**Ritual Performance in Hindu Pilgrimage: Exploring *Kalpvas* in *Prayag***

**Abstract**

*Kalpvas* is an annual pilgrimage at *Prayag* (Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh) during the month of *Magha* (January-February), extending over a period of 45 days and involves a range of rituals performed on daily basis and pilgrims undertaking it are known as *Kalpvasi*. Even though *Kalpvas* has found only cursory mention in various Hindu religious literatures, every year pilgrims from nearby areas of Prayagraj coalesce to undertake this popular practice. Therefore, *Kalpvas* as a practice is located at the boundary of what qualifies as folk religion and classical or higher religion. Examining the functioning and the mechanics of *Kalpvas* as a performed ritual, this study explores the meanings that pilgrims construct and derive during the pilgrimage. These rituals are both private and public and since the participants live in close contact with each other, it also involves a conscious ‘performance’ on the part of the participants, as each participant becomes both object and subject of observance, enforcing and re-enforcing religious discipline. It analyses how akin to a performance, the *Kalpvasi* experience a kind of ‘flow’ and loose the sense of self and merge with other pilgrims and the ritual activity both.

**Keywords:** Rituals, *Snan*, *Kalpvas*, Performance, Pilgrimage, Popular Hinduism

**Introduction**

Pilgrimage is both an individual activity as well as a socio-cultural institution. As an individual activity it refers to the journey undertaken by an induvial to a sacred center will consciousness of sacred nature of journey. As a cultural institution, pilgrimage can be understood as an ensemble of set of symbols, history rituals, legends, behavior, deities’ locations, specialists etc. that center on the site/s and therefore also constitutes the individual pilgrim behavior (Behera, 43). In this sense the institution of pilgrimage in India is believed to be an ancient and a persisting religious tradition among the Hindus. Multitudes of sacred places spread across the length and breadth of this country attract millions of pilgrims. From the most ancient civilizations to the present times sacred centers have exerted a powerful pull on the believers (Bharadwaj; 1973:01). Situated at the confluence of holy rivers Ganges-Yamuna and mythical Saraswati, the ancient city of *Prayag* (Prayagraj) is a *tirtha* (ford) known as *tirthraja* (king of all holy places). Prayag is regarded as the generative organ of Goddess Earth, with the land between the Ganges and the Yamuna said to be its *mons veneris* (Dubey: 2001:01). It is believed by the Hindus to be the holiest place in space and time. Every year thousands of men and women descend on the banks of *Triveni Sangam[[1]](#footnote-1)* in the cold month of January corresponding to the Hindu month of Magha, in Prayagraj district of Uttar Pradesh. This practice of staying month long at *Sangam*, is known as *Kalpvas* and the practitioners are known as *Kalpvasi*. *Kalpvas* at Prayag offers a popular and accessible alternative for gaining religious merits and benefits, as it is open to all irrespective to the differences of caste and class. Whereas Vedic sacrifices and rituals demand possession of religious knowledge which was restricted to only Brahmanas, pilgrimage is open to people of all caste, even the Shudras.

Despite of much popularity, this practice has evaded the eyes of social researchers from and has only found passing references in some research works mainly related to the *Kumbha mela[[2]](#footnote-2)* and in studies related with psychological aspects of the practice[[3]](#footnote-3). In their forty-five days of stay, the *Kalpvasi* undertake various religious activities like bathing in the Ganges, worshipping (Puja), hearing religious discourses by saints and attending performances of the Hindu epics (Eldering & Pandey). Apart from these, the *Kalpvasi* also follow a distinctive life-style which forms an intrinsic core of the practice. A *Kalpvas*i must sleep on the floor without any beddings, has to bathe thrice in the Ganges, has to practice celibacy, should not think about worldly affairs, should remain calm and composed and can eat only once during a day and preferably uncooked food among others. On the very first day a *Kalpvasi* is supposed to plant barley at the entrance of their hut/tent and take care of it throughout their stay.

The practice of *Kalpvas* can be understood as a ritualized stay, that is, the practitioner is supposed to strictly follow certain rules and regulations and has to perform a range of rituals on daily basis without any fail. The everyday ritualistic activities are undertaken not in isolation or for their own sake, but as a part of the bigger ritual which goes on for almost forty-five days.

The practice of *Kalpvas* from the point of view of participants consists of two actors; a) the *Kalpvasi* or the lay practitioners and b) the religious specialists known in local parlance as *Prayagwal Pandas.* *Kalpvas* is a joint practice undertaken by both these actors as both of them share the same space for entire duration.

**Performance and Religious Ritual**

Religious ritual and performance forms have found relation in culture since primeval times. The first “theatrical” performances have been speculated to have either originated in early agricultural practices of fertility renewal, or with shamanistic practices involving magic and healing, or both. (Beeman 2015). Also, it is considered that religious rituals have a performative element. According to Beeman (2010, 118-137) performance is collaborative behavior that takes place within culturally defined cognitive frames that have identifiable boundaries. He says that the most effective performances are those in which the performers and audience achieve full engagement with the performance activity through ‘flow’. He underlies that these characteristics of performance are also characteristics of religious ritual. Similarly, (Csikszentmihalyi 1990) argues that taking place within clearly defined frames, religious ritual results in a ‘flow’ like experience for the performers, like that in a performance,

Milton Singer coined the terms ‘cultural performance’ in his study of the Indian culture (Erika and Riley 1997). For him, a range of ubiquitous events like prayers, ritual reading and recitation, plays, rites and ceremonies, temple festivals, and weddings were characteristic of cultural performances and were concrete observable units within the structure of culture and particularly of Hinduism. According to Singer, every cultural performance ‘had a definitely limited time span, or at least a beginning and an end, an organized program of activity, a set of performers, an audience, and a place and occasion of performance’ (Singer 1972, 71).

In lines with Singer’s argument, we seek to analyze the practice of *Kalpvas* as a ‘cultural performance’. The practice of *Kalpvas*, as we will discuss below bears all the characteristics of ‘cultural performance’ as defined by Milton Singer; it has a definite time span, it is organized at a particular time or occasion, at a particular place and has a set of performers as well as an audience.

Victor Turner’s concept of ‘Communitas’ is of significance for exploring a ritual activity. Communitas occurs when people experience liminality in a common setting. It corresponds with an intense, pleasurable feeling of social bonding, togetherness and social unity (Turner 1969). As opposite to the secularity of the non-ritual world, the feeling of common bonding between people is equated with sacredness. In the otherwise external society there is an entire gamut of social differentiation on the basis of age, gender, social status, professional title and group membership. As we will further see, in *Kalpvas* the social differences are partially or completely eliminated. People undergoing *Kalpvas*, living in austerity, practice the same rituals and follow similar prohibitions and rules. They all receive a social title: *Kalpvasi* to indicate their new social status during their stay at Prayag.

***Kalpvas*: The month long pilgrimage**

*Kalpvas* begins when the Sun enters Capricorn, and continues for the month of Magha according to Hindu calendar, and is held nowhere else other than Prayag. According to one myth, during the month of *Magha*, all of the Hindu pilgrimage sites are believed to be present at Prayag to get rid of the sins they have received (Jacobsen 2013, 35) and so, there is no benefit in going to other sacred sites in this month.

Hindus believe that residing in Prayag brings religious merit, absolves sins and provides salvation. The religious scriptures eulogize the sacred importance of residing in Prayag especially during the month of *Magha*. According to (Ramanand 2013), the religious texts establish that it is a rarity for the mortals to have visited Prayag during *Magha*, and having bathed there is even rarer.

*Koorm Puran* says that,

“The holy place of Prayag destroys all the sins, redeems the manes, thus those who reside in Prayag, they should be taken as having been redeemed from the ocean of universe” (Chapter 36, verse 32).

Residing in Prayag is so fruitful that even Gods and divine beings have a longing for it,

“… Mahadeva Rudra Dwells there, Lord Brahma too lives there with other gods” (Chapter 36, verse 16).

Although the term *Kalpvas* does not find specific mention in the Purans, but it can be said that the nomenclature comes from ‘Kalpa’ that is one of the six *Vedanga*. The traditional practice of ritualistic stay (derived from the Puranic emphasis) in due course of time, probably came to have its name as *Kalpvas*. The significance of *Kalpvas* in the life of Hindus can be thus ascertained through the rituals themselves. It is as Durkheim would say, that ritual is a means by which religion is made visible and tangible (Pickering 1984, 327).

The various rituals throw light on the essential beliefs of Hindus regarding Life, Liberation, Soul and the Brahman (Supreme Being). The Hindu idea of birth, death and rebirth means that separation and transition is the only constant. The Hindu notion of the soul taking a new body[[4]](#footnote-4) - like we change clothes, teaches that, ‘life itself means to separate and be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn’ (Bhardwaj 1973, 189). This particular belief, that life is a journey, despite of births and death; is the base of the Hindu social and metaphysical thought. For Hindus this is an endless process.

*Kalpvas* is to awaken certain ideas and sentiments; to attach the present to the past. They celebrate it because their ancestors did, because they are attached to it as to a highly respected tradition and because they leave it with a feeling of moral well-being. An informant told us that he remembers accompanying both his great grandfather and grandfather to *Kalpvas*. He is often reminded of his own practice of *Kalpvas* as a continuing tradition of his forefathers. He said, “I am nothing more but an actor in this continuing chain of events… my grandfather was here, before him his grandfather… and I bring along my grandson… so that he sees everything and one day when I will be no more, my sons and grandsons will replace me.”

While undertaking *Kalpvas* the caste and class boundaries are worn off. Pilgrims introduced each other to us by referring them as *Kalpvasi*, and a remarkable social bonding and unity was observed. The realization of being in the same space, performing similar activities and having similar thoughts generates a kind of camaraderie amongst them. Pilgrims would often talk about having made friends while performing *Kalpvas* which carried on in their lives post their pilgrimage got over. One of the *Kalpvasi* groups jolly fully remarked, “in whichever direction you might venture in the Mela, you would find similar people, we all are same, in outer appearance we might differ, but in spirit there is no difference. Here all social boundaries are broken; there is no division of high caste or low caste, and rich or poor amongst us. We all bath as *Kalpvas*i and live as *Kalpvasi* day and night”

***Prayag* and its myths: The Place as the pilgrims believe**

1. **The Ganges: Mother goddess**

The confluence of Yamuna and Ganges seems to be referred in one of the verses of the Rig Veda, which says, “Those who bathe at the place where the two rivers, white and dark, flow together rise up to heaven.[[5]](#footnote-5) Their confluence is known as Veni, it signifies the meeting point of the Ganges and the Yamuna. The sacred texts state that the mere sight of the Ganges grants the devotee spiritual merits: by simply gazing upon the sacred river, one becomes purified. Having a *darshan* of Ganges is considered to be a merit bestowing activity which builds good *karma* while lending pleasure to the body and soul. The wonderful sight presented by the mixing of two rivers has often been sung in poems. In the Raghuvamsha, Kalidas describes the *Sangam*, “Look here the stream of Ganges mixing up with the Yamuna, looks like the string of pearls interspersed with lustrous sapphires at one place, and at other like a garland of white lotuses intertwined with the blue ones”[[6]](#footnote-6).

The idea of the gaze takes specific form of *darshan* in Hindu narratives. The sacredness that is attributed to the Ganges due to its extraordinary powers of purification has been the central belief around the holiness of *Sangam*. The confluence of the two sacred river streams forms a triangular curvature of religious significance for those who follow *Sanatan Dharma* (Narain and Narain 2010, 27). The banks of the river leading directly into the river, (in the absence of any permanent ghat) gives a trans historical sense, that the river is accessed in its natural state of being, flowing freely and channeled by pucca ghats.

Several hymns and glorifications of the supposed holy qualities of the Ganges are found in traditional texts, with various myths associated with it. The most popular legend has it that Ganges descended directly from Heaven. The myth goes that king Bhagiratha had his ancestors burnt to ashes by the fiery gaze of the *rishi* Kapila. As it was only the sacred waters of the Ganges which could purify the deceased and bestow redemption upon them, Bhagiratha prayed to Lord Brahma to make her descend on Earth, and for that he rigorously practiced extensive asceticism for years. The king was at last heard by Brahma, who let the Ganges flow on Earth. Flowing down through ascetic Shiva’s unbound hair, Ganges began to flow gently along the plains of India, following Bhagiratha, who led her from the Himalayas down to the sea in the region of Bengal where, in the confluence point known as Ganges Sagar, purified the king’s ancestors, and bestowed upon them ascension to heaven. For this reason, the Ganges is called ‘the river of the three worlds’ because it is believed to flow in ‘*Swarga’,* heaven, *‘Prithvi’,* earth, and *‘Patala’,* the netherworld[[7]](#footnote-7)

The pilgrims show an unremarkable emotional connect with the Ganges, for whom the river is more than a water body, and is referred as Goddess Ganges and seen as a mother. It is a living symbol of divine grace that flows and renews constantly those who enter its transforming waters (Bryant 2013, 57). A pilgrim Ramakant Shukla says

“I consider myself fortunate to be able to come into the lap of Mother Ganges. This is the most blissful experience of being in the Magh Mela”.

The Ganges is liberating and provides salvation. Hindus immerse the ashes of the dead in the Ganges. Ramakant Shukla would jokingly further say,

“… Anyways, at the end everyone has to come to her only”, signaling towards the mortal remains that are brought to the river”.

It is believed that Ganges is overlooking the *Kalpvas*, and is responsible for everyone’s well-being. It is as if the people are all children and the Ganges is the mother. She keeps an eye on everyone and doesn’t let harm come. Once when we were worried about leaving our belongings unlocked in the tent, a *Kalpvas*i Gita Devi remarked

“… Nothing will be stolen from here, Mother Ganges is here, and she looks after everyone. Leave your stuff and go.”

A fruit seller too iterated the same, while telling a story of how people who buy stuff and forget to pay, return back.

“… Ganges ji won’t let loss happen in any way”

**Ganges Aarti**

The entire stage set for the Aarti[[8]](#footnote-8) overlooks the Ganges, which is the central body of reverence of this celebration. The riverfront thus is the site to view the ceremony: during the performance the waterfront is full of tourists and pilgrims observing the ritual, taking pictures and making *dip dan,* the offering of little candles to the Ganges.

One of the members of the Harihar Sewa Samiti, which manages the Aarti at the riverfront announces soon before the ceremony begins.

“… Anyone who can hear me is invited to be a part of the Ganges Arti. Be a part and reap benefits.”

The seven *pujaris* line up on the platforms stand elegantly dressed in front of the audience and the Ganges, holding vessels of burning incense, the first of the ritual objects to be used. Praises of goddess Ganges, devotional songs, sound of bells and conch shell, and the rhythmic clapping of those attending the ceremony accompany the celebration. Derived from Vedic fire rituals, the Aarti revolves around the offering of fire: blazing cobra-shaped lamps are waved in circular movements by the priests*.* The Ganges Aarti is a religious celebration performed daily on the *ghats* to pay respect to the river Ganges in the form of goddess Ganges-ji: the Mother.

The devotees participate actively to the celebration by clapping their hands at the sound of *bhajans,* ringing the bells, doing *dip dan*, interacting with people. The feeling of being together in a ritual activity animates the space. Many devotees start dancing joyfully to the tunes of the devotional songs being played. A pilgrim Mahendra , one of those dancing , on being enquired emotionally remarked, “ Initially I was holding myself back, but suddenly something happened, and I felt my body in sync with the flow of the Bhajan and I got lost in the moment… My name is Mahendra, which is one of the names of Lord Shiva, who knows maybe in that moment when I was lost dancing my soul connected with him”.

The course that the Ganges takes is the main deciding factor behind the Mela planning. During the monsoons the regions is flooded by waters, thus leaving no space for any permanent construction. When the water recedes, the floodplain is left vacant for the Mela to be held. The Ganges often leaves one or two narrow channels in between, thus leaving certain elevated areas in between, and accordingly the administration has to plan the construction of Pontoon bridges or sector size. This landscape planning which takes place a new form each year, resonates with the Hindu idea of renewal or taking up of new form again and again.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Panda Sanjay Mishra beautifully sumps up the idea of renewal inherent in the gathering “…It is like a new morning, every year you learn new things, like a new form… The Ganges drives the gathering in a different way each year. It is only at Prayag that land allotment for Mela takes place every year. Nothing is permanent here, like the universe. Everything at this permanent site is temporary. If you get a piece of land here for tent, next year it might be somewhere else”

1. **Prayag: The Tirtha**

Prayag is called the king of pilgrimage places due to a unique feature. It is believed that it is only at Prayag that remedy for sins done at other tirthas can be achieved (Ramanand 2013, 85). *It is that great sacred place where all the desires get fulfilled, and the devotees attain salvation[[10]](#footnote-10)*.

Prayag has become a centre of faith and devotion, where people hope to find liberation[[11]](#footnote-11). For the Hindus paying visit to Prayag is considered a merit granting act, and all the sins are swept away by simply recalling this place. They believe it is that sacred place which fulfills all the desires of the devotees and grants them salvation. It is alleged that by reciting its name or by the very sight of it, a person becomes free of sins. The *Purans* proclaim that it is the sacred space of Prajapati; those who bathe here go to heaven and those who die here are not born again[[12]](#footnote-12). This is indicative of the religious significance of Prayag. Padma puran says that,

“As the sun is amidst the planets and the moon is amidst the asterisms, so is Prayag the foremost sacred place in the galaxy of *tirtha*s”[[13]](#footnote-13).

Prayag is believed to be the *Madhyama vedi* (sacrificial altar) of Prajapati, the other four being at Gaya, Kurukshetra, Viraj, and Pushkar[[14]](#footnote-14). According to Padma Puran, Prajapati performed a sacrifice at Prayag to gain power for creation of the universe.[[15]](#footnote-15) The Skanda *puran* and the Padma puran mention the story of the recovery of the Vedas from a demon, and according to them, the recovered Vedas were presented by the sages to lord Vishnu at Prayag, and Brahma also sanctified the place by performing sacrifices.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Quoting from a religious text a pilgrim said that when all the sacrifices were placed on one scale and Prayag on the other scale of the balance, the former kicked the beam showing that the latter was heavier. He further said, “This is the most sacred place on Earth. It provides you the opportunity to be in communion with God while it frees you from your sins”.

Speaking of the significance of Prayag pilgrims often quote Tulsidas by saying, ‘*Ko Kahi sake Prayag prabhau*’ (The sacredness of Prayag cannot be described in words). They hold the belief that this place has been revered by the great sages and their ancestors, and holds unquestionable divine presence. The *Kalpvas*i would unanimously be joyous of undertaking pilgrimage in Prayag, as if this is the purpose of their mortal lives. A *Kalpvas*i put down his attachment in the following words, “What is the point of living a human being’s life on Earth if one does not pay visit to Prayag. Having performed *Kalpvas* here is the destiny I have fulfilled; once I meet my ancestors in the afterlife I can show them my face proudly for I have performed my duty well’.

**Rituals at Prayag during Kaplvas**

Any pilgrim who arrives at *Prayag* offers flowers here on arrival which is followed by certain observances mainly three i.e. tonsure, sacred bath, and religious charity (Dubey 2001, 74). The ritual of tonsure is mainly followed by those who arrive from outside and the inhabitants need not to observe it. During the period of Kumbh Parva many rituals are performed at Prayag. A total of 26 types of these rituals are considered to be essential (Ramanand 2013, 75). The rituals called *Sanskaras*, considered to be the most auspicious ones at the *Kumbh Mela* are *Mundan*- shaving the head, Snana- bathing in the sacred waters, Tarpan- offering food to ancestors and Daan- making gifts of charity . The most common Daan made by the pilgrim is *Gau Daan* (cow gifting). The cow helps the soul to cross the river of punishment called *Baitarani* after death, if Gau-Daan is made (Narain and Narain 2010, 23).

Here we discuss few important rituals which, observed by pilgrims todraws maximum religious merit.

1. **Mundan**

*Mundan* or tonsuremeans shaving of beard, moustaches and head. It is a ceremony related to purification. In the Hindu system of beliefs, it is considered that hair absorbs all the impurities and sins committed by the pilgrim, thereby this ritual is considered important, as it leads to purification. The ceremony of *mundan* is considered to be very auspicious at Prayag[[17]](#footnote-17). It is prescribed to be performed on the Ganges only at Prayag. It must be preceded by an immersion in the holy confluence of the rivers there (Dubey 2001, 76). The ceremonial shaving takes place only once after the pilgrim has arrived even s/he stays there for a longer duration. Ramakant Shukla informed that

“…It is prescribed that one has to get the head tonsured upon arrival in Prayag, It is to remove the impurities that man carries along with him.”

Although, Shukla was well aware of people carrying impurities with them which get removed through tonsure, he was not well aware of the sources of such ‘ritual impurity’.

1. **Snan** (Holy Bath)

Bathing at sacred sites is considered to be bestowing merits upon the devotees. It is not only an act of Physical purification but also an act which purifies soul. The impurities of mind are considered to be more powerful than the impurities of body and hence bathing as scared sites is considered to cleanse the soul. Bodily purity and mental purity is seen in conjugation with each other and bodily purity cannot exist without mental purity and hence bathing is considered as one of the most important rituals.[[18]](#footnote-18) The centrality of mental cleansing through bath has been recorded in many Purnaic literatures. The Skanda *Puran* says that removal of mere physical dirt does not make a person pure, it is on washing away one’s mental impurity that one becomes immaculate. [[19]](#footnote-19) It has been said in the *Purans* that, any person who takes bath at the Sangam, is sure to go to heaven in afterlife and the merit s/he draws by bathing equals to that of learning four Vedas, and he also attains the region of supreme truth. A *Kalpvas*i, Rambahadur Singh remarked

… It is since the time of Purans that people have been coming to take a dip in Ganges. Whosoever seeks liberation, has to immerse himself.

The pilgrims differentiate religious bath with bathing in the river otherwise. According to them a person has to bow his head in reverence to the Ganges followed by three dips in the waters.

1. **Upvaas**

*Upvaas* means religious fasting. Fasting means giving up of food and water for entire day, but in practicality it means having light diet with certain limitation is quantity and quality.[[20]](#footnote-20) The meaning of *Upvaas* in Hinduism is not only restricted to abstention of food and drinks but means a lot more. *Upvaas* is living in union with good qualities, with aversion from sins and abandonment of all enjoyment. The rules and regulations associated with fasting which were meant particularly for religious purpose also had a purpose related with hygiene and were preferably meant to preserve mental, physical and cultural purity.

The observance of fasting at Prayag has special meaning attached to it and is considered to be a meritorious act.[[21]](#footnote-21) It has been mentioned in Vishnu Puran that fasting at Prayag when done by a person of sound health and has excellent self-control, is rewarded with merits and gains benefits which equals to the merits gained by horse sacrifice and he is absolved of all sins and gains many rewards.[[22]](#footnote-22) Our informant Ramakant Shukla told that

… It is one of the rules, like I said before, that when you are here you have to live a simple life, and eat less, and observe complete fast on some days.

Gita Devi, said on the day of her *Upvaas*.

… I keep *Upvaas* otherwise also, but while *Kalpvas* keeping *Upvaas* gives a pleasure of different kind. I am here to do all this only.

It is remarkable to see hundreds of people following the same pattern of daily life. Every *Kalpvas*i inhabitation, after returning from their morning *Snan* would offer food to their respective *panda*. It is then that they would proceed to have their one time meal, and rest of the day they observe fast.

**Religious specialists (Prayagwal)**

The religious specialists known as Prayagwal consists of families of Pandas settled in Allahabad who serve as hereditary pilgrim guides. The respectful name for them is *tirtha purohit,* ie. A tirtha ‘priest’), but are commonly referred to as Pandas, derived from the term *Pandit*, which means a learned man.

They officiate various rites and rituals associated with the pilgrimage and provide for the material and religious needs of the Kalpwasi. They maintain a long term personalized kind of relationship with the pilgrims. As a pilgrim arrives to Prayag, he is asked questions related to his Gotra, places of present and ancestral residence. Each panda family has exclusive rights to pilgrims coming from a particular region. The panda-pilgrim relations can be understood through the patron-client relationship where, the pilgrim cannot perform life cycle ceremonies without a panda, and pandas have donations coming from the pilgrims as their primary source of livelihood. Their entry register maintains a record of the dates and other details of earlier visits made by the same pilgrim or by his kinsmen.

The pandas feel obliged to make sure that their client is well looked after. Chhote Panda, tells that, “It is we that have the duty towards the pilgrim. We are to make sure that their journey is hassle free. Someone who comes from a far off land relies on us.” During the busy days of Mauni Amavasya or Sankranti, pilgrims would come looking for a particular panda, keep their baggage and other stuff with him. They can then go to take a dip without worrying about the safety of their belongings. Chhote Panda says, “People have faith in us, they know that we have been doing this since generations, so their belongings will be safe with us”. Indeed people unknown to the *Panda*, would just keep their belongings with him, as if they are familiar with him. There is an unspoken understanding and reliance upon the Pandas.

**Conclusion**

In *Kalpvas* we see that pilgrims’ everyday life is lived like a performance, which for them has a transformative impact over their lives. It is of significance to note that this transformation does not naturally ‘occur’, rather it is through skilled performance of the actors involved that the effects comes into being. The prayagwals have been carrying out their role hereditarily over many centuries, and the *Kalpvas*i too like their forefathers have been performing *Kalpvas* since time immemorial. The performance goes on irrespective of the actors which might change over time. Thus, the Hindu pilgrimage reflects cosmological renewal, every year everything is new yet so old. It is as if people come and go, only to play their part in the cosmos.

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1. The confluence of river Ganga, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mclean, Kama. 2008. Pilgrimage and Power. Oxford University Press. Delhi [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See for E.g. Maheshwari, Saurabh & Mukherjee, Tuheena. 2017. *Role of Social Detachment in Coping With Death Anxiety: A Case of Elderly Hindu Pilgrims. 2017.* OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying. P 1-27; Eldering, L., & Pandey, J. (2007). Experiencing the Mahakumbh Mela: The biggest Hindu fair in the world. Psychological Studies, 52, 273–285; Maheswari, Saurabh & Singh, Purnima. 2009. Psychological well-being and pilgrimage: Religiosity, happiness and life satisfaction of Ardh–Kumbh Mela pilgrims (Kalpvasis) at Prayag, India. Asian Journal of Social Psychology. 12. 285–292 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “[Vasamsi](http://vedabase.net/v/vasamsi) [jirnani](http://vedabase.net/j/jirnani) [yatha](http://vedabase.net/y/yatha) [vihaya](http://vedabase.net/v/vihaya)

   [navani](http://vedabase.net/n/navani) [grhnati](http://vedabase.net/g/grhnati) naro '[parani](http://vedabase.net/p/parani)

   [tatha](http://vedabase.net/t/tatha) [sarirani](http://vedabase.net/s/sarirani) [vihaya](http://vedabase.net/v/vihaya) jirnany

   [anyani](http://vedabase.net/a/anyani) [samyati](http://vedabase.net/s/samyati) [navani](http://vedabase.net/n/navani) [deh](http://vedabase.net/d/dehi)” *Bhagwadgita*, Chapter 2, Verse 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rig Veda X.75 (khila, supplementary verse) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Raghuvamsha, XIII.54 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The myth of the descent on earth of the Ganges is told in various versions in many of the traditional texts, most notably in: *Ramayana –* Bala Khanda 38-44; *Mahabharata* III.104-8; *Bhagavata Purana* IX.8-9; *Brahmavaivarta Purana* II.10; *Devibhagavata Purana* IX.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A ceremony in which lights with wicks soaked in ghee are lit and offered up to gods. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This can be understood from the Hindu belief of circular time or the idea of rebirth. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Skandpuran. IV.22.59). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Matsyapuran, 104.2 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Skandpuran, IV.7.47; Koormpuran,I.34.20; Matsyapuran, 103.5 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Padmapuran, VI.24.3-4a [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Vamanapuran, 23.19-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Padmapuran, VI.128.263b-264a [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Skandpuran,II.13.38-48; Pamapuran,VI.91.6-16 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Naradiya Puran II.62.52A [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Matsya Puran, 101.1 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Skanda Puran, IV.6.36 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Naradya Puran, II. 63.93 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Vishnu Puran, VI. 8.29 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Matsya Puran, 107.3-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)