

Akhadas and Media Logic: A Comparative Coverage of Maha Kumbh 2025

P-ISSN: 3048-9334 | E-ISSN: 3048-9342
SJCC International Journal of
Communication Research
Vol: 3 | Issue: 1 | Sept. 2026
pp. 9-28 | © The Author (s) 2026
Permissions: sjcr@sjcc.co.in



Vibhu Prakash¹ and Abhishek Kaushik²

Abstract

The Prayag Maha Kumbh 2025 witnessed one of the largest human gatherings in history, reaffirming its centrality in the Sanatana faith. However, while the Akhadas play a pivotal role in the event's religious and administrative framework, their media representation remains disproportionately limited. This study examines how India's leading English and Hindi dailies covered the Akhadas during the Kumbh, employing a mixed-method content analysis across six major newspapers between January 6 and February 6, 2025. Findings reveal significant disparities in coverage. Hindi newspapers dedicated more space and thematic diversity to Akhadas, whereas English newspapers largely prioritised event-driven or sensationalist narratives, focusing on high-profile personalities rather than institutional or spiritual contexts. Statistical analyses confirm these differences as statistically significant. Furthermore, Altheide and Snow's 'Media Logic' framework helps explain how audience-driven editorial choices shape the representation of religious institutions in mainstream media.

Key Words

Kumbh Mela, Akhadas, Media Coverage, Content Analysis, Media Logic, Religious Journalism

¹ Makhanlal Chaturvedi National University of Journalism and Communication, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

² University of Delhi, India

Corresponding Author:

Vibhu Prakash, Department of Communication Research, Makhanlal Chaturvedi National University of Journalism and Communication, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh - 462044, India.

Email: vibhuprakash.afgji@gmail.com

Introduction

The Kumbh fair is the largest human gathering in the world (Sawhney, 2021). This Hindu pilgrimage takes place every three years at the holy sites of Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nashik. Every 12 years, a special version of the fair called the Maha Kumbh is held at Prayagraj when the devotees visit the sacred river junction called the Sangam, which is the confluence of the rivers Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati, to take a dip in the holy water and cleanse their sins (Sawhney, 2021).

The 2025 Prayaga Maha Kumbh was the largest such congregation, witnessing footfalls of nearly sixty crore individuals (Government of India, 2025). The heightened participation in the event was attributed, among other factors, to its locational and periodic significance with the event having a claimed once in a 144 years frequency (Government of India, 2025). The origins of the Kumbh Mela are rooted in Hindu mythology. According to the Samudra Manthan (churning of the ocean) story in the ancient Hindu scriptures, the gods (Devas) and demons (Asuras) fought over the Amrit (nectar of immortality). During this celestial battle, drops of the nectar fell at four locations- Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain, and Nashik- where the Kumbh Melas are now held. Among these four locations, Prayagraj is considered as the 'Tirthraj' (King of all 'Tirths', or pilgrimages) explaining the vast turnout (Das, 2016).

As central the Kumbh is to the Sanatan faith, the Akhadas are central to the Kumbh. Etymologically, 'Akhadas' descend from the word 'Akhand' meaning 'inseparable' and inseparable they truly are from the concept of Kumbh. Kumbh festivals are a veritable institution for sadhus, a time when they emerge from ashrams and congregate. During Kumbh several Akharas (groupings, or sects, of sadhus) reside in camps set up at the mela grounds for approximately six weeks where they conduct initiations, ceremonies, convene meetings, perform impressive yogic feats, meditate, and provide pilgrims with pravachans and darshan (Maclean, 2009). Akhadas are religious schools that impart training in traditional martial arts, yoga and scripture with the earliest Akhadas, seven in number, believed to have been set up by Adi Shankaracharya in the 8th century. An Akhada is usually set up under single leadership and its members are expected to shun worldly life. At present, the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad, the apex body of Akhadas recognizes 13 official Akharas (Das, 2016). Today, as historically important players in the convening and conduct of Kumbh melas, the Akhadas

command and receive enormous respect from pilgrims, mela managers, and the media (Maclean, 2009).

The confluence of media and the Kumbh, however, is relatively recent with media presence at Kumbh being officially allowed only since the 2001, then Allahabad, Kumbh. The nascence notwithstanding, the Kumbh, however, has historically been a media, promotion, and exposure oriented event as we will later show in our discussions of the literature. This pilgrimage which has been described as the “greatest show on Earth” (Maclean, 2009) has been historically promoted via tools of mass media, especially the newspaper (Das, 2016).

Given the nature of religions’ historical fragility in India, the media’s responsible coverage of religion becomes important (Jena et al., 2021). Central to the process by which the media contribute to social and cultural change is their capacity to define situations, provide frames of reference and disseminate images of social groups. They also tend to constitute the ‘collective memory’ of a given national society, in the absence of extensive historical knowledge. The media might not be primary inventors or sources of any of these, but they put them together in more or less consistent and repetitive narratives that become the secondary sources for ideas that people have about their own society and their place in it (McQuail, 2010). It is this responsible coverage that we aim to investigate in the course of our paper, looking at, as we will further show, how the oft ignored Akhadas were covered by the media at the Prayag Maha Kumbh 2025.

Statement of Problem

The Kumbh is of essential import to the Sanatan faith, and its culturally comprehensive media coverage becomes equally important. Previous research suggests that media coverage of the Kumbh, has in its previous iterations, lacked cultural depth, reducing the event and particularly its akhadas to a spectacle rather than a historically and spiritually significant institution (Maclean, 2009). Our research aims to analyse this very nature of media coverage during the Prayag Maha Kumbh 2025, especially of its Akhadas.

Scope of the Study

Research into the Maha Kumbh and pilgrimages have statistically declared newspapers to remain the most effective and efficient channels for

communication of ideas regarding/during the Kumbh despite the advent of new media technologies (Raza & Singh, 2017). Our research focuses on a one month period starting from one week prior (January 6, 2025) to the start of the Maha Kumbh (January 13, 2025) to February 6, three days post the Basant Panchmi Shahi Snan (February 3). Top-3 English and Hindi language newspapers in India (Times of India, Hindustan Times, The Hindu, Dainik Jagran, Dainik Bhaskar, and Hindustan) in terms of readership in the country per the Audit Bureau of Circulation were selected for the purpose of the study.

Review of Literature

The Kumbh has been the subject of several research efforts. The intersections of Kumbh and Media however are sparsely researched. In this section we shall first outline the general themes of research into the Kumbh, followed by research into media as a conduit for other effects related to the Kumbh, and ultimately the research into the media's coverage of the Kumbh. Through these we shall identify the gaps in the current literature and arrive at our formulated research objectives. The section ends with the discussions on the theories of Media Logic that the researchers have adopted as a framework for the purpose of this research.

Kumbh Logistics

The Kumbh, by its virtue of attracting footfalls in scores of millions, makes for an ideal case study for managers of events and crowds of this scale. It is thus no surprise that considerable research has been conducted in these aspects of its organisation. Verma and Varma (2018) for instance, have described in detail their experience as members of the Indian Police Service cadre engaged in the management of Kumbh at Ujjain in 2016. They go on to draw lessons in general crowd management and policing from the event while making isolated mentions of the role of media in the same. More central role of media, in particular the audio medium, is found in the research of Sawhney (2021) who investigate the role of public announcement systems in crowd management at the Kumbhs over the years.

Kumbh, Covid, and Politics

Media, as we understand in the terms of news and press, have gained some prominence in Kumbh research in recent years. Most research, like that of Shukla et al. (2021), during the period of the global COVID pandemic, focuses on the health and sanitation concerns revolving around the 2021 Haridwar Kumbh. Apart from such studies being considered from a purely serological and virological perspective, other researchers like Jena et al. (2021) have taken social aspects of the event into account particular the media's role of villainising Muslims during the same event. Researchers found that the media actively vilified the Tablighi Jamat event much more than the Kumbh during the same period as a purveyor of viral contagion, thereby legitimising widespread surveillance and aggressive contact tracing in minority neighbourhoods (Chatterjee & Chatterjee, 2022). Other research, like that from Baral et al. (2023) on the Haridwar Kumbh found that conduction of Kumbh caused an increase in the voteshare of Hindu nationalist parties and reported the media's role in the process. All these researches, while proving different ends, are united by the media, its Kumbh's coverage's role in the society, and its effects. In terms of effects, it were the newspapers which were found to be most effective and efficient as a channel for communication of ideas during the Kumbh. These findings were based on Raza and Singh (2017)'s research on the Kumbhs from 1998-2017 and employed the usage of the cultural distance model to compute channel efficacy.

Media and Kumbh Coverage

Das (2016) in her analysis of media coverage during the Kumbh as a practicing journalist purported a spectrum on one whose popular and dominant end of which were stories on tragedies and disasters during pilgrimages which found their way to the headlines more prominently and on the feeble and sparsely populated end of the spectrum were information pertaining to the pilgrimage filled with nuggets of myths, rituals, history, and art. She also analyses that the media are creating new dimensions of the pilgrimage with a shift from its spiritual nature to a social one. These findings are also corroborated in other reports like that of Singh et al. (2021) which posit that there is an extensive media coverage of other aspects of Kumbh over spiritual aspects which is eroding the spiritual foundations of the tradition.

This emphasis on the social over spiritual aspects of the Kumbh was reported by MacLean back in 2009 itself. However, unlike the researchers who pin this on the media, MacLean (2009) uses this to highlight the intrinsic nature of the Kumbh. Per MacLean, mass-mediated representations have allowed for the Kumbh Mela to be interpreted as a quaint religious observance. While first and foremost the Kumbh Mela is perceived today as a religious event, this is an overly sober reading of the festival which neglects a major element of the Kumbh. Historical analysis by MacLean (2009) reveals that in the early nineteenth century the Kumbh was known among the faithful as being a great 'tamasha', or a spectacle. The coverage of media thus is its presentation in its intended form. The performance of sadhus at the Kumbh Mela is done explicitly for an audience and that is what is shown. This nature of the Kumbh is acknowledged by the sadhus as well, as evidenced by members of the Juna Akhada's media savviness as back as in 2001 where they had negotiated exclusive photography rights with certain media houses (Maclean, 2009).

These aspects notwithstanding, MacLean (2009) has reported the surface-level characteristics of the media coverage of Kumbh at Allahabad in 2001. He reports that rarely have the media ever provided coverage which would enrich a reader's cultural understanding of the Kumbh. Rather, the media tends to focus on sensational coverage and events during the festival which leads to their misinterpretation at a global level.

Gaps in the Literature

While the Kumbh in itself has been a somewhat densely researched topic, most of it pertains to its administrative and logical aspects or those which are historical and religious. In wake of the COVID pandemic, research has also been conducted in the public health aspects of the event. However, little has been done to study how the media tends to cover the event, let alone its cultural aspects and its Akhadas. What little research has been done also tends to lack academic rigour and comes from "personal encounters and journalistic observations" (Das, 2016).

This study aims to plug these gaps in manners that will not only be encompassing of the media coverage in a qualitative manner but also in a way that's statistically and systematically sound. With this in mind, the researchers have formulated the following research objectives.

Research Objectives

RO1: To identify media coverage trends of the Kumbh and its Akhadas during Prayag Maha Kumbh 2025 in India's top English and Hindi dailies.

RO2: To identify the nature and themes of media coverage of the Akhadas during Prayag Maha Kumbh 2025 in India's top English and Hindi dailies.

Theoretical Framework

This research primarily operates under the principles of Media Logic. Altheide and Snow (1976) were the first to use the term Media Logic to capture the systematic nature of pre-existing definitions of what a given type of content should be like. They have described media logic as “a way of seeing and interpreting social affairs”. It refers to the influence of media (considered both as a cultured technology and as a formal organisation) on real-world events themselves as well as on their portrayal and constitution. The processing of media raw material requires a form of cultural standardisation and these standardised formats which are rooted in traditions (which are either media-made or culturally inherited), ways of working, ideas about audience taste and interest, and pressures of time or space.

This concept has been especially useful for identifying the predilection of media producers for factors that they believe will increase audience attention and satisfaction and in this research the researchers shall be using the concept of media logic later on to explain the varying trends of Kumbh coverage across media and their implications.

Methodology

Research Method

For this study the researchers have employed a mixed method approach involving both quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Usage of quantitative content analysis of newspapers is a well-established method with its first recorded use dating back to the final moments of the 19th century. Since then, several

advancements, especially in methods of measurement have been made in the field providing it with necessary credibility as a systematic procedure devised to examine the content of recorded information (Sumpter, 2001). Our choice of the content analysis method was motivated by the fact that the research involved manifest contents of newspaper publication.

For the period between January 6, 2025 and February 6 a total of N=192, (6 papers over 32 days) papers were analysed for news articles on the Prayag Mahakumbh 2025 and the Akhadas. Any observed articles were manually measured and marked for their dimensions (column cm²), images associated with them, image dimensions, and the page numbers on which they occurred to measure for allocated priority. These variables were selected informed from Lynch and Peer (2002).

This categorisation of phenomenon allowed the researchers to simplify media behaviour and provided static pictures of the situation, providing an overview of the extent and nature of the situation. Following this, a thematic analysis was undertaken to provide richer insights into the qualitative nature of the data. This was done to overcome any simplification that the quantitative results might create. The quantitative results were kept for the performance of statistical analysis and determination of significant differences between inter and intra-language coverages. A Cohen's Kappa of 0.67 was found, indicating substantial agreement between the authors vis a vis the coding.

From the articles which were found to cover the Maha Kumbh, those which covered the Akhadas were selected and we performed a thematic content analysis with a semantic focus, an approach used to generate themes based on the explicit meanings found within the text. The researchers did this using a three-phase process for thematic content analysis which began with immersing themselves in the data, coding or labelling the data, and then arranging the coded data into themes. This was performed to find the nature of coverage received by the Akhadas. The developed themes are discussed further in the section.

Sampling

Sampling occurred in our research at three stages and which utilised different approaches. The period of January 6 to February 6 was decided upon in particular

because it covered a period starting from well before the Kumbh allowing us to capture any Agenda-setting pieces and by February 6, three of the five Shahi Snans (January 14, January 29, and February 3) would have occurred allowing us to cover the responses to most of the major events.

At the second level, the newspapers selected in particular were purposively chosen for their high readership indicating their significance. Both English and Hindi language press was sampled for lingual representation and opportunities to compare inter-lingual trends.

Table 1: Newspapers sampled based on readership and their content analysis codes

Newspaper	Language	Readership (in million)	Code
Dainik Jagran	Hindi	16.8	DJ
Dainik Bhaskar	Hindi	15.6	DB
Hindustan	Hindi	13.2	H
Times of India	English	5.5	ToI
Hindustan Times	English	1.5	HT
The Hindu	English	5.3	TH

Note. Sourced from (Indian Readership Survey, n.d.)

At the third level, the issues of the newspapers, no sampling was performed and all the issues of the selected publications in the chosen time period were analysed.

Developed Themes

After employing the process described in the Research Methods section we encountered the following themes for nature of coverage until saturation in the sampled Akhada articles.

Table 2: Coverage themes for articles covering the Akhadas at Prayag Maha Kumbh 2025

Nature of coverage	Code
Event Coverage	EC
Person Particular	PP
Informative	INF
Investigative	INV

These themes are discussed in detail in further sections.

While this point marks the end of our Methodology section, as a key for further discussions and easy reference, we are also providing here codes for the Akhadas that are to be discussed further below. While there are thirteen officially recognised Akhadas per the Akhil Bhartiya Akhara Parishad (for full list see, *Meet the 13 Akharas of Maha Kumbh: Their Origins, History, and Significance*, 2025), we have provided codes for only those which occurred in the course of our analysis.

Table 3: Akhadas and their codes for reference

Akhada	Code
Niranjani	N
Panchayati Bada Udaseen	PBU
Nirmal Panchayati	NP
Taponidhi Panchayati Anand	TPA
Juna	J
Nirmohi	N
Naya Udaseen	NU
Agni	A
Mahanirvani	MN
Atal	AT
Vaishnav	V
Kinnar	K

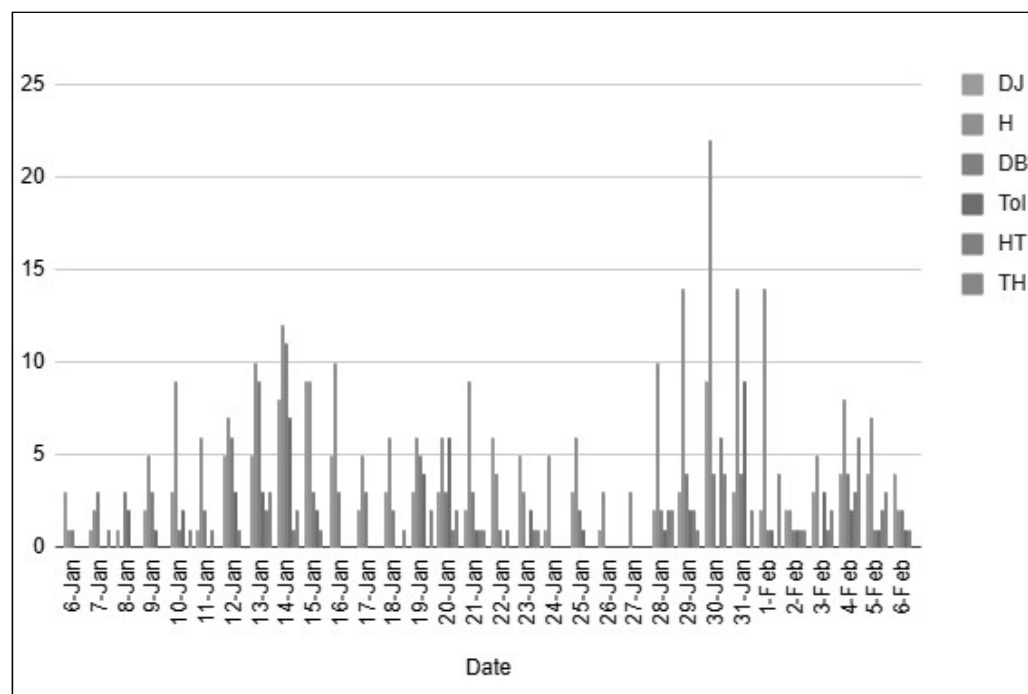
Note. Although the Kinnar Akhada is not an independent Akhada but an extension of the Juna Akhada, the researchers have decided to treat it separately due to its separate treatment in the media and its cultural significance of LGBTQIA+ inclusivity

Results and Discussions

The News Cycles of Kumbh

When the total of Kumbh stories are plotted against the days they occurred on we observe four periods of non-equidistant peaks. While they may appear to be occurring at random, an understanding of the Kumbh reveals the underlying patterns.

Figure 1: Kumbh articles across papers plotted against their day of occurrence

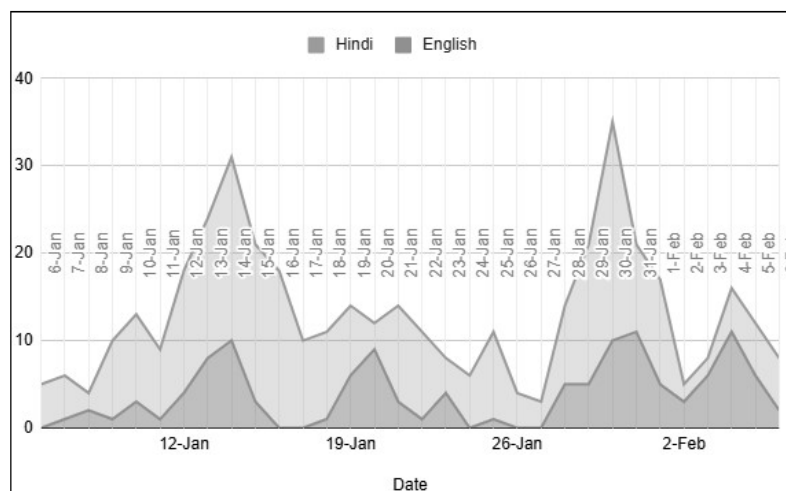


The four observed peaks are on January 14, January 20, January 30, and February 4. These are respectively the dates after the three Shahi Snans with the exception of January 20 which was the day following the initiation of Naga Sadhus. The January 30 peak appears to stand out among the others due to the stories of the deadly stampede on January 29. Between these periods of peaks the, media appears to have maintained a steady interest in the Kumbh related stories. These peaks and patterns appear to be consistent with Gitlin and Tuchman (1980)'s proposed time and types of news with the peaks being a result of the pre-scheduled (diary) events and the January 30 peak being a sum of the pre-scheduled and unexpected hard news.

Inter-language Comparisons

English language papers covered a total of 123 Kumbh-related articles during the measured period. In the same interval, Hindi-language press covered a total of 420 articles. Since their distributions across the time period were non-normally distributed, as found upon the performance of a Shapiro-Wilk test ($W=0.93$, $p=0.03$), we had to perform a non-parametric test to compare for differences. A Wilcoxon-signed rank test was performed and revealed the differences in the English and Hindi language press' coverage of the Kumbh to be statistically significant ($Z = 4.93$, $p = 4.66E-10$).

Figure 2: Differences in Kumbh coverage between English and Hindi language-press with number of Kumbh-related articles on the y-axis



These differences become even more stark when one takes into consideration the Akhada coverage of the two languages' press. In descriptive terms, the differences are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Akhada's coverage across English and Hindi-language press

	English press	Hindi press
Akhada articles	3	53
Non-akhada Kumbh articles	120	367

Due to the limited number of Akhada articles in the English language press a Chi-square test to determine the significance of this difference was not possible to conduct due to low expected counts. Thus a Fisher's Exact test was performed which revealed the differences to be statistically significant ($p=0.0001$).

Akhada-wise Coverage and Inter-Akhada Comparisons

A cumulative report of the coverage received by all the analysed Akhadas are as follows. The Juna Akhada followed closely by the Kinnar Akhada received the most coverage in nearly all aspects.

Table 5: Akhada coverage dimensions and nature

Akhada	Akhada articles	Column cm ²	Image associated	Image dimensions (cm ²)	EC	PP	INV	INF	Avg. Page
J	14	1813.69	11	262.94	11	3			11.40625
K	13	1343.53	13	337.22	11	2			8.95
MN	7	1681.91	10	793.42	4			3	7.3
N	6	961.09	7	274.99	4	1	1		10.165
NP	4	497.56	4	197.6	2	1	1		13.16
AA	3	89.7	2	16		3			10
PBU	2	155.41	2	48.76	1			1	9
AG	2	68.81	2	25.29	2				12.90
T	1	44.1				1			11
NI	1	75.64	1	81.6	1				14
NU	1	181.25		0	1				12
AT	1	103.2	1	8		1			18
V	1	404	1	171.6	1				1
Total	56	7419.89	54	2217.42	38	13	2	4	10.68*

*Refers to average page appearance

While the coverage accorded to the different Akhadas might appear unequal, a statistical comparison reveals the case to be not so. When the Akhadas accorded the top-5 coverage spots are compared between each other for all factors ranging from article count to image dimensions, the differences between them are found to be occurring due to chance as revealed by the Kruskal Wallis test. Efforts to obtain even a practical significance between the results by comparison of ϵ^2 values also failed to bear any results with all values approaching zero. However, these results should not let us to believe that there is not a clear hierarchy in terms of reportage and the nature of coverage the Akhadas receive.

Akhadas and Nature of Coverage

The most prominently featured Akhadas across the time period happen to be the Juna and the Kinnar Akhada. However, if one were to assume this feat's achievement to any intrinsic cultural significance of these Akhadas (of which they are no doubt full of), one could not be further from the truth. The causes leading to the prominence become clearer once one inspects the nature of coverage accorded to the Akhadas.

Both Akhadas receive the majority of their coverage from two categories, event coverage (EC) and person particular (PP). The former is defined as reactionary media reports to events related to the Akhadas while PP are coverages focusing on personalities associated with these Akhadas. The Kinnar Akhada's statistics have been pumped up by the reports of the former actress Mamta Kulkarni's appointment as the Akhada's Mahamandaleshwar (high priest) and her subsequent removal. With the Juna Akhada, the role was fulfilled by Abhey Singh, christened 'IITian Baba' in media reports owing to his alma mater and later renunciation.

In both the cases, it's not the Akhadas themselves that are the focus of the coverage, neither it is the spirituality of the people at the centre of coverage but rather their past lives and professions which attract the media (audience), owing perhaps to their unexpected nature as described in Gitlin and Tuchman (1980)'s proposed types.

Other than the two-cases above described, not all instances of PP coverage deals only with media's discovery of unlikely people's adoption of spirituality.

Several instances of PP coverage across papers and Akhadas focus on saints and ascetics related to the Akhadas who have gained public support and devotion due to their performance of austerities, supports to social causes, or other spiritual characteristics. Instances of these include the Amar Bharati Baba who has kept his hand in a raised position as a symbolic appeal for peace against terrorism or the Nirmal Giri Baba who hasn't consumed grain since the past twelve years. These reports are in line with theory of the age. The media are the main instrument for manufacturing fame and celebrity and they are also captivated by it. Fame manufacturing appears to be the primary resource and also criterion of value, when applied to people, products or performances and one of the driving forces of media logic is the search for new sources or objects of fame (McQuail, 2010). Then, the dominance of such coverage does not come as surprising.

Bhaskar as a Cultural Interlocutor: Informative Coverage of Akhadas

Attention must be drawn at this juncture to the nature of coverage that has been accorded a position of the higher value ideal since our literature review. Informative coverage, defined in our analysis as articles that provided social, cultural, or historical contexts regarding the Akhadas in a manner that is educative and not in conjunction with recent Akhada-related occurrences, were only covered by the Dainik Bhaskar (DB). While it is Hindustan which takes the crown for most Kumbh reportage by sheer volume, it is DB which makes the most attempts to realise the coverage ideals sought in MacLean (2009).

These reports varied from information regarding the procedures for the Shahi Snan of Akhadas and their Peshwais, or the rituals of Aghor Saadhna, to the membership rules of the different Akhadas. Although a minor fraction of all Kumbh-related coverage, DB's efforts still stand out as the lone attempt of providing a socio-cultural context of the Kumbh to its readers over just what's happening in the immediate, as a cultural interlocutor.

The English-language Press and Media Logic

The coverage of Kumbh differed significantly between the English and the Hindi-language press as statistically demonstrated above. Situations were even more

dire in the coverage of Akhadas with HT and TH dedicating not even a single article to any Akhada across the measured period. ToI covered Akhadas in a total of three articles with two of them about the Juna Akhada accepting a minor as a member. This lack of focus on the Akhadas show the English-language press in a reactionary light towards the Kumbh, reporting only on events that occur and not dedicating space to the congregations's cultural value.

This, or for that matter commentaries on any of the trends reported so far in the paper are not purported as value judgments. Rather, we believe this is the manifestation of the Media Logic we discussed earlier in our paper. This is not media playing the role of gatekeepers as Katz (1957) would have imagined. Rather, media houses and publishers operate on a standardised media logic that takes into account the culturally inherited ideas of the audience tastes and interests (Altheide & Snow, 1976).

While the research and literature might highlight the disparities in Kumbh coverage or beseech that those who have the power to represent the Kumbh would do so better with reference to its social, cultural, and historical contexts, the contemporary media is audience driven. We posit that the contemporary media culture is audience-demand, or atleast perceived audience-demand driven. English-language press does not cover the Kumbh with the rigour of their Hindi counterparts or stories about Mamta Kulkarni and the 'IIT Baba' take precedence over explainers of the historico-cultural values of the Kumbh and the Akhadas because that is what the media consumers want... or at least that is what the media houses have been led to believe that their consumers want and their market performances continues to bolster this audience understanding.

Conclusion

The Prayag Maha Kumbh 2025 reaffirmed the event's unparalleled significance in India's religious and cultural landscape. However, this study has shown that despite their central role in Kumbh's organisation, traditions, and spiritual framework, Akhadas remain marginal in mainstream media coverage, particularly in English-language newspapers.

Through a mixed-method content analysis, we identified stark disparities in how different media outlets covered the Kumbh and the Akhadas. Hindi-language

newspapers provided significantly higher coverage volume and more diverse themes, while English-language newspapers largely restricted their focus to event-driven reporting, often omitting the socio-cultural contexts of the Akhadas. Furthermore, the dominance of personality-driven narratives indicate a preference for celebrity-oriented storytelling over substantive engagement with the Akhadas' religious and historical significance.

Our study also reinforces Altheide and Snow's (1976) Media Logic framework, demonstrating that contemporary media coverage of the Kumbh is shaped more by audience expectations and market-driven imperatives than by a commitment to cultural interpretation. While newspapers like Dainik Bhaskar stood out as cultural interlocutors by offering informative and historical coverage, such efforts remain exceptions rather than the norm.

These findings underscore a broader concern: the media's role as cultural interpreters is increasingly compromised by commercialised and sensationalist priorities. For an event as historically and spiritually rich as the Kumbh, a more informed and culturally aware journalistic approach is necessary to prevent its reduction to a mere media spectacle.

Limitations and Recommendations

While this study offers a foundational analysis of Akhada representation in the media, it suffers from certain drawbacks. The scope, although justified with theory, was limited to print media and future researchers may expand to other mediums to check for inter-medium differences in reporting trends especially the internet which offers for a more personalised media experience.

This study is focused on media production (what the media publishes) but does not take into account audience reception. Future researchers may incorporate surveys or interviews in their methods to provide a more comprehensive picture.

And finally, while the researchers have done their best to maintain inter-rater reliability to a statistically satisfiable level, manual coding has its limits. With the advent of technology the researchers encourage future researchers to make use of Natural Language Processing to derive themes and process more data to formulate their conclusions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and publication of this article.

References

- Altheide, D., & Snow, R. (1976). *Media Logic* (Vol. 89). SAGE. https://books.google.co.in/books/about/Media_Logic.html?id=z7zZAAAAMAAJ&redir_esc=y
- Baral, S., Nellis, G., & Weaver, M. (2023). The Electoral Consequences of Mass Religious Events: India's Kumbh Mela. *escholarship.org*. <https://doi.org/10.26085/C3DK5R>
- Chatterjee, N., & Chatterjee, A. (2022). *Covid-19 in India, Disease, Health and Culture: Can Wellness Be Far Behind?* Routledge.
- Das, A. (2016). The Politics of Pilgrimage Through the Prism of Mass Media. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 4(6), 10. <https://doi.org/10.21427/d7j13n>
- Gitlin, T., & Tuchman, G. (1980). Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality. *Contemporary Sociology a Journal of Reviews*, 9(1), 99. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2065604>
- Government of India. (2025, February 26). *Mahakumbh 2025: A Spectacle of Faith, Unity and Tradition*. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2106476>
- Indian Readership Survey. (n.d.). *Indian Readership Survey 2019 Q4*. <https://mruc.net/uploads/posts/4b8be183b438b898c873dc6182d61ac0.pdf>
- Jena, A., Yadav, R. A., & Rambarki, R. (2021). Demonizing the Others: Vendetta Coverage of Tablighi Jamaat and Kumbh Mela During the COVID-19 Pandemic in India. *Media Asia*, 48(4), 346–351. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2021.1946282>

- Katz, E. (1957). The Two-Step Flow of Communication: An Up-To-Date Report on an Hypothesis. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 21(1), 61–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2746790>
- Lynch, S., & Peer, L. (2002). *ANALYZING NEWSPAPER CONTENT A HOW-TO GUIDE*. <https://www.orau.gov/hsc/ercwbtc/content/ERCcdcynergy/content/activeinformation/resources/NewspaperContentAnalysis.pdf>
- Maclean, K. (2009). Seeing, Being Seen, and Not Being Seen: Pilgrimage, Tourism, and Layers of Looking at the Kumbh Mela. *CrossCurrents*, 59(3), 319–341. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-3881.2009.00082.x>
- McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*. SAGE.
- Meet the 13 Akharas of Maha Kumbh: Their Origins, History, and Significance*. (2025, January 16). Moneycontrol. <https://www.moneycontrol.com/religion/maha-kumbh-mela-2025/meet-the-13-akharas-of-maha-kumbh-their-origins-history-and-significance-article-12911933.html>
- Raza, G., & Singh, S. (2017). Current Status of Public Understanding of Science: Results of Kumbh Mela Survey Studies. In *Springer eBooks* (pp. 133–145). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-1025-5_10
- Sawhney, M. (2021). Infrastructure of Life: Public Address, Listening and Crowds in the Delhi Metro and Kumbh. *Media Culture & Society*, 44(2), 341–361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437211037017>
- Shukla, S., Khan, R., Ahmed, Y., & Memish, Z. A. (2021). Conducting Mass Gathering Events During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study of Kumbh Mela 2021 as a Potential 'Super Spreader Event.' *Journal of Travel Medicine*, 28(8). <https://doi.org/10.1093/jtm/taab160>
- Singh, A., Malik, S., & Sharma, K. D. (2021). Deconstructing the Spurious Belief System Behind Pilgrimage: Enlightening Youth Towards Spirituality. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 6(1), 139–148. <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.61.17>
- Sumpter, R. S. (2001). News About News. *Journalism History*, 27(2), 64–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00947679.2001.12062572>
- Verma, A., & Varma, V. (2018). Policing Non-Violent Crowds: Lessons From Kumbh Mela in India. *Policing a Journal of Policy and Practice*, 14(4), 916–930

About the Authors

Vibhu Prakash holds a postgraduate in Media Research from the Department of Communication Research, Makhnallal Chaturvedi National University of Journalism and Communication, Bhopal, India. His academic interests explore the intersections of sports, media, and culture, with a focus on how mediated narratives shape public discourse and identity.

Abhishek Kaushik carries a postgraduate in Library and Information Science from the University of Delhi. His research adopts an interdisciplinary lens, engaging with themes of information management, retrieval, classification, and media systems. He is particularly interested in how media infrastructures and information systems intersect to improve accessibility, organization, and user engagement.