

Tribhuvan University

Kumbha Mela as Assemblage: A Performative Study of Rajeev Gautam's *Spirits of
Moksha*

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation entitled “*Kumbha Mela* as Assemblage: A Performative Study of Rajeev Gautam’s *Spirits of Moksha*” submitted to the office of the Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tribhuvan University is an entirely original work, and I have made due acknowledgements to all ideas and information borrowed from different sources in the course of writing the dissertation. The results presented in this dissertation have not been presented anywhere else for the award of any degree or for any other reasons. No part of the content of this dissertation has ever been published in any form before. I shall be solely responsible if any evidence is found against my declaration.

.....

Bharat Neupane

Date:

Approval Letter

This dissertation entitled “*Kumbha Mela* as Assemblage: A Performative Study of Rajeev Gautam’s *Sprints of Moksha*” submitted by Bharat Neupane to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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Abstract

The main claim of this thesis is that territorialization and deterritorialization allow the *Kumbha Mela* to adapt to changing social, political, cultural, and technical conditions while maintaining its customs. The *Kumbha Mela* is a living assemblage of people, places, ceremonies, physical artifacts, institutions, and communications that takes place throughout India. Drawing on assemblage theory as articulated by Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Manuel DeLanda, and performance theories proposed by Victor Turner, Catherine Bell and Richard Schechner, this thesis explores the interaction among pilgrims, ascetics, sacred waterways, ritualistic customs, mythic stories and media technologies in the formation of a transient yet potent sacred space.

The purpose of this dissertation is to critically analyze the documentary *Spirit of Moksha* directed by Rajeev Gautam. The representation of the *Kumbha Mela* in the documentary film will be the focus of the thesis. The documentary shows the festival as a global spiritual quest, but leaves out the political, economic, environmental or institutional components of the event. According to recent study, the documentary is beneficial in creating and promoting religious experiences for audiences around the world. It provides a framework for analyzing performative assemblage in big religious gatherings by integrating assemblage theory and performance studies. The interaction of physical entities, places, rituals, technological development, institutions and symbolic activities produces sacred experiences.

Keywords: Pilgrims; Sacred; Continuity; Contingency; Performance;
Territorialization and De-territorialization

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Chapter I: Introduction

Kumbha Mela is one of the largest religious fairs of the world, held at Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nashik (Tryambakeshwar). In Hindu mythology, the event marks the *Samudra Manthan* (the Churning of the Ocean of Milk), when devas and asuras fought for *amrita*, the elixir of immortality. Today, the *Kumbha Mela* occurs at four sacred places, which are claimed to have received drips of nectar during this cosmic war (Eck 281–83). The *Kumbha Mela* is not just a religious journey, however legendary its origins may be. It is shaped by spirituality, ritual practice, politics, business, media, technology and social identity. This thesis applies assemblage theory and performance studies to the analysis of the *Kumbha Mela* as a dynamic assemblage of religious, cultural and socio-political actions.

The *Kumbha Mela* is an important event attracting tens of millions of pilgrims, ascetics, tourists and media professionals, demonstrating its continuing relevance in contemporary culture. Since India became independent, the event has grown enormously in magnitude and popular participation. As Nityananda Misra writes, “Attendance has increased phenomenally from 50 lakh in 1954 to nearly 12 crore in 2013” (Misra 78). This extraordinary growth shows the *Kumbha Mela*’s capacity to sustain its hallowed religious traditions while transitioning to modern infrastructure, technological advances, and novel modes of social and cultural participation.

It might be best to think of the *Kumbha Mela* as a performance-oriented assembly rather than a religious ceremony. A useful theoretical framework to analyse the dynamic and contingent organization of social phenomena is Assembly. Originally developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) and later expanded by Manuel DeLanda in *A*

New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity (2006).

Assemblage theory stresses how heterogeneous pieces are brought together tentatively to form emergent features that cannot be reduced to their parts. It encompasses pilgrims, sacred rivers, ceremonial acts, religious institutions, media technologies, commercial transactions, mythological narratives, and state infrastructures at *Kumbha Mela*. Rather than a preordained religious event, these many human and nonhuman actors constitute the festival. Thus, assemblage theory helps to explain how these relationships produce new religious, social, cultural and affective meanings at the *Kumbha Mela*. As DeLanda notes:

An assemblage, broadly, is an assemblage of components that assemble and connect distinct forms of matter that would otherwise be separate from one another. Any of the following categories could apply to these components: physical, biological, social, economic, linguistic, and artistic, respectively. An assemblage's properties are not the properties of each one of the components of the assemblage. An assemblage's properties are the properties of the interactions that occur between the components of the assemblage. The contacts in question are not essential, but conditional. (10–11)

This conception privileges the externality and contingency nature of the linkages that constitute the assemblage, as opposed to organicist ideas that consider the components of the *Kumbha Mela* assemblage as natural and inseparable from the whole. In assemblage theory, the parts are not characterized by their adherence to a given arrangement, but by their ability to make a myriad of connections simultaneously. One example of this dynamic is the *Kumbha Mela*, a festival that momentarily unites pilgrims, sites, and ritual practice and media depictions. These arrangements enable for the event to be changed again, providing it with its own

social and religious identity.

Victor Turner, Richard Schechner and Catherine Bell's performance theory sees ritual as a dynamic, physical and transforming process rather than a static symbolic framework. In *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982), Turner defines ritual as a performative process that alters people and societies. In his *Performance Theory* (1988), Schechner emphasizes ritual, body-based action, reanimated behavior, and participation outside the theater. In Bell's *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (1992), the production of ritual meaning is through embodied practice, strategic action and engagement of participants rather than symbolic representation. Researchers are of the opinion that sacred experience is a result of rituals, holy places and time, and belonging to a religious organization. The premise is that the sacred is produced and experienced by ritual.

Turner developed the concepts of “liminality” and “communitas” which provide a very suitable framework for the analysis of the ceremonial acts that occur during the *Kumbha Mela*. These notions are also particularly applicable to the study of ritual acts. Turner argues that rituals generate liminal spaces, areas in which people temporarily transcend their normal social obligations and the status positions they previously occupied (98). Some transitory circumstances can put people in states of equality, of shared identity, and with a large level of social solidarity:

Victor Turner argues that what makes liminal experiences so compelling is their capacity to integrate apparently contradictory things, such as humility, sacredness, equality and solidarity. Rites create a distinct temporal and physical context that temporarily halts secular social structures. This intermediate condition, which Turner calls an awareness of a higher social link, is an undifferentiated human bond prior to social hierarchy. In “The

Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure” he says that ritual participants have “a momentary consciousness of a broad social link, a set of structural ties not yet differentiated into diversity, and nothing more, nothing less” (Turner 100).

Turner's approach explains the *Kumbha Mela* in developing greater views of solidarity, equality and community that transcend the regular social barriers of everyday life. The event attracts millions of pilgrims from all castes, regions, languages and socio-economic strata to take part in religious activities like ceremonial bathing and spiritual worship. The purpose of these activities is to provide the traveler with a vantage point from which to see him or her in relation to a broader moral and religious society, to enable the pilgrim worship the spiritual realm.

The concept of ritualization proposed by Catherine Bell provides an additional context for comprehending the manner in which the *Kumbha Mela* operates as a method

of progressing strategically:

Ritualization is, in its most basic sense, a style of behavior which is arranged and produced so as to distinguish and emphasize the acts when compared to other activities which are usually more ordinary events. Thus ritualization involves a range of culturally specific means for differentiating particular actions from others, for constituting and reinforcing a qualitative distinction between the “sacred” and the “profane,” and for relating such distinctions to realities thought to transcend the powers of human agents. (74)

Bell's concept is a useful one to interpret the transformation of ordinary human behaviors into hallowed actions and this is done within the framework of the *Kumbha Mela*. If people engage in activities such as bathing, walking, eating and socializing

according to the religious traditions, at astrologically significant times and in special locations, it is possible to make these activities very spiritual and religious when they are done. The process of ritualization creates a link between the broader cosmological and theological ideas and the individual. This process differentiates acts that seem to be insignificant and gives them symbolic meaning.

Most of the anthropologists, historians and sociologists of religion have studied *Kumbha Mela* but most of them have done so individually. Anthropology: ritual symbolism and social structure; Sociology: organizational and institutional aspects. While these approaches have generated useful insights, they have not been able to represent the complexity, adaptability and capability to embrace many religious, social, political and material variables that characterize the *Kumbha Mela*. The *Kumbha Mela* is theorized as a performative assemblage. The concepts of assemblage theory and performance studies are used to comprehend the festival and its significance in the modern world more fully.

This thesis explores the relationship of religious experience and documentary representation by looking at the global representation of the *Kumbha Mela* through the lens of Rajeev Gautam's documentary *Spirit of Moksha*. The study examines how the documentary develops and conveys religious meaning, cultural identity and spiritual experience through its visual and narrative tactics. The research analyzes the mediation of the pilgrims' lived experiences in the documentary *Spirit of Moksha* and the presentation of the *Kumbha Mela* to an international audience, positioning the film in a wider context of documentary studies, pilgrimage studies and religious representation.

Spirit of Moksha was released in 2010. It captures the ritual, cultural and spiritual aspects of the *Kumbha Mela*, one of the largest religious gatherings in the

world. The documentary's publication contributed to its prominence among both academic and mainstream audiences. The documentary's cinematic representation of pilgrimage, ascetic traditions, ceremonial acts and the spiritual ambitions of devotees, provides a powerful understanding of the *Kumbha Mela* as a venue where faith, identity and communal religious experience meet. These qualities make *Spirit of Moksha* a suitable primary text for investigating the documented representation of holy space, ritual practice and the affective dimensions of religious experience.

The documentary includes beautiful photographs of ceremonies and wide-angle cinematography. The *Kumbha Mela* is a world spiritual pilgrimage about dedication, cleansing, self-discovery and independence. But this utopian view tends to neglect the many political, economic, institutional and environmental issues that influence the present *Kumbha Mela*. Documentary films, the idea goes, help the public understand religious occurrences. Documentaries accentuate some issues and marginalize others and thereby shape the ways in which viewers observe, understand and experience religious events, and wider cultural discourses around pilgrimage and spirituality.

It investigates the growing engagement of the *Kumbha Mela* with Hindu nationalism, the state, worldwide media, business interests and environmental concerns. The festival has turned into a space for political mobilization, identity formation and cultural nationalism. The research dismisses idealized depictions of the festival and argues that the *Kumbha Mela* is a spiritual pilgrimage, a political arena, a commercial business and a mediated cultural event.

This thesis is an important contribution to academic discipline. It starts with the conceptualization of the production of religious experience through bodies, rituals, technologies, places, institutions, and symbolic representations, using the

theories of assemblage and performance studies. Second, by demonstrating *Spirit of Moksha*'s power to develop religious meaning for a global audience, it engages with core problems of authenticity, representation and visual culture in religion and media. Third, the study adds to the image of the present *Kumbha Mela* by addressing political, economic and environmental issues that movies normally do not portray. Finally, it contends that religious traditions can be modified to suit shifting social, technological and institutional settings, while still preserving its ceremonial meaning.

The theoretical and analytic inquiry used *Spirit of Moksha* and *Kumbha Mela*, assemblage theory, performance studies and documentaries representation scholarship. It is based not on anthropological fieldwork but on published ethnographies. The findings are confined to the representational tactics of one documentary and are not necessarily generalizable to all festival media depictions. Assemblage theory and performance studies foreground emergence and interaction, but shy away from historical trajectories and social injustice. The representational focus also does not allow the research to be able to express the lived experiences of the pilgrims and participants in their fullness. Comparative documentation studies and anthropological field study with pilgrims, ascetics and festival organizers can overcome these limitations.

Chapter II: Literature Review and Research Context

This chapter discusses the fundamental theoretical ideas and intellectual contributions that shape Rajeev Gautam's *Spirit of Moksha* and his representation of the *Kumbha Mela*. Chapter includes discussion of assemblage theory, performance and ritualization, documentary representation and ethnographic cinema as well as *Kumbha Mela* study. These theoretical perspectives regard the festival as a lively conglomeration of religious, cultural, social and material acts that are constantly constructed and reconfigured through human and non-human encounters. This chapter offers a conceptual and analytical framework to assess *Kumbha Mela* in *Spirit of Moksha*, and to understand its cultural importance, by reconciling several interdisciplinary perspectives.

This chapter also describes the theoretical base for this investigation and gaps in the literature. This is done by merging assemblage theory, performance theory and documentary theory to create the performative assemblage as the analytical framework. In this interdisciplinary study, I evaluate the dynamic intersections of ritual practices, embodied performance, holy space, institutional structures, media technologies, and cultural narratives in Gautam's *Spirit of Moksha* representation of the *Kumbha Mela*. The framework also situates them within broader social, political, historical and cultural settings highlighting the intricate processes by which the documentary negotiates pilgrimage, spirituality and communal identity.

a. Assemblage Theory: Deleuze, Guattari and DeLanda

Assemblage theory, established by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and further refined by Manuel DeLanda, offers a relational perspective of social processes as dynamic, contingent and heterogeneous creations. This was part of the larger philosophical endeavor of Deleuze and Guattari who were hostile to essentialist and

structuralism ways of doing social analysis. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, they introduced the concept of the assemblage to characterize the diverse and heterogeneous combinations of human and non-human elements that constitute social and material reality.

The concept of ‘assemblage’ is of philosophical significance in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (17). The translator of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Brian Massumi, points out that the French word *agencement* denotes both arrangement and the activity of arranging, and these points to the active, creative aspect of these systems. “Social entities are therefore temporary assemblages of heterogeneous human and non-human components, whose meanings and capacities result from their interactions”.

Manuel DeLanda’s book *A New Philosophy of Society* further elaborates this conceptual framework. In this work he contends that assemblage theory provides a powerful way of analyzing social complexity. He achieves it by steering clear of the traps of both methodological individualism and the holistic assumptions of organicist models. DeLanda conceives of social formations not as the sum total of the activity of solitary individuals or as a coherent organic whole, but as dynamic assemblages of various, but interrelated elements. This is what he claims to see as social formations:

The concept of assembly reveals how components originating from different sources can be put together from the outside in such a way that emergent qualities larger than the sum of their individual parts arise. The theory is crucial to the discourse because of its focus on the contingent, provisional and relational characteristics of social assemblages. (18)

The difference between assemblage theory and structuralize theories is that the former postulates that the foundation of social phenomena is made up of fundamental

qualities or underlying structures, while the latter postulates that the foundation of social phenomena is made up of relationality and contingency. That example, the former holds that the base of social phenomena is constituted by fundamental traits such as fundamental structures. Thus, the earlier hypothesis presupposes the base of social phenomena to consist of fundamental qualities such as fundamental structures. One of the biggest differences between the two conceptions is that this is the case.

According to Manuel DeLanda's theory of assemblages, social structures are the outcome of historical processes of linking, switching and reconfiguring. This dynamic has created cultures throughout history and now structures the socioeconomic order. In classical sociology, social formations are conceived as norms, structures or intrinsic features. Conversely, assemblage theory conceptualizes social institutions as contingent and relational assemblages of heterogeneous constituents. This approach, contrasted to structuralize techniques, perceives the fluidity, emergence and ongoing reassembly of social reality. From this point of view, DeLanda defines assemblage relations as follows:

An assemblage is above all the assembly of that which promotes proximity and connection amongst heterogeneous materials that would otherwise remain disjointed. They might be elements in any area, be it physical, biological, social, economic, linguistic or aesthetic. The attributes that compose an ensemble are not properties of the elements in the collection, but rather interactions between these elements. These interactions are not necessary but contingent. (10-11)

This concept is fundamental to understanding the *Kumbha Mela* as a performative assemblage. The festival does not arise from the intrinsic features of its constituents, the hallowed rivers, the bodies of pilgrims or the ritual procedures, but from the

contingent interplay of these heterogeneous elements inside the framework of the event. The *Kumbh Mela* generates a momentary convergence of relationships, which are not there before the event, and dissipate once it ends. The celebration does not possess an inherent religious essence from which its meaning and significance are drawn, but rather the meaning and significance of the festival are created via interactions affected by circumstances.

Buchanan further argues that assemblage theory is not primarily interested in identifying or cataloguing specific agents or material elements. Or, it proposes a more general approach. The fundamental aim is to analyze the linkages, interactions and the responsibilities of numerous entities within a certain framework. The emphasis is on the roles and capacities that arise through their interactions, rather than on seeing the constituent components themselves as static or distinct entities. To be clear, according to Buchanan:

Their objective is to “diagram the nature and types of relations... in order to acquire an understanding of how they function.” This is in contrast to the conventional method of cataloging the individual actors or entities that make up assemblages, which is the approach that is typically taken. (30)

This methodological approach is to be had in mind for the aim of understanding *Kumbha Mela* as a performative ensemble. The investigation must not only detail the elements that constitute the festival; pilgrims, rivers, rituals, institutions, media technologies; but also evaluate the relations existing between these elements and the functions they allow. Whether the *Kumbha Mela* is a religious festival or not can be decided by looking at the relationship between the different components of the *Kumbha Mela* and the functions that arise from these unique relationships.

In the course of their research Deleuze and Guattari came to the conclusion

that both territorialization and deterritorialization are necessary for the functioning of assemblages. “Territorialization” refers to the processes in which different components become stabilized and connected to each other and constitute cohesive systems. “Deterritorialization,” in contrast, refers to the factors that destabilize, alter and reconfigure such frameworks. You could say that territorialization and deterritorialization are concepts that are very much related. They put it like this:

An assemblage is an extension of the dimensions of a multiplicity, which is a fundamental change in the nature of the multiplicity through the increase in the number of links between the multiplicities. This is because of the multiplicity of the links among the multitude. Thus, an assembly is simply an extension of this. Simply put, it is a configuration that makes connections between particular multiplicities taken from each of these orders. (22-23)

This term foregrounds the notion that assemblages are never fixed but continually developing. This is because assemblages are always in flux, with new connections being added and old ones being changed. The *Kumbha Mela* has retained its mythological and ritual roots, but also included new elements, such as technological innovations, changing demography of participants, and changing political contexts. This is a sign of the vibrancy of the *Kumbha Mela*.

The festival can endure changes and modifications without losing its religious character; yet, it is a clear demonstration of the positive tension existing between territorialization and deterritorialization, which is a characteristic of all assemblages. Kaithwar provides one further reading of the relation between power and the dynamics of assemblages which is as follows:

The idea of power is something intrinsic to the assemblage as a whole. It can only operate by way of territorialization and deterritorialization. That is

because it is neither a fixed structure nor an individual's possession. The processes of setting up, stabilizing and disturbing the territories reflect the disciplinary, productive and destructive sides of power correspondingly. These processes are a mirror of the power structure. Ultimately these processes account for the establishment of its territories. (33)

This notion is fundamental to understanding the functioning of the *Kumbha Mela* assemblage as a location of encounter and interaction between heterogeneous modalities of power. The event is stabilized by territorialization processes such as creation of infrastructure, formation of institutional hierarchies and practice of ceremonial traditions. Deterritorializing forces are disruptive and are produced by globalization, communication technology and social change.

The event is characterized by its variety, but also by the dynamic quality it has when the many activities interact with one another. The festival is to establish both these qualities. Buchanan is another contributor to the development of this notion. He highlights the fluidity and contingency of assemblage configurations:

Assemblages are never stable; they are continually undergoing the process of being deterritorialised or lines of flight which cause ruptures in their coherence and consistency. Deterritorialization is power as constructive disturbance. It upsets the territorialized order, but it also opens up possibilities for a new kind of authority. "Deterritorialization occurs when the relations machined in an assemblage are modified by the forms of content or expression of another assemblage or of the outside. (38)

This comment allows us to better comprehend why the *Kumbha Mela* remains so sturdy in the face of constant change. The event continues to feature modern infrastructure, media technologies and a diverse spectrum of participants, but also

continues its ties to myth and ritual. The processes of territorialization and deterritorialization enable the *Kumbha Mela* to preserve its sacredness and adapt to modern contexts, thus remaining relevant across generations.

Assembly theory has been applied in various fields to analyze complex social, political and material assemblages. Urban studies have investigated the building and becoming of cities as dynamic socio-material assemblages, attending to human agents, infrastructures, institutions and materials (Anderson and McFarlane 2011). The establishment, growth and persistence of global governance institutions in international relations is characterized by connections between states, organizations and transnational actors (Acuto and Curtis; 2013). In Assembly theory democracy has been characterized as a complex web of institutions, behaviours, actors and political mechanisms (Kaithwar 2025). Assembly theory presents an analytical framework powerful for the study of complex social events that are resistant to causal explanation and essentialist interpretation, stressing heterogeneity, contingency, relationality and emergent aspects.

Assemblage theory has been widely embraced in the humanities and social sciences, but it has been less frequently applied to the study of religious events. Assemblage has been drawn upon in a number of prior studies as a framework for the study of various religious movements and practices (Bennett 2010; Thompson et al. 2022) to demonstrate the model's ability to capture the dynamic and linked nature of religious participation. However, in the study of assemblages, the practices of pilgrimage, in particular massive ritual assemblies have been completely ignored, which constitutes a major gap in the research.

This study attempts to solve this gap by evaluating the *Kumbha Mela* through the lens of assemblage theory. It invites us to consider the festival as a dynamic,

changing collective, a contingent junction of various human and non-human actors, material structures, ritual acts, spatial arrangements and emotional flows, rather than a static or homogeneous religious institution. The study points out that the unique religious, social and cultural aspects of *Kumbha Mela* are a continuous process of negotiation, interaction and transformation through interaction not by an individual or a pre-existing organizational notion.

b. Documentation of Ritual and Performance

Performance theory provides critical analytical tools to explore the ceremonial dimension of the *Kumbha Mela*, especially the transformational impact of community engagement in ritual. The essential framework for understanding how rituals can serve as catalysts for social evolution and generate powerful feelings of communal identity is Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process*, liminality and *communitas*.

Turner describes ritual as “a social and symbolic act which transgresses the normative structure of everyday life, creating liminal spaces between institutionalized social roles and identities (89-91).” These liminal periods offer a break from the normal and an opportunity to build social ties across the boundaries of social class, hierarchy, occupation, and other markers of social status. The capacity of the *Kumbha Mela* to engender significant experiences of collective identity can be explained through Turner's (1974) theory of *communitas*, the strong social relationships and community cohesion that develop throughout liminal spaces:

What interests us in liminal occurrences for our present aim is the mixture they provide of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship.

These rites provide us with a 'moment in and out of time', in and out of secular social structure, revealing, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and

is yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties. (96)

These encounters are beyond conventional societal barriers. The *Kumbha Mela* gives this deep sensation of oneness. The event attracts millions of pilgrims from all sections of the society and promotes togetherness and common purpose by bringing them together for communal religious activities. However, to concentrate just on Turner's concept of *communitas* is to risk portraying a too romanticized view of the *Kumbha Mela*, ignoring the robust presence of institutionalized structures, hierarchies and systems of authority that rule the festival. The ritual may appear to transcend socioeconomic divisions, yet it is deeply embedded in the complex networks of church authority, political influence and administrative control.

Catherine Bell's notion of ritualization offers a more comprehensive and all-encompassing approach, which presents a more refined and analytically useful way of looking at the relationship between the performance of rituals and the development of sacred experiences because it shows a broader approach, one that is holistic and comprehensive.

Bell's notion of ritual is brought up again. For Bell, ritual is an active process that entails the conscious separation of certain behaviors from the constraints of mundane living. Bell sees ritual as an active activity. She does not regard ritual as a particular kind of human behavior but as a process which consists in the deliberate distinction of things to a purpose:

In the most basic sense, ritualization can be described as a sort of behavior that is structured and conducted so as to distinguish and emphasize the actions being carried out over and against other activities, which are usually more mundane events. Ritualization, therefore, includes a variety of culturally specific ways of differentiating some acts from others, of creating and

confirming a qualitative difference between the “sacred” and the “profane,” and of projecting such differences onto realities that are assumed to lie beyond the grasp of human actors. (74)

Bell’s paradigm offers a good analytical tool to investigate the transition of mundane human practices into sacred ceremonies within the framework of the *Kumbha Mela*. The paradigm can be used for this purpose. This is something that can be done from the point of view of the *Kumbha Mela*. This paradigm can be used for the purpose of realizing research on the transition. Activities that are part of the daily routine include going for a walk, taking a shower, eating and attending meetings. In light of this, note that when these behaviors are done in ritualized settings, at astrologically favorable periods, and according to certain religious beliefs, they acquire a very hallowed meaning.

They are ritualized, that is, they are tied to broader cosmological and religious schemes that involve persons, and thus they are removed from the realm of the mundane and invested with symbolic meaning. As this process unfolds, participants are expected to connect with larger groups of people. This is done by taking them away from the worries that they confront in their daily lives. Bell extends this concept by contending that ritualization is not simply a series of programmed behaviors but instead a dynamic process wherein individuals transform into what she terms “ritualized agents”:

The final goal of ritualization is the production of ritualized agents, individuals who have a built-in knowledge of these schemes embedded in their bodies, in their perception of reality, and in their understanding of how to act in ways that both preserve and qualify the complex micro relationships of power. Ritual has no aim other than to ritualize. (221)

Focusing on embodiment is closely related to assemblage theory which highlights the dynamic interactions between distinct human and non-human parts that produce social, cultural, and material realities. Religious experience is molded by personal conviction, symbolic interpretation, and the linkages between people, things, places, infrastructures, ritual activities, and emotional energy. The *Kumbha Mela* is a complex event in which the sacred environment, ceremonial responsibilities, collective behavior, logistical structure, and spiritual authority all come together to determine behavior and meaning.

Richard Schechner defines ritual in *Performance Studies: An Introduction* as the bodily performance of “restored behavior,” that is, behavior that is transferred and repeated culturally (28-34). The *Kumbha Mela* through sacred bathing, religious a procession, devotional activities and ascetic performances, brings about spiritual evolution of people, negotiation of religious identities and reinforcement of cultural values. Ritual performance re-creates and re-interprets sacred meanings within changing historical and social situations. Schechner’s performance and assemblage theories serve as a powerful analytical tool for the study of the *Kumbha Mela* as a living performative assemblage, whose complex religious, cultural and affective significance is the product of embodied practices, material objects, spatial arrangements, institutional structures and social interactions.

Studies in documentary representation and ethnographic cinema have moved away from the idea of documentaries as objective records of reality, to recognizing them as produced narratives mediated by the perspectives, cultural assumptions and ethical decisions of documentary filmmakers. For example, Jay Ruby, Paul Rotha, Bill Nichols, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Jean Rouch, David MacDougall and Paul Henley have argued that documentaries use certain representational tactics that influence the

ways in which cultures and faiths are perceived by viewers. These views give an analytical framework for the analysis of *Spirit of Moksha*, in particular the use of factual realism, narrative framing and visual approaches in the representation of the *Kumbha Mela* and the spiritual idea of *moksha*.

The documentary's portrayal of the *Kumbha Mela* as an international spiritual pilgrimage is consistent with broader trends in the globalization of spirituality identified by researchers such as Paul Heelas, and Linda Woodhead. Gautam's documentary is an example of the "expository mode" as described by Nichols, an approach distinguished by the "voice of God" narrator, direct address of the viewer and a clear structure of argumentation (113). The voice-over narration of the documentary works as an interpretive framing device for the visual material, guiding the spectator toward certain interpretations and meanings. This approach is suited for the depiction of the *Kumbha Mela* as a religious occasion. It assists the filmmaker in conveying the religious significance of the festival, and in connecting it to broader concerns of human spirituality.

However, it is worth pointing out that the explanatory approach also admits the possibility of cultural reductionism and oversimplification. Tara Lal Shrestha in the article "Beauty Pageants Nepali Discourse:

The method is quite difficult in the representation of cultural aspects, but it offers a quantity of expressive options unparalleled in the documentary.

Society is often thought of as a basic occurrence in the religious life of the Hindus. But this interpretation takes place in India and Nepal and overlooks the traditions, history and religion behind it. Also, it doesn't pay attention to the details of the beliefs that are held and the meaning of universal spirituality which is a rather big subject to deal with. (12)

Shrestha's response points to the challenges faced by the documentary in conveying complicated cultural and religious events. While *Spirits of Moksha* brings the *Kumbha Mela* to the globe with a global story, it risks turning the festival into a show of spirituality. Shrestha warned that the depiction may not consider the historical, theological and cultural aspects that make the *Kumbha Mela* a Hindu pilgrimage. The *Kumbha Mela* means many things, as assemblage theory explains. The meaning of performance is derived from ritual, sacred place, pilgrims, ascetics, institutions and subjective experience. The documentary offers a mystical narrative of the *Kumbha Mela* but its descriptions of the event ignore its multiplicity of performance and reconstitution of religious and cultural meaning.

Documentary and ethnographic film interrogate the politics of visual representation. In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Stuart Hall argues that representation produces reality by selecting, organizing, and framing signs and images (Hall 24-25). That is, religious imagery is always ideological and based in discourses of power, identity and cultural authority. Documentary photography can support or criticize social conventions. To watch *Spirit of Moksha* is to watch what the documentary shows and doesn't show, stresses and sidelines. The assumptions this documentary makes regarding the audience's cultural knowledge, interpretive frameworks, and expectations must be evaluated since they influence the formation of meaning and reception.

Documentaries on religion raise questions about authenticity and the authority of the author. Robert A. Rosenstone, in his book *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, says that documentaries are narratives constructed by selection, interpretation and evaluation (Rosenstone, 1995, p. 93). Thus, assertions of authenticity are rhetorical strategies that rely on the audience accepting the authority

of the filmmaker and documentary norms. *Spirit of Moksha* feels authentic because of the abundant on-location filming, interviews with pilgrims and religious practitioners, and an authoritative voice-over narration that positions the director as an informed and trustworthy guide. The technical devices used in the film enhance the documentary's authority and affect the audience's perception of the *Kumbha Mela* as a religious and cultural phenomenon.

Contemporary studies of religion and documentary cinema need to study closely how audiovisual mediums transmit religious meaning and render sacred events. Documentaries provide context and aestheticization of religion through narrative, pictures, audio and editing techniques. As Marat Grinberg argues, cinematic portrayals of religion are not only about spiritual experiences, but also actively shape the concept of religion and cultural memory (3–7). Jolyon Mitchell claims that visual media enables religious innovation and political involvement (5–12). Gregory Price Grieve (Grieve 1-8) argues that movies and internet platforms influence the modern religious experience. These academic opinions explore the cinematic representation of the *Spirit of Moksha* and its exploration of ritual, spirituality and cultural identity.

c. Kumbha Mela: Scholarly Discourse and Research Gap

The *Kumbha Mela* is theorised as a performative assemblage through the combination of assemblage theory and performance studies. This paradigm views the festival as a fluid assemblage of diverse human and non-human energies, which co-constitute sacred experience. The framework does not see the festival as a static religious event but as a dynamic configuration. The *Kumbha Mela* has a unique atmosphere, formed by the interaction of pilgrims, ascetics, sacred rivers, ceremonial performances, religious institutions, state agencies, media technologies and

mythological narratives (DeLanda, 5-9). Therefore the concept of performative assemblage illuminates the festival as not one, but a number of different aspects that, through their relations and interactions, continuously produce religious meaning and communal identity.

Kumbha Mela appears as a dynamic assemblage of heterogeneous yet interrelated elements: pilgrims, ascetics and ritual professionals, temporary urban infrastructures, holy landscapes, technological networks, governmental organizations. These components do not form a fixed or hierarchical structure, but rather interact, adapt, and restructure in response to changing religious, social, material, and political contexts. As assemblage theorists suggest, such forms are marked by fluidity, contingency and relationality, rather than permanence or intrinsic unity (DeLanda 10–18). Thus the *Kumbha Mela* is potentially an emergent social construction, where the identity of the festival is continually formed by the interactions of many human and nonhuman actors, rather than a stable or pre-determined entity.

One of the most important things assemblage theory has given us is the idea of territorialization and deterritorialization. Territorialization is a term used to describe the processes by which social activities become fixed, ordered and culturally recognized. Deterritorialization in contrast, is a word for the reasons that change, upset or reconfigure existing arrangements. The *Kumbha Mela* follows traditional pilgrimage traditions and ceremonial practices, but also evolves according to technology improvements, government laws, developing infrastructures and patterns of religious engagement that are in constant motion. One sign of the festival's ability to sustain historical continuity without ossification socially and culturally is the adaptive character of religious gatherings.

Performance theory is a wonderful complement to assemblage theory in that it

focuses on the corporeal and experiential aspects of religion. Victor Turner's work on ritual suggests that there is transformation in religious performance where individuals undergo symbolic change and social regeneration. The *Kumbha Mela* comprises of ritualistic activities like taking a holy bath in the holy river, congregational prayers, devotional singing and interaction with ascetics. Such ritual actions are not symbolic representations; they are actual embodied performances producing spiritual experience (Turner, *The Ritual Process* 94-113). On various instances, ritual participants negotiate their religious identities and reaffirm their links to sacred traditions and communities.

Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas* are particularly useful for understanding social processes that were in action during the *Kumbha Mela*. Pilgrimages involve people temporarily transcending the customary social constraints of caste, occupation or economic standing. They go toward a borderland of spiritual equality and group engagement. The present transitional state encourages the formation of *communitas*, a deep sense of solidarity, shared devotion and community connection among pilgrims. Such experiences show that the power of the festival to effect transformation is not just a function of the person's spirituality, but also of the communal ritual involvement which momentarily reconstructs social relationships and reaffirms a common religious identity. (Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95-130)

The concept of ritualization of Catherine Bell further enriches the analytical framework by explaining how even mundane behaviors can acquire a sacred value via the use of culturally regulated procedures. For Bell, rituals are purposeful acts that distinguish themselves from the ordinary by structuring conduct into symbolic systems of leadership and meaning. The ritual bathing, processions, offerings, chanting and ceremonial encounters of the *Kumbha Mela* are considered sacred. This

is because such behaviors are entrenched in traditions of religion, mythological stories and institutional institutions. Ritualization is thus the process by which physical activities become performances through which spiritual meaning is communicated and religious values and community identities are affirmed (Ritual Practice. 74-90).

Another integral part of this theoretical integration is the documentary representation. This is what the increasing mediation of modern understandings of the *Kumbha Mela* through visual media makes easier. Documentary films do not only store religious traditions, but contribute in the production of knowledge about religious traditions (Nichols, Introduction to Documentary 1-20). But from this point of view *Spirit of Moksha* is more a mediated interpretation of the *Kumbha Mela* than an actual description of the event. This paradigm provides an account of the collective production of sacred experience through the interconnections of bodies, rituals, technologies, institutions, surroundings and symbolic representations. This is achieved by blending the relational and emergent understandings of assemblage theory with the embodied and transformational understandings of performance studies.

Chapter III: Research Methodology

This section will explain the theoretical framework, the study plan, the analytical methodologies, the data sources and the ethical considerations that will guide the analysis of Rajeev Gautam's *Spirit of Moksha*. This chapter uses qualitative interpretive methods to create a theoretical approach that combines assemblage theory and performance studies, in an attempt to theorize the *Kumbha Mela* as a performative assemblage composed of the interactions of ritual practices, sacred spaces, institutional structures, visual representations and embodied religious experiences. The methodology does not see the documentary as a neutral record of truth but as a mediated cultural text in which cinematic strategies generates notions of spirituality, asceticism and pilgrimage and alter viewers' views through inclusion, emphasis and omission. This chapter will establish the methodological foundation for evaluating the documentary's portrayal of the *Kumbha Mela* and the broader cultural, ideological and representational processes that inform its representation, employing close textual, visual and critical discourse analysis.

The present study is based on the interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological framework to analyze the *Kumbha Mela* as depicted in the documentary *Spirit of Moksha*. The paradigm is based on assemblage theory and performance studies. In this research the *Kumbha Mela* is not considered as a fixed religious congregation or a uniform cultural event, but as a dynamic and growing assemblage constituted by the interaction of pilgrims, ascetics, ritual practices, sacred geography, institutional structures, media technologies and symbolic systems. This is not like *Kumbha Mela* either as a single cultural celebration or a particular religious gathering. This study proposes a comprehensive paradigm for accounting for the production of religious meaning and sacred experience as the outcome of interrelated

material, social and performative processes. It is based on the theory of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, further developed by Manuel DeLanda. It also makes use of the notions of performance by Victor Turner, Richard Schechner and Catherine Bell.

A theoretical framework is developed through four interrelated ideas during the entire inquiry. First, assemblage points to the continual assembling of different human and non-human actors that constitute the particular religious ecology of the *Kumbha Mela*. The concepts of territorialization and deterritorialization are useful to understand the dynamics of simultaneous stabilization, negotiation and transformation of religious identities, the spaces of performance of rituals, the authority of institutions and the identities of religious groups in the festival. Third, performative assemblage is a blend of assemblage theory and performance studies. The purpose is to demonstrate how spirituality is not only portrayed but also constructed via physical ritual practices, communal participation and interaction of several actors within the framework of pilgrimage. Finally, the last piece of the puzzle is the idea of ritualization hypothesized by Catherine Bell. It provides a way of understanding how everyday bodily actions are culturally designated as sacred performances by certain spatial, temporal and cosmological arrangements.

The present thesis follows a qualitative interpretative design - integrating theoretical analysis and documentary film critique. This study is based on textual, visual and critical discourse analysis instead of empirical fieldwork or participant observation as its main aim is to assess *Spirit of Moksha* as a mediated representation of the *Kumbha Mela*. That is the other reason of study of the *Kumbha Mela*. The qualitative method enables for a more in-depth analysis of the effect of cinematic techniques on the viewer's impression of spirituality, ritual and pilgrimage. The

strategy allows for an interdisciplinary approach for the evaluation of the documentary as a cultural product and a representational practice. It does this by drawing on a range of disciplines including cultural studies, documentary studies, visual anthropology, media studies and religious studies.

The approach of analysis is an interrelated three step process. The first stage is a comprehensive analysis of assemblage theory, performance studies, ritual theory, and literature on pilgrimage and documented representation to develop the theoretical framework. The second step is full-text and graphic study of *Spirit of Moksha*. The examination considers the layout of the plot, cinematography, editing, sound design, narration, framing and representational strategies. This course investigates how such cinematic techniques make up the visual and affective experience of the *Kumbha Mela*, and generate various understandings of asceticism, dedication, sacred space and spiritual development. In this phase we analyze in more depth how the visual and aural elements of the documentary contribute in the construction of religious meaning in the video.

To recap, the findings are positioned within broader academic conversations about the *Kumbha Mela*, documentary representation, religious performance and visual culture. The interpretative analysis juxtaposes the representations in the documentary with existing scholarly material, with the aim of identifying areas of convergence, omission and critical dispute. The comparative perspective of this study enables us to understand how the *Spirit of Moksha* registers, analyzes and develops the religious reality related to the event. The research provides a coherent methodological framework to understand the function of cinematic representation in the performative production of spirituality. Furthermore, the research discloses cultural, ideological and representational aspects involved in the documentary film

making. This is done by theoretical interpretation and methodical analysis of documents.

This study is based on qualitative interpretative research approach to explore Rajeev Gautam's *Spirit of Moksha* as a cultural and cinematic text that creates distinct interpretations about the *Kumbha Mela*. The research examines the documentary as a mediated representation in which the cinematic choices actively shape the viewers' feeling of spirituality, ritual and pilgrimage. The research does not consider the documentary a neutral or objective account of reality, but rather a mediated depiction. The method combines textual analysis, visual analysis, and critical interpretation as a means of analyzing how the documentary organizes visuals, sounds, narration, and editing into a coherent account of sacred experience. The aim is to explore the structure of the documentary. This project seeks to investigate both the significance of the documentary and its construction through certain aesthetic and ideological choices. This is achieved by the application of an interpretative technique.

The framework is designed around three interrelated dimensions for the purpose of analysis. Firstly, the study explores the cinematographic strategies of the documentary. These techniques are cinematography, editing, soundscape, voice over narration, sequencing, framing and visual composition. The aim of this inquiry is to examine the visual and emotional construction of spirituality. This analysis draws on documentary studies and, in particular, Bill Nichols' theory of documentary modes to investigate how narrative authority (114), visual symbolism, and representational strategies create a sense of authenticity while shaping viewer perceptions of the *Kumbha Mela*. From this perspective, documentary filmmaking is seen as an interpretive technique, in which religious meanings are conveyed via the use of cinematic language, carefully arranged, rather than through the literal reproduction of

reality.

The second dimension is a study of the politics of visual representation, which analyzes how the documentary represents ascetics, pilgrims, and other participants in rituals. Drawing on visual anthropology and ethnographic film scholarship, particularly the work of Jay Ruby, David MacDougall and Paul Henley, this study engages issues of visibility, authority, authenticity, filmmaker positionality and spectatorship. The frequent depiction of *Nāga sadhus* and renunciant, whose visual prominence is significant, plays an important role in the building of globally known pictures of the *Kumbha Mela*. The third analytical dimension focuses on omissions and silences. This is accomplished via a detailed investigation of the limited representation of economic activity, environmental issues, administrative governance, commercialization, infrastructure, crowd management and political participation. The research reads the absences as important representational strategies, which influence the audience's comprehension by foregrounding spiritual transcendence over the festival's larger socio-political reality. This interpretation is founded on the concepts of critical discourse analysis.

The main source of knowledge is the documentary *Spirit of Moksha*. Other sources of information include scholarly writing on the Kumbha Mela, pilgrimage studies, documentary cinema, visual culture, assemblage theory, performance studies, ethnographic film, historical narratives, media coverage, and other secondary resources relevant to the topic. Before beginning a full formal analysis of film techniques and contextual understanding, the documentary is viewed a number of times to identify recurring themes, visual motifs, narrative conventions and symbolic structures. The analysis of the findings is carried out through the concepts of performative assemblage, ritualization, territorialization, and visual representation in

an effort to explain how the documentary constructs the *Kumbha Mela* as a mediated religious experience and at the same time demonstrate the limitations of its representational abilities. Ethical responsibility is maintained throughout the course of the research through methodological transparency and scholarly integrity, the recognition of the positionality of the researcher, a focus on cinematic representation rather than religious belief, and respect for the dignity of religious practitioners.

Chapter IV: *Kumbha Mela* as Assemblage in Gautam's *Spirit of Moksha*

Spirit of Moksha is a documentary based on Representation in the Documentary using Cinematic Techniques and Interpretative Narration of the *Kumbha Mela*. The approach is informed by studies in documentary, pilgrimage and religious subjects and draws on assemblage theory. It is not considered as a record of events, but rather as a cultural narrative that actively creates meaning around issues such as spirituality, sacred space and religious identity. This chapter examines the visual, aural and narrative qualities of the documentary so as to understand how the documentary invites the viewer to see the *Kumbha Mela* as a profound and life-changing spiritual experience. The dialogue allows for an examination of the documentary's depiction of the festival from historical, anthropological and religious viewpoints, drawing on relevant scholarly literature.

This thesis discloses that *Spirit of Moksha* offers an extraordinary representation of the *Kumbha Mela* from the perspectives of personal spiritual development, sacred landscapes, ascetic traditions, and ceremonial purity. The documentary's effective use of cinematography, editing, sound design, narration, symbolism and narrative sequencing changes the viewers' perspective of the pilgrimage and its religious meaning. The findings also suggest that the documentary gives a selective representation of the *Kumbha Mela*, giving far less attention to the political, economic, environmental and social concerns that also define the *Kumbha Mela*. This chapter is so solid for the success and failures of the documentary that it reveals how the cinematic depiction can reveal and obscure elements of religious truth. In this way, it helps to the dissemination of knowledge about the language of documentary cinema, its ability to express spirituality, to produce cultural knowledge and to build present-day perceptions of one of the main religious festivals in the

world.

The *Kumbha Mela* is an instance of heterogeneity of assemblage formations. The festival is a set of human, material, institutional, cosmological and symbolic characteristics whose contingent interaction produces the peculiar social and religious identity of the celebration. It is a massive congregation of pilgrims of diverse geographical locations, castes, classes, languages and cultural identities. Why do people make pilgrimages? There are several motivations for individuals to go on pilgrimages. These include expectations of ceremony, spiritual intensity and personal meaning of the pilgrimage experience. The festival is not a monolith, but a vibrant arena of interaction in which diverse types of religious practice, social identity and creative expression co-exist and intertwine.

The core aspect of the collection is the presence of ascetic communities and sacred landscapes, which are constitutive to the development of religious meaning and the validation of ritual. The most famous of such groups are the *Naga Sadhus* who are famous for their great renunciation, ritual nudity and strict spiritual discipline which invariably draws national and international media coverage. Ritual processions, sacred washing rites are carried out, representing ideals of discipline and spiritual fortitude yet there are constant disputes for rank, authority and power between the different monastic orders and with state officials and festival organizers.

The festival is linked to the sacred rivers like Ganges at Haridwar and *Triveni Sangam* in Prayagraj where it is said Ganges and Yamuna are meeting the invisible *Saraswati*. Streams are true geographical formations and divine beings with the ability to forgive sins, bring about spiritual transformation and provide ways to redemption. And Misra describes the significance of these rivers:

Many travelers thought the Ganges was a deity, and although it looked like

water, it was actually something much different. The symbolic importance of the midnight arati in Hardwar, where the pujaris light up her silvery image as well as her liquid form, both of which are considered to be iconic, emphasizes this point. This arati is done in the evening. (184)

The story shows the rivers as both physical events and metaphorical expressions of heavenly power. The rivers are not only geographical features but active participants in the festival's religious life, the very experience of the pilgrim, and the significance of ritual deeds.

A lot is at risk in the historical and metaphorical circumstances of the event to give it shape, to give it meaning. *Kumbha Mela* is based on intricate astrological calculations of the position and movement of celestial bodies. It ties human religious ceremony to wider cosmic cycles and sacred times beyond the reach of the individual. Mythological traditions also supported cosmological ideas, particularly the samudra manthana (churning of the cosmic ocean) and the concept that festival locations were touched by drops of *amrita* (the nectar of immortality). They say these legends are not myths. They assert, they unify, and they sanctify the events they relate.

Gautam's documentary looks at the link between legendary time and present performative reality. The importance of ancient myths to contemporary practice is articulated by the voices of intellectuals and sages. These characters have no conventional authoritative voice-over, but act as narrators who connect legendary time to contemporary performative realities:

Intellectuals and sages turn into storytellers and relate the legendary time with contemporary performing reality, instead of the standard voice-over. They recount the development of the theory of Moksha, which makes the time at Kumbh Mela cyclical, rather than linear. The documentary succeeds in

revealing how these old myths are performed, re-enacted and preserved by the communal beliefs and discourses of the participants. (1:12:00-1:25:00)

The documentary takes a significant interpretative choice to render time in a cyclical rather than linear fashion, a choice that is congruent with the cosmological roots of the event. By having the scholars and sages define these historical frameworks, Gautam thereby shows us how the *Kumbha Mela* functions as a site whereby old cosmological understandings are enacted and reanimated through community participation. This narrative element makes the festival a live activity and not simply a historical commemoration, making the time of mythology available in the present for those who participate.

Misra's description of the celebration is indeed indicative of its fluid and integrative character where many social, cultural, religious and material elements are brought together in one framework whose form is in a continuous process of evolution:

The Sanskrit word *kumbha* (meaning a pitcher or jug of water) *Kumbha* also signifies the sign of the zodiac, the aquarius, *mela* is also Sanskrit. It comes from the root which has two meanings, to merge or unite and to travel together. Actually, there is a Hindu fair-cum-festival called *Kumbha Mela*, where Hinduism is exhibited in totality, and all the participants partake of piety and spirituality with their behaviour, speech and ideas not opposed to each other. (2)

The *Kumbha Mela* is a classic example of the performative aspect of religion, when religious meaning is enacted and performed. It's about action, engagement, shared experience. It is a communal ritual of prayer, devotional singing, ceremonial washing, pilgrimage and procession. All these activities are result of joint effort by many

followers. Such like bodily activities create a sense of *communitas*, a common religious identity. The *Kumbha Mela* provides a rich social and ceremonial context for the construction of religious experience through the mobility, interaction and bodily presence of pilgrims, ascetics and religious institutions.

Gautam's documentary extensively records the performative features of ascetic practice, depicting the *Naga Babas* and diverse ascetics as beings whose corporeal behaviors are an intentional language of renunciation:

Sages and the act of Asceticism: In the extensive talks with *Naga Babas* and diverse ascetics, the documentary unveils asceticism as a highly purposeful and evident act. Dreadlocks, attitudes, body markers are textual elements that create a language of renunciation. These performative performances challenge the present capitalist idea of existence by demonstrating a radical detachment from the material world in the temporary encampment. (00:38:00–00:48:00)

The documentary's focus on the performative nature of asceticism resonates with broader scholarly views of religion as lived and practiced, rather than merely believed. For Gautam, the bodily markings and postures of the *Naga Babas* are "textual elements," and he sees ascetic practice as a type of communication that subverts mainstream social and economic ideals. Ascetics are not exotic spectacles in this view, but intentional performers of an alternative manner of being that critiques current materialist existence through radical renunciation.

The festival is also directly tied to environmental issues that enable or hinder the implementation of the *Kumbha Mela*. Clearly, there is a gap between the spiritual ideals of ceremonial cleanliness and the practicalities of dealing with large crowds, as seen in the pollution of sacred rivers, the greater strain on local water sources, and the enormous amount of garbage produced by large pilgrimage groups. The problems of

the environment are intimately related to the problems of the economy, religion and administration. Environmental problems have implications that are dependent on the history of the people involved and the place of the problem. There are no economic or ecological variables as isolated and separate forces; they are instead part of a complex web of contextual relationships which might have different degrees of importance at different times and at different festival sites.

The organizational structure of the *Kumbha Mela* is another proof of the fact that the *Mela* is a congregation of people to observe. Broad spectrums of stakeholders are present at the event including a number of government ministries, religious organisations, corporations and volunteers. Misra describes in detail the scope of this coordination:

For the 2019 *Ardha Kumbha*, 261 projects were executed by 15 State Government departments while the Mela was administered by 28 State Government departments and six ministries of the Central Government. The amount of government departments and ministries involved in the organization is mind-boggling. (47)

The collaboration provides a temporary administrative structure that makes the festival possible, but also defines the identity and the goals of the event. Since political leaders have exploited the festival to rally support and promote cultural nationalism, Maclean and Lochtefeld have noted that the participation of the state in the event has become more and more important.

The *akharas*, in addition to being designated as ascetic orders, are one of the entities incorporated into the creation of the institutional architecture of the *Kumbha Mela*. These *akharas*, which are Hindu religious communities, have another name. Many of these *akharas* are among the most essential actors in the ceremonial action

of the festival. This particular action is performed during the event. In an effort to give an overview of the akharas, Misra describes them as follows:

Thirteen *sadhus* organizations have participated in the Kumbha Mela throughout its history. Such associations are often referred to as akharas. Thirteen akharas have been participating in the Kumbha Melas over the years. Of these akharas, seven are Shaiva, three are Vaishnava, two are Udasina and one is Hindu. And so it has been for a long time. The members of the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad (ABAP) represent them. (70-71)

The *akharas* are not just religious organizations but are social and political entities with a long history of struggle, negotiation and adaptation. They play an important role in the ceremonial sequence of the festival in *Kumbha Mela*. At its climax, the celebration culminates in a series of bathing ceremonies and processions staged around the event. But the relationship that has gone on between the akharas has not always been a nice one. Some *Kumbha Melas* in the past have witnessed terrible internecine fights between *akharas*,” explains Misra (79). These issues have been largely settled, owing to the involvement of state officials, but they nevertheless point to the political character of the event.

A further dimension to the assembly that unfolds across much of the festival is the presence of *kalpavasis*, pilgrims who promise to undertake austerities for one month during the *Prayagraj Kumbha*. This is what Misra has to say about the method that they have selected to take:

The *Kalpavasis* are known to be some of the most pious pilgrims during the *Prayaga Kumbha Mela*. Most of them are not officially affiliated to any of the akharas. These people have no affiliation with any religious or spiritual leader or group... They are found in great numbers in every *Magha Mela* & *Prayaga*

Kumbha Mela living in humble & small tents, eating just once per day, washing three times per day & finding satisfaction in meditating, chanting, reading, listening & singing. They are living in these conditions, discreetly taking their vows. (90)

One form of asceticism, called *kalpavasis*, is not included among the planned *akharas*, but is an important part of the religious life of the festival. Their presence during *Kumbha Mela* generates a large area of ceremonial activity and spiritual expression that adds to the density and diversity of religious practice found there.

Rajeev Gautam's documentary *Spirit of Moksha*, rather than a vast assembly of believers performing religious rites, meditation and seeking freedom, he sees the *Kumbha Mela* as a voyage of spiritual development. According to the documentary, the festival is a sacred environment in which people can go upon their journey of existential discovery and can engage in spiritual repair. It has the story, the visual motif, and the interesting philosophical discourse. The way to achieve this is to put the festival back in its proper place as a place of worship inside the framework of the celebration. Gautam used film techniques in his works to articulate the collective and personal experiences he has gathered along the voyage. The *Kumbha Mela*, as he says, is not just a ritualistic affair but an experience, which broadens one's awareness of philosophical ideas as well as oneself.

The documentary claims the *Kumbha Mela* represents everyone's dream. The documentary states the festival's spiritual significance isn't restricted to a single country or creed. To overcome the problems of purification, transcendence and the quest for the ultimate truth, Gautam uses interpretative analysis and religious rites as symbolic tactics. Thus, the event is perceived as part of the religious tradition of Hinduism and as a reflection of the continuing efforts that people make in their search

for finding their life purpose and realize their potential for spiritual fulfillment. The voiceover at the start of the documentary gives an explanatory context for the *Kumbha Mela* as a particularly spiritual celebration. The structure is laid out as follows:

It is a tour of thought, beginning with philosophical meditation on the human situation and spirituality, and then transcending geographical and cultural variety to underline features common to all humans... It is crucial to realize that the spiritual path is not about garnering favor with other people. Central to this idea is the inner odyssey of self-realisation and awakening, which is an integral basis for most religious traditions. (00:02:15 to 00:02:45)

The documentary director presents the video with a global conceptual framework to comprehend and respect the *Kumbha Mela* by people who do not follow the Hindu beliefs. The festival has its roots in the theological and cosmological traditions of Hinduism and is an important event which takes place on a ceremonial occasion. It is also used as a broader background for exploring existential problems and reflecting on issues related to the spiritual realm. Other uses include investigation of existential issues, because it stands for a wider atmosphere. In this perspective, elaborate religious rites represent universal themes of self-awareness, personal growth, and the shared human experience of all peoples.

As Shrestha notes; “the methodology presents many problems in representing cultural elements, but also unprecedented opportunities of expression in the documentary” (13). The Hindu *Kumbha Mela* has been celebrated throughout India, yet its rituals, history, and religion are neglected. Myth: *Kumbha Mela* is a minor Hindu celebration. This is a problem since it ignores uniqueness and global spirit. Universalizing and particularizing representation is a difficulty in documenting of

religious traditions.

The documentary uses cinematic language to convey the significance, verisimilitude and magnitude of the event. An aerial photo shows the scale of the gathering and the well-planned tents, paths, encampments and bathing ghats that create a temporary city of prayer. Large festival grounds represent logistical issues and the symbolic importance of the event. Religious activity is followed by close-ups of the wide-angle community meetings. Personal passion, civic service, it can be done. The documentary shows *Kumbha Mela* as public and spiritual. It has a lot of perspectives.

Nichols's documentary technique is one of his signature styles. In *Spirit of Moksha* (109), which will be addressed in greater detail in the following paragraphs, the voice-over narration is a central feature of the documentary. Throughout the movie, this voice-over presents an authoritative perspective on spirituality, rituals, and the beliefs of the folks who are participating in the activity. By using this tactic, the listener is transformed into a learner in need of the story. This approach creates that effect.

The documentary portrays the *Kumbha Mela* as a sacred arena, filled with rituals and devotion, the cinematography. There is a religious celebration and a sacred place in the picture. The documentary celebrates the event participants. Pilgrimage, asceticism, rituality, and sacred sites spiritualize the world. During the *Kumbha Mela* the bodies of participants and the sites they inhabit become symbols of sacred geography and collective engagement, and offer a space for intense religious experience.

The ceremonial bathing in the Ganges and other cleansing procedures are the most essential and elementary displays of religious passion and spiritual refreshment.

This picture doesn't show an actual river. The rituals and visual sequences selected demonstrate the power of bathing as a transforming act. Faithful could obtain moral regeneration via it, heighten their connection to the holy and purify themselves of sin.

The documentary notes that the Ganges is a symbol, physical and spiritual:

The documentary contains a number of topics, including the worship of the *Kumbha Mela*, a religious gathering that spans hundreds of years and draws participants from all over the world. Pilgrims on their journeys seek to purify their bodies and souls by bathing in the sacred waters of the Ganges River.

The film also implies that these rituals have the potential for enormous transformation. The movie states the river is more than water; it's a spiritual force that may purify the soul. (00:45:10-00:45:40)

The documentary calls the *Ganges Ganga Ma*, mother of old Hinduism, who is supposed to grant, favors to her devotees who approach her with devotion, humility and ritual cleanliness. The river is a real thing, and a powerful symbol of spiritual strength, purity and promise of renewal. The Ganges is here invoked as part of a larger theological discourse on sacred place and the redemptive possibilities of travel. The pictures show the importance of the river for Hindu spirituality and the emotional and symbolic relationship between the devotees and the holy place.

Gautam's documentary further expands the idea of experiencing spirituality through the encounter with real things. The documentary illustrates the correlation between the dedication practice and the relationship of material goods, a reciprocal link:

By studying the documentary's text, it becomes clear that the sacred is not separate from the material. The actual objects; earthen lights, ashes, marigold garlands, rushing water; are part of the assemblage. They are material objects

mediating the spiritual experience, conduits of the performative devotion of millions. This film illustrates this symbiotic relationship and how spiritual liberation (*Moksha*) is actively achieved through material participation.

(01:30:00-01:42:00)

This comment is crucial to understanding the documentary's way of dealing with religious experience. Gautam reveals that the sacred is not detached from the material but rather communicated via material things. It challenges dualistic paradigms separating the spiritual and material worlds. The clay lamps, the ashes, the garlands and the flowing water are not just decorative elements but active participants in the assemblage that constitutes the religious experience. This materialist take on spirituality is congruent with the emphasis that assemblage theory gives to the role of non-human agents in shaping social and religious events.

Yet the documentary's emphasis on ritual purity and spiritual transcendence obscures the river's complex material and ecological realities. Recent environmental studies have found that the main sources of pollution in the Ganges River are untreated sewage, industrial effluents and agricultural runoff. Problems like these are frequent in large pilgrim gatherings like as the *Kumbh Mela* which gathers millions of people and exerts pressure on fragile ecosystems. The sacred river of stories of dedication, the river of reality is poisoned by the air. But they cast a completely different light on religious traditions. Such a dichotomy offers serious methodological questions to filmmakers in their use of material boundaries and spiritual symbols for an audience knowledgeable enough to recognize such contradictions.

The documentary gives much time and attention to the tale and visuals of ascetic practitioners, especially the *Naga Sadhus*. What strike one most are their ritual nudity and their strict discipline. The *Spirit of Moksha* is a rich source for visual and

narrative emphasis for these practitioners. The documentary is a passionate investigation of these ascetics, who are posed as major players in the vast spiritual field of Hindu religious traditions. One is struck by the austerity, the ash-colored bodies, and the nudity in ritual form. This is not a drama. It is a vigorous testimony of true religious devotion, a negation of the vanities of this world.

The documentary also highlights examples of enunciates, the *Naga Sadhus*. Their abstinence is a growth in the spirit, in consciousness. The documentary is about self-discipline, sacrifice and detaching from material things. Asceticism is a technique to transcend ordinary consciousness, to arrive at a real dedication to the sacred. And so the *Spirit of Moksha* allows the practitioner to worship prototypes of a spiritual ideal on the basis of control and self-denial of the body. It helps practitioners to attain enlightenment and higher consciousness:

The problem is that higher consciousness demands renunciation. It's a hard road, but it's a route to knowledge. In this essay we shall look at the *Nagas Sadhus*-ascetics who sacrifice worldly objects and society institutions so that they can be able to attain this. Their stringent practices re-iterate the core ideals which are the foundation of Hindu Philosophy and are the peak of the pyramid of sacrifice of wishes and ego. (Gautam 00:46:30-00:47:00)

The documentary describes *Naga Sadhu* according to Hindu asceticism. Renunciation (*sannyasa*) is a spiritual practice in Hinduism of renouncing worldly responsibilities and earthly desires to reach spiritual liberation. Thus the *Naga Sadhu* is the ideal holy man, the product of severe self-discipline, self-renunciation and single-minded devotion to spiritual concerns. It is a celebration of the traditional religious notion that austere commitment is the path out of the trivialities of ordinary life.

The documentary is about the religious part of monasticism, notably the

symbolic and devotional aspects. The documentary does not tell anything about the material, structural and social grounds for the formation of austere civilizations.

Misra sets the legacy of the *Naga Sadhus* in a larger historical, literary and philological framework, and so corrects simplistic or sensationalist portrayals:

The *Naga sadhus* are part of the *Kumbha Melas*. There are thousands of them, the Shaiva *Nagas*, who are very naked even in the bitter cold of the *Prayaga Kumbha*. The word *Naga* is derived from the Sanskrit *nagna* ('naked') in Hindi, or more probably from the Sanskrit *naga* ('of the mountains'). They are nude and live in the highlands. *Naga sadhus* According to Jadunath Sarkar, the naked *Naga sadhus* were termed gymnosophists by Greek historians, especially by Arrian in *Indika* (second century BCE). (67-68)

For Misra, the objective is not to showcase the dramatic, physically stimulating aspects of ascetic practice, but to highlight the complex historical processes, religious lineages and doctrinal developments that have molded the identity of *Naga* ascetics throughout the centuries. Such a contextual approach demonstrates that the *Naga Sadhus* are not merely 'weird religious folk' but active participants in a complex tradition with significant institutional, theological and intellectual roots. The historical complexity and intellectual underpinning of Misra's work resist simple representation and suggest a more complicated understanding of asceticism as a complex religious phenomenon affected by broader social, cultural and historical influences.

The visual focus of the documentary on the *Naga Sadhus* raises problems about the relationship between spectacle and knowledge. In the environment of beauty pageants, as Shrestha notes, the visual representation is often one of the exotic and spectacular, rather than the common and complex. This tendency also shows up

in documented representations of asceticism where the stunning visual picture of the *Naga Sadhu* might overwhelm the theological, intellectual and historical qualities of ascetic practice. The video is clearly respectful and admiring of its subject matter, yet the visual choices seem to indicate a greater issue in the fair depiction of non-Western religious traditions. “These great symbols could hide the history and the thought that lie behind them (69).”

The politics of visual representation are even worse when the documentary is produced for an international audience. While the film’s framing of the *Kumbha Mela* as a global spiritual journey might make it more appealing to the non-Hindu viewer, it also tends to reduce the festival to a series of aesthetically pleasing and spiritually uplifting images that gloss over its wealth, uniqueness, and internal diversity. The challenge for documentary filmmakers is to develop representations that are both accessible and courteous, to convey the richness and depth of religious traditions without exoticizing or essentializing them.

In the translation selected one of the most important passages of *Spirit of Moksha* is omitted. The documentary doesn't really address the political, economic and environmental issues at the core of the present *Kumbha Mela*. There is scant acknowledgment of the celebration’s link to Hindu nationalism, particularly the increased involvement of government agencies and political parties in the event’s organization and staging. This silence matters, since the *Kumbh Mela* has become a key site of political mobilization, religious identity creation and cultural nationalism.

While the documentary narrates the *Kumbha Mela* as a spiritual event that has survived through time, it downplays the role of modern technologies, transport networks, mass media, tourism, and state administration in the planning of the festival and the experience of the pilgrim. The event is not outside of globalization, nor

outside of commercialization. It is in the midst of both. Hardwar, he says, “is an example of a pilgrimage center which has been transformed by urbanization and tourism:

Hardwar still has in many respects the air of a little village, and the surrounding scenery still retains the beauty so rapturously described by the British visitors of old days. It is also a short day’s travel from Delhi and many well-heeled Dalits are buying property or apartments as a refuge from their crowded, unsafe and unclean city. A few miles north of Hardwar, billboards mark sites for future housing complexes, and in 1990, ads for one of them, the Ganga Darshan Apartments, occasionally appeared in the Hindustan Times, a national daily. (101-102)

Unlike other festivals, the *Kumbha Mela* is marketed as a festival of true spirituality, yet it is also influenced by commercial factors. This festival takes place in India. This depiction is made difficult by the fact that the pilgrimage destination has become a focus of tourism and real estate. Money earned from the festival goes to local businesses, housing providers and public transit systems. The event is consequently important economically and a source of income for various organizations. Misra claims that “the *Kumbha Mela* has been a forum for commercial and trade activities for centuries” (122). The more these feature of the festival economics, the bigger the attendance of the celebration.

The least essential part of the celebration for *Spirit of Moksha* is the environmental challenges. The Ganges is a sacred, cleansing river. But the program doesn’t discuss the environmental issues of mass pilgrimage. These include waste generation, water contamination, stress on ecosystems and depletion of resources. The omission is especially surprising given the increased focus on environmental

sustainability by the management of large religious congregations in India. In the *Ardha Kumbha* of 2019, Misra comments on the steps done to cope with these problems:

The Ministry of Environment, Government of India has taken a conscious decision to make the *Ardha Kumbha* 2019 plastic free. The efforts have been praised by environmentalists. The administration would promote the use of *kulhads* (earthen cups), *dona-pattals* (leaf plates) among tirthayatris... The Mela is expected to see an average of between five to eight lakh *kulhads* and *dona-pattals* being utilized daily. (179)

These remedies do address certain environmental difficulties of the festival but do not fully reconcile the tensions between huge religious gatherings and the concepts of ecological sustainability. Overpopulation, water system degradation, inadequate sewage treatment and destruction of ecosystems are continual threats to the region's environmental management strategy. The size of the gathering casts doubt on the authenticity of promises of ceremonial purity in the face of the deteriorating environmental situation and the strain on the environment infrastructure and natural resources. The event is thus an interstitial place of complex and often paradoxical crossings between ecological realities and spiritual objectives.

It is also remarkable to observe, however, the almost total indifference of the documentary to caste, especially as the *Kumbha Mela* serves a dual function of reinforcing and challenging the social order. Often the festival is imagined as a moment when millions join together across borders, languages and castes but such representations ignore the fact that caste continues to influence institutions and religion. Caste differences influence place in ritual, eligibility for ascetic orders and ties with one another. The conference's general air of friendliness should not be

misconstrued for the eradication of entrenched socio-economic inequity.

But the documentary does address the social dimensions of the occasion, if briefly, by representing the *Kumbha Mela* as a site where hierarchical restraints are momentarily suspended:

During a *Kumbh Mela* assembly, the frontiers of race, religion, caste, gender and age are suddenly thrown down, making it a great socio-political leveler.

This is on top of the fact that the meeting is focused on topics that are wholly or exclusively religious in character. The documentary devotes a short section to the construction of a utopian space through performative interactions. This is a place where lots of people can be on equal terms. This fluid social interaction shows the potential for a massive gathering of people on pilgrimage to be revolutionary and transformative. (Gautam 3:00:00-3:12:00)

This depiction of the festival as a ‘temporary utopian space’ is in line with scholarly ideas of *communitas*, but also raises questions about the sustainability and significance of such egalitarian moments. The film’s image of the *Kumbha Mela* as a social leveler is striking but risks covering over the hierarchies that still shape participation and experience. This contradiction between the festival’s egalitarian rhetoric and its discriminating institutions is a fundamental lacuna in the documentary’s otherwise far-reaching investigation of the event.

The latest attempts to induct Dalit people into the ranks of the religious leadership and monastic orders indicate that the social revolution in contemporary Hinduism is conceivable. But these processes take place in a broader framework of hierarchical relationships that continue to shape religious practice and social structures. Thus, exclusionary institutions produce inclusion that is not consistent and universal, but fragmented. These developments, Misra explains:

The Kumbha Mela has been utilized as a venue to reach out to Dalit tirthayatris and sadhus. At the 2013 Prayaga Kumbha, some 100 Dalit women, who were former manual scavengers, bathed with conch-blowing Brahmin priests at Sangama. Dalit women stayed in the camps of the sadhus and had dinner with the head of ABAP, Swami Narendra Giri. Similarly, about 200 Dalit women, erstwhile scavengers, from Rajasthan took a holy dip in the Shipra with Brahmin priests chanting Sanskrit poetry and mantras during the 2016 Ujjain Kumbha. (137)

Such efforts indicate that involvement in communal rituals offers disadvantaged individuals opportunity to engage in activities relevant to spiritual equity. The ritual of bathing together becomes a strong metaphor, giving a spiritual basis that fits within the personal beliefs of the believers. The development of the festival into a social forum allows marginalized groups to demonstrate their dignity, visibility and sense of belonging in a society that has often ostracized them. This is done through the event.

But the caste structure is still there even in the celebration. The Brahmin priests have ceremonial authority, and the equality that is established by rituals is temporary; it does not change the basic ties between people. The presence of Dalit ascetics in spiritual leadership is an example of initiatives aimed at challenging the dominant, exclusionary norms of orthodox religious institutions. Such measures are being introduced to counter the entrenched exclusionary practices. Misra gives the ordinations of the Dalit saints as follows:

The *Juna Akhara* has decided to bestow the Mahamandaleshvara status upon Shivananda Giri, who is a sadhu belonging to the Dalit caste. There were around two hundred and twenty women and three hundred men from the Dalit community who would be introduced as sants (saints) by the akhara. As of

June 2018, the akhara housed approximately five hundred women saints from the Dalit community. (138)

By implementing these improvements, the *Kumbha Mela* has been transformed into a public place that allows for the expression and discussion of concerns regarding caste, hygiene, and the legitimacy of spiritual practices. On the other hand, these alterations also bring up problems regarding the boundaries of inclusiveness. Despite the fact that the ordination of Dalit saints is a tremendously symbolic movement, it does not immediately eliminate the fundamental socioeconomic inequities that are deeply ingrained in Indian society. It is a delicate balancing act between opposition and promotion when it comes to the politics of religious experience at the *Kumbha Mela*.

Gautam's documentary analyzes the discursive construction of faith. This is done by presenting the debates and conversations that took place among educational professionals. To do this it is necessary to demonstrate that religious identity is something that is continually negotiated and performed:

Gautam's design is self-explanatory, and the observer might perhaps perceive faith not as an abstract, untouchable concept, but as a discursively created, performative practice. As the discussions and debates of the scholars from different lineages show, religious identity is always negotiated and performed.

The transitory group is a fluid stream of ideas, where tradition is challenged, confirmed and preserved for the following generation. (01:48:00-02:00:00)

This attention to the discursive and performative character of faith is a significant contribution to factual depictions of religion. Gautam does not see religious identity as something that is passively inherited or accepted, but as something that is constantly negotiated via argument and discussion. This situates his documentary within contemporary anthropological understandings of religion as activity and

performance. The *Kumbha Mela*'s "temporary assemblage" is a site where tradition is replicated, disputed, affirmed and transformed for the next generations.

The *Kumbha Mela* is the largest religious gathering in the world and provides an essential backdrop for the study of processes of territorialization and deterritorialization in a complex socio-religious context. In assemblage theory, territorialization refers to the stabilization of heterogeneous materials into integrated systems. Deterritorialization is the force that breaks up, transforms and remakes such assemblages. The *Kumbha Mela* is a place where ritual activity, religious organizations, government administration, infrastructure, media networks and other actors engage in a variety of activities. The festival is not a stable religious tradition but the consequence of a continual confrontation between stability and change, order and movement, continuity and creation.

The dynamics of territorialization are evident in the constitution of the temporary sacred city, in the coordination of the ritual actions and in the hierarchical arrangement between the religious groups, which give coherence and continuity to the festival. De-territorializing elements such as globalization, technology advancement, the mass media, new religious movements and the growing diversity of participants at the same time break down the established patterns and create new types of communication. The complementarities and conflict make the *Kumbha Mela* relevant and flexible in the long run.

The territorialising processes by which *Kumbha Mela* attains its remarkable scale and relative stability bring many elements into predictable interaction. These include the construction of temporary infrastructures that facilitate mobility and settlement, the establishment of hierarchical relations between akharas, the frequent performance of rituals, and the dissemination of discourses explaining the meaning

and value of the festival.

The documentary that Gautam directed makes this territorialization visible to the audience through the use of tracking views of the temporary tent city. This throws the spatial qualities of this territorialization into relief. The problem of territorialization must be faced if one wants to advance the realization of this purpose. This can be done by a number of techniques. Some of these are:

The building of the large tent city of the *Kumbh Mela* is an example of Deleuzian assemblage theory, where disparate materials, social hierarchies and religious organizations are connected into one other to form a temporary functional machine. Gautam's tracking shots through the maze of passageways of the tents demonstrate how physical space is managed and turned into a sacred geography solely through the performative acts of the pilgrims living within them. (00:52:00-01:05:00)

The visual approach of the tent city in the documentary reveals that space is not simply a container of religious activity, but is generated by the interaction of material infrastructure, social organization and performative practice. The tracking shots through the labyrinthine paths show how pilgrims build sacred geography out of physical space through their movements, rituals and relationships. This view of space-making is consistent with the assemblage theory's concern with the active construction, rather than passive reception, of social and material structures.

One of the most striking examples of territorialization through spatial design is the city erected for the *Kumbha Mela*. This example is a striking representation of territorialization through the structuring of geographical space. The majesty of this structure and the difficulties of its construction are described by Misra as follows:

The 2010 Haridwar *Kumbha* was celebrated in an area of 20 sq km wherein

most of the activities of *Kumbha Mela* were performed. *Mahakumbha Nagara* has been declared across a much larger area (130 sq km) comprising parts of Dehradun, Pauri, Tehri and Haridwar districts. The 2021 *Kumbha* will be held in an area of same size divided into 32 sectors. The preparations for the establishment of the *Kumbha Nagari* started three months before the *Mela* started in 2010, yet the planning had started much before. (48)

The picture shows the construction, development, occupation and deconstruction of the transitory city according to the timings of the state, thereby exposing the artificiality of the hallowed location. The photograph shows the artificiality of holy location. This is an example of collaboration between state affiliated entities and religious institutions. Sacred sanctuary is a place built by God hand.

The infrastructure component is the basic support of the event's stability. It includes roads, bridges, ghats, sanitary systems, security measures. Infrastructural means infrastructural component as well. These elements enable the unfettered collection and free movement of millions of individuals around the venue. Misra elucidate that the building of pontoon bridges is done with a mixture of traditional techniques and contemporary engineering:

The roads, bridges and ghats constructed for the *Kumbha Mela* are an example of how the festival brings together traditional religious practice and modern infrastructure. To traverse the rivers, temporary floating pontoon bridges (*pipa pul*s) can be constructed from pipas; hollow, cylindrical floating steel structures. In 2013, 18 such bridges were constructed across the Ganga and the Yamuna with the use of more than 4,200 pipas. Each pipa was 32 feet (9.75m) long and 8 feet (2.4m) wide, weighed around 5.5 tonnes and had two inspection cameras mounted on top to monitor the performance and quality of

the waterproofing system. (51-52)

Bridges are not just practical infrastructure but also visual symbols of state power and technological achievement. The construction and maintenance of these require collaboration among government departments, commercial contractors and engineering professionals, a cast of human and non-human actors that extends well beyond the religious leaders who preside over ritual ablution. This coordination points to the contingent and diverse character of assemblage configurations, where elements from many domains; religious, administrative, technological, commercial; are brought together in temporary but effective interactions.

Order and hierarchy are also used to establish the territorialization of ritual performance. The climax of the ceremonial acts takes place in the royal baths, or *shahi snanas*, where *akharas* march in preordained patterns, revealing the hierarchical connections between ascetic societies. Misra says that the order of bathing at the festival venues was different and it also varied from year to year:

Sometimes the arrangement for bathing of the akharas is different than the fixed order at Prayaga. The second shahi snana happened at the Nashik-Tryambakeshwar *Kumbha* of 2015 on 13 September and was led by the Nirmohi Akhara, which took the first dip at Rama Kunda, followed by the Digambar and Nirvani Akharas. The first was *Niranjani Akhara* at *Kushavarta Kunda* and then *Ananda, Juna, Agni, Avahana, Mahanirvani, Atala, Bada Udasina*, Naya Udasina and finally *Normal Akhara*. (78)

What these transitions demonstrate is that ritual performance is precisely that: not the simple repetition of a fixed tradition, but rather the negotiation of authority under changing institutional conditions. A bathing order can be a problem and could produce tension between them. The performance of ritual thus offers a theatre for the

enactment of hierarchical relations among ascetic orders, relations that are vulnerable to change over time.

Mechanisms of territorialization stabilize the *Kumbha Mela* ensemble, while forces of deterritorialization break current linkages and prepare the way for new configurations. These are the factors of the disintegration of traditional relationships between guides and pilgrims, the introduction of new players with different expectations, the mediation of the festival by international media networks and the adoption of current technologies.

Kumbha Mela is a good example of these strategies, using creative tension as a strategy of deterritorialization and territorialization. It is also an amazing example of these methods because it is a great representation of these strategies. In addition to adding to the efficacy of the ritual, one of the distinctive aspects of the *Kumbha Mela* is the existence of a variety of ephemeral components that not only reveal insights but also contribute to the efficiency of the ritual. Some of these personality characteristics are:

Kumbha Mela is an absolute congregation of people, communities and thoughts and also a place where tradition and modernity mix in perfect harmony to offer an incredible experience to one and all. The average Hindu tirthayatri who visited the Mela several decades ago was poorer and less literate than the present day tirthayatri. The number of people attending the *Mela* has increased substantially during the last few decades. (11)

This specific conclusion runs counter to modernization and secularization theories. It is not modernism that has augmented the *Kumbha Mela* but its capacity to include modern aspects such as transport, media, sanitation and security while still retaining the strength of the rite. This inclusion refers to how assemblages can build positive

connections with elements from different fields.

The more media technology grows, the more vital becomes the alteration of the event. Documentaries like *Spirit of Moksha*, television broadcasts, social media and digital communication increase the reach of the *Kumbha Mela* beyond the actual location and allow people across the world to participate in the visual and symbolic experience of the festival. The mediations that make up the spectator's experience and memory of the festival are typically those that happen before the spectator has ever visited that festival. The idea of the sacred experience is increasingly linked to notions of visibility and circulation within the framework of the culture of global media.

This modification of the media is something that the documentary itself participates in, so presenting tradition as a living assemblage that is capable of adapting to new contexts:

In documentary, tradition is a dynamic, breathing assemblage that is always responsive to new settings, not a static, historical object. The participation of millions of people shows how ancient customs become more accepted and resilient over time. The performative continuity of the Kumbh Mela demonstrates the human capacity for regeneration and the continuation of deep cultural traditions throughout millennia. (2:40:00-2:55:00)

This re-framing of tradition as dynamic rather than static makes a valuable contribution to documented portrayals of religious activity. By showing the *Kumbha Mela* as “a living, breathing assemblage,” Gautam opposes essentialist views of tradition that would represent it as unchanging and monolithic. The millions of individuals involved show that ancient rituals are being not only preserved, but also actively regenerated through current engagement and acquire new meanings and

value in the process.

In addition, the festival is now more accessible to visitors traveling from places who were unable to engage in the activities that were being hosted in conjunction with the festival. Now these folks can go to the celebration. This is because advances in transportation have made the event more accessible to a wider audience. Some of the observations made by Misra are as follows:

There is a microcosm of India to be found in Varanasi; but, the microcosm of India to be seen at *Prayaga* during the *Kumbha* is substantially more interesting. Individuals from the northern part of India are the ones most likely to be familiar with the *Prayaga Kumbha*, but individuals from the southern part of India have also been drawn to the *Prayaga Kumbha* for a long length of time. (95-96)

The pan-Indian element of the ritual also plays a role in the construction of a pan-Hindu identity, another key facet of the ceremony. This is diametrically opposed to the ideas of Hindu practice based on local disparities. It is this very nature which presents challenges for the Hindu religion. The members have formed a sense of religious community since they are connecting with one another from diverse regions of the subcontinent.

The purpose of deterritorialization has been made possible by the acknowledgment of new religious movements and the inflow of tourists from all over the world. This breakthrough has enabled the achievement of the goal. As for the explanation, Misra has offered the following:

The traditional participants of the *Kumbha Mela* include the sadhus with their traditional akharas and sampradayas, kalpavasis and the tirthayatris. Many of the supporters of these modern Hindu movements at the *Kumbha Mela* are not

like traditional Hindus. But this does not stop their amazing vivacity in participating in the *Kumbha Mela*, a traditional Hindu celebration. (109-110)

The active engagement of these individuals shows that territorializing practices and deterritorializing activities are not incompatible but can productively co-habit. These include the emergence of new religions, the involvement of people from many different places, and the use of today's technologies. It is important to bring in new aspects, as well as the strands of long-standing traditions handed down through the generations, to make the event viable and contribute to its evolution.

The documentary *Spirit of Moksha* depicts the *Kumbha Mela* as a vibrant congregation of human and non-human actors, rituals, symbolic systems, material infrastructures and spiritual objectives. The assemblage theory of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Manuel DeLanda supports this reading. Assemblage theory does not consider social processes as cohesive systems under one organizing principle, but as heterogeneous linkages between components. The *Kumbha Mela* is a site where pilgrims, ascetics, religious institutions, governments, transportation systems, communication technologies, holy geography, ritual acts, and legendary narratives converge into a transitory but highly organized social structure. Gautam's documentary demonstrates that theology cannot explain the pilgrimage. Its meaning as a performative assemblage comes from several material and emotive elements.

The theory of assembly is based on the heterogeneity of multiplicity. Deleuze and Guattari deny the possibility of one type of social form. Assemblages, on the other hand, consist of elements with different qualities, roles and origins. There is no shared identity of a collection of goods, persons, institutions, discourses, emotions and symbolic systems. This view explains the wonderful confluence of several forces in the *Kumbha Mela*. Within the event, sacred rivers, temporary cities, rituals, transit

networks, media portrayals and personal salvation journeys co-exist, maintaining their identities. The documentary stresses that the journey's importance is in personal relationships, not religious doctrine or institutional authority.

Deleuze and Guattari provide a variety of observations in their writing that highlight the diverse makeup of assemblages. Here are some instances of such assertions. Some of the feedback received is given below:

The multiplicity of an assemblage is that it has to work, at the same time and inseparably, on semiotic flows, material flows and social flows. There are no social assemblages that are not linked to material and semiotic components, and there are no social assemblages that are the absence of social components.

(88)

This comment is highly useful for the interpretation of the documentary's depiction of the *Kumbha Mela*. The *mela* is not merely a social occasion; it is a complete religious event. Instead, it is the interaction of material flows (bodies, water, infrastructure, mobility), semiotic flows (myths, symbols, sacred tales), and social flows (collective involvement, institutional organization, ceremonial authority). All these fluxes interact with each other. In his documentary, Gautam frequently emphasizes these overlapping aspects, highlighting the process of deriving spiritual significance from the convergence of these dimensions. Thus, the *Kumbha Mela* is a good example of the principle of assemblage, which asserts that heterogeneous elements can work together without losing their separate identities.

The documentary highlights this variability of the trek. The camera wanders from bustling bathing ghats to makeshift camps, to religious talks, devotional actions and solitude. Such changes establish that *Kumbha Mela* does not have a fixed social scale or meaning. Each pilgrim is essential yet ritual, landscape and community

enable their experiences. Gautam's visual idea is not about one piece through assembly. Instead, meaning is produced by multiple actors and processes.

This documentary offers the journey as a physical experience with a lot of diversity. Pilgrims come from varied social, personal and spiritual backgrounds. Others come for healing, for religious merit, or for hereditary customs. Individual objectives are affected by environmental, institutional, and ceremonial influences. It needed something more than subjective belief or objective social structure to explain the incident. Rather, *Kumbha Mela* materials combine to create it. Gautam's narrative suggests that pilgrimage is a balancing of material and emotional components.

The documentary investigates the materiality of the ensemble. For assemblage theory, materiality constitutes society. Bodies, things and situations shape religious experience. Gautam speaks of the physical trials of the pilgrimage, especially that of the *ganges*. River is the generator of religious experience, not only a scene for ritual. Its currents, temperature, chemical composition and presence are vital to the pilgrims' cleansing and transformative experiences.

This link between materiality and spirituality is represented in the documentary's subject matter, territorialization and deterritorialization. The problem can be stated as follows. A model for how this relationship could be expressed is as follows:

The ultimate performative objective of the gathering of the *Kumbh Mela* is the annihilation of the ego also known as the quest for Moksha. Gautam looks out at the sea of faces, the bodies present at the *Maha Kumbh*, the faces and bodies he doesn't know, letting go of his own unique, egocentric identities deliberately. The performative dimension of the pilgrimage enables a

collective consciousness, in which the individual is a node in a huge cosmic-social assemblage. (2:05:00–2:18:00)

This section shows that spiritual transformation is created by being part of a collective gathering, not by individual reflection. The “sea of faces and bodies” is more than a visual feast. It is a material setup, through which individual identity is rerouted to the group consciousness. The notion of the human as a “node” inside a broader “cosmic-social assemblage” is a direct reflection of the assemblage theory’s denial of autonomous, self-contained subjects. Liberation is not described as escape from the social environment, but as immersion inside a network of relations that beyond the limitations of human identity. Thus, Gautam’s understanding of *Moksha* is in line with the emphasis of assemblage theory on relationality and interdependence.

The documentary’s portrayal of group consciousness also challenges prevalent Western notions of spirituality that privilege individual liberty and personal experience. In the *Kumbha Mela*, spiritual realization is a result of participation in the crowd and not of solitary contemplation. The ritual gathering is a performance space where people are integrated into larger circuits of social, cosmic and holy ties. This view aligns with the notion of assemblage that agency is dispersed across networks and not held within solitary individuals. Thus the film re-frames spiritual transformation as something that comes out of participation in community.

The second important point of assemblage theory is the interaction between the material and expressive axes. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari, all assemblages simultaneously perform material and expressive functions. Material components are responsible for organizing people, spaces and physical relations, and expressive components are responsible for creating meanings, symbols and codes that

communicate and verify the arrangements that are established. Each dimension is dependent on and reinforces the other. Neither can thus be understood in isolation.

Kumbha Mela is an event of celebration where ceremonial acts are intimately connected with symbolic narratives that give them significance. This theoretical understanding turns out to be extremely useful in analyzing an event such as the *Kumbha Mela*. This is the duality they speak of. Now here is what Deleuze and Guattari have to say about it:

An assemblage is made up of two segments on the first horizontal axis, a segment of content and a segment of expression. On the one hand it is a mechanic assemblage of bodies, deeds and passions. On the other it is a communal assemblage of enunciation, of acts and assertions. (88)

This link between content and expression is a living illustration of the *Kumbha Mela*. The material dimension involves bodies wandering through ritual places, bathing in sacred waters, uttering prayers and engaging in communal ceremonies. Also, religious narratives, holy stories, symbolic gestures, and theological interpretations of Moksha create expressive dimensions. Gautam's documentary shows the co-production of these dimensions repeatedly. The ritual bath is spiritually important as it is part of a symbolic system in which the river is associated with purification and release. Religious narratives can acquire social force because they are performed through material actions. Hence, the assemblage works in the constant interplay of the physical and the symbolic.

The documentary complicates this material-expressive interaction by combining the ritual action with spiritual considerations. Gautam does not make a ritual metaphorical. The film is on the senses of religious worship. Spiritual expression, immersion in water, chanting rhythmically, dancing in groups, praying in

groups. The documentary shows religious meaning is made. This makes *Kumbha Mela* tangible and figurative.

The first two dimensions of assembly theory, heterogeneous multiplicity and material-expressive axes, offer a robust framework for assessing *The Spirit of Moksha*. Gautam characterizes the *Kumbha Mela* as a complex combination of persons, objects, institutions, narratives, emotions and ritual performances that produce meaning. The documentary undermines reductionist concepts that center on religion, society or individual faith. It represents pilgrimage as a performance of material and emotive energy that transforms, connects and inspires. This method considers the *Kumbha Mela* as a space of dynamic relationships that opens up new meanings and possibilities.

The second assemblage theory considers the *Kumbha Mela* as a performative assemblage in relations of exteriority. Assembly theory differs from sociological theories that define states by social status. In assembly theory each component is independent of the assemblage in which it is found temporarily. Manuel DeLanda sees bits and wholes as exterior, able to enter, exit or join other assemblages without losing capacity. In the *Spirit of Moksha*, pilgrims, ascetics, religious groups, government agencies, sacred landscapes, media technologies, and documentaries form new alliances without losing their identities.

Gautam documentary illustrates that the *Kumbha Mela* is a network of independent components that briefly create a spiritual experience. For example, the director of documentary, pilgrimage's stability is not through hard systems, but through negotiation of connection. DeLanda on autonomy of assembly parts:

The parts are self-sustaining, their relations are external to each other, which suggests that a part of an assemblage can be extracted from it and put into

another assemblage where its interactions are different. This is because the aspects of the assemblage are outside of each other. (11)

Gautam's documentary shifts *Kumbha Mela* perception they are not defined by the journey they're on. Prayagraj has pilgrims coming from families, castes, occupations, localities and cultures prior to it. Religion leaders are surrounded by monastic, intellectual and authority networks. The government has religious, bureaucratic and political celebrations after the trip. Before it filmed the *Kumbha Mela*, the documentary camera was embedded in cinematic, technological and creative assemblages. These autonomous identities momentarily combine giving value to festival activities that establish new social and spiritual engagement. Travelling may create deep relationships between individuals and there are plenty of events to attend before and after the festival.

Gautam works with connectional autonomy. The documentary shows trips to ritual sites for different reasons, memories and expectations. Pilgrims break the cycle of rebirth, establish family commitments and enjoy the culture. There are motivations that aren't a theological reason. According to assembly theory, diversity is not fragmentation but external relations in a performance space. *Kumbha Mela* coherence arises from interaction because multiple goals suddenly align. The institutional ideology makes the pilgrims' experiences unpredictable, but they generate a collective religious mood. The documentary by Gautam reveals how many personalities can practice spirituality without losing their identity through exteriority.

The documentary also takes a shot at centralized power. Gautam constructs several interpretive voices, partially autonomous, to account for the pilgrimage. Experts describe rituals, history, asceticism and experience of pilgrims. The journey has many stories to tell, new perspectives. This decentralized approach is consistent

with the component autonomy of relational network assembly theory.

Documentary calls on a range of voices to build understanding. Knowledge is developed through independent discourses rather than hierarchies, as demonstrated in Gautam's failure to foreground an explanatory framework. This dedication to narrative plurality is specifically spelled out inside the documentary:

Gautam's documentary is multifocal and decentralized in its telling, without a single voice of authority. It establishes a democratic textual space where narration is co-produced by sages, pilgrims, intellectuals. This performative manner of storytelling respects the multiplicity of the *Kumbh Mela*, where a single voice cannot speak for the vast and diverse experience (04:15:00-04:28:00).

In this observation, conventional documentary technique is broken with to emphasize the performative interplay of assemblage ontology and cinematic form. The participants are individual voices that cannot be absorbed. Religion is no rank, but no discussion. The strength of democratic narration lies in DeLanda's conception of external contacts, where each speaker adds but is not dependent on the others. The documentary's importance resides not in the presence of an all-knowing narrator, but in its plurality of voices. This technique produces knowledge through participant social interaction, rather than through ethnographic approaches that privilege expert interpretation over religious experience.

Documentary cinema shines a light on the outdoors, but here the camera actively creates the activity it shows. Assembly theory in performative documentary theory is the technological autonomy of the camera in the performative assembly of the *Kumbha Mela*. The camera does not win in the observation of reality. It just touches pilgrims, ceremonies, sacred places and spectators, for a short time, opening

its potentiality. The camera takes the ride without comment through careful framing, constant observation and little editing. Gautam's attentive photography shows relationships. The assemblage draws its power from the connection of the visual, sensuous, spiritual and emotional. The documentary explores how cinematic technology, religious practice, and community experience are transformed when they are folded into the performative network of the *Kumbha Mela*.

The components are autonomous; they interact and lead to emergent qualities that cannot be reduced to any component. The exteriority is autonomous. Emergence is the process by which diverse components give rise to agency, meaning and experience. Assemblages are not composed of parts, but are constituted by their dynamic relations." (Manuel DeLanda, adds) The *Kumbha Mela* produces social consciousness, spiritual development, emotional intensity and the efficacy of ritual with the pilgrims, sacred space, institutional organization and religion. Instead they are generated by bodies, rituals, sacred narratives, environment and technology, claims the documentary *Spirit of Moksha*.

"Pilgrimage makes one spiritual," says Gautam. The documentary illustrates how these new capacities provide meaning to the *Kumbha Mela* by transforming social touch into collective devotion and transcendence. This is where assemblage theory illuminates how millions of individuals performing simple rituals can have huge religious experiences. Emergence, for DeLanda, is what determines all assemblages and produces meaning and experience:

These aspects are reflected in the meaning of the term "assembly," which encompasses emergent features. Even although such attributes are the result of the interaction taking place between the components, they cannot be reduced to the characteristics associated with the components. That is because these

qualities originate from the components themselves. There is a class of emergent properties called aggregates. (5)

Gautam believed pilgrimage was a divine act. Pilgrims bring their own hopes, religious beliefs and social identities, yet no one can explain the *Kumbha Mela*'s unique dedication. Documentary spirituality is based in the sacred river, ritual chants, processions, itinerant communities and religious discourse. It is connection alone that creates community, faith, solidarity and breaks down barriers. Gautam: Pilgrims are beyond faith. Journey helps to confirm DeLanda's thesis about the unifying power of assemblages. These ever increasing components give performance power to *Kumbha Mela* by combining various material and feelings to produce a singular religious ambience for millions.

Documentary openly links this emerging metamorphosis to the performative death of the individual ego, presenting *Moksha* not as an abstract theological idea but as an actual capacity produced via group participation:

The ultimate performative purpose of the *Kumbh Mela* gathering is the eradication of ego, the quest for Moksha. When Gautam looks at the sea of faces and bodies at the *Maha Kumbh*, faces and bodies unrecognizable to him, he is voluntarily dropping his individual, egocentric identities. The performative aspect of the pilgrimage allows for a collective consciousness, where the individual is a node in a vast cosmic-social assemblage. (2:05:00–2:18:00)

The documentary believes moksha is not guaranteed by doctrinal comprehension, meditation and ritual perfection. A wide social, material, environmental and spiritual network awakens pilgrims. Collective subjectivity modifies identities without destroying them in the “sea of faces and bodies.” Gautam's “a node in a huge cosmic-

social assemblage” parallels DeLanda’s blossoming as pilgrims only gain ability through connections. Collective consciousness is composed of thousands of autonomous humans sharing ritual space, sacred geography, bodily activities and symbolic meanings. The documentary re-imagines Moksha as a relational accomplishment of the assemblage, not an individual spiritual success, providing a basis for assemblage theory that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The last and most active phase of assemblage theory is territorialization and deterritorialization. Here the *Spirit of Moksha* becomes stable and then changes. Heterogeneous multiplicity accounts for the diversity of assemblage components, the autonomy of exteriority relations, the interaction-induced capacity of emergent qualities, and the inseparability of the physical and symbolic functions of the material, expressive axis. Deleuze and Guattari explain that any assemblage can “bind and unbind connections” (1988, p. 35) to allow new configurations.

Ritual, sacred setting, institutional regulation and social interaction make the *Kumbha Mela* a site of identity, relationship and spirituality. Gautam’s documentary captures the perennial pilgrimage conflict between stability and change. Assembly theory suggests that processes of territorializing and deterritorializing at kumbha mela are creating new spiritual social and cultural realities. Deleuze and Guattari describe this double movement as follows:

Assemblages have two sides to them. The territorial sides, or deterritorialised sides, contribute to consolidating and defining the assemblages. The other side of the coin is the cutting edges of deterritorialization, which serve to carry them away. (88)

The theoretical setting represents the increasing number of pilgrims. *Kumbha Mela* as the territorialisation of its ritual repetition a documentary. Sacred geography,

mythological stories of the elixir of immortality, ceremonial bathing at auspicious moments, communal prayers, monk parades and the temporary ordering of the pilgrimage city all provide religious order to the gathering. All these features are conducive to the preservation of cultural memory and continuity which allow pilgrims to perform a sacred rite. Pilgrims are deterritorialised from their social lives, their regions, their places of employment and their daily routines and go to a sacred site with a different physical and spiritual rhythm. They are less interested in the oddities of the individual than in devotion to the collective. They hate the old social systems. Gautam keeps repeating and repeating. Performative assemblage can transform identity. Deleuze and Guattari write that travel can stabilize and destabilize any ensemble.

In the documentary film, it is not a pre-determined destination but a process of transformation that occurs along the voyage. The documentary is characterized as: This lively understanding of pilgrimage is presented in a straightforward and succinct way:

The trip for the *Spirit of Moksha* is not a destination but an adventure, a continuing dynamic performative experience. The pilgrims arrive for the holy immersion and the film follows them till they leave. It might be considered a life changing experience. All these physical steps of the voyage are a necessary rite that transforms the consciousness of the travelers and that incorporates them into the universal harmony. (03:55:00–04:08:00)

Gautam did not believe in deterritorialisation, *moksha*, in assemblage theory. Pilgrims are inspired by travel, purification, prayer, meditation and living. New religious subjectivities are produced in each stage from changing bodies and sentiments, sacred sites and symbols. “Religion is a process of becoming, not arriving,” the documentary

states. De-territorialization and re-territorialization cannot be separated. Religious pilgrimage changes communities. *Kumbha Mela* cycles consume and re-define identities but do not consume culture. Gautam's performance is a case in point of the dynamic equilibrium of continuity and change in assemblage theory.

De-territorializing and re-territorializing cinema: documentary Gautam's attentive camera, decentralized storyline, minimalist style and religious orientation are contrary to any documentary objectivity. Documentary film of *Kumbha Mela* traditions participants, photos connect pilgrims, religious sites, sounds, rituals. Limited photography, rhythmic singing, group prayer and intensive observation make pilgrimage experiential. The festival isn't spoiled by cameras. They communicate the wealth of the festivity. Art, religion, technology and interpretation complement the documentary. Gautam uses pilgrimage and cinema in his documentaries.

The ideas of assemblage theory are used to understand the spirit of *moksha* at the *Kumbha Mela*. Externality refers to the independence and relational potentiality of human and non-human actors; emergent properties show how their interaction results in collective consciousness, spiritual transformation and ritual efficacy; material and expressive axes show embodied practice and symbolic meaning; and decentralized storytelling, participatory cinematography, physical ritual and lived religion. Rather than a theological concept or a pilgrimage to institutional religion, the film represents liberty as the lively enactment of people, landscapes, rituals, technologies, symbols, and social devotion. *Spirits of Moksha* uses the theory of assemblage to articulate one of the world's largest religious gatherings, and argues that the spiritual experience is relational, tactile, procession and constantly created through shared material and emotion. This synthesis shows how assemblage theory can help us to understand the complex relationship between ritual performance, cinematic representation and the

collective search for *Moksha*, and thus positions the documentary as a significant contribution to documentary studies, pilgrimage studies and contemporary religious scholarship.

The *Kumbha Mela* is a complex religious, social and political phenomenon, where ceremonial practices meet with concerns of identity, authority, inclusiveness and contemporary government. While the festival remains a great spiritual pilgrimage in the quest for moksha, there is a growing political agenda, media portrayal, technological evolution and commercialisation that is reshaping the traditional meaning of the festival. At the same time, documentary portrayals such as *Spirit of Moksha* convey the spiritual core of the festival through cinematic techniques, but selectively emphasize transcendence and ritual purity over its political, economic, environmental and social complexity. Thus, *Kumbha Mela* is a vibrant and ever-changing cultural environment, where tradition, spirituality, institutional power and modern influences conjointly affect religious experience and public perception.

Chapter V: Conclusion and Recommendations

The present thesis examines the *Kumbha Mela* as a spiritual performance of human and non-human performers. This pilgrimage is a blend of ascetics, pilgrims, sacred rivers, rituals, infrastructure, media technologies, institutional frameworks, and legendary narratives. Assemblages, as defined by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) Catherine Bell's idea of ritualization (Bell, 1992) claims that holiness is created via the ritual behaviors around body and connections. Every time it is hosted, the *Kumbha Mela* becomes a colorful religious spectacle of gathering, discourse and ritualization.

The study showed that *the Kumbha Mela* is a real religious event that involves continuity, bargaining, adaptability and transformation. The gathering of millions in a short time generates a unique ritual setting in which holy space, collective identity and spiritual experience are constantly constructed and repeated. This idea challenges essentialist views of religion that suggest that tradition does not exist because it does not change but that it can re-billed itself in relation to changing historical, social and cultural contexts. So the *Kumbha Mela* is continuity with change, not continuity with stability.

The *Kumbha Mela* is conceptualized in this work as a dynamic assemblage of human and non-human energies that constitute the sacred. The *Kumbha Mela*, as a religious meaning-making event that involves pilgrims, ascetics, sacred rivers, ritual practices, institutions, infrastructures, media technologies and legendary narratives can be seen as an assemblage according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's assemblage theory (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). The ritualization theory suggests that holiness is produced not by places or events, but by embodied ritual activities (Bell 1992). *Kumbha Mela* is a live sacred milieu of assembly, performance and

ritualization.

The following study effort is based on critical analysis of the documentary *Spirit of Moksha* by Rajeev Gautam. In this research, we have suggested that the documentary should not be read as a direct image of the *Kumbha Mela* but as a constructed interpretation that selectively frames a specific event for a worldwide audience. The film's portions on the spiritual, transcendent and global religious experience do justice to the devotional ambiance of the festival while downplaying its political, economic, environmental and institutional ramifications. The conclusion considers the interpretive aspect of documentary film and the importance of engaging critically with visual depictions of religious traditions.

The dissertation employs the ideas of territorialization and deterritorialization to make sense of the ongoing and proliferating of the *Kumbha Mela* across time. The *Mela* has evolved with changing governments, administrative structures, technological developments and cultural standards, it claims. The event is about a sacred site, mythology, ceremonial authority, religious memory, modern government, public transport systems, digital communication and mass media. Such dynamism means that religious traditions are not just kept, but re-negotiated. It is territoriality that institutionalizes the cultural concept, and it is deterritorialization that affords the prospect of a historical revolution, argue Deleuze and Guattari. Territorialization and deterritorialization are two sides of the same coin; one is always followed by the other (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 174). The *Kumbha Mela* is an example of how the religious traditions can retain relevance over the ages, adapting to the changing political, technological and socio-cultural situations while retaining its basic symbolic and spiritual meaning.

Another key finding is the close connection between religion and power. The

analysis reveals the *Kumbha Mela* as a pilgrimage and a site of convergence for the power of the government, religious authority, caste relations, media coverage and cultural identity. Political players need exposure and credibility. Power struggle among religious organizations, minority groups battle for recognition. Media businesses created stories that spread over the world. These arguments highlight the ways in which the spiritual experience of the *Kumbha Mela* is embedded in larger social and political processes and as such the *Kumbha Mela* is an important site to comprehend the current preoccupations of identity, nationalism, representation and inclusion.

In this contribution, the performative assemblage is theorized as an analytical tool for the study of religious assemblages and contributes to the literature. The paradigm seeks to investigate the production of sacred experience through the interconnections of bodies, spaces, rituals, technology, institutions and symbolic systems, drawing on the relational and emergent features of assemblage theory and the embodied and performed dimensions of performance studies. This synthesis adds to the literature on religion, pilgrimage and documentary representation and offers analytical tools that can be applied to a wide range of religious and cultural events outside from the *Kumbha Mela*.

The conclusions have very major significance in theory and practice. They argue for the need of multidisciplinary approaches to the study of complex religious phenomena in principle, and they promote cooperation between Religious Studies, Anthropology, Cultural Studies, Media Studies and Sociology. The report says that the organizers, policymakers and media workers involved in the *Kumbh Mela* should comprehend the multi-dimensional nature of *Kumbh Mela*. The big scale pilgrimages can be managed in a sustainable manner only when the needs of rituals are

harmonized with the needs of environmental protection, infrastructural development, public health, crowd management and media coverage. For documentary producers, we should understand the selective nature of visual storytelling, and try to give a more contextualized and multidimensional view of religious traditions.

The present work also suggests some topics for further research. The concept of performative assemblage could be further explored in diverse cultural contexts, in different traditions of pilgrimage or religious assemblies. Further studies on the range of documentary representations of audience response and digital media activities at the *Kumbha Mela* can contribute to understanding the global spread of religious meaning. What is needed is an anthropological study of the pilgrims, ascetics, organizers and local communities to supplement the present approach and to provide a more thorough grasp of the lived religious experience. A cross-disciplinary study of environmental sustainability, resource management and the politics of pilgrimage may also contribute to a clearer understanding of religious festivals in current times.

The *Kumbha Mela* is, after all, a testament to the extraordinary capacity of religious traditions to stay current in an age that is defined by fast innovation. Ritual system of real time, a traditional pilgrimage, a cultural institution, a mediated spectacle, a political region under dispute in same time too. What will survive, what is vital, is the making of new linkages between faith, ritual, technology, institutions and society. This is far more important than preserving a history that never changes. It's a lovely illustration of how religious traditions evolve throughout time and yet retain their symbolic and spiritual significance from one generation to the next.

To recapitulate, I have tried to show that the *Kumbha Mela* is a performative assemblage in which the religious experience is constructed through the dynamic interaction of many human and nonhuman actors. By applying assemblage theory,

ritualization and documentary analysis, the festival has been presented as a dynamic religious phenomenon rather than a static cultural relic. This work contributes to the larger debates of religion, media, culture and performance through a critical investigation of the lived reality of the *Kumbha Mela* and its filmic representation in *Spirit of Moksha*. The program seeks to promote multidisciplinary study on pilgrimage traditions and to encourage more nuanced understandings of the ongoing production, negotiation, representation and transformation of religious meaning in a globally interconnected society.

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