

India

At the Largest Gathering of Humanity, Who Takes Out the Trash?

By [Krista Mahr / Allahabad](#) Feb. 12, 2013



Hindu devotees walk past a pile of trash after taking a dip at the Sangam, or the confluence of the Yamuna, Ganges and mythical Saraswati rivers, at sunrise during Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, India, on Feb. 12, 2013.

There is perhaps nowhere in the world where people strip down with such gusto as they do on the banks of the Ganges during the Kumbh Mela. On Feb. 10, some 30 million pilgrims converged on a narrow strip of riverfront in Allahabad, India, ditching their sweaters, pants, saris, skirts, T-shirts, scarves, sandals and whatever other garments stood in their way between this mortal coil and a little salvation. Some tiptoed gingerly into the murky water, plugging their noses as they went under; others ran in with a battle

cry. But every pilgrim washed their sins away in the water on that holy day, when the stars and planets aligned for a fleeting moment to spill life-giving nectar from the heavens into the Mother Ganges.

As the faithful left, dripping and shivering, workers in orange vests swooped in to collect the thousands of orphaned sandals, sweaters, vests, T-shirts and scarves, clearing the way for the next wave of bathers to come and start it all over again. The mounds of soggy clothes left behind are a small part of the massive amount of waste being generated every day at this year's Kumbh Mela, the gathering that happens every 12 years in northern India. This Kumbh, 100 million pilgrims are expected to make their way to the river's edge during the 55-day event, and they will create some 200 tons of garbage every day. Getting that trash out of the hundreds of camps and clearings where people sleep and eat during the pilgrimage is not just a sanitary and logistical necessity, it's an opportunity. The central government will spend over \$220 million on this year's Kumbh Mela, but officials estimate that 15 to 20 times more will be generated in jobs and businesses supporting the event.

Most of the year, "Kumbh City" is not an inhabited part of Allahabad. There is no pre-existing water or electricity supply there, or any system to get rid of human waste. But by the time the festival started this year in January, Kumbh City was a functioning metropolis with a population larger than most permanent cities in the world and many small countries too. The government erects vast tent encampments, some 40,000 toilets, hospitals, markets, emergency services, food stands, supply shops, offices and hundreds of temples. Making sure all of that stays clean is quite literally a matter of life and death. "Every minute is critical," says Ramesh Srivastava, the additional director in charge of the *mela's* health and sanitation. "If you say, 'Now it's O.K.,' something will happen."

That fine line was tragically demonstrated this week when systems to control the masses both inside and outside the Kumbh grounds broke down. On Sunday, three people were killed in crowding inside the festival grounds, though their cause of death has yet to be determined. The same day, another 36 people were killed at a railway station in Allahabad when a bridge collapsed as tens of thousands of commuters crowded the platforms. Inside the grounds, authorities dispatched thousands of police and special forces to deal with crowd-related emergencies and drew up over a dozen separate plans to deal with different crowd conditions. Eighteen temporary bridges were constructed to control the movement of the crowd, along with 822 portable barriers, 126 fixed barriers and check points and 68 watchtowers. Azam Khan, the state minister in charge of the Kumbh Mela, resigned the day after the deadly incident. "I take moral responsibility and resign as the in-charge of the Kumbh," he told reporters.

Some systems are working better than others, and the camp sanitation seems to be one of them. Places to throw trash away on the grounds are easier to find than they are in most cities in India, with municipal garbage collectors deputed from their regular jobs in Allahabad to work around the clock against the

endless flow of paper teacups, political flyers and wrappers that litter the grounds. According to doctors, most of the patients admitted to the main hospital have arrived with respiratory and cardiac problems, both pre-existing conditions, as opposed to disease or illnesses contracted in the camp. Sure, it's still a bit of a mess. Even 40,000 toilets are not enough to accommodate millions of people, and there are massive, open-air pit toilets in different places around the grounds. The bleaching powder and lye sprinkled around those pits and other spots to prevent insects from breeding seems, to the naked eye, to be doing the job. But it does give one pause to watch families cook their evening roti on a dirt ground dusted with white chemicals.

Officials say at least 100,000 people will be employed inside the festival grounds during the event. By Sunday afternoon, Kumbh City's wide streets were packed with pilgrims heading home, carrying their belongings on their heads. Raj Mani, one of the garbage-truck drivers working on the site, rested in the cab of his truck, waiting for them to pass. "No one can go anywhere right now," he said, watching people stream by. Mani has been hauling garbage at the Kumbh for years now. He says he doesn't make much money doing it — he just gets paid for the diesel it takes to get the garbage to the dump outside the city — but for Mani, it's worth it. "I'm working for the Mother Ganges," he says. He sleeps in the truck for the month he works in Kumbh City and gets up every morning to walk down to the riverbank and take a dip. "That's the first work I do."

Outside the festival, officials estimate another 100,000 people have been working to support the massive event. A few kilometers away from Kumbh City, a front loader trundles up to a black mound of refuse and scoops a heap of steaming trash into its maw. It reverses toward an elevated conveyor belt in the yard of this 25-hectare recycling plant, and a crew of men scramble up a ladder to the belt's edges, getting ready to start sorting the incoming load. The Allahabad Waste Processing Company (AWP) is the last stop for Allahabad's trash — and all the trash generated in Kumbh City. Or rather, it's almost the last stop: the majority of the trash that arrives there is recycled into either organic manure or organic plastic pellets, which are used to make products like sandals and trainer soles.

Since the Kumbh started, the amount of trash that AWP handles on a daily basis has increased by 30% — and so has the quantity of products it's been able to make. "Everyone hates the garbage around us," says Anil Srivastava, a manager at AWP working the night shift after starting the day with a predawn dip in the Ganges. "They don't understand that it's also money." That scores of discarded scarves and sandals from Kumbh City are destined to find a second life in a wheat field or on somebody's feet is an unlikely — but somehow fitting — end to what is left behind by the millions of pilgrims, submerging themselves in the hope that the river will give them, too, a new beginning.

— *With reporting by Alka Pande / Allahabad*