non-existent. Additionally, 25% described the facilities as moderate, suggesting a partial but insufficient effort to address the unique needs of the city's permanent

population. The inconsistency in service provision further compounded the difficulties posed by crowding and barricading.

6. POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THE KUMBH MELA FOR THE CITY

Positive Impacts

- **Infrastructure Development**

One of the most widely acknowledged benefits of the Kumbh Mela was the improvement and expansion of urban infrastructure. 87% of respondents noticed the maintenance and development of roads, bridges, railways, and public spaces. The city was beautified with murals, graffiti, and lighting installations. This urban renewal improved the overall aesthetic and functionality of the city, even beyond the Mela period.

- **Spiritual and Social Unity**

The Mela fostered a sense of religious fulfillment and spiritual upliftment, and several residents noted that the event promoted social unification, bringing together people from different economic and social backgrounds. Charitable acts were also prominent, with 84% of respondents observing the distribution of food, clothing, and blankets to the needy.

- **City Visibility and Tourism**

The global recognition of the Kumbh Mela—bolstered by its UNESCO status—significantly boosted the popularity and international image of Prayagraj. This resulted in a surge of domestic and international tourists, increasing awareness of the city's cultural importance.

- **Economic Boost**

The Mela generated economic opportunities through tourism, local business activity, tent cities, hotel bookings, and services like auto-rickshaw rides and retail sales. However, it is important to note that most residents did not report a significant change in personal income, although the city's overall economy did benefit.

- **Efficient Administration and Cleanliness**

84% of respondents found administrative bodies, especially the police and railway officials, helpful and responsive. Despite the crowd, 84% also said that cleanliness in the city was well-maintained, reflecting successful sanitation management during the Mela.

Negative Impacts

- **Overcrowding and Traffic Congestion**

The most pressing issue identified by locals was overcrowding, with 100% of respondents noticing a surge in population, and 96% experiencing traffic congestion. On peak bathing days, travel times stretched dramatically—even short distances could take hours. Local mobility was severely hampered.

- **Unpredictable Barricading and Accessibility Challenges**

90% of residents reported experiencing barricades, which changed frequently and without notice. Locals often had to walk 11–15 kilometers, regardless of age or physical ability, to reach the Sangam area. This made the site inaccessible for elderly and disabled individuals, and no dedicated routes or services for locals were provided.

- **Increased Cost of Transportation and Goods**

Residents experienced a sharp increase in auto-rickshaw fares, in some cases up to 10 times the normal rate, driven by congestion and longer travel times. 57% of respondents also noted price hikes or scarcity in daily-use commodities, particularly in areas closer to the Mela.

- **Pollution and Environmental Pressure**

The influx of vehicles and the dust they generated led to noticeable increases in air pollution, causing health concerns for some residents.

- **Pressure on Public Services**

Railway stations and trains were heavily overcrowded, with 81% of people needing 3–4 extra hours to reach the station. Despite temporary tent hospitals near the Mela, no permanent healthcare infrastructure was added for residents, and no special arrangements were made for their transportation needs.

- **Safety and Accessibility Concerns**

Many respondents felt it was unsafe or too difficult to bring elderly people and children to the Mela area due to the crowd and long walking distances. Additionally, there were no prioritized routes or facilities for locals, placing them on equal footing with tourists in terms of travel burden.

7. CONCLUSION

The Mahakumbh Mela, a religious and cultural event of immense magnitude, holds significant spiritual and socio-economic relevance for the city of Prayagraj. This study, based on the responses of 100 local inhabitants primarily from Nehru Park and Preetam Nagar areas, aimed to explore the multifaceted impact of the Mahakumbh Mela on local residents. The findings clearly indicate that while the mela brings numerous infrastructural improvements, cultural pride, and economic opportunities to the city, it also imposes several challenges for its residents—particularly in terms of mobility, accessibility, and daily convenience.

A considerable majority of respondents affirmed the administrative preparedness and the spiritual importance of the mela, with 81% having visited the event and nearly all recognizing its presence through widespread advertisement. However, these benefits were accompanied by concerns over overcrowding, traffic congestion, inflated prices for basic services and goods, and long walking distances to key locations such as the Sangam ghat—issues that affected locals' routines and access to resources. Despite 84% of respondents acknowledging administrative assistance as helpful, and 87% recognizing visible infrastructure development, nearly half still felt that the unique needs of local residents were not adequately prioritized in planning and policy-making.

The mela spurred temporary but in this sort time also it had visible changes in the city's environment such as increased charity, decorated cityscapes, and higher tourist influx that resulted in both intangible cultural promotion and tangible revenue generation. Yet, for the everyday life of the citizens, the challenges of barricading, limited transport, overcrowded railway stations, and increased pollution levels often outweighed the direct personal economic gains. Most locals did not observe any significant changes in their income or living costs, suggesting that while the city as a whole may have benefited, the distribution of those benefits among residents was uneven.

In conclusion, the Mahakumbh Mela presents a dual impact on Prayagraj local population: fostering a sense of cultural pride and facilitating city-wide development on one hand, while causing disruptions to daily life and highlighting gaps in inclusive urban planning on the other. Future planning of such large-scale events should aim for a more resident-centric approach, balancing the needs of the incoming pilgrims with those of the city's permanent residents—ensuring that development is both participatory and equitable.

8. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings from this study on the impact of the Mahakumbh Mela on the local inhabitants of Prayagraj, several policy recommendations can be made to ensure a more inclusive, sustainable, and locally-sensitive approach to the planning and execution of future mega-events:

1. **Prioritized Local Access and Mobility**

Special transportation arrangements should be made for local residents, especially the elderly, children, and those with disabilities. Dedicated local routes, resident ID passes, and shuttle services to critical locations like Sangam ghat could significantly ease mobility challenges.

Special corridors should be assigned within the city for the people who want to places other than the Sangam ghat, for example the markets, offices, schools etc.

2. **Transparent and Predictable Barricading Protocols**

If possible clear, publicly announced barricading schedules and alternate route information should be disseminated in advance to minimize confusion and commuting difficulties for locals. Though it is also a fact that for handling such a large crowd barricading is very much required but some alternative ways should be made for the people visiting the other places.

3. **Equitable Resource Allocation**

While infrastructure development is a major benefit of the mela, future projects should explicitly include enhancements to facilities that locals use regularly—such as markets, schools, hospitals, and parking areas—ensuring long-term community benefits.

4. **Price monitoring and Regulation**

Authorities should monitor the pricing of transportation and essential commodities during the mela period to prevent price gouging by private service providers, especially in auto-rickshaws and local markets. Proper supply of the daily commodities should be ensured to check the inflation.

5. **Enhanced Public Transport Availability**

Reliable and frequent public transport should be maintained throughout the mela period, with clear information systems and affordability for local users. Presently the public transports were functioning very well in the beginning but in later stages their accessibility became quite limited. A Proper coverage of the whole city should be ensured.

6. **Targeted Communication and Feedback Mechanisms**

Set up local help centers and digital platforms for residents to voice their concerns, offer feedback, and access real-time updates about changes in routes, services, or emergencies during the mela period.

7. **Health and Environmental Safeguards**

Given the pollution concerns raised by locals, stricter control over vehicular emissions, road dust, and waste management should be implemented. Additionally, permanent or semi-permanent medical facilities, beyond temporary tent hospitals, should be considered.

8. **Inclusive Planning Committees**

Involve local resident associations, educational institutions, and civil society groups in the planning stages to ensure a more balanced and grassroots-informed development model.

By incorporating these recommendations, future editions of the Mahakumbh Mela can become more harmonious with the lives of local inhabitants—enhancing its spiritual significance without compromising the daily functionality and well-being of the host city.

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