

Shuddhabrata Sengupta

Astrology, Mortality, and Indifference to Life

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Kumbh Melas are held every twelve years. The last Haridwar Kumbh Mela – a Hindu pilgrimage and festival held at the Haridwar (Ganges) river – was held in 2010. This means the actual due date for the “current” Kumbh at Haridwar is 2022, not 2021. So how did it get advanced by one whole, lethal year at a time when India’s second Covid wave was expected? Epidemiological studies indicate, of course, that second waves of infection are always worse than the first.¹ Let me tell you the reason.

It was “advanced” by a year, to 2021, because the “astrological configurations” of the “Sun entering Aries” and “Jupiter entering Aquarius” were available for 2021 this time.² This happens once every eighty-three years because of the need to reconcile astrological configuration charts to calendrical years. The calculative arcana of this “adjustment” is beyond my capacity. I suggest none of you try working it out if you don’t want to give yourself a headache.

So, not only did the government of India and the government of Uttarakhand *not* cancel the Kumbh Mela, which they could have easily done so as not to endanger the lives of millions of people by causing a Covid-19 super-spreader event; they also need not have let it take place this year at all, simply because this is the eleventh year, not the twelfth, since the last Kumbh Mela at Haridwar. They could have used this extra time to create the conditions whereby holding an event like the Kumbh could have made some kind of sense, maybe, in 2022.

Instead, they did much worse. In consultation with the Akhil Bharatiya Akhada Parishad (All India Akhara Council, an organization of Hindu Sants [saints] and sadus [ascetics]), they “advanced” the date, knowing full well the dangers of the pandemic, because some astrological mumbo-jumbo told them that this was desirable. Because, you know, “*Aastha*/Faith,” that beloved article that makes the Supreme Court reward criminal trespass with a building plan, is also what makes the governments of India and Uttarakhand do what they must to put people’s lives in danger on a grand scale.

A History of Contagion

The Kumbh Mela is a historically documented site of contagion. Governments in India have sometimes pulled off the efficient and compassionate management of the staggering public health problems posed by an event like the Kumbh. The 2013 Maha Kumbh, said to have been the largest gathering of its kind in history, went off without any adverse event. This is corroborated by an in-depth study of the epidemiological issues, as well as preparedness for calamities and disasters, undertaken by the

Harvard School of Public Health.³ But there was no rampant pandemic at the time.

With Covid raging since 2020, one doesn't need a PhD in public health to guess that an occasion like a Kumbh Mela Shahi Snan (mass bathing in the river) could be the possible epicenter of a second contagious wave of the disease, which, given the conditions of the Kumbh, would most likely turn into a tsunami of illness. That is exactly what happened at this year's event.

Everybody in India, and frankly, the world, is now at risk as a result of some foolish decisions by a few ignorant men in Delhi and Dehradun.

None of this should have come as a surprise, including Narendra Modi's belated and half-hearted counsel that the rest of the Kumbh be "symbolic."

Chinmay Tumble's recent book, *The Age of Pandemics: How They Shaped India and the World*, includes a specific discussion of pandemics and successive Kumbh Melas.⁴ Also useful is David Arnold's 1986 article "Cholera and Colonialism in British India," and Kama Maclean's 2008 book, *Pilgrimage and Power: The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, 1765–1954*.⁵ The history of the Kumbh Mela and disease has been well documented over the years.⁶ The World Health Organization has a monograph about cholera that includes a section on the Kumbh.⁷ There is even an article in the *Indian Medical Gazette* from 1895 on the "Natural History of Haridwar Cholera Outbreaks," and a more recent paper, "A Comprehensive Review of the Kumbh Mela: Identifying Risks for Spread of Infectious Diseases," published in *Clinical Microbiology and Infection* in 2015.⁸

So was it ignorance on the part of the prime minister and his advisers that led them down this dangerous path? Or a deliberate political decision taken despite knowing the risks?

Timeline Shows Government Knew of Risks

In an indication of its awareness of the public health risks, the Uttarakhand government hemmed and hawed over whether and how to hold the Kumbh Mela over the past year.

In July 2020, the then chief minister of Uttarakhand, Trivendra Singh Rawat (BJP), assured the Akhil Bharatiya Akhada Parishad that the Kumbh Mela in Haridwar would be held as per usual (when he was in no position to predict what might happen in the future, and thus not in any position to offer such reassurances). "However, the manner in which it has been traditionally organized may see some changes depending on the coronavirus situation at that time," PTI reported him saying.⁹

In September 2020, Trivendra Singh Rawat said that there would be restrictions on

attendance.¹⁰

In December 2020, the "saints" of the Akhada Parishad expressed their "dissatisfaction" with the state of preparation for the Kumbh Mela. It is possible that the Uttarakhand government was reluctant to go ahead with what may finally have been seen as a disaster in waiting and was using "unpreparedness" as a valid reason to not go ahead at the last moment. However, the Parishad threatened to stage the Kumbh Mela on its own steam.¹¹

On March 9, 2021, Trivendra Singh Rawat resigned. His successor, Tirath Singh Rawat, immediately said that there would be no *rok-tok* – no restrictions – on pilgrims, and that with Goddess Ganga's blessings, faith would triumph over disease.¹²

After resigning, Trivendra Singh Rawat expressed misgivings over the turnaround on restrictions at the Kumbh Mela. The *Hindustan Times* quoted him saying that "given the rising number of Covid-19 cases in India, there is a need to be more cautious in organizing mega religious fair like Mahakumbh."¹³ This suggests that one of the elements that led to his dismissal may have been differences of opinion with the Central BJP leadership, and factions within the Uttarakhand BJP, about how to handle the Kumbh Mela.

In April, as the event began, even the central government's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare sent mixed messages. On April 6, ANI, a news agency particularly favored by the government, put out a report suggesting that senior government officials had expressed concern about the Kumbh Mela turning into a "super-spreader event."¹⁴ The report was picked up, and published with minor variations, by many portals and magazines, including *India Today*. The very same day, however, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare tweeted that the *India Today* report was "#FakeNews."¹⁵ The denial was terse; it did not even say whether a government official had been misquoted. What it did convey was the impression that the government of India was in total denial mode about the possibility of the Kumbh Mela becoming a serious public-health emergency, and that it would go to the extent of cancelling a statement made by a senior government official.¹⁶

Political Culpability

The Chinese government may have been responsible for a degree of understatement regarding actual figures in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, but they took steps to contain it, and they certainly did nothing to amplify it. The regime that rules India, on the other hand, has taken steps that have led to a

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huge rise in infections. This could have been avoided. Unlike the Chinese regime, this time the Indian state cannot even pretend to say that it was caught unaware by the outbreak of a disease. Not only was it in command of all the knowledge necessary to know that there could be a second wave, but also, by letting the Kumbh Mela happen – by actually scheduling it during a time when it did not even “need” to happen – the Indian government actively took steps to create the conditions for a second wave.

It is bad enough that different government agencies and entities are working at cross-purposes, sending contradictory messages (such as the prime minister belatedly asking for “symbolic” participation in the remaining rituals of the Kumbh Mela, while simultaneously exhorting large numbers of people to come out to vote for election rallies in Bengal). What is worse is doing nothing when something is required to be done, or doing too much when nothing is required to be done, or just fudging numbers and telling straightforward lies (such as about death rates in Uttar Pradesh recently). All told, the government of India, and the government of Uttarakhand, have messed it up in a very big way. But whatever else they may or may not have done, and regardless of whether eighty-three years have or have not passed since the last “off-cycle” Kumbh Mela, there really was no justification for advancing this massively scaled event by a year.

And all this has happened when the vaccination program has barely gotten underway. Again, there is no way by which anybody can rationalize holding mass gatherings at this time. The same goes for elections, which an election commission possessed of a spine and/or a brain could have easily insisted on postponing, or at least on curtailing rallies. But that was not to be.

Why Let Astrology Trump Public Health?

So, have Kumbh Melas been advanced by a year before? Yes, they have, in 1938, and in 1855, when similar “astrological configurations” were in place.¹⁷

Are we living in 1938, or in 1855? Was there an airborne viral epidemic around in 1938? There actually was a cholera epidemic in 1855, and that year’s Kumbh Mela did hugely amplify the disease. People knew this even then, though their understanding of epidemics was much less than it is today. The International Sanitary Convention of 1866 in Istanbul specifically looked at reports of disease spread from the Kumbh Mela locus. There was international consensus reached in 1866 on Indian pilgrimage sites along the Ganges River as the sites where cholera developed, and then spread – first to

Mecca, then Egypt and the Mediterranean seaports of Europe, before entering major European cities. This is all documented in the transcripts of the International Sanitary Conference, which was held between February and September 1866 in Constantinople/Istanbul, then the capital of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁸

In 2021, when we know so much more about disease than we did in 1938 or 1855, a rational, sane government should have used all its persuasive power to convince a bunch of self-appointed “holy men” that maybe, just this time, they could put “astrology” in abeyance and rely simply on the calendrical calculation of a twelve-year interval between two consecutive Kumbh Melas.

Was this not one key instance where there could have been a sensible dialogue between ordinary reason and faith -that could have helped save lives? Perhaps, given that all the astrologers of India put together are unable to come up with an explanation, based on their “discipline,” for how and why a pandemic of this nature broke out when it did, this would be a reason to let “astrology” take a bit of a back seat, just for a while. This would be especially expedient when it comes to taking major policy decisions like whether to commit government support to a super-spreader event.¹⁹

1942: When War Led to a Curbed Kumbh

Finally, have government agencies ever effectively curtailed Kumbh Mela observances? Is there a precedent for saying, “Let’s not do it this year?” Yes, there is.

The government of India did not make any arrangements to facilitate the Kumbh Mela–Magh Mela conjunction held in Allahabad in 1942. No railway tickets to Allahabad were sold for the duration of the Kumbh, and in the days leading up to it. This automatically restricted the number of pilgrims who could travel to Allahabad. This was done citing the possibility of a bombing attack by the Japanese air force – because Japan had entered the Second World War in September 1940. Further, no logistical arrangements were made to accommodate crowds at the site of the Mela. Attendance at the Kumbh in 1942 was very low. There were no widespread protests by any of the Akhadas against the withdrawal of government support for the Kumbh that year.²⁰ It was understood, by all stakeholders, that circumstances had dictated the necessity for a different kind of response.

This time, instead of cancelling trains, Indian Railways ran special trains to Dehradun/Rishikesh for pilgrims to the Kumbh Mela at Haridwar.²¹ And the government placed advertisements in newspapers, on radio, and TV

exhorting pilgrims to gather in large numbers.

“Death is inevitable but traditions must go on”

Simply deciding to not run these trains or not publicize the event could have made a huge difference. But no.

How could it have been so? There are elections to win, and the support of various holy men is deemed crucial as ever, as are the opportunities to make money off contracts and advertising revenue for an event that can hold millions captive to disease and to mammon. And so, the men at the helm of the governments of India and Uttarakhand laid a death trap. And they knew what they were doing. Even the “holy men” were fully aware of what was going on.

“Death,” said Mahant Narayan Giri of the Juna Akhada, on April 17, 2021, “is inevitable, but we must maintain our traditions.” He was declaring why he and his fellow holy men did not call for a curtailment of the Kumbh Mela gatherings, and why, for him, it was going to be business as usual at Haridwar.²²

Less subtle minds will ask why this open invitation to death is not being condemned on every forum. Especially when the Tablighi Jamaat was pilloried for saying much less. Truly subtle “Sanatani” minds will understand why. Good Hindus, emboldened by Karma and the theory of reincarnation, get more than one chance at the game of life. Death may be inevitable, but for the Holinesses, such as the eminence of the Juna Akhada, it is not irreversible. You may die today, but the Karmic debt you incur by voting for Narendra Modi will certainly bring you back tomorrow. So why not, if you want it stronger, dip a little longer in the Kumbh cauldron? You live, you die, you live, you pass on an infection, you kill some more, you die, you live, you die, and so on.

Some of us may not be so blessed, because, in our belief systems, or, in our nonbelief systems, we get just one shot at life. Accordingly, we try our best to prolong the time given to us, to try and preserve our lives and those of others, and to persevere, by wearing our masks, avoiding gatherings, maintaining as much of a social distance as possible from the vectors of this disease and the religiosity, and the governmentality, that takes life, and death, so casually.

But these, dear Indians, dear Hindus, are your leaders and your holy men. They are your mirrors and your death wish. Take a good look at them. Because they are not looking out for you.

The stars, indifferent in heaven, feel no need to laugh at you. Frankly, no matter what you think about them, they don’t even care about you.

Best of luck.

X

This essay was originally published in *The Wire Science*, April 23, 2021 <https://science.thewire.in/health/leaders-listened-to-astrologers-so-haridwar-mela-happened-after-11-years-not-12/>.

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