

## Mahakumbh 2025 – ‘Holy’Grail for Public Health Personnel

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### CITATION

Kulkarni A, Nath R. Mahakumbh 2025 – ‘Holy’Grail for Public Health Personnel. Indian J Comm Health. 2025;37(2):180-182. <https://doi.org/10.47203/IJCH.2025.v37i02.001>

### ARTICLE CYCLE

Received: 08/04/2025; Accepted: 18/04/2024; Published: 30/04/2025

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The **Kumbh Mela** stands as the world’s largest religious gathering, a unique confluence of spirituality, culture, and public health challenges. Held every 12 years at four sacred locations in India—**Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nashik**—this event draws millions of devotees who converge to take a sacred dip in holy rivers. The primary religious belief behind this ritual is that bathing in these rivers during an auspicious period can cleanse the soul, wash away sins, and lead to **moksha** (spiritual liberation). The Kumbh Mela is a mix of **faith, tradition, cultural history, and public health challenges** on an unprecedented scale.

Among these, the **Mahakumbh** at Prayagraj stands as the grandest and most significant. Occurring once every 144 years, it attracts over **100 million participants** from India and across the globe. This exceptional gathering transforms Prayagraj into a temporary city, requiring vast infrastructural developments, from sanitation systems and healthcare facilities to law enforcement and transportation. Managing such an enormous influx of people necessitates meticulous planning, logistics, and most critically, **public health preparedness**.

### Spiritual and Cultural Significance of the Mahakumbh

- While the Kumbh Mela is rooted in profound religious traditions, its appeal spans beyond the spiritual realm. People from diverse backgrounds—devotees, traders, artisans, scholars, and healthcare professionals—gather, creating a microcosm of India’s vast cultural diversity. Many pilgrims view the Mahakumbh as a **personal spiritual journey**, a form of pilgrimage where families or individuals seek blessings from divine forces through ritualistic cleansing. For others, it is an opportunity for spiritual discourse. Renowned saints, scholars, and monks gather to

discuss and disseminate teachings on **ancient scriptures**, providing a platform for intellectual exchange. The Mahakumbh, therefore, represents not only a religious pilgrimage but also a **cultural and social hub**, fostering deep community connections and vibrant economic activity. The diverse assembly of scholars and saints at the Kumbh Mela, representing various schools of thought, can be considered one of **the earliest forms of an academic conference in human history**. These sages and intellectuals would gather knowledge from across the world and engage in profound discussions during the Mela. The event, held in rotation across the four sacred locations, was timed according to the alignment of the Nakshatras (stars and planets), further emphasizing its spiritual and intellectual significance.

**The Historical Foundations of the Kumbh Mela** - The origins of the Kumbh Mela are deeply intertwined with history of Hindutva, specifically the story of **Samudra Manthan** or the Churning of the Ocean. According to ancient texts, the Gods (Devas) and Demons (Asuras) churned the ocean to obtain **Amrit**, the nectar of immortality. A divine bird, **Garuda**, carried this nectar in a **kumbh** (pot), and during its flight, spilled drops of the nectar at four locations—Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nashik. These places, deemed **astrologically significant**, became the sites of the Kumbh Mela.

The historical symbolism of the Kumbh Mela reflects the **eternal battle between good and evil**, the human quest for immortality, and the cleansing of the soul. In a contemporary context, it also resonates with efforts to improve human health and longevity, aligning with **public health** themes such as **disease prevention, wellness, and the pursuit of human well-being**.

### Kumbh & Health

The **Mahakumbh** is one of the **biggest tests of public health preparedness** in the world. The convergence of millions in one place presents significant **public health challenges and opportunities** for healthcare. Emergency medical services are set up with makeshift hospitals, ambulances, and mobile clinics providing rapid care for injuries, dehydration, and infections. Large-scale vaccination drives are conducted to prevent outbreaks of **cholera, typhoid, influenza, and measles**. Public health officials actively monitor and manage infectious diseases, including tuberculosis (TB) and vector-borne illnesses. The event necessitates proper sanitation infrastructure, including safe **drinking water, toilets, and waste disposal systems**, to prevent the spread of waterborne diseases. Additionally, pilgrims are educated on **medication adherence, nutrition, and basic first aid**, making the Mahakumbh a real-world model of public health intervention. It also offers an invaluable opportunity to deploy large-scale public health strategies and interventions, showcasing the importance of **preventive medicine, health education, and community-based care**.

**Our Experience at Kumbh Mela as Public Health Experts** - What is community medicine without the community? And what is public health without the public? These are questions that every public health professional must ask themselves. The true essence of public health lies not in academic discussions or research papers but in the field, among people, where real challenges demand real solutions. And what better place to experience this than the largest human gathering on the planet – the **Mahakumbh**!

**Preventive Medicine: Addressing Health Issues Proactively** - One of the most impactful aspects of the healthcare efforts at the Mahakumbh was the application of preventive medicine on a massive scale. Many pilgrims, particularly the elderly, had never undergone routine health check-ups and were unaware of underlying health conditions. During our work, numerous cases of undiagnosed hypertension and diabetes were identified, highlighting the importance of proactive health screening. For these individuals, the focus was on early detection and treatment initiation, with follow-up recommendations to ensure ongoing care. Additionally, chronic disease management was emphasized. Those already diagnosed with conditions like hypertension and diabetes were educated on medication adherence, lifestyle modifications, and the importance of regular monitoring to prevent complications. In cases of injury or exposure to contamination, particularly from animal bites or unclean surfaces, prompt assessments for tetanus and rabies prophylaxis were provided, reinforcing the necessity of specific preventative interventions in such large-scale gatherings. This approach underlined the critical

role of preventive care in protecting public health at mass events.

**Diversity of Medical Cases and Resourceful Management** - The **range of medical cases** encountered during the Mahakumbh was vast, including **febrile illnesses, dehydration, minor injuries, and dermatological conditions**. Given the limitations of the makeshift healthcare infrastructure, **resourcefulness and innovation** became essential in providing care to a large number of patients. For example, **coconut oil**, a readily available and low-cost remedy, was used to treat skin conditions such as rashes and irritation, instead of expensive commercial anti-itch creams. **Musculoskeletal pain**, commonly reported by pilgrims due to long hours of standing or walking, was managed with **warm water bottles** as an alternative to prescription medications, reducing the reliance on pharmaceuticals.

An important aspect of managing dehydration was **Oral Rehydration Solutions (ORS)**, which are essential for combating fluid loss. However, many pilgrims carried smaller water bottles (750 ml, available in the market) instead of the 1-liter bottles for which standard ORS packets are designed. Therefore, **customized ORS preparation** was emphasized, ensuring proper hydration practices and preventing the risk of waterborne diseases.

**Collaboration and Multi-Sectoral Partnerships: A Unified Approach** - The **healthcare response** at the Mahakumbh was a **multi-sectoral effort**, involving the collaboration of **government agencies, charitable organizations, and professional healthcare bodies**. This integration was pivotal in delivering comprehensive healthcare services across the event. One notable initiative was the **Netra Kumbh**, organized by **AIIMS Delhi**, which provided **free eye exams and prescription glasses** on the same day. This initiative addressed a common public health concern, particularly for the elderly pilgrims who may not have access to such services in their home regions.

Additionally, the collaboration between **Shri Madhusudan Sai Institute of Medical Sciences & Research (SMSIMSR)**, the **Uttar Pradesh Health Department, Indian Association of Preventive and Social Medicine, National Medicos Organisation** and local healthcare providers was essential in setting up and managing healthcare services. This partnership demonstrated the **power of multi-agency collaboration, where more than 100 doctors participated** in ensuring the successful delivery of healthcare to a large and diverse population. IAPSM has been instrumental in this multi-agency collaboration and have played an active role in providing medical doctors, interns and specialists on rotation basis. Furthermore, **Arogya Seva** played a crucial role in providing free meals to doctors and healthcare

workers, ensuring their well-being during the long hours of service, thereby fostering a spirit of collective effort.

**Public Health Administration in Real-Time: Managing Healthcare Logistics** - Effective **public health administration** is essential in large-scale events like the Mahakumbh. The management of healthcare services for millions of people in a temporary setting required meticulous planning, coordination, and real-time decision-making.

Key aspects of this administration included:

**Inventory management** to ensure the availability of medical supplies, medications, and equipment

**Ambulance services and patient transport** to facilitate the quick transfer of patients to central hospitals when necessary

**Staff workload management** to prevent burnout and ensure efficient delivery of healthcare services

**Waste disposal and infection control** measures to prevent outbreaks of diseases, particularly in a densely populated environment

The sheer complexity of this healthcare operation made it a valuable **exercise in disaster preparedness** and **crisis management**, requiring a level of coordination that mirrors public health responses to **large-scale emergencies**.

**Work Ethics: Commitment to Service Amidst Challenges** - Healthcare workers at the Mahakumbh demonstrated extraordinary **dedication** and **resilience** in the face of severe environmental and operational challenges. The combination of **Heat** during the day, **Extreme Cold temperatures** at night, and constant **noise pollution** created a physically demanding and stressful work environment.

Despite these conditions, healthcare providers remained committed to serving the needs of the pilgrims. The experience underscored a fundamental truth about **community medicine**: it is not merely a profession, but a **calling**. The **ethics of service** and **compassion** were central to the efforts of every healthcare worker, ensuring that they went above and beyond to provide the best care possible under difficult circumstances.

**Mass Screening: A Strategic Opportunity for Disease Surveillance** - The Mahakumbh provided a unique opportunity for **disease surveillance** and **active case finding** on a massive scale. One of the most important public health initiatives was the **screening for Tuberculosis (TB)**, conducted under the **National Tuberculosis Elimination Program (NTEP)**.

Given the high population density, this event was ideal for conducting targeted **mass screenings** for TB, which included **symptom assessments**, **sputum collection**,

and **public awareness campaigns**. This proactive approach not only identified TB cases early but also contributed to addressing the broader **TB burden** in India, making the Mahakumbh an invaluable setting for public health intervention and **disease elimination efforts**.

**Final Reflections: Beyond the Kumbh** - The **lessons learned** from the Mahakumbh extend far beyond the confines of this singular event. The ability to **manage large crowds**, set up **emergency healthcare facilities**, ensure **public safety**, and coordinate **multi-agency efforts** is a valuable asset for public health professionals working in any emergency or mass gathering scenario.

Ultimately, the Mahakumbh represents more than just a religious gathering—it serves as a **living model of public health in action**, illustrating the importance of **being in the field**, working directly with communities, and implementing **real-world solutions to public health challenges**. The experience reaffirms that true public health is not only about research or policy but about **solving real problems** in real time, impacting lives when and where it matters most.

The collaboration between the **Sri Madhusudan Sai Institute of Medical Sciences and Research**, the **Uttar Pradesh Government**, and **IAPSM** which helped manage the **15-bedded free hospital** at Prayagraj, is a testament to the success of public-private partnerships in tackling large-scale health challenges. Through this unique opportunity to serve the pilgrims of the Mahakumbh, we were reminded of the profound impact of **compassionate care** and **collaborative action** in public health.

*We extend our sincere gratitude to the Management team of SMSIMSR and the Uttar Pradesh Government for their invaluable collaboration in managing the 15-bedded free hospital at Prayagraj during the Mahakumbh. This initiative provided an opportunity to deliver critical healthcare to pilgrims and was a deeply transformative experience for all involved.*

*The hospital treated over 40,000 outpatients, facilitated more than 500 admissions, and successfully stabilized nearly 100 Myocardial Infarction patients, referring them to central hospitals for further care.*

*This achievement would not have been possible without the guidance and blessings of **Swami Sadguru Sri Madhusudan Sai**, whose grace and love made this mission a reality. Our heartfelt thanks to Swami for providing us, and the entire SMSIMSR team, with the unique opportunity to witness and serve at the Mahakumbh.*