The Maha Kumbh Mela As Living Cultural Heritage: Preservation, Continuity, And Sustainable Cultural Development In India

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Abstract
The Maha Kumbh Mela represents one of India's living cultural heritages; of which the various expressions-rituals, spiritual lineages, traditions, memory, pilgrimage and temporary social structures-are unique to the specific site. While the religious authority of the Mela as a festival is well recognized, it is important to study the event as a case for the processes involved in the transmission, retention, adaptation and negotiation of cultural traditions under this accelerated pace of socio-economic change, technological advancement and environmental shift. Here is an assessment of the Maha Kumbh Mela through the lens of cultural heritage, continuity and sustainable development. Qualitative documentation and interpretation, taking the example of the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2017 inscription of the Kumbh Mela on the Representative List, relevant heritage/pilgrimage scholarship, and organizational and environmental management documentation relating to the 2025 Kumbh Mela. The work identifies five related dimensions. First, the dimension of embodied knowledge transmission and the institutions of the ascetic community. Second, the dimension of temporary sacred formation of physical space. Third, the interaction and hybridization of traditional cultural practices with modern technologies and facilities. Fourth, the dimension of the sustenance of mass gatherings. Fifth, community as the driver for cultural vitality and overcoming cultural, environmental and social sustainability problems. The paper advocates a hybridization of different domains of significance, the participation of a broader range of stakeholders and other factors, which suggests that cultural activism can be a way of reaching community health and vitality.

Keywords: Maha Kumbh Mela; living cultural heritage; intangible cultural heritage; cultural continuity; sustainable development; India

Introduction

Definitions of heritage have broadened, and today they represent a much broader idea of ways of life and cultural expressions whereby distinct peoples of the world can remember their pasts, celebrate their identity, immortalize their values and practices and express their relationship with their environment. These are expressed through rituals, festivals, performing arts, oral traditions, structures, and customs. It is fluid and constantly adapting to conditions (Harrison 2013, Smith 2006).

This can be demonstrated with reference to the example of the Maha Kumbh Mela. This gathering, at a site at the Prayagraj at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and the ancient Saraswati, attracts ascetics, sadhus, saints, teachers, householders, service providers and officials. The visible attributes of the Kumbh Mela are the processions, discourses, devotional activities and settlements and camps. But the Maha Kumbh Mela is not to be understood purely in its processes or in term s of its attendance. Its real significance is in the constituted associations of knowledge, discipline and memory that imbue cultural meaning, and the participating networks which enable a participative, engaged interactional context.

In 2017, the Kumbh Mela was inscribed to the UNESCO list: A Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It is during the mela that social and festive practices are strengthened by community memory, knowledge of rites and the transmission of skills from master to apprentice (UNESCO, 2017). The listing of the Kumbh Mela on an international level is noteworthy because the 2003 Convention specifies: The intangible cultural heritage is manifested in a number of expressive and artistic practices, knowledge and skills that are recognised by a community and are transmitted through its relationship with the environment and the world around it.

The other characteristic of the Mela that is quite fundamental to an understanding of it, is the idea of living heritage. Everything changes over the years in the Mela – in the way it is organised, the built environment, in communication, mobility, hygiene and public interaction. Yet, continuity of the Mela exists through, for instance, the order of rituals, lineages of saints, sacred geographies, paths and expectations.

The important question that immediately throws up is can a large cultural assembly cater to modern day necessities while preserving the festival culture that defines the Mela? An immediate consequence of large

number of people visiting the Mela is that it provides a market for transportation, accommodation, food, craft, communication, construction, retail and other services. It may also be an economic resource for some, but the effects of the Mela differ for participants, informal workers may be exposed to risks. This commercialization can come at the expense of its significance, and end up incurring costs to the environment. When we examine the variety of activities taking place, we need to consider who benefits, who makes the decisions and who should incur the costs.

The ecological features of the region create a number of limitations for the pilgrimage purposes. Some key issues emerge for the future of the considerable cultural events as it is not only about controlling these limitations but also providing the pilgrims' religious activities. For example, can the religious rituals compromise with the duty to consider the nature?

In this paper the Maha Kumbh Mela is treated as a dynamic cultural system and analyzed to assess its transformation processes through different cultural, institutional, natural and economic determinants. The sustainable growth of culture, along with the healthy long term ecological planning and functional integration of stakeholders, must promote the participation of community, the implementation of customs with cultural flexibility, the offering of 264 transparently managed income-generating opportunities and a sense of community, and provide conditions for tradition in adapting to change.

The article raises four questions: What is the living cultural heritage of the Mela? What practices and institutions can preserve the continuity? What contradictions are created in the process of preservation, modernization, commercialization, and environmental sustainability? What support is needed for the sustainable development of culture?

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Living heritage and intangible cultural heritage

"Living cultural heritage is cultural practices that are consciously lived and passed on from generation to generation by communities" (UNESCO 2003 Convention). Some of the first models developed that started to define the process is set out in the UNESCO Convention 2003 whereby the categories of intangible cultural heritage are set out as the oral tradition and expressions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge about the nature and universe, and traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2003). This model assumes heritage as an ever-renewed cultural practice that continually renews itself, rather than a fixed object to be separated and preserved.

For the conservation of group residents' intangibility at the Maha Kumbh Mela, the above perspective suggests that its heritage cannot be narrowly analyzed in terms of physical spaces or iconic scale models. Intangible elements of Maha Kumbh Mela heritage include knowledge of rituals, hymns, discipline, and worship techniques. The second implication relates to the protection of intangible parts of heritage. Institutions and mechanisms designed for heritage protection might support the community to preserve their ways of conveyance of a heritage, as generations of practitioners may need to participate continuously.

The UNESCO safeguarding guidance warns about the tendency to 'freezing' heritage in an idealised time. Heritage should be really protected for the way that knowledge, skills and meanings are transferred to enabling the heritage to move on. To marginalise present day users in order to keep moving heritage in a state as imagined in the past is extremely problematic. Likewise heritage should not be protected to the extent that it damaged a local ecological balance and control. Safer should in the end distinguish the difference between changes that promote well-being of a community and would not hinder it.

The 2017 UNESCO inscription acknowledges the role of community memory and transfer of knowledge through teacher-student relationship. Such recognition could be the starting point to consider the Mela as a community of culture-carriers and practices that might transcend the big mass event (UNESCO, 2017).

2.2 Cultural continuity, memory and identity

The implication of continuity is that there is no preservation of tradition over generations. It is primarily a process of reiteration, modification and reinterpretation of the works of meaning and relationships which transmit the same values across multiple means and ways. Both individual and collective memories are kept alive in history and sacred narratives both of which are forms of collective memory that help reconstruct identity including the duties of individuals to society.

Memory is carried, spoken and performed through procession, discipline, conformity, teaching, instruction, hospitality, group work, and preparation for ritual bathing. These ways of knowing and Being can be spoken and demonstrated in the way in which they are learned, often learned without having the benefit of a written language. Practices are required to be spaces that allow things to be spoken and demonstrated, and knowledge to be transmitted.

In addition, not all cultural identity is homogenous; people come to Mela with different social positioning, engagements and expectations, relating to regional and linguistic differences and, in addition to gender, age and disability. It seems likely that a perspective from a living heritage vantage point would be required to get a sufficiently nuanced picture.

2.3 Sacred space and the production of temporary urban space

The earth of the Mela's spatial arrangement signifies the cultural symbolism of the Mela itself. The Mela creates an "urban fabric" that includes the bed of the

river, the bathing ghat, processional pathways, akhara camps and enclosures, floating markets, roadways and bridges, and the Mela's services sector. S. (1991) suggested that space itself may be socially produced and disciplined. This conception of space helps us to conceptualize the production of the Mela through repeated ritual acts, social memory, and scriptural interpretation.

Furthermore, it is expected that positive spatial planning will have cultural impacts. The orientation and planning of the transit camp, access ways and bathing banks are expected to influence the revival of pilgrim's rituals. Inclusion of community members in heritage-oriented spatial planning is likely to give rise to heritage sensitive planning of access, circulation and safekeeping of culturally sensitive boundaries and spaces.

2.4 Sustainable development and cultural sustainability

Sustainable development refers to the use of resources to satisfy current demands without future generations acquiring similar access to those resources (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The 2030 agenda for sustainable development combines economic, social and environmental aspects and considers the importance of inclusive institutions (United Nations, 2015). Cultural heritage is the aspiration to safeguard, coexist with and promote identity, knowledge, social cohesion, creativity and livelihoods as well as intangible values and a sense of place.

Cultural sustainability should be seen in conjunction with sustainable use of natural resources, and economic sustainability. It is the ability of the community to sustain the meaningful qualities of culture in the face of the threat to cultural traditions, and the ability to make intelligent choices about their traditions and to be able to pass on those traditions to future generations. Cultural sustainability in the Mela involves the practice of tradition, the health of ascetic institutions, sacred sites, the oral tradition and the river environment.

It has to be remembered that heritage and sustainability can support each other. For example, a emphasis on the environmental dimensions of sustainability would draw our attention to something like ecotourism. Yet if that industry became the prime landuse, it might threaten the habitat in which cultural practices take place – so the cultural, ecological, social and economic dimensions of sustainability have to be looked at simultaneously.

3. Methodology

This paper used a qualitative, interpretive, documentary analysis method. It combined library-based information, documents, and instruments from UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and various official sources, in addition to existing researches, in order to formulate an analytical framework to study the Maha Kumbh Mela as a living heritage. The paper does not make attempt to reflect the beliefs or opinions of the entire group of people engaged in such an event. It also does not claim that the sample of the interview texts is statistically representative or that the entire set of interview texts have been thoroughly analyzed.

The documentary corpus is divided into four broad categories: international heritage documents or programmes (UNESCO 2003 convention, UNESCO 2003 Convention and Kumbh Mela inscription), Indian institutional and government documents or programmes such as sanitation and environmental management for 2025, academic texts that describe ideas related to heritage, pilgrimage, social space, identity and sustainability and other published texts that describe the ritual, institutional, spatial and economic experiences of the Mela.

Following thematic analysis was performed on the collected documents. Similar concepts were categorized into the following 5 themes: (1) body knowledge, (2) custodianship and passing-on culture, (3) embodiment of the sacred in the temporary, (4) commodification and modernization, (5) the search for ecological and socio-economic sustainability. The themes were defined and expressed in regards to the research questions and the overall conceptual framework.

Furthermore, the use of triangulation supports the authenticity of the discussed interpretations. Terms relating to heritage are cross-checked to the UNESCO inscription. Organizational narratives are cross-referenced to academic conceptualizations and descriptions of infrastructure are reviewed in relation to sustainability. Official reporting is treated as evidence of announced strategies rather than conclusive proof that all measures have adequately delivered the expected results. The evaluation of environmental performance required operational data collection and analysis, and independent monitoring and/or evaluation.

This documentary and conceptual article does not present a new survey data or code interview transcripts in a systematic fashion. There are no quotations, participant demographic information, information about consent to participate, information about review by a human subjects review board, or other primary data. We hope this documentary will stimulate more transdisciplinary empirical research on epistemological sustainability.

4. Results And Discussion

4.1 The Mela As A Living System Of Ritual And Embodied Knowledge

Heritage is a networked, living system of rite, narration, embodied knowledge, and conviviality. For example, the action of ritual bathing is one aspect of a layered milieu, which comprises not only processions, narration, pedagogies, asceticism, sacrifices, reverence, and shamanic orientation.

Kumbh Mela is also listed as a 'Social and Festive Event' recognized by UNESCO for promoting the memory and transmission of knowledge in the

community through the teacher-disciple tradition (UNESCO, 2017). This suggests that the primary mechanism for continuity is in fact participation and learning, and whether through communication or practice, as religious teachers and ascetics enact certain philosophical principles, values and disciplinary forms, they are indeed creating relationships which translate into a structure for the teaching and learning of cultural practices. The Kumbh Mela provides a substantial and diverse audience to learn, practice and adopt these practices. What ensures the strength of this embodied knowledge is the notion that much cultural knowledge cannot be translated into the written form. For instance, the order and timing of steps and gesture, the postures adopted and discipline of the ritualist, are learned through observance and trial and error. Though the knowledge thus preserved can be documented, it can only survive if the continuity is ensured through spaces and opportunities of learning and practice. Caring for the Kumbh then would mean ensuring spaces for people to gather and interact – such as religious camps, learning spaces and informal networks.

The oral narratives help to keep links with ancestors' tradition, and at the same time, it can also help the participant to reflect on the meaning and importance of their movements in the ritual. The oral narratives should be seen as active cultural resources, not something that stand alone or exists outside of the culture. A record should safeguard different modes of these narratives.

Mela heritage is essentially performative and relational, and is found in the doing and interacting of individuals. The broader, less visible, systems of cultural heritage, as well as the learners, practitioners and transmitters of heritage, will, hopefully, contribute to its sustainable safeguarding.

4.2 Akharas, sadhus and community custodianship

Ascetic institutions and akharas play an important role in the organisation and cultural life of the Mela. Sadhus and other religious practitioners bring unique knowledges and practices based on long histories of religious scholarship and tradition. They help to connect the mass gathering to these long histories.

A role from a living heritage perspective is not just a title or honour but an active role. Custodians have a role in maintaining the practice; the application and interpretation of tradition and norms; providing leadership and education for learners; and knowledge of the practice. The knowledge of custodians includes, (but is not limited to) the means of performance and the performance space; the means of ritual and manner of practice; community behaviour; community interaction; the moral and ethical messages being imparted; social norms; and knowledge of how the community is organised and makes decisions. It is therefore crucial that the processes of heritage safeguarding afford custodians opportunities to contribute to documenting heritage, to providing education and training on heritage and to the decision-making processes concerning spaces and practice linked to that heritage.

Community involvement is also written into the UNESCO Convention. The Convention highlights that where appropriate, identification and management of intangible heritage should involve the participation of communities, groups and NGOs (UNESCO 2003). Heritage policies are not the sole prerogative of administrators or tourism and planning bodies. Heritage practitioners need to be involved in the decision as to what heritage resources warrant documentation, how the communication and dissemination of heritage knowledge should take place, the degree of access to heritage, and how heritage is represented.

Furthermore, a participative approach that considers and respects the uniqueness of every community-including differences in power, capabilities, gender, age, location, relationship with different institutions, and more-needs to be used. This would include local residents, small vendors, artisans, sanitation workers, volunteers, women, and any other stakeholders who are crucial to the project and yet are seldom a part of the processes of formal heritage.

The best way for cultural custodianship to be accomplished is by ensuring that cultural practitioners are at the forefront of decision making and governance, and that cultural heritage specialists and custodians are approached before decisions are taken. Involving cultural custodians (akharas), local authorities, researchers, environmentalists and public authorities in decision making forums will assist in mediating between the cultural considerations and the logistical requirements.

4.3 Sacred geography and the temporary city

The conversion of riverine landscapes into short-lived urban settlements is achieved through the development of structures designed to support large numbers of inhabitants and through changes to the landscape to support any and all services. Ritual, civic, transportation, commercial, security and social. From the evolution of these mechanisms exists a spatial system of different component elements confluence, ghat, camp, road, bridge, market, and many service or support facilities.

A variety of spatial practices can be discerned at work in the Mela. Sacred practices include pilgrimages, ritual baths, sacred story as well as collective memory; and profane practices encompass state intervention to produce a market-place that is regulated and controlled through the setting up of boundaries, barriers, and temporary networks of infrastructure and services. Different spatial practices are apt to coexist and even fuse with each other, but are also prone to conflict in terms of control and access.

The existence of a dense and swift communication network together with built-up temporary products and service during the exhibition requires a

particular type of intense and flexible urban planning as well as rapid urban planning. It must face such challenges as the unceasing transformation of the exhibition and the riverine environment and the demand for sustainable, recyclable and environmentally conscious infrastructure.

There are many other factors that affect practices, including how people get there, access points, camp sites, and bathing practices. In those areas where there has been some interaction with Tradition Bearers, these factors and solutions for better access management might be identified. Infrastructure where the access can be improve for the older, PWDs and families with children can also be accessible.

The construction of a "Temporary City" has to stand as an example of sustainable cities. The deployment of solutions characterized by modular and decoupled infrastructures, services and systems (urban planning, mobility, water), could be a game changer for the development of sustainable and low-impact systems that are as easy to recover after the event. These innovations, however, have to be checked with the use of clear sustainability indicators, not because they are innovative or transient.

4.4 Modernization, digital systems and the continuity of tradition.

Digital tools, integrated with repurposed mobile communication and positioning systems, can be used to broadcast messages, coordinate transportation and mobilize emergencies, helping to run a meeting more efficiently, more safely and more comfortably. These systems could help organisers take control of the chaos.

Nonetheless, as with all systems, it is vital to be assured that digital technologies are not only valued for their safety and socio-cultural preservation, and managed, in times of threats to heritage continuity, but also for their potential to marginalize community knowledge. A heritage-centred digital approach can cover and enhance oral traditions, include descriptions of certain rituals in many languages, provide maps, enable communication during emergencies, and enable digital services and products for users. Digital archives can save photographs and recordings of audio however, any documentation needs to be done according to important criteria of consent, user's privacy, and restrictions, of rights, customary law and interests of the community. It's not that everything can be, or should be, documented or commoditised.

The enhancement of conditions for cultural practice is most likely to be achieved when it is enabled by modern systems to continue existing. The benefits of technologies should be assessed in the context of safety, accessibility and the enhancement of environmental management and knowledge sharing.

4.5 Cultural entrepreneurship, livelihoods and inclusive economic development

Temporary economic arrangements are made during the Mela, because of the rise of food, accommodation, transportation, and other services needs. The Mela serves as an open market for local entrepreneurs, to sell their trade goods, jewelry, crafts, religious objects, etc. The Mela generates profit for small entrepreneurs and creates networks between local producers, and visitors. The economic aspect of the Mela is worth looking into for entrepreneurship journals and sustainable development studies, with the rising trends in cultural tourism and local development (Richards, 2018). The advantages of a mass gathering event ought not to be know decided on the overall spending by the tourists, and the immediate financial benefits of the occasion. What is important is the implication of the event in the division of gains, and job security between the local individuals. The assessment of the events should include the participation of the local businesses, and the community during the event and whether these gains carry forward after the event.

Temporary jobs can be very beneficial – but they can also be terrible. There is a risk that the role might not give individuals a permanent contract, and they might be paid low or irregular wages, have no holiday entitlement, and work in bad conditions with no safety net. Cultural entrepreneurship can help a heritage to develop by supporting the activities of local craftspeople and producers but if those activities become too homogenized they risk no longer being rooted in the original culture and not being meaningful. To contribute to the growth of the local economy, public procurement could be used to benefit women's groups, cooperatives, craftpersons, micro and small entrepreneurs. Capacity development through training of service providers can be relevant to provide for the needs of the tourism and events sectors. This may include general service sector competences, such as financial literacy, digital literacy, hygiene and sanitation, waste management and other services. The capacity built through the Mela training - for transport, hygiene, sanitation, digital and communication skills, and craft making - could be maintained through long-term access to training and markets. This might reduce dependency on seasonal events and result in a more equitable sharing of benefits.

4.6 Environmental sustainability and the riverine ecosystem

The spiritual ecology of the Mela would be good for the spiritual quality of the Mela as well. The rivers Ganga and Yamuna do not just form a backdrop of or bring forth water for the Mela; they are an essential part of the religious landscape of the Mela. Pollution of the Ganga and Yamuna might have negative impact on the spiritual and cultural quality of the pilgrimage; ecological balance and riverine ecology management would be important aspect of cultural heritage of the Mela.

Large crowds of people put a lot of pressure on the environment as well, including a significant level of solid and liquid waste, air emissions from automobiles, dust, and temporary damage of the banks of the river. Large groups may also create noise

pollution, light pollution, and other types of environmental pollution.

To cater to the significant number of visitors visiting the last Maha Kumbh, temporary drains, sewage treatment plants, and bioremediation plant, as well as 250 kilometers of drainage for potential environmental damage, were also created (Press Information Bureau, 2025). This example shows the large temporary environmental management system set up when creating a temporary urban centre.

The performance of the proposed treatment system should be measured against the outcome. This should include treatment of wastes and wastewaters, discharges (load and concentration), water quality, disposal, and recovery of the environment. A public report should be available showing planned capacity versus actual output.

The environmental sustainability of this pilgrimage-tourism project also depends on the behavior and participation of all the stakeholders, including all pilgrims, vendors, religious authorities, contractors, and all local communities. Infrastructure for waste management, awareness-raising of visitors on proper waste use and disposal, and riverbank protection measures should be considered as an essential part of infrastructure development and reinforcement of existing law enforcement. Visitation areas should be equipped with sufficient, appropriately placed, and maintained garbage bins, toilets, and clean drinking water facilities; vendors should adopt recyclable or biodegradable serviceware; contractors should adhere to established quality standards.

Across the aforementioned contexts, therefore, questions of story and faith may be appropriated to foster care for water, if stories of river love and concern could be established. Still, the stories should be wrought in concert with those practitioners, not from a top-down posture. Faith does not have to be coerced, it is only via the stewardship of faith that it is conserved.

Lastly, environmental safeguarding efforts cannot be merely limited to the Mela. Disposal of wastes and industrial effluents should be dovetailed with urban, agricultural and riverbank management. An isolated strategy for a single Mela event may mitigate some of the impacts but it can never substitute a sound river basin management strategy.

4.7 Governance, participation, and balancing priorities

A wide range of stakeholders participate in the Mela-state and local government, religious groups, service providers, contractors, civil society, businesses, volunteers and pilgrims. Managing the Mela entails managing all of these stakeholders as transportation patterns affect the flow of crowds; location of camp sites affects the levels of sanitation services and other services required; licensing, waste management and security affects accessibility to the space for performing the ritual.

A robust governance structure would imply the presence of both adequate administrative structures as well as community participation. The State is expected to play a role in safeguarding life and upholding other obligations such as the provision of public infrastructure and services, sanitation, and maintenance of the environment. Knowledge about local custom, sacred sites and social protocol is owned by cultural practitioners and the community. Space for operationalism belongs to businesses and service-providers and civil society, independent researchers and educational institutions may participate in monitoring and evaluation. With communication channels in place, participants of the Mela would likely work out the tensions and elaborate any practical resolutions to existing and future problems.

Participation must be honest, based in a time and space that is opportune for people. It must be a process in which people have the capacity to change policies and decisions that are relevant to them - this must include informal workers, small vendors, women, disabled people, etc.

This situation necessitates that a means by which to adequately communicate and mediates conflicting opinions, interests, value, and aspirations of the pubic to facilitate an appropriately balanced public culture, protection of the environment, and safeguarding of the economy. A solution can perhaps be found in: a risk assessment of the potential impacts of activity on the environment and community, consultative decision-making including the community, and review of actions taken to remedy the impacts: a process with opportunities for learning and improvement.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Maha Kumbh Mela as a living culture heritage It is rooted in collective memory and experiential community participation. Additionally, it creates bonds and maintains traditions between the communities and their heritage and community today. Weeds out the idea of preservability of living heritage is implied in the Kumbh's inscription by UNESCO in 2017 as part of the intangible cultural heritage. The word 'Safeguarding' as per the 'Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage' (2003) is based on the notions of "viability and transmission".

Culture is preserved when its customs are changed and developed even when the basic spirit and values of the tradition are preserved. In other words, continuity and development are inseparable. As a modern infrastructure and systems may help the Mela to resolve issues such as safety, security and accessibility, it may simultaneously improve the dissemination of knowledge and protection of environment. At the same time, it may also pose certain kinds of threat especially if it reflects not restriction of market economy and commercialization of sacred space.

The five priorities for sustainable cultural

development are: community participation and sharing in the safeguarding of heritage; inter-generational transmission; care for the environment; cultural entrepreneurship; and good governance. These priorities imply that sustainability in culture and heritage is not likely to be reached if safeguarding activities are left to the government alone; it also requires the active participation of cultural workers, an environmental ethos, equitable economic opportunities and new educational institutions.

Furthermore, the Mela can promote partnerships between local service providers, entrepreneurs and cooperatives, among other aspects. However, these partnerships should be analyzed based on inclusivity and equity principles, as well as long-term sustainability and local livelihoods, rather than short-term commercial benefits. The proliferation of waste and pollution from the Mela illustrates the need for integrated heritage, environmental and policy solutions.

The documentary method offers a solid conceptual framework, yet analysis based solely on this approach needs to be supported with field studies. An assessment should be carried out through interviews with pilgrims, local residents, workers and small entrepreneurs – but also incorporating the results of environmental monitoring and policy analysis. Moreover, long-term research during a series of parallel fairs should be carried out.

There are other aspects of the Mela's existence that require further investigation. For example, what supports the cultural and social systems, ecological systems, and livelihoods that the Mela seeks to demonstrate exist? Although inseparable, these intricacies could be addressed in a holistic, just, inclusive, and sustainable way using a community-led development approach that is based on the living dimension of heritage, aligning cultural vibrancy with ecological and socio-economic aspects.

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