

13th Jan, 2024

1. India's Data Protection Rules Need Some Fine-Tuning GS 2 (Governance)

• Why in News:

- On January 3, 2025, India reached a significant milestone in its data protection journey with the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) releasing the Draft Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Rules.
- This development follows the passage of the DPDP Act, 2023, marking a crucial step towards operationalising a robust framework for safeguarding personal data.
- The draft rules symbolise a pragmatic departure from India's earlier, more rigid data protection efforts, emphasising a balanced approach that avoids overreach while promoting flexibility.

• India's Journey Toward the DPDP Rules

- The Fall of the Personal Data Protection Bill (PDPB)**
 - The PDPB's downfall can be traced to its failure to balance privacy with economic and operational feasibility.
 - It sought to impose rigorous obligations on businesses, mirroring the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) approach.
 - Although the GDPR was widely regarded as a benchmark for privacy laws, its rigid rules inadvertently created barriers to innovation and imposed significant compliance costs, particularly on small and medium enterprises (SMEs).
 - India's PDPB similarly drew concerns for being too interventionist and industry-hostile.
 - It mandated exhaustive consent requirements and strict data localisation, creating fears that the compliance burdens would deter foreign investment, stifle startups, and limit technological innovation.
- The Shift to a Principles-Based Framework**
 - The shift from the PDPB to the DPDP Act and its draft rules represents a fundamental change in philosophy.
 - Learning from the challenges of the PDPB and the limitations of global models like the GDPR, India adopted a less prescriptive, more principles-driven framework.
 - The DPDP rules focus on empowering users without micromanaging businesses, emphasising simplicity, flexibility, and proportionality.
 - This pragmatic approach reflects an understanding of India's unique socio-economic and technological landscape.
 - Unlike the EU, where a mature digital economy can absorb the costs of stringent regulations, India's ecosystem is characterised by diverse entities, ranging from multinational corporations to fledgling startups.
- Avoiding the Brussels Effect**
 - India's decision to move away from the Brussels Effect, a global trend of replicating the EU's interventionist regulatory ethos, is a notable aspect of this journey.
 - The EU's GDPR, once hailed as a gold standard, has faced growing criticism for its unintended consequences.
 - These include favouring well-resourced corporations capable of absorbing high compliance costs, marginalizing SMEs, and failing to significantly enhance public trust in digital platforms.

India's data protection rules need some fine-tuning



- **India has instead chosen a path that prioritises outcomes over processes.**
- **By focusing on what needs to be achieved rather than dictating how to achieve it, the DPDP rules aim to minimise unnecessary complexity and compliance fatigue.**
- **Challenges and Ambiguities**
 - **The Complexity of Cross-Border Data Flows**
 - **One of the most contentious provisions in the draft rules is the restriction on cross-border data flows, particularly the mandate for Significant Data Fiduciaries (SDFs) to localise certain data within India.**
 - **The DPDP Act allows the government to notify specific countries where personal data can be transferred,** but the rules extend beyond this provision, introducing added complexities for SDFs.
 - **Such localisation mandates can have far-reaching implications.** For global businesses operating in India, maintaining separate infrastructure for data storage can significantly increase operational costs.
 - **Gaps in Safeguards Against Misuse**
 - **The draft rules lack clarity on mechanisms to verify the legitimacy of user requests for information on data processing activities.**
 - **Without adequate safeguards, businesses may face a barrage of excessive or frivolous requests, diverting resources away from their core operations.**
 - **For example, malicious actors could exploit the lack of verification processes to overwhelm a company's compliance infrastructure or gain access to sensitive information.**
 - **Furthermore, the rules do not specify whether businesses can charge a reasonable fee for processing such requests, especially if they are excessive or unfounded**
 - **Ambiguity Around Government Access to Data**
 - **A particularly concerning gap in the draft rules pertains to the government's potential access to sensitive business data.**
 - **While the rules grant the government the authority to demand information, they do not provide clear safeguards to protect this data from misuse or exposure.**
 - **For instance, businesses may have to share proprietary information, trade secrets, or confidential data with the government, raising questions about how this information will be protected from competitors or malicious actors.**
 - **The absence of specific provisions addressing these scenarios creates uncertainty and creates apprehension among businesses, particularly those operating in industries where intellectual property and trade secrets are critical assets.**
- **Necessary Measures to Address these Challenges**
 - **Strengthening Procedural Clarity**
 - **A critical aspect of the way forward is to address the procedural gaps in the current draft rules.**
 - **Clear guidelines must be established to manage potential conflicts between user rights and business operations.**
 - **For instance, in scenarios where users request data correction or erasure, businesses need clarity on the extent of their obligations, especially if such requests conflict with operational or legal requirements.**
 - **Addressing Cross-Border Data Flow Concerns**
 - **The draft rules' provisions for restricting cross-border data flows require careful reconsideration.**
 - **While data localisation can address legitimate concerns around law enforcement access, it risks deterring foreign investment and stifling innovation if applied indiscriminately.**
 - **A more nuanced, sector-specific approach could provide a solution.**
 - **For example, the Reserve Bank of India's 2018 mandate for payment data localisation struck a balance between regulatory oversight and business needs.**
 - **A similar strategy tailored to industries handling sensitive data, such as finance, healthcare, and national security, could address law enforcement concerns without burdening all businesses equally.**

- **Rethinking the Consent Model**
 - The **reliance on the notice-and-consent model, while traditional, is increasingly inadequate** in the face of modern technologies like IoT, AI, and 5G.
 - **These advancements enable vast, often invisible data collection** in public and digital spaces where obtaining informed consent is impractical.
 - To address this, **India must explore alternative mechanisms that go beyond consent-based frameworks.**
- **Anticipating Emerging Technologies**
 - **India's data protection framework must also account for the rapid evolution of technology.**
 - **Innovations such as generative AI, augmented reality, and autonomous systems** are redefining how data is collected, processed, and used.
 - **The convergence of these technologies with 5G and IoT is creating a hyper-connected environment,** increasing the complexity of privacy challenges.
 - **Future-proofing the DPDP rules will require integrating flexible, principles-based approaches** that can adapt to technological changes.

• Conclusion

- **The Draft DPDP Rules mark a pivotal moment in India's journey toward a modern data protection**
- However, **their potential will only be realised if the government addresses the challenges,** clarifies ambiguities, and prepares for the complexities of the digital future.
- **By focusing on innovation, ensuring procedural integrity, and building public trust, India can establish a framework that protects privacy while enabling economic growth and technological leadership.**

2. Should Voter IDs Be Linked with Aadhaar? GS 2 (Governance)

• Why in News:

- The debate over linking Election Photo Identity Card (EPIC) with Aadhaar has been reignited amidst allegations of electoral roll manipulation.
- Prominent political parties have accused each other of tampering with voter lists, especially ahead of the Delhi Assembly elections
- This issue draws attention to the potential benefits and challenges of such a linkage.

• Historical Context

- **Initial Steps (2015):**
 - The **National Electoral Rolls Purification and Authentication Program (NERPAP)** was launched by the Election Commission (EC) to address duplicate entries in electoral rolls.
 - The program aimed to authenticate voter data by linking EPIC with Aadhaar. Within three months, over 300 million voters were linked.
- **Supreme Court Intervention (2015):**
 - The program was halted after the Supreme Court ruled that Aadhaar's mandatory use should be limited to welfare schemes and PAN linking.
- **Revival (Post-2018):**
 - Following the **Puttaswamy judgment**, which upheld the constitutional validity of Aadhaar, the Representation of the People Act, 1950, was amended in 2021 to enable the voluntary linking of voter IDs with Aadhaar.

• Current Process:

Should voter IDs be linked with Aadhaar?

Why was the National Electoral Rolls Purification and Authentication Program launched by the Election Commission? How do already existing voters link EPIC with their respective Aadhaar numbers? What did the Supreme Court mandate in the Puttaswamy case in 2018?

EXPLAINER

Background

The **Jan Aadi Party (JAP)** and the **Shiv Sena Party (SSP)** have accused each other of manipulating electoral rolls before the Delhi Assembly elections. This has reignited the debate about linking voter IDs with Aadhaar numbers.

What is the history of the proposal? The Election Commission (EC) had in February 2015 launched the National Electoral Rolls Purification and Authentication Program (NERPAP). This was to address the issue of duplicate entries in the electoral roll and to remove such entries. In order to achieve this, the EC began authenticating EPIC data by linking it with the Aadhaar database. It had linked more than 300 million voters in a span of three months. However, the Supreme Court in an interim order, in August 2015, held that the mandatory use of Aadhaar should only be for welfare schemes and PAN linking. Following this order, the NERPAP exercise was discontinued.

After the Supreme Court's final order in Puttaswamy in September 2018, that upheld the constitutional validity of the Aadhaar Act, the EC sought amendments to the Representation of the People Act, 1950 (RPA) and the Registration of Electors Rules, 1962 (RER) to enable the linking of EPIC with Aadhaar. It provided the format in which Aadhaar information may be submitted to the electoral registration officer by a new voter at the time of fresh registration (Form 1) or an existing voter already included in the electoral roll (Form 2). For the purpose of authentication, any other valid document may be submitted only if the voter is unable to furnish their



Need to verify: A special camp for linking Aadhaar with voter ID card held in Madhya Pradesh in 2022. (AP Photo)

number would definitely help in weeding out duplicate entries that are essential. At present, more than 675 million Aadhaar numbers have already been uploaded in the process of finalising the electoral rolls. Further, the errors in the Aadhaar database, however minimal, may result in wrongful rejection or deletion of entries from the electoral roll. Secondly, Aadhaar is only a proof of residence and not a proof of citizenship. Thus, it may not help in removing voters who are not citizens from the electoral roll. It would require a separate effort from the EC.

Finally, while the linkage is to happen at the back end and a mere mention of the Aadhaar number on the EPIC electoral roll may not be itself a violation of right to privacy, it may still result in misuse as the electoral rolls are widely circulated among political parties.

What can be the way forward? The right to vote is a constitutional right and declared so by the Supreme Court in various cases. It is part of the basic structure of the Constitution and cannot be compromised through legislative action.

What are the pros and cons? EPIC linkage with the respective Aadhaar

THE GIST

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- **Submission Requirements:**
 - New voters can provide Aadhaar during registration using **Form 6**, while existing voters can use **Form 6B** for authentication
 - If a voter does not have Aadhaar, alternative documents like a PAN card, driving license, or passport can be submitted.
- **Voluntary Nature:**
 - The EC clarified in 2023 that linking Aadhaar is not mandatory and ensured no voter will be excluded for failing to provide it.
 - However, forms have not been updated to reflect this clarification, causing confusion.
- **Advantages of Linking Aadhaar with Voter IDs:**
 - **Elimination of Duplicates:**
 - Linking Aadhaar can help remove duplicate or fraudulent entries, ensuring cleaner electoral rolls. Currently, over 650 million Aadhaar numbers have been linked.
 - **Improved Electoral Integrity:**
 - Accurate voter data can strengthen the electoral process by reducing instances of impersonation and ensuring fair elections.
 - **Administrative Efficiency:**
 - A streamlined voter database can reduce administrative overhead during elections, making the process more efficient.
- **Challenges and Concerns:**
 - **Errors in Aadhaar Database:**
 - Even minor inaccuracies in Aadhaar data can lead to wrongful deletion or rejection of legitimate voter entries
 - **Proof of Citizenship:**
 - Aadhaar is a proof of residence, not citizenship. Linking Aadhaar will not address the issue of non-citizens being on electoral rolls, requiring separate measures by the EC.
 - **Privacy Risks:**
 - Electoral rolls are widely circulated among political parties, and linking Aadhaar may risk misuse of personal data, even if Aadhaar numbers are only linked in the backend
 - **Public Misconceptions:**
 - Many voters fear that linking Aadhaar with voter IDs might compromise the secrecy of their votes, leading to reduced confidence in the system.
- **The Way Forward:**
 - **Transparent Communication:**
 - Public awareness campaigns are necessary to educate voters about the benefits of Aadhaar linkage and address misconceptions regarding data security and voter secrecy.
 - **Updating Forms:**
 - The EC must urgently update forms to explicitly state that providing Aadhaar is voluntary, as clarified in the 2023 Supreme Court submission.
 - **Data Security Measures:**
 - Strong safeguards must be implemented to prevent misuse of Aadhaar-linked electoral data, ensuring voter confidence.
 - **Separate Citizenship Verification:**
 - To ensure only citizens are on electoral rolls, the EC should develop independent methods of verifying citizenship, apart from Aadhaar linkage.
- **Conclusion**
 - The right to vote is a fundamental component of free and fair elections, integral to India's democratic framework.
 - While linking voter IDs with Aadhaar can enhance the integrity of the electoral process, it must be implemented with caution to address privacy concerns, data errors, and misconceptions.
 - A balanced approach, combining transparency, data security, and improved administrative measures, will be key to gaining public trust and strengthening the democratic process.

3. Centre-State Clashes on Vice Chancellor Appointments GS 2 (Governance)

- **Why in News:** The University Grants Commission (UGC) has proposed new regulations for appointing Vice Chancellors (VCs) in universities, sparking disputes between states and the Centre.

- **New Regulations for Appointing VCs in Universities:**

- **Name:** The draft UGC (Minimum Qualifications for Appointment and Promotion of Teachers and Academic Staff in Universities and Colleges and Measures for the Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education) Regulations, 2025.
- **Objective:** It aims to standardize appointment processes but has drawn criticism for allegedly undermining state rights and federalism.

- **How VCs are Appointed?**

- **Central universities:**
 - Central universities are established under parliamentary Acts and administered by the Centre, with the President of India acting as Visitor.
 - VC appointment committees include two nominees from the university's Executive Council and one from the Visitor.
- **State universities:**
 - State-specific laws often determine the composition of search committees.
 - Typically, the Chancellor (usually the Governor) selects the VC based on committee recommendations.
 - For instance, Kerala's law includes nominees from the university Senate, UGC Chairman, and Chancellor.
- **Private universities:** Private institutions follow similar procedures, with UGC playing a limited role through its nominee in the search committee.

- **Key Provisions of the Draft Regulations 2025:**

- **Committee composition changes:**
 - The new rules specify that the **search-committee-selection committee** will have three members, including one each nominated by the Chancellor/Visitor, the UGC Chairman, and the university's apex body (e.g., Senate or Syndicate).
 - This grants a majority to Centre-aligned nominees in the committee.
- **Eligibility expansion:** Besides professors, individuals from senior roles in industries, public policy, administration, or public sector undertakings may now qualify as VCs.
- **Chancellor's role:** The Chancellor or Visitor will directly constitute the search committee, a departure from the 2018 guidelines.

- **State vs Centre Disputes over VC Appointments:**

- **Kerala:**
 - Conflict started in 2021 when Governor Arif Mohammad Khan contested VC reappointments.
 - The state passed a Bill to replace the Governor as Chancellor, which awaits Presidential assent.
- **West Bengal:**
 - The Supreme Court is involved in resolving disputes over interim VC appointments made unilaterally by the Governor.
 - The state Assembly's move to replace the Governor with the Chief Minister as Chancellor is stalled due to lack of gubernatorial assent.
- **Karnataka:** Proposed legislative reforms aim to remove the Governor as Chancellor. Bills are awaiting approval.
- **Maharashtra:** Attempts to limit the Governor's role in VC appointments were reversed under the new government in 2022.

What draft rules on VC appointments say, why states are upset

ABHINAV K. HANMANGUDKAR
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 12

FEDERAL EXISTENCE has always depended on the UGC's Minimum Qualifications for Appointment and Promotion of Teachers and Academic Staff in Universities and Colleges and Measures for the Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education Regulations, 2018, that stipulate the Chancellor – who is typically the Governor – appoints the Vice-Chancellor (VC) of universities.

How VCs are appointed

Regulations notified by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 2018 said that VCs should be appointed by the Chancellor, who is usually the Governor. The Chancellor – or Visitor in a central university – appoints the VC from among the recommended names.

In the case of state and private universities, one member of the committee is nominated by the UGC Chairman, the state Governor, and the university's apex body.

What the draft rules say

The draft rules say that the Chancellor or Visitor will directly constitute the search committee, a departure from the 2018 guidelines. The committee will have three members, including one each nominated by the Chancellor/Visitor, the UGC Chairman, and the university's apex body (e.g., Senate or Syndicate).

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- **Tamil Nadu:** The DMK-led government's efforts to appoint VCs without Governor approval remain blocked.
- **Federalism Concerns over VCs Appointments:**
 - State governments have raised alarms over the draft regulations, citing:
 - **Erosion of State autonomy:** States argue that these rules centralize power in the hands of Governors, undermining federal principles.
 - **Democratic concerns:** Critics see it as a move to weaken democratically elected state governments.
 - **State leaders' reactions:**
 - **Kerala CM Pinarayi Vijayan:** Described the draft as "anti-federal" and an overreach into state rights.
 - **Tamil Nadu CM M K Stalin:** Called it a "direct assault on federalism."
 - **UGC's stance:** UGC Chairman M Jagadesh Kumar defended the regulations as necessary for aligning with the **National Education Policy 2020** and ensuring transparent, high-quality leadership in higher education.
- **Conclusion:**
 - The proposed UGC regulations have intensified ongoing Centre-state tensions, particularly over Governors' roles in university administration. While the Centre justifies these reforms as quality-driven, state governments view them as a threat to federalism and their autonomy in education governance.
 - The resolution of these disputes will significantly shape higher education and federal-state dynamics in India.

4. Pink fire retardant is being used to curb California wildfires GS 3 (Environment)

- **Why in News:**
 - Wildfires in Southern California have prompted authorities to deploy planes and helicopters to combat the blaze. Nine planes are spraying pink fire retardant, a long-used product, and 20 helicopters are dropping water.
 - While the fire retardant has been in use for decades, recent research questions its effectiveness and potential environmental impact.
- **What is the pink fire retardant?**
 - **What is Fire Retardant?**
 - Fire retardant is a chemical mixture designed to extinguish or slow the spread of fires.
 - It is commonly used to combat wildfires, with **Phos-Chek** being the most widely used brand in the US.
 - **Composition of Phos-Chek**
 - Phos-Chek is primarily a mixture of water, fertilizer (ammonium phosphate), and rust-based red color.
 - The formulation may also include thickening agents to control viscosity and prevent the material from drifting.
 - The key active ingredient is ammonium phosphate, which helps slow the spread of fires by cooling and coating fuels, depleting oxygen, and altering how fuels burn.
 - Unlike water, it does not evaporate easily and remains effective for a longer duration.
 - **How It Works**
 - Phos-Chek reacts with cellulose in plant matter, consuming heat from the fire and producing non-flammable carbon material.
 - This process slows or stops the fire's spread, especially in areas with homes or structures.
 - **Strategic Application**

WHAT IS PINK FIRE RETARDANT, BEING USED AGAINST CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES?

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 12

AS MULTIPLE wildfires blaze in Southern California, authorities are using planes to drop a large amount of bright pink fire retardant. While its use is not new in the United States, growing research has raised questions about its effectiveness and potential environmental impact.

What is the fire retardant?

Fire retardant is a mix of chemicals used to extinguish or slow the spread of fires. To tackle wildfires in the US, authorities commonly use a brand known as Phos-Chek, which mostly contains an ammonium phosphate-based slurry. Salts like ammonium polyphosphate do not evaporate easily like water, and stay for longer. Stanton Florea, a spokesman for the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, told *The New York Times* that the retardant is sprayed ahead of the fire to coat vegetation and prevent oxygen from allowing it to burn.

Colour is usually added to the fire retardant to ensure that firefighters can see it against the landscape. This helps them create fire lines, potentially saving lives and property. Phos-Chek is pink because the colour is "by far the most visible. And, it is pretty," Melissa Kim, vice president of research and development at Perimeter Solutions, which manufactures Phos-Chek, told *NBC Los Angeles*.

What are the concerns?

Environmental experts have argued that spraying fire retardants using planes is ineffective, expensive and a growing source of pollution for rivers and streams. A 2024 study by researchers at the University of Southern California found that Phos-Chek "is laden with toxic metals," and estimates retardant use has released "850,000 pounds of these chemicals into the environment since 2009," as per a report by the *Los Angeles Times*. These toxic metals include chromium



A tanker drops fire retardant during a wildfire in California. *The New York Times*

and cadmium, which can cause cancer, and kidney and liver diseases in humans. However, their adverse environmental impact is potentially bigger in scale, especially when retardants enter waterways and kill aquatic life.

The effectiveness of Phos-Chek also remains unclear because it is one of the numerous firefighting tactics deployed in a major fire. After the flames are extinguished, it is difficult to assign credit.

Studies have found that the effectiveness of aerial retardants also depends on factors like slope, fuel type, terrain and weather. Timothy Ingalsbee, a former wildland firefighter and executive director of the nonprofit Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics and Ecology, told *the LA Times*, "Aerial retardant is effective over a narrow range of conditions, and the windows of opportunity for those conditions are narrowing each year due to climate change."

As global temperatures continue soaring, wildfires are expected to become more frequent and intense. This will only increase the use of aerial fire retardants.

Data show that more than 440 million gallons of retardant were unleashed between 2009 and 2021 in the US. The USC study estimated that as a result, more than 400 tonnes of heavy metals were released into the environment. *The NYT* reported.

- Fire retardant is typically dropped at the edges of fires to create barriers, preventing the flames from spreading.
- Unlike water, the fertilizer-based active ingredient remains effective even after water evaporates, leaving a protective layer for days or weeks.
- Large air tankers can release up to 9,400 gallons of Phos-Chek in a single drop.

○ Importance of the Pink Colour

- A pink dye is added to the fire retardant for visibility against the landscape, enabling firefighters to create fire lines effectively.
- According to experts, pink is the most visible and aesthetically pleasing option.

● Concerns Over Fire Retardant Use

○ Environmental Impact

- Spraying fire retardant via planes is criticized for being ineffective, costly, and a significant source of pollution to rivers and streams.
- A 2024 USC study revealed that Phos-Chek contains toxic metals like chromium and cadmium, which can harm aquatic life and potentially cause cancer, kidney, and liver diseases in humans.

○ Questionable Effectiveness

- Assigning credit to aerial retardants is challenging as they are one of many firefighting methods.
- Their effectiveness depends on environmental factors like slope, fuel type, terrain, and weather, as noted by Forest Service scientists.

○ Limited Scope of Use

- Experts state that aerial retardants work under a narrow range of conditions, which are increasingly rare due to climate change.

○ Growing Usage Amid Intensifying Wildfires

- Rising global temperatures are expected to make wildfires more frequent and intense, escalating the use of aerial fire retardants
- Between 2009 and 2021, over 440 million gallons of retardant were deployed in the US, releasing more than 400 tons of heavy metals into the environment.

○ Ongoing Debate

- Environmental experts, the federal government, and manufacturers are at odds over the environmental and health risks posed by fire retardants, sparking an ongoing debate.

5. Kumbh Mela Explained GS 1 (Art and Culture)

● Why in News:

- The Maha Kumbh 2025, a grand religious event held every 12 years, will take place in Prayagraj, starting on January 13, with the first holy bath (snan).
- Expected to attract over 45 crore devotees over one-and-a-half months, it is one of the largest gatherings on earth. While its exact origins are debated—some tracing it to the Vedas and Puranas and others to the past two centuries—it remains a significant spiritual and cultural festival.

● The Kumbh Mela

○ Origin

- The Sanskrit word "kumbh" means pitcher or pot.
- According to mythology, during the ocean churning by Devas (gods) and Asuras (demons), Dhanvantri emerged with a pitcher of amrita (elixir of immortality).

Kumbh origin, history, appeal

The Kumbh Mela begins in Prayagraj today. Why is it held in four cities periodically? What are Ardh and Maha Kumbh? And why do millions flock to the Mela, making it the largest gathering of devotees on Earth?

YASHEE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 12
It's cold in Prayagraj, foggy with a chance of rain. Yet on Monday, hundreds of thousands are expected to arrive in the city to camp on the banks of the Ganga. During their visit, they will stay in tents and huddle in the shivers, and the music of the Mela will fill the air. Prayagraj is hosting the Maha Kumbh Mela, or Purna Kumbh — which is held every 12 years. Many myths are prevalent around the Kumbh Mela, there are many theories about its origin. Some say the festival finds mention in the Vedas and Puranas. Some say it is a religious festival that started centuries ago. What is certain is only that it is the largest gathering of religious devotees on Earth.

What is the Kumbh Mela, and why is it held in four cities? What is Ardh Kumbh and Maha Kumbh? What is the difference between the two? The answers lie in a mix of myth, history, and the evolving faith of an ancient people who strive to reach the heights of the divine in their lives.

Mythological origins of Kumbh
The Sanskrit word kumbh means pitcher. The story goes that when devas (gods) and asuras (demons) churned the ocean, the nectar (amrita) emerged carrying a pitcher of nectar, or the elixir of immortality. To make sure the nectar did not get lost, Indra's son, Ishta, came with the pot. The pot, his son, Shakra, and his wife, Yami, the goddess of the river, were the first to drink the nectar. The pot was then thrown into the Ganga, and the nectar spilled out, creating the four Kumbh Mela sites: Prayagraj, Haridwar, Nashik, and Pushkar.



Devotees make their way to the banks of the Ganga in Prayagraj on Sunday, a day before the Maha Kumbh begins. **Visuals: Anshu**

According to the Kumbh Mela website, when the pitcher — which takes 12 years to complete a revolution around the Sun — is in Aquarius or Kumbh rashi (whose symbol is the water bearer), and Sun and Moon are in Aries and Sagittarius respectively, Kumbh is held at Haridwar.

When Jupiter is in Taurus, and the Sun and Moon are in Capricorn or Makar (this Makar Sankranti is also in this period), the Kumbh is held at Prayagraj.

When Jupiter is in Leo or Simha, and the Sun and Moon are in Cancer, the Kumbh is held at Nashik and Trimbakeshwar, which is why it is called Simhashta Kumbh.

Debate over Kumbh's antiquity
Reference to the Kumbh in the Skanda Purana is sometimes cited as evidence of its antiquity.

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after the flood of 1817 to rescue the British did not make it.

Dr Dubey, a retired professor of ancient history at the University of Allahabad who has studied the Kumbh Mela in depth, has written that the fair at Haridwar is likely to have been the first to be called Kumbh Mela, as Bhagwan is in Kumbh rashi for the first time. The origin of the Kumbh is linked to the worship of the Ganga as the great life force of the northern plains. Fairs on the banks of sacred rivers are indeed an ancient Hindu tradition. Gradually, travelling sadhus spread the idea of four Kumbh Mela, and the banks of sacred rivers, where lay men as well as ascetics could gather. Apart from pilgrims, age, such huge gatherings also generated an opportunity to start religious and religious activities," Dubey told the Indian Express.

In the Kumbh Mela, pilgrims go to the Centre of the Fair, Dubey, citing records from the Mahabharata to their help by ancient scholars, writes. "The Kumbh Mela came to be regarded as a fair after the twelfth century CE. The tradition of holding this religious festival possibly crystallised during the period of the Bhakti movement, a movement of the socio-religious reforms set on foot by a series of Hindu saints and reformers."

What pilgrims do at Kumbh
While some come for only one ritual dip in the river to wash away sins, many, termed sadhus or yatis, stay at the riverbank, take a break from the daily fight of earning material resources and earn spiritual credit instead. With any large crowd comes the chance of crime, and the Mela has also served as a market crucial to local communities. Historically there are records of Victorian missionaries and European types being spotted at the Mela markets.

They go for ritual baths, called snan, in elaborate processions, in the past, inside ornate golden chariots. It is important enough to have first had to be bloody battles, or, now, at least a generally pre-decided.

The Kumbh Mela has played an important part in history by providing and sustaining society. These days, it is easy to advertise the name and one of the most media-hyped events, it was the faith that made it an important religious and spiritual event. People travelled to the rivers without trains or motorised vehicles, without the grandiose luxury tents, driven only by faith. During the freedom struggle, the mela was a venue to spread nationalist thought," Banerji Pandey, retired history professor at BHU, said.

- To prevent Asuras from getting it, Jayant, Indra's son, fled with the pot, protected by the Sun, Shani, Brihaspati (Jupiter), and the Moon.
- As Jayant ran for 12 divine days (equal to 12 human years), amrita spilled at four locations: **Haridwar, Prayagraj, Ujjain, and Nashik-Trimbakeshwar.**
- **Frequency**
 - **Maha Kumbh (Poorna Kumbh):** Held every 12 years.
 - **Ardh-Kumbh:** Held in Prayagraj and Haridwar every 6 years.
- **Significance of the Rivers**
 - The festivals occur on the banks of sacred rivers:
 - **Haridwar:** Ganga
 - **Prayagraj:** Confluence of Ganga, Yamuna, and mythical Saraswati
 - **Ujjain:** Kshipra (believed to emerge from Vishnu's heart in his Varah avatar)
 - **Nashik-Trimbakeshwar:** Godavari (known as the Ganga of the south)
 - Bathing in these rivers during Kumbh, under specific celestial alignments, is believed to cleanse sins and provide spiritual merit (punya).
- **Gathering of Sadhus and Spiritual Learning**
 - Kumbh Melas attract Sadhus and holy men, especially from the akhadas, providing opportunities for devotees to meet and learn from them.
- **Astrological Basis of Kumbh Mela**
 - The site of a Kumbh Mela is determined by astrological calculations based on the **positions of Jupiter, the Sun, and the Moon.**
 - Jupiter's 12-year revolution around the Sun also explains the 12-year gap between Kumbh Melas.
 - Astrological alignments unique to each site guide the timing and location of the Kumbh Mela.
- **Historical References to Kumbh Mela**
 - **Ancient References to Kumbh Mela**
 - The Skanda Purana is often cited as proof of Kumbh Mela's antiquity, but no extant version explicitly describes the festival as we know it.
 - The Samudra Manthan story, though mentioned in various scriptures, lacks references to the spilling of amrita at four places
 - Some claim the Rig Veda includes shlokas highlighting the benefits of participating in the Kumbh Mela.
 - **Xuanzang's Account**
 - The **Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang** described a seventh-century fair in Prayag, but it is unclear whether it was the Kumbh Mela.
 - Kama Maclean suggests that an ancient bathing festival, Magh Mela, held at Prayag was rebranded as the "timeless" Kumbh after 1857 to avoid British interference.
 - **Adi Shankaracharya's Role**
 - The 8th-century philosopher Adi Shankaracharya is believed to have formalized the four periodic fairs, creating opportunities for Hindu ascetics and scholars to gather and guide the public.
 - **Evolution of Kumbh Mela**
 - According to some experts, the Kumbh Mela likely began at Haridwar, as Brihaspati (Jupiter) in Kumbh rashi corresponds to this site.
 - The tradition possibly took shape after the 12th century CE during the Bhakti movement, as fairs on sacred riverbanks are an ancient Hindu tradition.
 - They link the Kumbh's origins to Ganga worship and the influence of travelling sadhus, who spread the idea of holding Kumbh Melas at four sacred rivers.
 - **Historical Records**
 - Mughal-era records and those kept by sanyasi akhadas indicate the Kumbh Mela was formalized over time, evolving into a major socio-religious event.
 - These gatherings provided opportunities for ascetics to earn followers and for pilgrims to engage in spiritual practices.

- **How Kumbh Mela became a platform for nationalism during Independence movement?**

- **Allahabad's Rise as a Political and Cultural Hub**

- Following the 1857 revolt, Allahabad became the capital of the North-Western Provinces, gaining prominence as a political and administrative center.
- With institutions like the High Court (1867) and Allahabad University (1887), the city attracted influential families, students, and nationalists.
- By the late 19th century, Allahabad had transformed into a significant site for political and religious activities, including the Kumbh Mela

- **Religious Festivals as a Platform for Nationalism**

- From the late 19th century, the Kumbh Mela evolved into a platform for disseminating nationalist ideas.
- The British policy of non-interference in religion allowed Indian leaders to leverage religious gatherings for political purposes.
- **By the 1900s, nationalist leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Gopal Krishna Gokhale used the Kumbh to promote Swadeshi and other nationalist causes.**

- **The Role of Congress and Religious Leaders**

- By the 1930s, the Congress Party actively used Kumbh Melas for political mobilization.
- Sadhus and ascetics played a key role in spreading nationalist messages, blending religious authority with Congress policies.
- **Events like the 1936 Ardh Kumbh saw displays such as the idol of Bharat Mata and political processions that aligned spiritual and nationalist sentiments.**

- **Conclusion**

- The Kumbh Mela evolved from a regional religious gathering to a significant national event with political undertones, especially during the Indian freedom struggle.
- Its transformation was influenced by nationalist leaders, local priests, and ascetics, who used it as a stage for resistance against colonial rule and the assertion of India's political sovereignty.