

120m people expected at Indian festival

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From last June, Dilip Trigunayak would stride out to the banks of the Ganges each day and will the holy waters to recede. The clock was ticking. In six months' time, the floodplains where he stood would be the site of possibly the largest human gathering in the world ever.



“I would watch the water levels going up and down,” the official says. “From then my anxiety started.”

More than 120 million Hindu devotees and tourists are expected to visit the north Indian city of Prayagraj over the next few weeks for the Kumbh Mela, a vast spiritual festival at the point where two sacred rivers, the Ganges and Yamuna, converge. As the rivers emptied of monsoon rain, Indian authorities have swung into action, reclaiming the riverbed and laying the skeleton for a temporary city two-thirds the size of Manhattan.

The festival starts this morning, when tens of thousands of Hindu ascetics will charge – roaring, naked and smeared with ash – into the water, sanctifying it for the tens of millions of pilgrims who will follow.

Prayagraj is believed to be one of four sites in India where drops of the essence of immortality were spilled from an urn being fought over by gods and demons. The festival moves between the four locations, with Prayagraj the largest. Pilgrims wait for days to bathe there for a few seconds, including at least 30 million people on the most auspicious day.

For India's Hindu nationalist government, which has an election looming, the Kumbh's message of unity across the religion's many castes and deities dovetails with the ruling Bharatiya Janata party's goal of consolidating Hindu votes.

This is the first Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj since the city's name was changed from the Muslim Mughal-era Allahabad. No Kumbh Mela has ever been so well-funded, nor so heavily promoted online, in newspapers and on billboards, invariably alongside the face of India's Hindu nationalist prime minister, Narendra Modi.

“In many recent Kumbhs there’s always been a political presence,” said Kama Maclean, who teaches south Asian history at the University of New South Wales in Australia.

“For most people who go it’s a religious event. But from the 1930s, people were going to the Kumbh Mela, bathing in the Ganga and then going up to [India’s first prime minister] Jawaharlal Nehru’s house and learning about nationalism.”

Pilgrims will cross a pop-up city of 200 miles of roads, nearly twodozen pontoon bridges, a hospital, 40 police stations, 120,000 toilets and more than 40,000 lights.

The core of the festival are some 200,000 Hindu sadhus, or holy men, many emerging from seclusion in forests and mountains to take up residency in the tent city. Many belong to one of the 13 major sects represented at the festival, first formed as militant defenders of Hindu temples, and who in the past have turned on each other to decide who bathes in the holy river first.

Sarabhang Giri, an Australian who became a sadhu in 2004, said: “They have physically fought over the order. Thousands of people have died in Kumbh Melas through history. Now they’ve worked out treaties saying, ‘This is the order in which we do it; if there’s any change, there has to be big discussions.’”

As well as keeping the peace, organisers must try to curb disease. The first cholera epidemic of the 19th century was traced to the 1817 Kumbh Mela. As well as building toilets and deploying 9,000 “night sweepers” to deal with waste, authorities want the river to flow fast enough to avoid stagnation but not to wash away bathers. Stampedes are another threat. The most recent crush at the Prayagraj train station killed 36 people in 2013.

The key is to keep the crowds moving, says Devesh Chaturvedi, who organised Prayagraj’s last Kumbh Mela. “Even if the water is 500 metres away, we have a system where the pilgrims can be moved for another three or four kilometres.

“People won’t worry about how much they have to walk. After five or six hours of walking, they should finally get their dip.” One pilgrim, Devi Prasad, says he walked hundreds of miles from Bihar state to bathe where the rivers meet. “If you want to get close to God, you have to walk.”