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Gangasagar Mela

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Abstract: The Gangasagar Mela is a significant Hindu pilgrimage and festival held annually at Gangasagar, where the Ganges River meets the Bay of Bengal in West Bengal, India. Celebrated on Makar Sankranti (January 14 or 15), it is second-largest Hindu fair after the Kumbh Mela, attracting millions of devotees who come to take a holy dip at the confluence, believed to wash away sins. The mela has deep historical roots, being mentioned in the Mahabharata and linked to the legend of Kapilmuni. Pilgrims perform various rituals, including offerings to Lord Surya and worship of Kapil Muni. Modern infrastructure, such as temporary camps, jetties, and ferry services, supports the large influx of pilgrims. In recent years, attendance has surged, with over 51 lakh devotees participating in 2023. The mela combines ancient spiritual practices with contemporary logistical efforts, ensuring a safe and organized experience for pilgrims.

Index Terms – Gangasagar mela, Hinduism, Kapil Muni, Kumbha mela, Makar Sankranti.

1.Introduction

Gangasagar Mela is a festival in Hinduism held every year at Gangasagar, South 24 parganas, West Bengal, India. The confluence of the Ganges and the Bay of Bengal is called Gangasagar. The fair is the second largest Hindu fair in India after Kumbh Mela. The fair is held every year on Makar Sankranti at Kapilmuni's ashram located on Gangasagar. The mela celebrated on 14 or 15 January every year. Many people from different states of India and some foreigner come here every year to take a holy bath on Makar Sankranti day.

2. HISTORY

a. Hindu scripture

The Gangasagar is mentioned in the Mahabharata's Vana Parva, which provides proof of the existence of the pilgrim site in 1500-2000 BC. According to Mahabharata, the Pandavas traveled from the banks of river Kaushik and reached the Gangasagarasangam, confluence of Ganges and Sagara. According to Hinduism, the "Gangesagarasangam" mentioned in Mahabharata is Gangasagar in Sagardwip, situated at the estuary of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly rivers-on the sea coast of West Bengal.

Legend has it that Kapilmuni, the progenitor of Samkhya philosophy, had an ashram at Gangasagara. Sixty thousand sons of King Sagara were consumed by Kapilmuni's wrath and their Souls were thrown into Naraka. The grandson of the Sagara king, Bhagirath brought the Ganga from Heaven to wash the remains of the Sagara's sons and free their Souls.

b. Ancient times

The Gangasagar pilgrimage is also mentioned in Raghuvamsha, a Sanskrit epic poem written by Kalidasa in the fifth century AD. There is a disagreement over the exact age of Kapil Muni's ashram. The temple of Kapil Muni is mentioned in the 16th century ancient Puthi Tirthattvapradayini. Also, King Devapala of the Pala dynasty mentioned in an inscription that he performed rituals at the confluence of the Gangasagar.

c. Middle Ages

During medieval times, pilgrims from every corner of the subcontinent defied many obstacles and dangers to reach Gangasagar on Makar Sankranti. During the perilous journey, the pilgrims faced diseases like cholera and small pox.

d. Modern era

Hindu pilgrim gathering at Gangasagar Mela, Ganga Sagar, West Bengal –where river Ganges meets the Bay of Bengal. Kapalkundala, a Bengali novel written by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, depicts a perilous journey to reach the Gangasagar. In 1914 AD, a man named Wilson mentions the temple of Kapilmuni in the District Gazetteer. According to the person's writing, Kapilmuni's temple structure surrounded by a bamboo fence. Gangasagar Mela is mentioned in Bharatera Tirthayatra by Shri Madhavachandra Varman published in 1336 Bangabda.

After India's independence, the pilgrimage site began to flourish. Picture of the temple were published in the Bengali book Gangasagar Mela O Pracina Aitihiya by Tarundev Bhattacharya. The Government of West Bengal assisted in the construction of a permanent temple in the 1970s. In the following decades, the number of pilgrims to the fair increased. At present, millions of people congregate every year on the auspicious day of Makara Sankranti or Poush-Sankranti in the month of Poush to celebrate the Gangasagar fair and the pilgrimage site.

e. Dates

The Gangasagar Mela is organized on the occasion of the holy dip on Makar Sankranti, usually on January 14 or 15. Makar Sankranti is set by the solar cycle and corresponds to the exact time astronomical event of the Sun entering Capricorn and observed on a day that usually falls on 14 January of the Gregorian calendar, but on 15 January in leap years.

f. Location

Gangasagar Mela is held at Gangasagar, Sagardwip. The place belongs to South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal. The Mela is organized around Kapil Muni's ashram. The site of the Mela is on the banks of the confluence of the Ganges and the Bay of Bengal.

g. Preparation for the fair

Pilgrims from different states of India arrive on the occasion of Ganga bath and the Gangasagar Mela. Most of the pilgrims first arrive at Kolkata to visit Gangasagar. Transit camps are established in Kolkata every year for the convenience of pilgrims. All kinds of civic facilities are provided to these camps. The biggest obstacle to reaching Sagardwip is the Muri Ganga river; Pilgrims have to cross this river on their journey. However, due to the low navigability of the river, it is not possible to cross the river without tide. Every year, dredging is carried out in the river for uninterrupted ferry operation. Ferry services are operated between Lot No 8 and Kachuberia, Sagardwip on the occasion of fairs and Ganga bath. Several temporary jetties were constructed for faster and more pilgrim transport. All vessels and buses can be monitored from a central control room. GPS and NAVIC technology is used in all the transport vehicles of Sagardwip for surveillance. Vessels are also provided with navigation lights to prevent visibility problems due to fog.

h. Rituals

On the day of Ganga Bathing, Hindu devotees gather early in the morning and take a holy dip in the Ganges river. They offer offerings to Lord Surya and chant Lord Surya Mant.

After completing the rituals, people worship Kapil Muni and light pradeep [Diya]. Some also perform Yajna and Homa on the day of Ganga bathing. Some devotees even observe a strict fast on Gangasana days. On this auspicious day of Ganga bathing, devotees express their gratitude to Goddess Ganga and seek forgiveness for their misdeeds knowingly or unknowingly.

i. Special Certificate

The District Administration of South 24 Parganas handed over special certificates to all the pilgrims who came to Gangasagar Mela. Apart from the photo and phone number of the pilgrims, the certificates also contain a greeting message from the State Government.

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