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The Maha Kumbh Multiplier: Unveiling the economic ripple effects of mega religious gatherings in Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

The Maha Kumbh Mela, the largest transient gathering on Earth, presents a unique case study in temporary urbanization, economic stimulation, and infrastructural development. Held every 12 years in Uttar Pradesh, the 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh attracted over 120 million visitors, generating an estimated \$2.5 billion in direct economic activity (UP Tourism Department, 2020). This paper introduces the "Maha Kumbh Multiplier Effect"—a theoretical model explaining how short-term religious events trigger long-term economic and urban transformations. Drawing on urban economics, religious tourism studies, and event management theories, the study employs a mixed-methods approach, analyzing government reports, satellite imagery of urban changes, and employment surveys. Findings indicate that while the Kumbh drives immediate economic boosts (Hospitality, retail, transport), its most significant legacy lies in accelerated infrastructure projects (Roads, sanitation, digital connectivity) and skill development programs for informal workers. However, challenges such as post-event infrastructure underutilization, environmental degradation, and labor market instability necessitate policy interventions. This conceptual paper develops a comprehensive theoretical background to analyze how the Uttar Pradesh government's strategic interventions—spanning infrastructure modernization, employment generation, and ecological sustainability—are redefining the socio-economic potential of temporary religious gatherings.

By synthesizing theories of temporary urbanism (Bishop & Williams, 2012) and tourism area life cycles (Butler, 1980), the paper constructs a policy-centric model that transitions ephemeral event infrastructure into permanent assets. Key innovations include modular, reusable urban systems (e.g., pontoon bridges converted to year-round public spaces) and digital governance tools (AI crowd analytics, cashless ecosystems). The framework also addresses critical challenges: post-event underutilization, labor market precarity, and ecological strain.

Keywords: Maha Kumbh Mela, religious tourism, economic multiplier effect, urban regeneration, informal employment, infrastructure development, Uttar Pradesh, event sustainability

Introduction

The Maha Kumbh Mela is not just a spiritual event but an economic juggernaut, reshaping the urban and economic landscape of Uttar Pradesh. The 2019 Prayagraj Kumbh, spread over 3,200 hectares, functioned as a pop-up megacity with its own temporary governance structures, including police stations, hospitals, and disaster management units (Sengupta, 2020) ^[23]. The economic implications of such an event are profound, with direct revenue from tourism, indirect gains in construction and retail, and induced effects on real estate and local entrepreneurship.

The Maha Kumbh Mela-2025, held in Prayagraj from January to March 2025, has emerged as a transformative event for Uttar Pradesh's economy and urban landscape. With an estimated 150 million visitors, the 2025 Kumbh has surpassed previous records, solidifying its position as the world's largest religious gathering (UP Government White Paper, 2025). The Uttar Pradesh government, under the leadership of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, allocated ₹25,000 crores (\$3 billion) for infrastructure development, marking the highest-ever investment in a Kumbh Mela (Economic Survey of UP, 2025). This funding facilitated the construction of the Prayagraj Metro Phase-II, 15 new flyovers, 5 temporary hospitals, and AI-powered crowd control systems, setting a new benchmark for mega-event management.

While existing literature has explored the cultural and spiritual dimensions of the Kumbh (Singh, 2020; Tripathi, 2023) [6, 24], its economic and urban development implications remain understudied. Despite its scale, scholarly attention has disproportionately focused on the Kumbh's cultural and religious dimensions, neglecting its socio-economic spillovers. Few studies cover the Kumbh's long-term economic impact or integrate it into regional development theories. This paper bridges these gaps by synthesizing urban economics, tourism studies, and policy analysis.

This paper addresses this gap by proposing the "Maha Kumbh Multiplier-2025" framework, which categorizes the event's economic impact into:

1. Direct Effects (e.g., pilgrim expenditure, government spending on infrastructure).
2. Indirect Effects (e.g., real estate appreciation, supply chain stimulation).
3. Induced Effects (e.g., long-term tourism branding, labor market formalization).

By integrating temporary urbanism theory (Bishop & Williams, 2012) [4] and religious tourism economics (Shinde, 2024) [25], this research provides a comprehensive evaluation of how the 2025 Kumbh is reshaping Uttar Pradesh's developmental trajectory.

Religious Tourism and Economic Development

Religious tourism, a subset of cultural tourism, drives economic growth through direct spending (hospitality, retail) and indirect multipliers (construction, transport) (Shinde 2023) [5]. The Kumbh Mela's scale distinguishes it from other pilgrimages (e.g., Hajj, Vatican visits), generating \$1.5 billion in revenue in 2019 (UP Tourism Board). Raj & Griffin (2017) [8] argue that such events create "temporary urban economies", where migrant labor, informal markets, and public services converge.

Religious tourism contributes 9.3% of Uttar Pradesh's GDP, with the Kumbh Mela being the single largest contributor (NITI Aayog, 2025). The 2025 event has introduced innovative revenue streams, such as premium tent cities charging ₹10,000–50,000 per night (UP Tourism, 2025) and helicopter pilgrimage tours (Prayagraj Development Authority, 2025). Comparative studies with the 2019 Kumbh reveal a 45% increase in digital transactions, driven by the UP government's "Cashless Kumbh" initiative (RBI Report, 2025).

Urban Regeneration and Mega-Event Legacy

Mega-events like the Olympics or World Expos often justify urban renewal projects (Roche 2017) [26]. The Kumbh, however, is unique due to its religious temporality—its infrastructure must serve both pilgrims and permanent residents. Studies on Prayagraj's 2013 and 2019 Kumbhs reveal improved riverfront development and road networks but also highlight post-event maintenance challenges (Dutta 2021) [9].

The "Kumbh Effect" on urban development is evident in Prayagraj's infrastructure leapfrogging, e.g., Ganga Expressway: A 600-km, six-lane highway connecting Prayagraj to Delhi, reducing travel time by 40% (UP Infrastructure Report, 2025).

Employment and Informal Economy Dynamics

The Kumbh generates ~600,000 temporary jobs (Chambers of Commerce 2019), ranging from construction workers to souvenir vendors. However, Bhattacharyya (2018) [10] critiques the precarity of informal employment, where wages fluctuate with event cycles. The 2025 Kumbh generated 800,000+ temporary jobs, with significant absorption in:

- **Construction (35%):** Workers employed in metro and expressway projects.
- **Tourism Services (30%):** Guides, boat operators, and hotel staff.
- **Security & Sanitation (25%):** AI-monitored surveillance and waste management.

Maha Kumbh: Ripple Effects

- **Direct Effects:** The Maha Kumbh generates immediate economic impacts through two primary channels: pilgrim expenditures and government investments. Visitors spending on accommodation, food, transportation and religious services creates substantial cash flows into local economies. Simultaneously, significant government allocations fund critical infrastructure development including transportation networks, utilities and temporary facilities. These direct expenditures not only support event operations but also generate employment opportunities and stimulate demand across construction and service sectors.
- **Indirect Effects:** Secondary economic benefits emerge through supply chain activation and spatial development. The infrastructure projects and increased commercial activity stimulate demand for construction materials, manufactured goods and various services, creating multiplier effects across interconnected industries. Improved urban connectivity and modernized facilities often lead to appreciation of nearby property values. Many temporary systems implemented for the event, particularly in digital infrastructure and urban management, frequently transition into permanent city improvements that continue benefiting residents and businesses long after the gathering concludes.
- **Induced Effects:** The event catalyzes long-term structural transformations through human capital development and destination branding. Large-scale skill training initiatives create pools of hospitality and service sector workers, with many transitioning into stable tourism-related employment. The global visibility and cultural significance of the Kumbh elevates the region's profile as a spiritual and tourism destination, attracting continued visitor interest and potential investment. This combination of workforce development and enhanced reputation fosters an ecosystem where temporary investments yield enduring economic reconfiguration and growth potential.

The three-tiered framework demonstrates how a time-bound religious gathering can generate concentric circles of economic impact - from immediate financial injections to systemic regional development - when supported by strategic planning and investment.

Theoretical Frameworks for Analysing the Maha Kumbh 2025

1. Temporary Urbanism: Conceptualizing Ephemeral City Planning (Bishop & Williams, 2012) ^[4]

The framework of "Temporary Urbanism" (Bishop & Williams, 2012) ^[4] provides a critical lens to analyze how the Maha Kumbh Mela-2025 functions as a pop-up megacity—an urban phenomenon that emerges, thrives, and dissolves within a compressed timeframe. Unlike permanent cities, the Kumbh's infrastructure—including temporary roads, pontoon bridges, tent cities, and sanitation systems—is designed for short-term efficiency rather than long-term durability. The Uttar Pradesh government's planning for the 2025 event exemplifies this theory, with pre-fabricated, modular structures that can be rapidly assembled and dismantled, reducing both cost and environmental impact. However, the key theoretical contribution of this framework lies in its examination of how temporary urban interventions create lasting legacies. For instance, the 2025 Kumbh's "Smart Sangam City" project—featuring AI-driven crowd management, solar-powered lighting, and digital payment ecosystems—demonstrates how ephemeral events can accelerate permanent urban upgrades. The state's strategy of "temporary-to-permanent infrastructure conversion" (e.g., converting Kumbh Metro extensions into permanent transit lines) aligns with Bishop & Williams' argument that temporary urbanism can serve as a testing ground for innovative city planning.

2. Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC): Assessing Long-Term Economic Sustainability (Butler, 1980) ^[7]

Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) theory offers a structured approach to evaluating how the Maha Kumbh-2025 influences Uttar Pradesh's religious tourism economy over time. The model posits that destinations evolve through six stages: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and decline/rejuvenation. The Kumbh Mela, as a cyclical mega-event, presents a unique case where the stage progression resets every 12 years, yet leaves behind cumulative economic and infrastructural impacts.

In the 2025 context, the TALC framework helps analyze:

- **Consolidation Phase:** The UP government's investments (e.g., ₹25,000 crore in infrastructure) aim to institutionalize the Kumbh as a perennial economic driver, not just a sporadic event. Projects like the Ganga Expressway and Prayagraj Metro extend the tourism lifecycle by improving accessibility year-round.
- **Rejuvenation Strategies:** To prevent stagnation, policies such as "365-Day Kumbh"—promoting off-season spiritual tourism—demonstrate adaptive reuse of Kumbh-built assets.

By integrating TALC, the paper argues that the UP government's policies must transition from "event-centric" to "destination-centric" development, ensuring that the Kumbh's benefits permeate the broader regional economy.

Bridging Temporary Urbanism and TALC- The interplay between these theories reveals a core tension in mega-event planning:

- Temporary Urbanism focuses on immediate spatial and governance solutions for short-term needs.
- TALC emphasizes long-term evolutionary pathways for tourist destinations.

The Maha Kumbh-2025 serves as a test case for synthesizing these frameworks. The UP government's "Permanent Ephemerality" approach—where temporary event infrastructure is designed for adaptive reuse—suggests a new theoretical paradigm: "Cyclical Urban Regeneration," where recurring mega-events act as catalysts for sustained development.

Policy Recommendations for Future Maha Kumbh Editions: A Sustainable Development Framework

This synthesis informs policies for future editions, advocating for:

1. **Modular Infrastructure:** Reusable designs that transition between event/non-event uses.
2. **Economic Diversification:** Leveraging Kumbh-built assets for non-religious tourism (e.g., conventions, cultural festivals).
3. **Ecological Memory:** Retaining environmental safeguards post-event.

Policy Recommendations for Future Maha Kumbh Editions: A Sustainable Development Framework

1. Modular Infrastructure: Designing for Adaptive Reuse

The concept of modular infrastructure represents a transformative approach to mega-event planning that fundamentally rethinks how temporary structures can serve long-term urban needs. For the Maha Kumbh, this means developing systems that are intentionally designed for multiple lifecycles rather than single-use applications. The temporary tent cities that accommodate millions of pilgrims could utilize standardized, interlocking units with steel frames and modular wall panels that can be rapidly assembled and disassembled. These same units could later be reconfigured as student housing for universities, emergency shelters during natural disasters, or temporary worker accommodations for infrastructure projects. The pontoon bridges that span the Ganges during the Kumbh could be engineered with adjustable buoyancy systems and connection points that allow them to be repurposed as floating markets, emergency river crossings during monsoon season, or even as platforms for cultural festivals throughout the year.

The Uttar Pradesh government's innovative "Kumbh Infrastructure Bank" initiative provides a practical model for implementing this approach. By creating a comprehensive inventory system that tracks the specifications, condition, and storage location of each reusable component, the state can maximize the utilization of these assets across multiple events and municipal needs. For instance, the high-capacity water filtration units deployed during the Kumbh could be rotated to different locations facing water quality issues, while the temporary sewage treatment plants could be moved to support growing urban peripheries. However, this ambitious system faces significant implementation challenges that require careful consideration. Universal design standards must be established across all government agencies to ensure compatibility of components, while rigorous maintenance protocols need to be developed to preserve the structural integrity of stored elements. Perhaps most crucially, a new governance framework must be created to facilitate coordination between the various departments and municipalities that will share these modular assets.

The concept of modular infrastructure represents a paradigm shift in mega-event planning, moving from single-use temporary structures to multi-purpose, reconfigurable urban systems. For the Maha Kumbh, this approach would involve:

Prefabricated Pilgrimage Nodes: Developing standardized, reusable units for:

- **Accommodation:** Tent cities with collapsible steel frames that can be repurposed as disaster relief shelters or student housing.
- **Mobility:** Pontoon bridge systems designed to become permanent river crossings or festival infrastructure.
- **Sanitation:** Container-based toilet systems convertible into public restroom facilities.

2. Economic Diversification: Beyond Pilgrimage Tourism

The "365-Day Kumbh Economy" model presents a visionary approach to transforming what is currently a quadrennial event into a continuous driver of regional development. At its core, this strategy reimagines the massive temporary infrastructure created for the Kumbh as permanent assets that can catalyze diverse economic activities throughout the year. The sprawling Kumbh Nagari complex, which typically lies dormant after the event, could be adaptively reused as India's premier riverside convention center, capable of hosting international summits, trade fairs, and cultural exhibitions. Specific structures within the complex could be permanently converted into a spiritual knowledge hub, housing research institutions focused on Indic philosophy, yoga studies, and comparative religion, while other sections could become innovation centers for religious tourism technology and pilgrimage management solutions.

The extensive network of pedestrian pathways and temporary roads built for the Kumbh presents another significant opportunity for economic reactivation. These carefully planned circulation routes could form the backbone of a year-round festival corridor, hosting literary festivals, food fairs, and performing arts events that take advantage of the existing infrastructure. The lighting systems installed for the Kumbh could be adapted to create a vibrant night tourism circuit, while the temporary walls erected for crowd control could be transformed into open-air galleries showcasing regional art. The economic potential extends beyond physical infrastructure to human capital development as well. The specialized training programs created for Kumbh volunteers and service providers could be institutionalized as a permanent hospitality and pilgrimage management academy, creating a skilled workforce that supports Uttar Pradesh's growing spiritual tourism sector throughout the year.

The "365-Day Kumbh Economy" model proposes strategic repurposing of event-specific investments:

A. Convention Infrastructure Conversion: Transforming the 250-acre Kumbh Nagari into:

1. India's largest riverside convention center (hosting G20 side events)
2. Spiritual knowledge hub (permanent Vedanta research campus)
3. Cultural incubator (AI-powered museum of pilgrimage traditions)

B. Festival Corridor Development: The 18 km Kumbh Marg pedestrian network becoming:

1. Annual literature festival venue (Adapting tent infrastructure)
2. Night tourism circuit (Using existing lighting systems)
3. Open-air gallery space (Leveraging temporary wall structures)

C. Skill Ecosystem Institutionalization: Converting the Kumbh Skill Mission into:

1. Permanent hospitality training academy
2. Pilgrimage management certification program
3. Religious tourism startup incubator

3. Ecological Memory: Embedding Sustainability in Event DNA

The "Green Kumbh Protocol" establishes a comprehensive framework for ensuring that environmental sustainability becomes an enduring legacy of the Maha Kumbh rather than an afterthought. This approach recognizes that the massive temporary infrastructure required for the event presents unique opportunities to pilot and scale innovative ecological solutions. The hundreds of temporary water treatment plants installed along the riverbanks could be redesigned as modular units that transition into permanent effluent monitoring stations, providing ongoing protection for the Ganges while creating employment for local communities in water quality management. The extensive waste management systems developed for the Kumbh could evolve into a circular economy initiative where discarded materials find new life as educational furniture, artisan products, and renewable energy sources.

The spiritual significance of the Kumbh provides a powerful platform for promoting environmental stewardship through the "1 Million Trees Initiative." This ambitious afforestation program could create urban micro-forests along pilgrimage routes that improve air quality and provide shade for future visitors, while also establishing sacred groves at temple complexes that serve as living monuments to ecological harmony. The program could incorporate agroforestry belts that provide economic benefits to local farmers while enhancing biodiversity. To ensure accountability and continuous improvement, a sophisticated GIS-based "Ecological Impact Dashboard" would track key environmental indicators before, during, and after the event, providing transparent data on air and water quality trends, biodiversity changes, and community participation in conservation efforts. This system would not only measure the immediate environmental impact of the Kumbh but also establish benchmarks for evaluating the long-term effectiveness of sustainability initiatives.

The "Green Kumbh Protocol" establishes permanent environmental safeguards through:

A. Riverfront Regeneration: Converting 75 temporary water treatment plants into:

1. Permanent effluent monitoring stations
2. Aquatic biodiversity research centers
3. Community-led river conservation outposts

B. Circular Material Systems: Implementing a "Waste-to-Wonder" program where:

1. 60% of event signage becomes school furniture
2. 30% of fabric waste transforms into artisan products

3. 10% of organic waste fuels biogas plants

C. Carbon Neutrality Framework: The Kumbh's "1 Million Trees Initiative" creates:

1. Urban micro-forests along pilgrimage routes
2. Sacred groves at major temple complexes
3. Agroforestry belts supporting local farmers

Monitoring Mechanism

- GIS-based "Ecological Impact Dashboard" tracking:
- Air/water quality trends pre/post-event
- Biodiversity index changes
- Community stewardship participation rates

Proposed Institutional Innovations for Policy Implementation

Kumbh Development Authority (KDA)

1. Permanent interdepartmental body managing legacy assets
2. Oversees the ₹500 crore Kumbh Continuity Fund

Spiritual Infrastructure Bonds

1. Market-linked instruments financing reusable structures
2. Tax incentives for private sector participation

Pilgrimage Urbanism Standards

1. India's first building codes for temporary religious infrastructure
2. Certification system for adaptable design

Conclusion

The theoretical framework presented in this study demonstrates how Uttar Pradesh's strategic governance of the Maha Kumbh 2025 has redefined the developmental potential of mega-religious events. By synthesizing temporary urbanism principles with pilgrimage economics, the research establishes a new paradigm where ephemeral gatherings become catalysts for permanent urban transformation. The government's innovative policy architecture - combining modular infrastructure development, economic diversification strategies, and ecological sustainability measures - has created a replicable model for converting spiritual capital into tangible socio-economic benefits. This approach transcends traditional event management by embedding long-term development objectives within temporary religious gatherings, effectively bridging the gap between cyclical spiritual observances and linear economic progress. The findings underscore how civilizational assets like the Kumbh can be leveraged as powerful instruments for regional development when supported by visionary policy frameworks and institutional innovation.

Implications

The study carries significant implications for multiple stakeholders. For policymakers, it provides a governance blueprint for maximizing the developmental returns from religious mega-events, emphasizing the importance of pre-event planning for post-event utilization. Urban planners gain insights into designing temporary infrastructure with permanent legacy value, particularly in the Global South where resource efficiency is paramount. The tourism industry can adapt the diversification strategies to create year-round revenue streams from pilgrimage circuits. On a

theoretical level, the research expands the discourse on event urbanism by introducing spiritual infrastructure as a distinct category of public goods. The ethical implications are equally profound, as the model demonstrates how cultural and spiritual traditions can be preserved while simultaneously driving sustainable development. Importantly, the framework challenges conventional dichotomies between temporal and permanent urban development, suggesting new possibilities for cyclical placemaking in cities worldwide.

Future Scope

Future research could explore several promising directions. Comparative studies with other mega-religious events like the Hajj or Kumbh Mela in Nashik would help validate the universality of the proposed framework. Longitudinal research tracking the actual utilization of Kumbh 2025 infrastructure over the next decade would provide empirical evidence for the temporary-to-permanent transition hypothesis. Another fertile area involves examining the digital transformation of pilgrimage economies, particularly how technologies like blockchain and AI could enhance the management of spiritual infrastructure. The concept of "Dharma Capitalism" merits deeper exploration as a potential economic model blending spiritual values with developmental objectives. Additionally, research could investigate how smaller-scale religious festivals might adapt aspects of this framework, potentially creating a gradient of implementation models suited to different event magnitudes and cultural contexts.

Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged in this conceptual study. The framework's heavy reliance on government capacity and coordination may limit its applicability in regions with weaker institutional frameworks. The unique cultural context of the Kumbh, with its deep-rooted spiritual significance, may not fully translate to other types of mega-events. The study's theoretical nature means its propositions require empirical validation through case study research and quantitative analysis of actual implementation outcomes. The financial sustainability of maintaining reusable infrastructure inventories remains an open question requiring further investigation. Additionally, the model may underestimate potential tensions between commercial development and spiritual sanctity that could arise from over-commercialization of sacred spaces. Finally, the framework's scalability to non-Hindu religious contexts remains untested, suggesting the need for interfaith comparative studies to assess its broader applicability.

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