

MAHAKUMBH: A SPIRITUAL EXTRAVAGANZA

The Mahakumbh is one of the most revered and significant events in Hinduism, an occasion that attracts millions of devotees from all corners of India and the world. Held at four key locations- Prayagraj (Allahabad), Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nashik- the Kumbh Mela is a spectacular confluence of spirituality, culture, and devotion. The Mahakumbh, a rare occurrence, is celebrated at each of these locations. It is considered the largest religious gathering in the world, with millions of devotees immersing themselves in the holy rivers for purification and salvation.

The origins of the Kumbh Mela are deeply rooted in Hindu mythology. According to legend, during the churning of the ocean (Samudra Manthan), the gods and demons fought over a pot (Kumbh) containing the nectar of immortality, known as Amrit. While the nectar was being fought over, a few drops of it fell at four locations in India: Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nashik. These places are now the sites of the Kumbh Mela, believed to be sacred and blessed by the divine nectar, offering devotees the chance to bathe in the waters and purify their souls.

Mahakumbh 2025 is more special not only because of its religious significance but also because of the rare celestial alignment that occurs only once every 144 years. It is during this period that the spiritual energy at the designated bathing ghats (steps leading to the river) is believed to be at its peak, making the ritual of taking a dip in the holy river particularly powerful. This act is considered to absolve sins, elevate one's spiritual stature, and potentially liberate the soul from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

The Mahakumbh is more than just a religious event; it is a massive cultural celebration. The gathering begins with elaborate rituals, including prayer offerings, chanting of sacred mantras, and processions of Nagas (ascetic monks), sadhus, and devotees. Pilgrims from every walk of life, from the humble to the affluent, come together to experience the spiritual grandeur of the festival.

They arrive in droves, some walking for miles or even months to reach the Kumbh site, where they prepare for the most significant spiritual act of their lives- a holy dip in the river.

The experience of the Mahakumbh is a mixture of awe and devotion. The sight of millions of people standing on the riverbanks, dressed in white, with devotion in their eyes, while saints and sages lead the rituals, is mesmerizing.

The atmosphere is filled with chants of "Har Har Gange" and "Om Namah Shivaya", reverberating in the air. The night skies are lit with thousands of lamps and a sense of collective spirituality prevails.

Apart from the bathing rituals, the Mahakumbh also features religious discourses, devotional music, dance performances, and cultural programs.

Numerous temples and ashrams are set up along the riverbanks, offering a glimpse into various aspects of Hindu philosophy and spirituality.

Indian Defence Forces Veterans and the National Security

■ COL SHIV CHOUDHARY (RETD)

Indian defence forces veterans day is being celebrated in India with all the poignancy and respect. These tri-services veterans (here after referred as veterans) are a valuable resource that can play multiple roles especially the critical role in enhancing the national security and nation building. With a pool of approximately 2.6 million veterans, including both officers and enlisted personnel, and 60,000 retiring annually, India boasts a highly experienced workforce. Many of these veterans are still within their prime working years, typically between the ages of 35 to 45, and have served in a wide range of challenging and demanding environments. From deserts to high-altitude mountains, jungles, plains, and islands, they have operated in conditions with temperatures ranging from 48°C to minus 48°C, demonstrating remarkable resilience and adaptability.

This human resource has consistently risen to the call of duty, embodying pride and unwavering integrity in the face of numerous conflicts, battles, and non-military tasks. While these achievements might seem straightforward at first glance, they carry significant weight when considering India's unique security challenges. With borders stretching over an imposing 15,106 km and sharing land and maritime boundaries with nine countries, India faces unpredictable threats, particularly from its two aggressive neighbours. These challenges are further complicated by the evolving dynamics in global and regional security. In such a scenario, it is prudent to look at utility of veterans rather than unnecessarily expressing anguish over their hard earned pension as burden.

In this context, it is essential to ask whether such a valuable group which has honed skills in some of the toughest environments, can be overlooked, underutilized or looked down upon. This article explores how these veterans can be harnessed to strengthen national security, combat terrorism, enhance border defence, and provide crucial guidance and training, thereby benefiting society as a whole.

Veterans represent a rich reservoir of practical knowledge and expertise, honed through years of service in complex defence operations. Many have operated and maintained advanced technologies, ranging from missiles, radars, and air defence systems to submarines, aircraft engines, and state-of-the-art communication equipment. They are proficient in modern weaponry, managing ammunition, and navigating challenging terrains under extreme conditions. This technical

expertise, combined with their hands-on experience in critical security areas such as counterterrorism and insurgency, over sky and sea and under water makes them invaluable assets in addressing both internal and external threats to national security.

Most veterans have operated in conflict zones such as Jammu and Kashmir, the Northeast, and other regions bordering hostile countries, where they gained firsthand knowledge of enemy tactics, local socio-political environments, and the psychological profiles of terrorists. This unique combination of practical experience and tactical insight makes veterans an indispensable resource for assisting in developing counterterrorism strategies that go beyond mere military action. They bring a deeper understanding of the root causes of extremism such as poverty, alienation, lack of opportunities, and political grievances, which are often ignored in traditional military approaches. Their knowledge of local communities gives them an edge in crafting solutions that address these underlying issues while ensuring security.

Veterans' deep familiarity with insurgency tactics, terrain, and regional dynamics allows them to engage more effectively with terror groups. They excel in navigating complex situations, gathering intelligence, and minimizing civilian casualties. Their expertise in human intelligence (HUMINT) is a crucial advantage, as it can complement or even surpass technological surveillance in some scenarios. Veterans are also embedded in local communities, especially in affected areas, which enhances their ability to identify suspicious activities and unusual movements. This local knowledge makes them pivotal in preventing security threats and strengthening overall national defence.

The security of India's vast and often porous borders is another area where veterans can make a significant impact. Having served in these regions, veterans possess valuable insights into the local terrain, climate, and the tactics of both adversaries and local populations. Their operational experience allows them to effectively monitor and patrol border areas, providing early warnings of infiltration attempts and acting as a deterrent to hostile activities. Moreover, veterans' firsthand knowledge of disturbed areas helps to shape policies that balance military operations with diplomatic and community-focused strategies. These approaches contribute to long-term stability, reducing opposition and fostering cooperation with local populations.

In addition to national security, veterans can also play a vital role in crisis management.

Their experience in high-pressure situations equips them to handle emergencies, from natural disasters and accidents to counterterrorism operations. Veterans are trained to remain calm under pressure, make quick decisions, and efficiently organize resources, which is invaluable during national crises. Whether it's providing humanitarian aid, managing refugees, or ensuring the smooth flow of essential supplies, veterans' skillsets are critical to minimizing the impact of such events. Their training in managing civilians during emergencies further enhances their ability to protect strategic assets and support local authorities in times of need.

Beyond their operational contributions, veterans are uniquely positioned to combat radicalization and indoctrination. Having experienced the devastating consequences of extremism firsthand, they can serve as influential voices in preventing individuals from being drawn into terrorist ideologies. By engaging with vulnerable communities, veterans can offer guidance, mentorship, and intervention, helping to steer at-risk individuals away from extremist paths. This preventive role adds an important layer to national security efforts, making veterans a key asset in the fight against radicalization.

Another significant contribution veterans can make is in training and mentoring not only law enforcement and security personnel, but youth across board for multiple aims and goals. Many security agencies, including the Para-Military Forces (PMFs), state police forces, and Village Defence Committees (VDCs), are on the front lines of internal security. While these agencies are well-trained and dedicated, they can benefit immensely from the specialized knowledge and real-world experience that veterans bring. Veterans can share crucial skills in areas such as counterterrorism operations, crisis management, and emergency response, without undermining the authority, capability or cohesion of these forces. Additionally, their understanding of local terrains, languages, and security protocols would improve coordination between different security agencies and local communities, ensuring that operations are executed more efficiently and effectively.

Veterans can also serve as important advocates for peace and reconciliation, helping bridge the divide between military, civilian communities, and government institutions. Many veterans, disillusioned by the brutal realities of war, can become powerful voices against the emotional and psychological toll of conflict. Through speaking engagements and written works, they can shift public perceptions, promoting diplomacy, human

rights, and peaceful conflict resolution over militaristic approaches. Incidentally, the far less percentage of veterans absorbed in the corporate sector continues to excel and sustain in their organizations seamlessly.

Veterans are in a unique position to offer a more realistic perspective on military life, especially to young individuals considering joining the armed forces. While military recruiters often highlight the brighter side of service, they may overlook the emotional, physical, and moral tolls of war. Veterans, by sharing their personal experiences, can help guide prospective recruits toward a better understanding of the realities of military service. This can ensure that individuals who join the forces are better prepared, reducing the risk of attrition and enhancing the overall effectiveness of the military.

The relationship between the military and civilian sectors is vital for national security. Veterans, having experienced both worlds, can play a pivotal role in fostering understanding between the two. They can help civilians understand the complexities of military goals, role and operations, as well as the challenges soldiers face. At the same time, veterans can communicate the concerns and aspirations of local populations to military leadership, particularly in border areas where civilian-military relations are often fraught with tension.


Many veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other psychological challenges. Their journey of healing and recovery can serve as a source of inspiration and support for others facing similar struggles. By fostering a culture of empathy and understanding, veterans can help break the stigma surrounding mental health issues and promote a culture of care and solidarity within both the military and civilian communities.

India's tri-services veterans are a critical, yet underutilized, asset in the country's national security framework. By recognizing their potential and strategically, smartly and selectively deploying them in areas where their skills and experience can be most effective, the government can tap into a wealth of knowledge and capacity. Rather than relegating veterans to mundane jobs, they should be engaged for larger societal and national benefits without unduly worrying for remuneration where they can contribute to national security and nation building in numerous meaningful ways. Their skills, experience, and dedication to the nation can be harnessed to safeguard the country, just as they demonstrated during their active service.

(The author is a military veteran and a motivational speaker)

Modi Govt Welfare Schemes Reflect Dr B R Ambedkar's Vision

■ BALBIR RAM RATTAN

 Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, envisioned an inclusive and classless society where equality, justice, and opportunities were available to all. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, through its welfare schemes and initiatives, has sought to translate Ambedkar's vision into actionable policies, particularly for the marginalized sections of society.

The welfare schemes introduced by the Modi government align with Ambedkar's ideals and work toward addressing inequalities, empowering marginalized communities, and fostering socio-economic justice. Dr.

Ambedkar dedicated his life to fighting caste discrimination, advocating for the upliftment of the downtrodden, and ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens. His vision rested on three pillars- Social Justice, Economic Empowerment and Education for All. These pillars are integral to creating a society where individuals can rise above socio-economic barriers and contribute meaningfully to nation-building. The Modi government's initiatives resonate with these ideals, targeting the underprivileged to ensure holistic development.

Dr. Ambedkar emphasized economic empowerment as a means to eradicate poverty and inequality. The Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, launched in 2014, is one of the most significant steps in financial inclusion. This scheme has enabled millions of unbanked individuals,

especially from marginalized sections, to access formal banking systems. corruption and ensured that funds reach the intended beneficiaries, aligning with Ambedkar's ideals of empowering the oppressed.

Ambedkar believed in empowering individuals economically to enable self-reliance. The Stand Up India and Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (PMMY) are revolutionary schemes aimed at providing financial assistance to entrepreneurs from Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and women.

Through Mudra Yojana, over 40 crore small entrepreneurs have received loans without collateral, fostering a culture of entrepreneurship among marginalized communities. Stand Up India complements this by offering loans specifically

for SC, ST, and women entrepreneurs, thereby breaking barriers to entry in the business world.

Access to healthcare is a fundamental right that Ambedkar envisioned for an equitable society. The Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) is the world's largest healthcare scheme, providing free medical coverage of up to rupees 5 lakh per family annually.

Dr. Ambedkar strongly advocated for women's empowerment, recognizing their critical role in societal progress. The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, which provides free LPG connections to women, has transformed the lives of over 9 crore families.

Education and skill development were central to Ambedkar's strategy for uplifting marginalized communities.

The Modi government's Skill India Mission aims to equip the youth with job-ready skills, ensuring they are employable in a competitive market.

Ambedkar regarded housing as a basic necessity and a marker of dignity. The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), which aims to provide affordable housing for all, particularly focuses on SCs, STs, and other marginalized groups. Under this scheme, millions of houses with basic amenities have been constructed, ensuring that even the most disadvantaged sections have a roof over their heads.

Ambedkar envisioned self-sufficient villages as the cornerstone of India's development. The Modi government's focus on rural infrastructure, electrification (Saubhagya Scheme), and water supply (Jal Jeevan Mission) has trans-

formed rural India.

Dr. Ambedkar's vision for an equitable and inclusive India remains a guiding light for policy makers. The Modi government, through its comprehensive welfare schemes, has made remarkable progress in realizing this vision by addressing economic inequality, promoting education, and uplifting marginalized communities.

While challenges persist, the foundation laid by these initiatives provides a robust framework for achieving Ambedkar's dream of a just and equitable society. By ensuring that the benefits of development reach the last mile, the government reinforces the principle of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, and Sabka Prayas"-an ethos that resonates deeply with Ambedkar's ideals.

Mahakumbh 2025: Where Tradition Meets Transformation

■ AMITABH KANT

The Kumbh Mela, one of the world's largest religious gatherings, symbolizes faith, unity, and humanity's timeless connection to the divine. Rooted in mythology, it commemorates the spilling of nectar of immortality (amrit) at four sacred sites- Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nasik- during a cosmic struggle, with its timing dictated by celestial alignments of the Sun, Moon, and Jupiter. Millions gather every 12 years to bathe in holy rivers, seeking purification and salvation. Over time, Kumbh Mela has evolved, blending ancient traditions with modern innovations.

On February 4, 2019, Kumbh Mela witnessed the largest peaceful gathering of humanity ever recorded. This extraordinary event, deeply rooted in spirituality, is a celebration of faith, community, and commerce. With fairs, educational events, religious discourses by saints, mass gatherings of monks and diverse entertainment, Kumbh Mela exemplifies the vibrant ethos of Indian society.

The 2019 edition in Prayagraj was particularly remarkable, hosting an estimated 240 million visitors over 50 days, with 30 million attending on February 4 alone. Held at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the fabled Saraswati rivers, preparations included a sprawling tent city across 3,200 hectares with 440 km of temporary roads, 22 pontoon bridges, nearly 50,000 LED street-lights, and extensive sanitation infrastructure.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the Kumbh Mela in 2019 was a gesture of gratitude to the organizers and workers who made the event a global success. During his visit, he honored sanitation workers, washing their feet as a mark of respect. He reinforced the spirit of the Swachh Bharat Mission, saying "Honouring remarkable safaikaramcharis... I salute each and every person making a contribution towards a Swachh Bharat."

The 2019 Kumbh set new benchmarks for cleanliness and public sanitation. Compared to just 5,000 community toilets in 2013, the 2019 event



saw 122,500 toilets, complemented by 20,000 dustbins and 160 waste transport vehicles. Innovative measures, such as water jet spray machines for cleaning, significantly reduced waste wastage and eased sanitation work.

Toilets were strategically placed for accessibility and included gender-specific and disability-friendly designs. Pink toilets for women, serviced by female workers, encouraged adoption, while elderly-friendly toilets addressed inclusivity. The introduction of impervious sewage tanks eliminated the risk of river contamination.

One of the standout innovations was an odor-dispelling solution, first tested during the 2018 Magh Mela and scaled up for Kumbh 2019. Produced on-site by student researchers, nearly 65,000 liters of this solution were manufactured daily. Additionally, swachhagrahis (cleanliness volunteers) played a pivotal role in maintaining sanitation and promoting toilet usage. Equipped with IoT-enabled mobile apps, these volunteers monitored 60,000 toilets across the sprawling grounds, ensuring real-time issue resolution. This initiative not only enhanced operational efficiency but also empowered the volunteers, many of whom were

youth and women.

In 2017, UNESCO inscribed Kumbh Mela on its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The 2019 edition lived up to this honor, showcasing India's capacity for organizing events of unparalleled scale and significance.

With the 2025 Mahakumbh Mela in Prayagraj expected to host over 300 million pilgrims from across the globe, the scale and ambition of the preparations are unprecedented under the leadership of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. His commitment to preserving the sanctity of the Mahakumbh while elevating its global stature is unwavering. His hands-on approach, from regular reviews of infrastructure projects to ensuring the welfare of pilgrims, reflects his dedication to flawless execution. The Chief Minister's vision also emphasizes community participation, encouraging local artisans, cultural groups, and volunteers to play an integral role in creating an event that embodies the essence of "Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat." Guided by the successes of the transformative 2019 Mela, the upcoming edition promises a seamless blend of devotion, technology, and sustainability, setting new global benchmarks.

One key focus is on expanding the venue and accessibility. The number of ghats will be significantly increased to enable safe and orderly bathing, even during peak days, supported by advanced crowd management techniques to avoid congestion. Transport infrastructure is being enhanced, with special trains and improved railway networks connecting Prayagraj to major cities. Multi-lane highways, upgraded intersections, and expanded parking areas are being developed to manage heavy vehicular traffic. Additionally, Prayagraj Airport is undergoing an expansion to handle increased passenger capacity, with chartered flights introduced for international pilgrims.

To cater to the millions of pilgrims, public amenities are being upgraded on an unprecedented scale. Over 50,000 eco-friendly toilets and portable sanitation units will ensure hygiene and convenience. Clean drinking water facilities, solar-powered lighting, and expansive shelters are being developed, reflecting a commitment to pilgrims' comfort and well-being. Technology will play a pivotal role in transforming the Mahakumbh 2025 experience.

AI-powered crowd control systems, supported by drones, will monitor real-time crowd density to prevent overcrowding. Pilgrims will have access to dedicated mobile apps offering real-time information on routes, ghat timings, weather updates, and emergency services. Moreover, a cashless economy will be promoted through digital payment systems, including UPI-enabled kiosks, simplifying transactions for vendors and pilgrims alike.

Sustainability is a cornerstone of the 2025 Mela, building on the green initiatives introduced in 2019. A zero-waste policy will guide operations, with extensive recycling systems and composting facilities in place. Plastic use will be strictly regulated, and biodegradable alternatives will be promoted for packaging and utilities. Advanced water treatment plants and real-time quality monitoring systems will ensure the sanctity of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers, while massive afforestation drives around the riverbanks aim to mitigate soil erosion

and improve water retention. Renewable energy sources like solar panels and bio-energy systems will power large sections of the Mela, significantly reducing its carbon footprint.

Safety and security are paramount for an event of this scale. Over 10,000 CCTV cameras with AI-enhanced facial recognition technology will monitor the premises, while thousands of personnel, including paramedics, fire services, and disaster response teams, will remain on standby. Temporary hospitals and clinics, equipped with advanced medical facilities and supported by telemedicine services, will ensure timely healthcare for attendees.

The Mahakumbh Mela 2025 will also be a cultural and spiritual showcase. Dedicated pavilions will feature traditional music, dance, and art from across the country, with exhibitions on the history and science of the Kumbh Mela, complemented by VR experiences. Interfaith dialogues involving global spiritual leaders and scholars will foster harmony and understanding among diverse faiths. Special programs for youth, including workshops, clean-up drives, and volunteering opportunities, aim to instill responsibility and spiritual growth.

To enhance its global appeal, tourist-friendly initiatives such as multilingual information centers and guided tours will cater to foreign visitors. Spiritual tourism packages, including heritage walks, will highlight the region's rich history. Inclusive provisions for differently-abled individuals, including wheelchair-accessible zones and personalized assistance, will ensure a welcoming environment for all.

The 2025 Mahakumbh Mela is poised to be a spiritual and logistical marvel, uniting faith, innovation, and sustainability on an unprecedented scale. It reflects India's ability to honor our ancient traditions while embracing modern advancements, offering an unforgettable experience for millions worldwide.

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