

Abstract – Deshna Mehta

Session: Kahani, parampara, aur bhavishya: Oral traditions, their role and impact

Being in it and being of it

Conversations at the Kumbh Mela, Allahabad 2013, Nashik-Trimbakeshwar 2015, Ujjain 2016

Things afar make you wonder. Getting close builds curiosity. Observing raises questions. Engaging evokes emotion. A transition from experience to expression, *Being in it and being of it* is a compendium (spanning 13 volumes) and 2 documentaries (this far) documenting the Kumbh Melas of Allahabad 2013, Nashik-Trimbakeshwar 2015 and Ujjain 2016.

The ritual performer, the faithful, the curious, the observer, the formless worshipper, the agnostic - the Kumbh landscape can potentially accommodate every tone of belief. It is a landscape that houses diversities and contradictions; all of which converge at the flowing rivers that level these paradoxes. The essence of the Kumbh through the viewpoints of over 250 people 'voices' engaged with the Kumbh scape in a participatory manner in real time and performing various roles that are inspired by and contribute to this landscape form the base of this documentation.

Data of religious and spiritual significance gathered from saints, sages and pilgrims complemented by practical and logistical facts gathered from organisational personnel and academicians, alongside the team's unavoidable 'outsider' perspective balanced through an honest and clear rendering of collected anecdotes and experiences of the mela attendees forms this body of work. This undertaking attempts to create an unbiased, experiential and communicative narrative which seeks to invite people to come and experience the Kumbh Melas for themselves. It provides a comprehensive overview of the Kumbh landscape by distilling valuable information and thoughts gathered from having spent a little over 6 weeks at the Kumbh of Allahabad in 2013, 7 weeks at the Kumbh of Nashik-Trimbakeshwar in 2015 and 2 weeks at the Kumbh of Ujjain in 2016.

The intent of this documentation is to unearth the essence of a gathering as intense and immense as the Kumbh Mela, its prevalence and subsequent manifestation in the way it tangibly unfolds and the intangibles it houses. With a focus on individuals (through an anthropological approach), the hope is to make sense of the collective spectacle.

Challenges on-field whilst navigating the scape, making connections and being led to various people, to observe and to not know and therefore ask, to be told and not having seen and therefore to keenly observe, co-incidences, the unpredictable being the only predictable, the emergence of structures, categories, design, information architecture, a bibliography that comprises only primary research, the 'no objection certificates' prior to publishing are integral parts of the process of the on field documentation and off field compilation. Multi-perspective thinking, informal learning, self-organisation, emergence and recognising interdependencies (some in hindsight) best encapsulate the intent and process both, for this endeavour.

Making its way recently into UNESCO's list of Intangible World Heritage of Humanity has generated an interest about the Kumbh Mela amongst audiences who may not necessarily have connected to this landscape on the outset. Through this platform of the World Living Heritage Festival, the hope is to reveal stories and insights, share processes and learnings from the opportunities of having undertaken the Kumbh journeys this far.

thekumbhmelaexperience.com

This sharing by Deshna Mehta is on behalf of the in house team at Studio Anugraha and the many collaborators who joined hands with the studio team to embark on and document the Kumbh journeys.