

Toilets and Sanitation at the Kumbh Mela

Companion Notes

2014

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Overview

“Toilets and Sanitation at the Kumbh Mela” describes the challenge of balancing public health concerns with religious practices of pilgrims attending the Kumbh Mela festival. The Kumbh Mela festival, the largest mass gathering in the world, takes place in Allahabad, India. Pilgrims at the 2013 festival followed toilet and water sanitation practices common in South Asia, practicing defecation in both designated areas (contained squat toilets and private “flag” areas for open defecation) as well as public defecation in the sand or by the riverbanks. Every 12 years a temporary “tent city,” is built in the annual dry season on the sand flats at the confluence of three rivers sacred to Hindus around the world—the Ganges, Yamuna, and (historical but now mythic) Saraswati. During the 55-day festival in 2013, it was estimated that more than 100 million people would “take a dip,” practicing a sacred bathing ritual that, according to Hindu beliefs, would release them from their sins and the endless cycles of reincarnation. The construction of the site—and organization of the facilities to support it—follow a detailed system that has developed over decades of close collaborations with national, state, and regional governments and religious leaders, and includes the provision of clean drinking water and public toilets. This case describes efforts by government officials during the 2013 festival to ensure and maintain adequate and appropriate sanitation facilities (toilets and the use of safe drinking water) and the long-term impact of the observed practices on the physical environment.

Learner Level

This case would be of interest to those teaching courses in public health especially those focused on sanitation, religion and urban design. It could be used at the high-school, college, graduate or professional level.

Context

“Toilets and Sanitation at the Kumbh Mela” introduces students to the conditions and challenges of water and sanitation as it relates to cultural issues (social determinants of health) in global communities with limited resource for optimal health governance.

Background

This case was written in collaboration with Dr. Richard Cash and is based on the Harvard T.H. Chan School Public Health and the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights Center research team on toilets and sanitation at the 2013 Kumbh Mela. This effort was part of Harvard University “Mapping the Kumbh Mela” project where over fifty Harvard professors, students, administrative staff, and medical practitioners made the pilgrimage to Allahabad, India to analyze issues that emerge in any large-scale human gathering.

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