

## 17. Planning and programming for a government-hosted mass-gathering event in India: the 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh Mela

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India has a long tradition, going back to colonial times, in which government plays host to multi-week Hindu festivals, known as *melas*. Since independence, Uttar Pradesh's state government has hosted melas in its Prayagraj (formerly Allahabad) district. In 2017, the newly elected head of this state government, Yogi Adityanath, a Hindu monk belonging to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BNP), brought together his government ministers and officials to tell them that one of his priorities was for the 2019 mela in Prayagraj to be more than a usual one: the experience of attending would be as magnificent as possible for as many as could attend. This would be a Kumbh Mela, a major focus for regional and local development in the state. Cleanliness would be a major goal, and preparations would get underway 18 months ahead of the event. Chief minister Adityanath also named officials who would be responsible for such preparations, one of whom, Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer Ashish Kumar Goel, was directed to serve as commissioner for Prayagraj division and given the additional role as 'nodal officer' for the 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh Mela, and reporting directly to the chief secretary, the highest-ranking official in the state government. The case is broadly about managing a programme of major projects in government in preparation for hosting a mass-gathering event – one that turned out to be the largest human gathering ever on the planet.

The case is suitable for use in a course concerned with public management, an academic discipline centred on the collective endeavours of implementing public programmes and managing public organisations. It can be used to show what tasks – managerial and otherwise – are functionally necessary to implement a public programme in a

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novel way, making it suitable for teaching early in a course concerned with innovation, management and delivery in government. It can also be used in instructing students how to explain the functioning of major projects.

Guidance on how to write a case analysis can be found in Chapter 1, 'Business cases: what are they, why do we use them and how should you go about doing a case analysis?.'

## Introduction

In March 2017, the *Bharatiya Janata* ('Indian People's') Party (BJP) won the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh (UP) Assembly elections and formed a new government for India's most populous state and the world's most populated subnational entity (approximately 250 million people by 2018). The new chief minister (CM), Yogi ('active practitioner of Yoga') Adityanath, was a Hindu monk, *mahant* ('head priest') of the monastic order running a temple in Gorakhpur (UP), and founder-leader of a religious-political youth organisation. He assumed office on 19 March 2017.

The BJP's government of UP (2017–), as with the BJP's national government of India (2014–), displayed an ambitious, institutionally reformist agenda around the upgrading of governance. A symbolically important part of this agenda evolved around the idea of organising the upcoming Hindu festival of Kumbh Mela of Prayagraj, to be held in January to February 2019, in the best possible way.

## Continuity and change: the concept for the Prayagraj Kumbh Mela 2019

The Kumbh Mela ('great pot') Festival or Fair is the most important regular Hindu religious event in India. For as long as sources can trace (some 13 centuries), pilgrims gather once a year in selected riverside sacred places where the Hindu gods are believed to have unwantedly spilled *mana* from heaven, during a legendary fight. Millions of people travel to these 50–60 day gatherings, and state governments are responsible for the organisation of the events.

Kumbh Melas of Allahabad (since 2018 known as Prayagraj) have always been the most attended melas in India, and quite probably the most attended mass gatherings on Earth. The previous big festival, in 2013, had been attended by an estimated 100–120 million people, and was the object of careful logistical preparations, ensuring a clean, safe and satisfying stay for visitors. These preparations included local infrastructure upgrades and special planning and coordination of security and sanitation in and around the Triveni Sangam grounds, the 20km<sup>2</sup> area where the most important parts of the event take

place. Although the 2013 event had been praised by most visitors, many administrative and logistical challenges remained regarding adequate infrastructure for the large quantity of visitors, crowd management, the prevention of accidents, and cleanliness of the festival grounds and the areas for ritual bathing in the sacred river waters.

The state government's political vision for Prayagraj Kumbh Mela (PKM) 2019 was to run a 'great Kumbh'. The festival had to be open and welcoming of all Indians, regardless of caste, gender and age. It had to be especially attractive to the young. And it had to show that better governance could be achieved in India's biggest state. The vision coalesced into a slogan for the 2019 festival: a *Swachh* (clean) Kumbh, a *Divya* (divine) Kumbh and a *Bhavya* (great) Kumbh.

UP's government initiative aligned well with the Indian national scene. The 2014 election had brought BJP's Narendra Modi to power as prime minister. The campaign pivoted on the need for rapid development through institutional change, as his 'victory tweet' expressed: '*Bharat ki vijay, acche din aane wale hai*' ('India has won, good times are about to arrive').

A centrepiece of Modi's government was the creation, in December 2014, of the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog 'policy commission'), which replaced the long-standing classical top-down, Planning Commission (1950) and its five-year plans. NITI Aayog provided intellectual support for nationwide social transformation *abhiyaan* ('campaigns' or 'missions'). These transformations aimed to achieve governance and behavioural change, delivering planning and management strategies capable of effectively coordinating ministries' actions through pivotal campaigns. This was particularly the case for *Swachh Bharat* ('Clean India', 2014–2025) and *Nanami Ganga* ('Clean Ganges', 2014–2022).

The *Swachh Bharat* mission was presented by Narendra Modi with words chosen to reflect Mahatma Gandhi's *Satyagrah se Swachhagrah* (loosely translated 'cleanliness is moving towards the truth'; *satyagrah*, loosely translates as 'the force of truth'). The aims of Clean India were to eliminate 'open defecation' (the human practice of defecating in the open – fields, bushes, forests or other open spaces – rather than into a toilet), and to improve solid waste management, eradicating 'manual scavenging' (hand manipulation of waste) in urban and rural areas. This was to be achieved through a kind of behavioural change facilitated by monetary incentives, volunteer work (*Swachhagrahis*, 'ambassadors of cleanliness'), and sanitation infrastructure development. The campaign received technical and financial support from the World Bank, and required the scaling up of coordination between ministries, states, divisions and districts. The main goal was to achieve an 'open-defecation free' India by October 2, 2019, the 150th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's birth.

The *Nanami Gange* mission was intended to 'abate pollution' and promote 'conservation and rejuvenation' of the Ganges River Basin, covering an area that is distributed across eight Indian states and is inhabited by between a fifth and a quarter of India's 1300 million citizens (2018 figures). Clean Ganges'

main project lines were aimed at identifying 'pollution hotspots' (crucial source areas); intercepting, diverting and/or treating waste water (including industry shutdowns, if necessary); and cleaning the river surface and coastlines.

## **Governance and organisation for PKM 2019**

After Independence in 1947, India's national- and state-level governments were broadly modelled on the British Westminster-Whitehall governmental system. Governments are formed based on parliamentary composition: at the state-level, the head of government is the CM. Cabinet government includes ministers appointed by the CM. In the UK Whitehall pattern, the government is supported by a civil service, headed at the state level by the chief secretary, appointed by the CM. The Civil Service is composed of many branches, some of which are functionally specialised (for example, in policing). The Indian Administrative Service is a branch that provides officers to serve as representatives of the state government within territorial jurisdictions within states.

Indian states are divided into districts. A number of districts comprise a division (for administrative purposes), which is managed by UP government-appointed 'commissioners'. The role of commissioners (normally senior IAS officers) is to supervise state activities in the territory, from land-use to planning, coordination and control of services and special projects. Districts have politically elected mayors who preside (with limited powers) over councils or local governments (the most populated districts like Prayagraj have municipal corporations). The districts' administrations are managed by (mostly junior) IAS district managers, also called 'collectors'. IAS, Indian Forest Service (IFS) or Indian Police Service (IPS) officers manage their sector-related agencies (among them development and police).

PKM 2019 was to be organised by the Allahabad-Prayagraj division commissioner. The person invited to occupy this pivotal position was a senior IAS officer, Ashish Kumar Goel. He knew the melas relatively well, as he had previously served as Allahabad district magistrate/collector in 2007–2008 and, in this role, had been responsible for a Magh Mela, a much smaller version of Kumbh Mela. He was also part of team for the Kumbh Mela 1998 in Haridwar (now in Uttarakand) as joint magistrate, and had seen up close the Kumbh Mela 2013 in Allahabad.

Goel was serving in Lucknow (UP state capital city) and was directly given the goals and conditions of the invitation: he was to produce an unmistakably great festival in all possible senses. He knew how some of the best Indian administrators had been historically at pains to control all the variables for a 'no issues' mela, and had a fair idea of what needed to be done. Success depended on developing costly infrastructure for the host city, controlling upstream river pollution in one of the most densely populated areas of UP and India and building, managing and dismantling the temporary city in the timespan of little over three months – when the Triveni Sangam and adjacent areas are free from flooding.

Goel was assured he would have as much high-level support as possible. The national–state political alignment would make full financial support easier (though not necessarily simpler) to secure. A generous UP special budget was to be ear-marked for the campaign, and the national government's involvement was to be stronger, both through direct financial contributions, and through facilitating key national agencies' and missions' cooperation to deliver infrastructure projects, HR and technical support. Goel was invited to ask what he needed for PKM 2019 as soon as possible, as everyone agreed that the 'stringent constraint' of time was the most important independent variable.

## Planning for the 2019 PKM

In the first days of April 2017, Goel presented to the UP government a short list of key aspects that he considered crucial to accomplish the CM's aims for PKM 2019. To optimise cleanliness in the event, he requested full government support for water pollution control and called attention to the need for special efforts and funding for waste management. To achieve efficiency and speed for the preparation process, he requested 'untied funds' for technological innovation and hiring experts, as well as a 'dedicated cell' placed directly under the CM office to support the budget process and fast appointment of key collaborators. To guarantee governance and enhanced transparency, he requested the creation of a professional third-party monitoring system and authorisation to thoroughly document all operations. Finally, in considering how to appropriate and use recent technological innovations, he requested that a smart monitoring system of works and labour, based on geo-tagging and biometrics, was created.

Goel was appointed division commissioner (DC) of Allahabad (soon Prayagraj) on 14 April 2017, little less than a month after Adityanath had become the CM of UP. Goel took office in 21 April, in a ceremony where the CM publicly announced his vision of a 'Divya Kumbh, Bhavya Kumbh'. He immediately moved to the old spacious white house, not far from the mela area, where the Raj's local authority used to reside. Quickly, a 'situation room', austere but equipped with all things necessary, was built adjacent to the house. In an interview granted later for the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB) report team, Goel specified: 'With the sole aim to enhance pilgrim experience, the Kumbh 2019 vision rested on five key pillars: Inclusion of all sections of the society, improved quality of services and new cultural/spiritual experience, aesthetically coherent and pleasing Mela, use of digital technology as an enabler to further planning goals and overall efficiency improvement, and finally, creation of a worthwhile legacy for future Kumbhs.'<sup>2</sup>

The new DC's first move was to meet representatives and experts of all areas related to the project in Delhi, Lucknow and Prayagraj and thoroughly review impressions, diagnostics, grievances, expectations, needs and suggestions. By June 2017, this process had led to the elaboration of what Goel called 'the

wish-list'. The wish-list was presented to the CM and the new high committee, relabelled 'Apex Committee', which had been constituted in Lucknow in May. Most aspects were agreed upon, including key collaborators' names. A resulting 'checklist' reduced the project's front-end 'fuzziness', although many of the specificities, as well as some new important ideas, would evolve later. From the perspective of the DC's expert team, this checklist condensed the means to achieve the purposes of two overarching programmes: the transformation of Prayagraj's infrastructure, and the delivery of 'the greatest Kumbh ever'.

The first programme included a strategy for UP government's ambitious reshaping of the urban area of Prayagraj of five million people plus (as estimated for 2017) into a 20 million-plus 'smart' host city (as calculated for peak days for the city's development master plan). This was to be done 'conveying a positive message of government'. The city transformation 'final' plan included almost complete redevelopment for access (airport, railway station, roads, parking areas), circulation (road grid, traffic flow, pedestrian 'friendliness'), security (rapid deployment of specialised disaster and emergency teams) and servicing (water, sanitation, police and health facilities, as well as commercial areas). A redevelopment of that size, in the available timespan, would require both major financial commitments and substantial administrative adaptations, both of which would only be possible with strong political backup.

The second programme included providing 'the greatest Kumbh ever', which meant 'delivering an experience' to visitors and showcasing governance. It was expected (and desired) that the event hosted a larger turnout than in 2013, considering the growth in Indian citizens' mobility and interest, and communication campaigns dedicated to entice the non-religious public with targeted messages. The turnout was naturally impossible to calculate with precision, but it was thought it would double 2013 numbers, with roughly 200 million visitors. A 'tricky' event had to be delivered with no 'harm' or 'mishap'; it had to be 'welcoming' and generate the best possible impression in public opinion. Together with upgrading safety and services, festival cleanliness was seen as the most challenging aspect.

The newly appointed DC started by putting together and empowering a 'core team' of close collaborators, some of them in key official positions, some contracted as experts for the campaign. The core team was to become the taskforce that interacted with national, state and local authorities. Although it had no formally defined boundaries, it comprised the two districts' magistrates (Prayagraj and the mela's temporary district) and their closest collaborators. The number of full-time contracted experts was small and belonged to a well-known international business management consultancy firm that won the open bid: Ernst & Young. With the help of his core team, the DC began a series of 'iterative' interactions with higher and local authorities, as well as with experts from private and public reputed institutions, to further define the multi-project campaign. Of these first iterations the 'front end' of the project came to be.

## Preparatory projects and the delivery of the 2019 Kumbh Mela

Prayagraj required a fully-fledged commercial airport (it was currently using Air Force infrastructure), new train stations and capacity enhancement of existing ones, enlarged and upgraded access routes, a highway system with flyovers and underpasses, a thorough conceptual and physical redesign of the city circulation grid, new electricity main lines and transformer platforms, and as wide-as-possible 'beautification' of the city proper. As it was stated that visitors would need to walk for a maximum of 5km to reach the mela area, this meant larger parking areas in densely used terrain. The Sangam confluence needed a dramatic number of interventions in polluted *nalas* (minor water courses), upstream drains and sewage. The prepared *ghats* (bathing riversides) needed to be extended to almost twice their existing length, to better distribute user pressure. Clean Ganges support would be used to design a new network of sewer lines for the city. The temporary district, finally, needed to be significantly enlarged (by an estimated 35 per cent relative to 2013), taking the total area to a surface of 3200 hectares or 32km<sup>2</sup>, which required complex negotiations with local communities. Finally, the new version of the 'tent city' and its servicing required smart and sensitive plot allocation, in line with religious organisations' expectations, and to avoid usual conflicts.

The programme of preparations for the festival itself reflected the way in which the upgrade relative to 2013 was expected to be brought about. Control for crowd management was undertaken by a smart-city styled 'command and control centre', armed with specifically developed and adapted real-time monitoring technology, manned by a 24/7 human team, and fed with a widespread CCTV grid and digitised information coming from facilities and field teams. Security and disaster prevention and management would be planned through a scenario-failsafe 'multi-tiered' programme, developed with the help of UP police, the Indian Army and special branches of Indian Defence departments. A 'No batons, whistles and ropes' policy would be implemented to ensure the visitor-friendly safety vision for the event. This entailed capacity development for the roughly 50,000 police force to be deployed.

To enhance the Prayagraj and mela area hosting capabilities, regulations for traffic, vending, camping and religious activity would ensure an adequate equilibrium between logistical arrangements, stakeholder expectations and visitors' needs. A 'visitor and tourist' oriented campaign would develop symbols and theme parks for the festival, as well as strategic embellishments of the host city. Two key aspects of this were to be the 'Paint my city' campaign, providing the means for special teams to design and paint images and messages on visible walls, and a negotiation with the Indian Army to temporarily open public visitation of a revered Hindu relic tree, previously only open for limited religious access.

Waste management was clearly considered the crucial domain in which PKM 2019 had to make the difference. The concept and vision, arising from

iterations with Clean India and India's World Bank office, were to develop a 'no manual handling' and 'rapid evacuation' process, allowing 'no ground contact' and 'no odour, no flies' outcomes.

To ensure timely procurement and subcontracting, acquisitions and delivery of services, e-tendering and payment technologies and protocols would be adapted. Experience showed that classical monopolistic procurement needed to be avoided. Labour negotiations and agreements would prevent the much-feared vendor bottlenecks and workers' strikes that could endanger the delicate time-limited activities.

The entire operation would be given visibility and transparency through an online project monitoring system. The campaign would also take steps to 'manage its legacy'. A commitment to open government and thorough documentation would ensure the experience could outlive the festival.

In early 2018, there was a version of the festival (Magh Mela), with a lower turnout of around eight million visitors, which presented the opportunity for a pilot, and showed the 'evolving solution' approach in development and action. Viewed from the perspective of the core team, the pilot provided a measure of what was still needed to complete the Prayagraj zone transformation, as well as new insight on a number of issues for the festival that, if solved, could prove key for the desired Kumbh Mela upgrade relative to 2013. It also provided some reassurance that preparations were headed in the right direction.

The pilot was also fertile ground for providing new ideas for stakeholder management, from the treatment of VIPs to the negotiations with religious organisations. It also highlighted the need to innovate for the retention of people working in the mela, considering stringent timelines and long working hours. Safety, wellbeing and personal treatment of workers had to be specifically targeted. The Magh Mela also helped them to better understand the possibilities and threats of communication through social media, given the rising importance of this 'arena' of public opinion. As a collaborator put it, social media needed to be 'pushed', so as not to work in 'reaction mode'. The communication team thus needed to become an 'influencer'.

The second half of 2018 involved the deployment of all final infrastructure arrangements and festival management plans, final budgeting, procurement solutions for the waste management plans, and stakeholder management for the religious organisations involved. Particularly important was the finding of crucial financial support from national programmes (amounting to 50 per cent of the estimated final cost), which was dealt with by a string of visits of the DM to Delhi and Lucknow, and a round of negotiations with national and state authorities by the DC and the DM.

## **The Prayagraj Kumbh Mela as it turned out**

Between 15 January and 4 March, 2019, the cumulative footfall of attendees was estimated to have been 240 million people. The six peak days attracted, approximately, over 20 million (on days 1, 5 and 6), over 30 million (on days



2 and 4), and over 50 million (on day 3, *Mauni Amavasya*, 2 February 2019). Although the turnout was way over the twofold increase on 2013 that was expected, the festival went ahead with no significant issues and received wide praise as an impressive experience by the vast majority of visitors. It was widely remarked that the festival area was much cleaner than was expected. As a high political stakeholder observed, ‘cleanliness took people by surprise, and that made them happy’. On 22 February, during his visit to the festival, PM Modi took a dip, and in a situation that, according to well-informed participants, was off-protocol and programme, he washed the feet of sanitation workers, adding he ‘would carry the memory of washing the feet of safai karamcharis life-long’.

The final bill was almost five times bigger (at constant prices) than the 2013 Kumbh Mela. Approximately two-thirds of the costs were taken up by infrastructure development. Although there was heavy scrutiny, no significant observations were made around the budgeting and spending procedures utilised.

The IIMB had been requested by Prayagraj Mela Authority (PMA) to participate in the event and produce a report on its management. The two field surveys conducted by the IIMB team showed approval by visitors. In the first one, all facilities were rated quite positively, with the three most notable services being safety, hygiene and *ghats* arrangements. In the second one, safety, hygiene, sanitation facilities, *ghats* arrangements and electricity and lighting were noted as the most approved features of the event.

## Preparing the case

In preparing the case analysis you might like to consider the following questions in particular:

1. How was the information available to Ashish Goel, when he began serving as divisional commissioner of Prayagraj, pertinent to carrying out the task of planning the 2019 Kumbh Mela?
2. How are the specifics of both the context and the carrying out of tasks of managing the 2019 PKM relevant in explaining the progress and completion of this mass-gathering event’s preparations?
3. In commissioning an evaluation study of preparations for the 2019 PKM, how would you define its scope, focus and main issues, if it is going to be of great value in managing future government-hosted mass-gatherings endeavours in India?
4. What would count as (a) a finding of the evaluation study and (b) a proposition about how to manage future government-hosted mass-gathering endeavours in India?

## Sources

Primary sources for this case study included field observations which took place between 11 and 27 January 2020, and 25 semi-structured interviews with local officials which took place between 10 January 2020 and 2 February 2020. Secondary sources included:

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## References

- <sup>1</sup> This case study was written by Luciano Andrenacci and Michael Barzelay, with additional contributions provided by Yifei Yan (Assistant Professor of Public Administration and Public Policy at the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Southampton).
- <sup>2</sup> From an interview with authors, see Sources section for information on primary sources quoted in this case study.