

Prayagraj and Its Sacred Glory

(Prayāga Māhātmya)

प्रकृष्टं सर्वयागेभ्यः प्रयाग इति उच्यते

(स्कंद पुराण)

At the dawn of creation, Lord Brahma performed the first and supreme sacrifice (Prakrishta Yajna) at this site. Therefore, it is named **Prayaga**, meaning “the foremost among all sacrifices.”

Prayag as Tirtharaja — The King of Sacred teerthas

Prayag is called **Tirtharaja**, the Sovereign of all pilgrimage places. The ancient seven sacred cities of India are revered as its queens. The Ganga and Yamuna divide this holy region into three parts, symbolizing the three Vedic fires:

- Between the rivers — the **Garhapatya Fire** (domestic offering).
- Across the Ganga, at Pratishtanapura (Jhansi) — the **Ahavanīya Fire**.
- Across the Yamuna, at Alarkapura (Arail) — the **Dakshina Fire**.

Dwelling one night in each region bestows the fruits of worshipping these fires.

The Magha Mela and the Kumbha Festival

Every year during the month of **Magha**, the great fair of **Kalpavasa** occurs at Prayagraj. Devotees undertake temporary ascetic living between the rivers. The observance begins at **Makar Sankranti** and continues until **Kumbha Sankranti**.

Every twelfth year, when Jupiter is in Taurus and the Sun enters Capricorn, the **Kumbha Mela** is celebrated — humanity’s largest spiritual congregation. Six years thereafter, the **Ardha Kumbha** takes place.

Even Emperor **Harshavardhana** convened grand religious assemblies at Prayaga every fifth year, donating his entire wealth to saints and mendicants.

Scriptures affirm that bathing at the Sangam (confluence) removes all sins and grants heaven, while dying here leads directly to liberation.

Principal Rituals and Observances

Common pilgrimage duties such as fasting, prayer, and charity are observed here, but Prayag's chief ritual is **tonsure** (Mundana) — a ceremony symbolizing surrender and purity. Unlike other pilgrimages where shaving is prohibited, it is here an essential act performed near the Triveni. Widows also perform tonsure; married women participate in the sacred ceremony of **Veṇī-Dāna** (offering the braid) with their husbands at the riverbank, invoking prosperity and longevity.

After tonsure, pilgrims perform the **Triveni Bath**, where the luminous waters of the Ganga meet the blue stream of the Yamuna, and the hidden Saraswati flows beneath. Boats often ferry pilgrims to the mid-current for immersion.

There are no built river ghats; hereditary priests (**pandas**) place wooden planks in shallow waters for devotees, each identified by flags specific to their family traditions.

Principal Shrines of Prayagraj

The Skanda Purana lists the principal sanctuaries:

**त्रिवेणीं माधवं सोमं भरद्वाजं च वासुकिम्।
वन्देऽक्षयवटं शेषं प्रयागं तीर्थनायकम् ॥**

“Triveni, Madhava, Soma, Bharadwaja, Vasuki, Akshayavat, and Shesha — these are the foremost deities of Tirtharaja Prayaga.”

(i) Akshayavat (Eternal Banyan)

Located within the fort near the Yamuna, this sacred tree symbolizes eternity. Formerly represented by a dry branch inside the subterranean **Patalpuri Temple** It is now visible in open air near the southern fort gate. The fort complex also houses the **Ashokan Pillar** with ancient inscriptions.

The underground temple (**Patalpuri**) contains idols of Dharma, Annapurna, Vishnu, Ganga, Saraswati, and many more divine forms, reflecting the completeness of creation.

(ii) The Twelve Madhavas

Prayagraj traditionally enshrines twelve manifestations of Lord Vishnu:

1. Shankha Madhava (near Chhatnag in Jhansi)

2. Chakra Madhava (at Arail)
3. Gada Madhava (in Naini)
4. Padma Madhava (at Veekar)
5. Ananta Madhava (near Akshayavat)
6. Bindu Madhava (near Draupadi Ghat)
7. Mano-hara Madhava (at Draveshwarnath Temple)
8. Asi Madhava (near Nag Vasuki)
9. Sankashta-hara Madhava (behind Hans Tirtha, Jhunsi)
10. Adi Veni Madhava (in the waters of Triveni)
11. Adi Madhava (in Arail)
12. Shri Veni Madhava (at Daraganj)

(iii) Other Important Shrines

1. **Bada Hanuman Temple:** A massive reclining image of Hanuman near the fort, submerged during monsoon floods.
2. **Manakamreshwar Temple:** An ancient Shiva temple west of the fort, accessible by boat.
3. **Somnath Temple:** Across the Yamuna in Arail, near Bindu Madhava.
4. **Nag Vasuki Temple:** On the Ganga bank at Daraganj; a fair on Nag Panchami.
5. **Baladeva (Shesha) Temple:** Two miles west of Nag Vasuki, honoring the serpent form of Vishnu.
6. **Shivkuti (Kotitirtha):** On the western Ganga bank, with a temple of Lord Shiva and an annual Shravan fair.
7. **Bharadwaja Ashram:** In Karnal Ganj; houses Bharadwajeshwar Shiva Linga and serpent idols.
8. **Alopi (Lalita) Devi Temple:** A major Shakti Peeth in Daraganj; the Goddess is worshipped here in her formless state.

Old City of Jhunsi

(Pratishthanapura)

Across the Ganga lies **Jhunsi**, the ancient capital of King Pururava. The remains of its old fort and sacred wells — **Samudra Kupa** and **Hans Kupa** — are revered spots. The **Hans Tirtha** temple represents spiritual awakening through Yoga. The area also houses the ashram of **Shri Prabhudatta Brahmachari**, where continuous devotional singing and discourse take place.

Lalita Devi – The Shakti Peetha

According to **Tantra Chudamani**, Prayagraj is one of the 51 Shakti Peethas where the **finger of Goddess Sati** fell. Here, she is worshipped as **Lalita Devi**, and her Bhairava counterpart is **Bhava**. Two forms are venerated — one near the Akshayavat and another toward Mirpur. Alop Devi represents the true seat of this Shakti Peetha.

Sacred Circuits (Parikramas)

1. **Antarvedi Parikrama (Inner Circuit):**

A two-day pilgrimage covering major shrines between the rivers. Starting with a bath at the Triveni and worship of Bindu Madhava, pilgrims visit over 30 tirthas including Parasurama Tirtha, Kapila Tirtha, Indreshwar Shiva, Bharadwaja Ashram, Durvasa Tirtha, Soma Tirtha, Saraswata Tirtha, concluding with worship at Hanuman Temple and another Sangam bath.

2. **Bahirvedi Parikrama (Outer Circuit)**

A ten-day pilgrimage encircling the outer sacred boundary. Major halts include Someshwar Temple, Gada Madhava, Vikar Devaria, Vanakhanda Mahadeva, Draupadi Ghat, Shivkoti, Nageshwar Nath, Shankha Madhava, Jhunsi, and finally back to the Triveni. Each day's journey sanctifies miles of sacred riverbanks with prayers and offerings.

Nearby Sacred Regions

1. **Durvasa Ashram:** Six miles from the Sangam on the Ganga bank, near Kakra village.
2. **Aindri (Anandi) Devi Temple:** Half a mile from the ashram, founded by Sage Bharadwaja for protection.
3. **Lakshagriha (Lachchagiri):** Believed to be the wax palace built to destroy the Pandavas; near Hadiya Khas station, 18 miles from Jhunsi.

4. **Sitamadhi:** Believed to be Sage Valmiki's hermitage where Sita raised Lava and Kusha; near Bheethi station, 3 miles from the Ganga.
5. **Imilian Devi Temple:** Located beyond Veekar along the Yamuna, famous for its fair.
6. **Rishiyan:** Where Sage Bharadwaja's disciples accompanied Lord Rama on his exile route.
7. **Rajapur:** Forty kilometers from Prayagraj; the birthplace and literary site of Goswami Tulsidas, houses the preserved manuscript of **Ayodhya Kanda**.
8. **Shringverpur:** 21 miles from Prayagraj, ancient capital of Nishad Raja Guha; connected with Lord Rama's exile.
9. **Kada:** 40 miles from Prayagraj; birthplace of Saint Maluk Das and famous for Sheetala Devi Temple and Jahnu Rishi Ashram.

Jain Heritage

The Akshayavat is also sacred to Jains, being the site of Lord Rishabhadeva's penance. Prayag houses several Jain temples, including:

1. **Prabhasgiri (also known as Pabhosa):** Near Bharwari, featuring a temple of Lord Padmaprabhu on Prabhas hill.
2. **Kausambi (Kosam):** Four miles away, site of four Kalyanakas (blessed events) of Lord Padmaprabhu, and the ancient capital of King Udayana.

Pandaveshwar (Padilla Mahadev)

Located near Bharwari railway station, 10 miles from Prayagraj, this Shiva temple is believed to be where the Pandavas worshipped before their final journey to the Himalayas. Near it lies Bhima Kunda. Local tradition venerates a devotee named Baiju; his worship precedes that of the deity. The temple hosts a large fair on **Maha Shivaratri**.

The Eternal Cultural Identity

From the Rigveda through the epics and Puranas, Prayagraj is praised as the holiest of holy lands — the heart of Indian spirituality. Every grain of sand here holds stories of divine presence, from Brahma's sacrifice to Harsha's generosity, from saints' meditation to the world's largest gatherings at the Kumbha Mela.

Prayer

May the King of Tirthas — Prayag — the eternal meeting place of sacred rivers, the seat of divine knowledge, and the cradle of civilization, continue to guide the cultural soul of India and inspire the **Prayagraj Cultural Circuit**, symbolizing the living continuum of faith, heritage, and unity.