The Kumbh Mela is a Hindu religious fair that occurs every 12 years at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers on the plains of northern India. The next festival will take place from January 14 - February 25, 2013 in Allahabad. Since its inception early in the first millennium CE, the Kumbh Mela has become the largest public gathering in the world. Today it draws tens of millions of pilgrims over the course of a few weeks. On the three "main bathing days" in 2001, the crowd was estimated at some 30 million. The Mela provides a forum for both individual and collective expressions of faith as pilgrims, religious teachers, and followers of monastic orders converge from all parts of India.

On the broad sandy flats left after the rainy season by the receding waters of the meeting rivers, a temporary city is created for the Kumbh Mela. This "pop-up" mega-city will house the Kumbh Mela’s many short-term pilgrims as well as the Hindu faithful and the working personnel who stay for the duration. This city, laid out on a grid, is constructed and deconstructed within a matter of weeks. Creating this huge encampment entails multiple aspects of contemporary urbanism: city planning and management, engineering and spatial zoning, an electricity grid, water lines and sanitation systems, food and water distribution plans, hospitals and vaccination centers, police and fire stations, public gathering spaces, and stages for entertainments and plays. Most important are the many encampments of religious teachers and monastic orders in neighborhoods that include devotees as well as volunteers who work on their behalf to provide services and sustenance to the crowds.

Because of its size and complexity, the Kumbh Mela inspires interdisciplinary research in a number of complementary fields—urban studies and design, religious and cultural studies, environmental science and public health, technology and communications. In January 2013, an team of eight faculty from Harvard’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences, School of Design, Business School, School of Public Health, Medical School and the Harvard Global Health Institute, as well as twenty undergraduate and graduate students, are traveling to Allahabad to engage with this “pop-up mega-city.” These faculty and students have conducted extensive research on this festival prior to their departure, so that their time on the ground at the Kumbh will be the culmination of this research.

The various faculty are engaging in different projects at the Kumbh with their respective students. The GSD team envisions this project as a case study, or prototype, for the pop-up mega-city, and will map flows of people and infrastructure. The FAS team will look at various religious and cultural aspects of the Kumbh including the kinds of religious groups present at the festival, devotional practices, tourism and environmental concerns. The Health team will look at the presence and networks of hospitals, clinics and public health facilities. The Business team will gather information on business practices of the Kumbh, including the interaction of the public and private sectors. They will also examine the way in which technology, media, internet connections and cellular networks play a role in the 2013 Kumbh logistics as never before.

This university-wide interdisciplinary project is coordinated by the Harvard Global Health Institute and South Asia Institute at Harvard University.

January 2013
PROJECT TEAM

(This is a list of all of the faculty involved in the project. Not all of these professors are necessarily traveling to the Kumbh in January)

For Interviews with Faculty, please contact SAI Associate Director, Meena Hewett, meenahewett@fas.harvard.edu

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