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Akharas at Kumbh: Parampara, Sampradaya and Purushartha

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Abstract

The religious festival of Maha Kumbh, which is held at 4 holy places Haridwar, Prayag, Ujjain and Nasik in India is one of the largest gatherings of devotees of Sanatana Dharma celebrate the occasion on basis of 12 years cycle associate with Nakshatras calculations based on Jyotisha system and participate with enthusiasm and take holy bath without observing any caste restrictions at Kumbh. The present paper will analyze the role and significance of Akharas the custodians of Sadhu Parampara(tradition) at Kumbh Mela. The theme will focus on historical journeys, organizational aspects, structure of knowledge and hierarchical order of Akharas in Sadhu Parampara. The ideology, monastic discipline and categories of different Akharas are highlighted in the paper will shed a viewpoint on the characteristics features of Dashnami, Juna, Niranjani and Nagas Akharas and their subsequent contributions in proliferation and assimilation of Sadhu Parampara of Sanatana Dharma. The Akharas are central to the Kumbh celebrations and their subsequent hierarchies at observance of Shahi Sanan Parampara are crucial for the maintenance of peace and social order at Kumbh. The paper will also discuss the process and development of the traditional order of these Akharas, the initiation ceremonies and training of the Sadhus of different Akharas and how these integrate the religious and mundane activities in their orders and what purpose the Akharas serves for Sanatan Dharma generally and at Kumbh specifically. The paper finally analyzed the system of mentioned Akharas and their specific contributions in the Maha Kumbh.

Keywords: Sadhu, Kumbh Mela, Parampara, Sanatana Dharma, Akhadas, Jyotisha

1. Introduction

The religious festival of Maha Kumbh, which is held at 4 holy places Haridwar, Prayag, Ujjain and Nasik in India is one of the largest gatherings of devotees of Sanatana Dharma celebrate the occasion on basis of 12 years cycle associate with Nakshatras calculations based on Jyotisha system and participate with enthusiasm and take holy bath without observing any caste restrictions at Kumbh. The present paper will analyze the role and significance of Akharas the custodians of Sadhu Parampara(tradition) at Kumbh Mela. The theme will focus on historical journeys, organizational aspects, structure of knowledge and hierarchical order of Akharas in Sadhu Parampara. The ideology, monastic discipline and categories of different Akharas are highlighted in the paper will shed a viewpoint on the characteristics features of Dashnami, Juna, Niranjani and Nagas Akharas and their subsequent contributions in proliferation and assimilation of Sadhu Parampara of Sanatana Dharma. The Akharas are central to the Kumbh celebrations and their subsequent hierarchies at observance of Shahi Sanan Parampara are crucial for the maintenance of peace and social order at Kumbh. The paper will also discuss the process and development of the traditional order of these Akharas, the initiation ceremonies and training of the Sadhus of different Akharas and how these integrate the religious and mundane activities in their orders and what purpose the Akharas serves for Sanatan Dharma generally and at Kumbh specifically. The paper finally analyzed the system of mentioned Akharas and their specific contributions in the Maha Kumbh.

2. Statement of the Problem

The present research paper has been an attempt to visualize the Sant Parampara or Sadhu Orders or *Akharas* and their sacred relationship with Maha Kumbh tradition in Sanatana Dharma, the historical narrative about the *Akharas* been one of the important parts of history and these not only have been part of Maha Kumbh but also played prominent role in defense of Sanatana faith in historical past.¹

As in Sanatana tradition the foundation of these *Akharas* attributed to the Adi – Shankaracharya, who revive and rejuvenate the Vedic philosophy and pose challenge to supremacy of Buddhism in 8th Century India, his travel from South to North India (*Dhammdigvijayatra*) played a significant role in re-establishment of Sanatana Dharma and subsequent formation of four *Mathas* provides a strong material and philosophical base for dissemination of Sanatana faith, later to maintain discipline and social order the Institution of *Akharas* were introduced, the reference of these been mentioned in many historical works ,The *Akharas* are special types of organization of Sadhus who are well versed in *Sastras* and well equipped and trained in Arms, many organizations like Dasnamis are organized into 7 *Akharas* , they hailed from the Guruparmpra tradition of Shankaracharya, so Sadhus are related into this organization of *Akharas* to defend and disseminate the Santana Dharma.²

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Historical Context of Akharas

The *Akharas* are organizations which are not only significant for the Maha Kumbha celebrations but played very pivotal roles in history of Sanatana Dharma as defenders and custodians of Sanatana Faith. There are vivid references in history which describe the role of *Akharas* in defense of Sanatana Dharma. There is proper understanding of the context and notions which have been investigated and explored by historians. The *Dasnamis* and *Naga* Sadhus fought valiantly against the invading Mughal forces of Aurangzeb during the attacks on Prayag and Benaras in 1664 and 1667 respectively, the role of *Nagas* and *Dasnamis* warriors been well documented by later historians. By the time of decline of Mughal Empire in 18th Century the chaos prevailed in India, during this period *Nagas* and *Dasnamis* Sadhus joined the rank and files of various local rulers such as Marathas, Bundelas, and Jats to provide combined struggle against the invaders like Ahmad Shah Duranni of Afghanistan even some records indicated that during 3rd battle of Panipat these warrior ascetics accompanied the Marathas against Durrani. In mid- 18th Century the band of these warriors joined the Civil War which ensued between the various regional kingdoms, finally with establishment of British rule in Bengal the popular *Sanyasi* rebellion in 18th Century devastated the forces of East India Company and *Sanyasis* fought pitched battle against the Company but because of lack of resources these *Sanyasis* were defeated by Company's forces. So, these warrior ascetics were major forces to reckon with in Medieval and early Modern times. There are various sources that in early 18th century many *Gosains* of *Dashnamis* were well versed in commercial subjects manned and managed the mercantile activities in Princely states of Datia, Jhansi, Gwalior, Darbhanga and Bhagalpur.⁶

3.2. Historicity of Kumbh Melas

The early reference of Prayaga gathering is from the account mentioned in the Bana Bhatta of Harsh Carita, wherever he mentions about a massive assembly gathered on the banks of Parayaga in 643 CE, the fact been corroborated by famous Chinese traveler Huein Tsang who provide detailed description of the event during the rule of Harshvardhan. The Puranas which were compiled during 8th to 11th century have reference about the sacred events held at Prayaga, the Vishnu and Narad Purana has description about the huge gathering of Sharman, Munis, Bhikshu at Magh Month on Banks of Ganga river in Prayag during the reign of King Vikramaditya but there is uncertainty about the dates mentioned in these Puranas , however undoubtedly the annual bathing ritual held at Magh month in Prayag The name *Kumbh* wasn't use in any historical record it had become one of the important part of Sanatana ritualistic tradition by 11th century in India.

In medieval times there are scanty references about Magh festival, it held occasionally at Prayagraj as documented from different sources but Medieval chroniclers didn't inform or write about much these events in details, so some historians provides justification that as because of Muslim rule the festival might not be celebrated with much fanfare and show-off by the Sanatanis and because of chaotic conditions prevalent during 18th century and participation of various *Akharas* in warfare of the period, the event might not be reported at extensive scale.⁷

The first documented reference for Kumbh Mela been found for 1867 Mela at Haridwar which was organized with the help of Colonial Authority a gathering of people and entry of *Akharas* tradition for first time observed in the Kumbh, it was the first official Kumbh the Gazzeteer of Northwest Province in 1872 Describe" It was the first religious gathering of Hindoos after Mutiny, the arrangements been extensive, the thousands of colorful tents marks the landscape, thousand devotees took holy bath and immersed the body in water of river Ganges". In Arya Samaj tradition the Kumbh of 1867 was one of the crucial events in dissemination of ideology of Samaj, here Swami Dayanand Sarasvati raise the banner of revolt against the superstitions prevalent in Sanatana faith and engage into polemic against the Sanatana faith.⁸

In later years like 1882, 1889 and in 20th century we have massive information about celebrations of Maha Kumbha were reported and covered regularly by the newspapers and journals. After Independence of India, the first Kumbh was held at Prayagraj in 1954 where more than 6 million people participated, and administration successfully completed out the arrangements for the first Kumbh Mela in Independent India.

3.3. Akharas System: Segregation

The *Akharas* system begins with four in numbers established by Adi-Shankaracharya, later it grew to 13 based on the shastric traditions, Parmparas the general division were based on the ideology and worshippers of deities' traditions, Shaiva, Vishnu and blended Hindu Sikh tradition called Udasis

SHAIVA--- Juna, Niranjani, Mahanirvani, Avahan, Ananda and Atal

VAISHNAVA---- Sri Nirvani, Digambhar and Nirmohi

UDASIS----- Naya, Bada and Nirmal Panchayat

In later years a new addition was made to the system introduced by the name of Kinnar *Akharas*. Since post-Independence in every Kumbha festival these *Akharas* with their disciples congregate and stay at place and join the Shahi Sanan with great pomp and show the devotees show the reverence and enthusiasm it is believed that by having Darshan of the Sadhus they would be Mukht – Seek salvation from the birth and death cycle

as prescribed in Sanatana religious scriptures. The most important aspects of Kumbh Parampara are that it does not adhere to any caste restrictions in Shahi Sanan festival the millions take holy bath on Ghats without observing any caste discrimination nobody bothers about the identity of caste in Kumbh.⁹

The entire structure signifies the importance of the systematic pedagogy of the Sanatana tradition being imparted to all Sadhus of the *Akharas*, they are well versed in Shastra and Sastra the two major components symbolize the significance of defense of Sanatana Dharma . The *Akharas* aren't meant only for participation in Kumbh festival, it invokes Dharmic principles in various Mathas of India, according to education reports compiled during colonial period estimated that about 3,20000 Mathas and Pathshalas were there in India in 1830's and 1840's having the well knitted educational network spread across different states of India.

The major pilgrimage centers like, Ayodhya, Kashi, Ujjain, Gaya in Northern and Eastern India had been dotted with these educational centers provided education to masses in Vedic philosophy, Grammar, Arithmetic, elementary Book keeping (account) and languages were taught to the pupils the Niranjana and Dasnami *Akharas* imparted Arms training or "Sastra Vidya" to the disciples, the Naga Sadhus were well trained and lived in Military discipline at their *Akharas* and whenever need arose Nagas Sadhus fought the battles to safeguard the Sanatana Dharma.¹⁰

The hierarchy of every *Akharas* never adhered to caste practices however highest ranks are usually dominated by the Brahmans because of their role as teacher in the Institutions but practice of inter dining and community kitchen in *Akharas* absolve the caste discriminations at every level, the burial practice in Sadhu Samaj further established and confirm that after death the process of renunciation of soul from body and its union with God is achieved finality of the purpose for which a Sadhu enters and initiated into the monastic order of *Akharas*.

4. Conclusion

So we have analyzed the integrity of Kumbh and *Akharas* system within the Parampara of Dharma, the paper presented and researched onto the domain of Significance of *Akharas* Parampara in Sanatana faith and its adherence to ritual practices enshrined in the early Vedic philosophy till the advent of Adi- Shankaracharya who formalized and revived the Sanatana faith through establishment of Mathas and *Akharas* in India which provided an essential motivation to people of faith to counter the invading armies of Mughals and saved the Dharma from complete annihilation. The counterattack by the Sadhus in Mughal and Colonial period to safeguard the Sanatana Dharma proved to be significant and *Akharas* association with Kumbh festival provides legitimacy to *Akharas* as helmsmen and protector of the Sanatana Dharma.

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