

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF THE MAHAKUMBH IN SHAPING INDIA'S SOFT POWER AND GLOBAL ECONOMIC RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The Mahakumbh is considered as the largest religious gathering on the planet. In addition to being a spectacular religious event, it is a phenomenon that has considerable economic terms, cultural context, and diplomatic implications. For centuries viewed as a spiritually sacred gathering of faith and ritual at the banks of India's holy rivers, the Mahakumbh is very much on the path of moving beyond being merely a religious event to a process of economic activity, global cultural exchange, and soft power diplomacy or global diplomacy based on soft power. This paper will examine the interplay of faith and finance with specific reference to the Mahakumbh's contributions to global image building, economic opportunities, and new emergent forms of international relations through cultural diplomacy. In economic terms, the Mahakumbh will generate significant revenues on several fronts: religious tourism, hospitality, transport, food, handicrafts, and informal sector employment. Compatibility studies have estimated the Mahakumbh events generate well over tens of billions of rupees for the Indian economy, creating a multiplier impact across the economy. The event's scale requires massive investment in infrastructure such as health care, sanitation, access to digital connectivity, and to make urban mobility sustainable for an event that attracts millions of people to a few designated locations for a few weeks at a time—all of which represent investments usually with longer-term value for host cities! In addition to the tremendous revenues, the Mahakumbh also serves as a global gathering of millions of pilgrims and visitors, creating a rallying event in a specific geographic location. In this paper, a multidisciplinary approach is used, drawing from economics, international relations, and cultural studies, to critically examine how the Mahakumbh connects faith and finance. While this paper finds the immediate economic gains of the Mahakumbh to be clear, it argues that the Mahakumbh holds significance in the long term for its use of cultural capital (or soft power) for economic engagement and global image construction. The Mahakumbh showcases how religion can transcend a spiritual basis and engage in international markets, diplomatic relations, and cultural exchanges, when situated in a global framework.

Keywords: Mahakumbh, Soft Power, World Economy, Cultural Diplomacy, Religious Tourism, Global Image of India.

Hindistan'ın Yumuşak Gücünü ve Küresel Ekonomik İlişkilerini Şekillendirmede Mahakumbh'un Rolünün Araştırılması

ÖZET

Mahakumbh, gezegendeki en büyük dini buluşma olarak kabul edilir. Görkemli bir dini etkinlik olmasının yanı sıra, önemli ekonomik koşullar, kültürel bağlam ve diplomatik çıkarımlar içeren bir olgudur. Yüzyıllar boyunca Hindistan'ın kutsal nehirlerinin kıyısında manevi açıdan kutsal bir inanç ve ritüel buluşması olarak görülen Mahakumbh, yalnızca dini bir etkinlik olmaktan çıkıp ekonomik faaliyet, küresel kültürel değişim ve yumuşak güç diplomasisi veya yumuşak güce dayalı küresel diplomasi sürecine dönüşme yolundadır. Bu makale, inanç ve finans arasındaki etkileşimi, özellikle Mahakumbh'un kültürel diplomasi aracılığıyla küresel imaj inşasına, ekonomik fırsatlara ve yeni ortaya çıkan uluslararası ilişkiler biçimlerine katkılarına değinerek inceleyecektir. Ekonomik açıdan Mahakumbh, dini turizm, konaklama, ulaşım, gıda, el sanatları ve kayıt dışı sektör istihdamı gibi çeşitli alanlarda önemli gelirler yaratacaktır. Uyumluluk çalışmaları, Mahakumbh etkinliklerinin Hindistan ekonomisi için on milyarlarca rupiden fazla gelir elde edeceğini ve ekonomi genelinde çarpan etkisi yaratacağını tahmin etmektedir. Etkinliğin ölçeği, sağlık hizmetleri, sanitasyon, dijital bağlantıya erişim ve milyonlarca insanı birkaç haftalığına belirli birkaç lokasyona çeken bir etkinlik için kentsel hareketliliği sürdürülebilir kılmak gibi altyapılara büyük yatırımlar gerektiriyor. Bunların hepsi, genellikle ev sahibi şehirler için uzun vadeli değer taşıyan yatırımları temsil ediyor! Muazzam gelirlerinin yanı sıra, Mahakumbh aynı zamanda milyonlarca hacı ve ziyaretçinin küresel bir araya geldiği ve belirli bir coğrafi konumda bir buluşma etkinliği yarattığı bir etkinlik olarak da hizmet veriyor. Bu makalede, ekonomi, uluslararası ilişkiler ve kültürel çalışmalardan yararlanan çok disiplinli bir yaklaşım kullanılarak, Mahakumbh'un inanç ve finansı nasıl birbirine bağladığı eleştirel bir şekilde inceleniyor. Bu makale, Mahakumbh'un anlık ekonomik kazanımlarını açık bir şekilde ortaya koyarken, Mahakumbh'un ekonomik etkileşim ve küresel imaj inşası için kültürel sermaye (veya yumuşak güç) kullanımı nedeniyle uzun vadede önem taşıdığını savunuyor. Mahakumbh, dinin manevi bir temelin ötesine geçerek küresel bir çerçevede konumlandığında uluslararası pazarlara, diplomatik ilişkilere ve kültürel alışverişlere nasıl dahil olabileceğini gösteriyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mahakumbh, Yumuşak Güç, Dünya Ekonomisi, Kültürel Diplomasi, Dini Turizm

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1. Introduction

The Kumbh Mela is recognized by UNESCO as one of the world's largest peaceful gatherings and recurs in cycles, culminating in a Maha Kumbh roughly every 12 years at Prayagraj. The 2025 Maha Kumbh attracted unprecedented global attention on account of its scale and state-led emphasis on security, sanitation, and digital management. Beyond spiritual practice, these large gatherings are leveraged by policymakers to project India's cultural depth and administrative competence to foreign publics and investors alike. This paper explores the dual axis of soft power and economic impact at the Maha Kumbh and how the two interlink.

2. Literature review & conceptual framing:

Soft power, according to the formulation of Joseph Nye, is a way of influencing others to get what you want through attraction and co-option rather than through coercion; cultural events are the main instruments. Scholarship and policy writing on mega-festivals suggest three transmission channels: symbolic projection through culture and values, people-to-people diplomacy through diaspora and international visitors, and institutional demonstration through governance and capability. Research on the Kumbh has highlighted its transient urbanism, multiplier effects on local economies, and its potential as a living repository of Indian civilization that foreign audiences can directly experience. Recent analyses of the 2019 and 2025 Melas detail economic windfalls in the form of jobs, local trade, and transport revenues and growing government efforts to use the event in public diplomacy.

3. Methodology

This paper is a qualitative policy analysis synthesizing (a) major international and national media coverage of the Maha Kumbh (2025), (b) economic impact studies and working papers, and (c) policy commentary by think-tanks and cultural-diplomacy analysts. Rather than primary fieldwork, the approach triangulates secondary sources to identify patterns and plausible mechanisms through which the Maha Kumbh shapes India's soft power and external economic relations.

4. Findings

4. 1. Maha Kumbh as an instrument of soft power

The symbolic potency of the Kumbh is rooted in its antiquity, scale, and ritual centrality. It narrates an embodied cultural spectacle that tells of a civilizational identity-be it through millions bathing at sacred confluences or processions of sadhus whose rituals are broadcast across the world-to sympathetic audiences, diaspora, and international publics. Indeed, in

2025, India's invitations to foreign delegates and its provision for international participation had transformed the Mela into an explicit soft-power exercise: religious hospitality combined with curated exposure to the best traditions and culture of contemporary India. Analysts note that this has taken the form of organized invitations for diplomatic and diaspora delegations, media outreach that grooms India for the role of a steward of living heritage.

4. 2. Economic stimulus and the pilgrimage economy

Mega-melas thus create large-scale direct and indirect economic activity: temporary employment, hospitality and catering revenues, transport and retail sales, and infrastructure contracting. Studies of recent Kumbh cycles estimate substantial returns-reports for earlier Kumbhs place local and regional revenues in the billions of dollars (or tens of thousands of crores rupees)-while scholarly analyses of the Maha Kumbh emphasize multiplier effects from temporary urbanization and tourism.

The 2019 and 2025 cycles catalyzed extensive public and private spending on sanitation, tent cities, transport, and services that benefited local suppliers and created short-term employment for hundreds of thousands. These economic flows, when combined with media exposure and tourist experience, contribute to a view of India as a market with strong domestic demand and organizational capacity.

5. Policy implications & recommendations:

1. Embed cultural diplomacy into planning: The Ministries of Culture, External Affairs, and Tourism must come together in inviting targeted foreign delegations-academics, cultural attachés, and travel trade-and design programs to translate transient goodwill into long-term partnerships.
2. Develop legacy infrastructure: Convert temporary investments in waste management systems, health clinics, and transport nodes into lasting municipal assets, and make sure the Melas deliver durable development returns for host cities.
3. Promote sustainable pilgrimage tourism by encouraging responsible tourism products (heritage trails, interpretation centers) that extend visitor stays and spread economic benefits regionally beyond the immediate Mela footprint.
4. Measure and publicize impact: Standardize economic and soft-power metrics on visitor origin, spending patterns, partnership leads, and publish post-Mela reports to inform investors and cultural partners.
5. Safeguard authenticity: Balance commercial activity with protection of ritual integrity; inclusive stakeholder governance-including religious orders, civic groups, and local communities-can help maintain legitimacy.



6. Conclusion

The Maha Kumbh occupies a unique confluence of faith and finance. As a ritual, it throws millions into a common spiritual experience; as a staged event, it showcases India's cultural narrative and administrative acumen to worldwide audiences. The economic impulses it unleashes—from local commerce to investment signalling in tourism—combine to strengthen India's soft power through people-to-people diplomacy. In order to transform episodic gains into lasting international influence and economic ties, the integration of cultural diplomacy with sustainable infrastructure planning, careful measurement of outcomes, and strategies that safeguard ritual authenticity while affording pathways to global engagement become imperative.

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