

The Himalayan

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MAHASHIVARATRI: Mosaic of culture and spirituality

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The announcements rang out through crackling loudspeakers throughout the day. "Family of Gulab Devi Singh from Siraha," said a shrill voice. "She is waiting for you in the lost and found centre. Please come and receive her the moment you hear this."

It was the day of the largest annual human gathering in Pashupatinath, where an estimated 1.3 million devotees came together for Mahashivaratri. Older pilgrims walked hunched over, eyes fixed to the ground as children stepped between thickets of adult legs as they and a thousand others made their way to the shrine of Lord Shiva.

By mid-morning of February 22, the lost and found booth was already heaving with lost men, women and children. Pradeep Regmi, a police officer stationed at the booth informed that by 11:30 am there were already over 115 cases of lost people alone without taking into account the lost items. "By the end of the festivities, all those missing will be reunited with their families," assured Regmi. As much as faith, chaos has also always been a part of the Mahashivaratri and it wasn't any different this year.

Spiritual 'high' light

The religious site echoed with hundreds of musical performances, chants and prayers, the occasional shouts of conflict and the din of millions of people. Holy men marched in spiritual poise, some asking for alms, and others sitting in quiet repose, their bodies caked in ash. One priest was crouched on a corner wearing a loin cloth, smoking marijuana from a pipe just a few paces away from a security personnel. In all that commotion, there is a palpably joyous atmosphere to Shivaratri at the Pashupatinath, if your senses manage to adjust.

Talking about adjusting their senses, many *sadhus* could be seen taking marijuana. "It helps us to deal with the environment, the cold and the suffering," said one *sadhu*, Nayan Gyankuni Naga Baba. He became a *Naga Baba* after his *Naga Sanskar* initiation ceremony in 1986. Being a *Naga Sadhu* is regarded as one of the toughest streams of asceticism as per Gyankuni and he has been one since the last 30 years.

Known for performing extreme penances by pushing their bodies beyond the limit and staying naked

with ash smeared on them, these *sadhus* have always been an attraction for common people visiting the holy shrine of Pashupatinath. Most of these *Sadhus* and spiritual *babas* were seen nearby the Bagmati River area.

People who didn't prefer to get in the long lines towards the main entrance of the temple, simply made their way through the path below the Bagmati bridge, where with exuberant thuds of the *dammara*, a few spiritual gurus called customers for a pouch of marijuana or two, selling at Rs 100 per packet.

Glee of the carnival

At the parking area of the World Heritage Site, though, things were completely different. The otherwise desolate parking ground felt like a 'pop-up city' — a temporary megapolis containing several tents erected to house pilgrims, organisers, cultural programmes, shops, food stalls, and a full-blown carnival. Pashupatinath area wasn't only

swarming with devoted Hindus, but rather with people from many different places and faith. International visitors like Seung Ho Jang, a photographer from South Korea was also present on the temple premises.

He said, "In South Korea, we do not have Hindu festivals like these. Being here and experiencing the vibrant culture while capturing the essence of each moment has been very special for me."

The carnival incorporated almost every imaginable form of entertainment — merry-go rounds, columbus, breakdance, carousels and of course a circus, which was really only a tent of a magician. SK Samrat, the magician, with his cowboy hat and black cape lured huge crowds into his 'Jadugar's den'. The magic show itself was a hit with curious children gawking at the tricks and looking at their elders' shoulders rubbing for possible answers to the 'miracles' witnessed.

There was a cheerful glee in the air at the carnival, especially in the



taking unlikely routes or risking getting injured by. A group of visitors were climbing over fences and jumping from walls to observe Mahashivaratri festivities from a closer view. Hundreds of people were also seen using the under construction bridge with no railings, an obvious hasty action which clearly could lead to serious injuries.

The spontaneous crowd would at times erupt and chant 'Jai Bholenath' in unison, an energetic breath of fresh air to the seemingly tired members of the chaotic crowd.

For devotees like Aruna Shah, returning home without receiving blessing of Lord Shiva on the auspicious day was not an option. She shared, "I have been standing in line to enter the main temple for seven hours straight. I am exhausted at this point." Hundreds like Shah were patiently standing in line with fruits, flowers and other offerings for Lord Shiva.

Apart from actual devotees, throngs of street vendors selling everything from electronics to clothes and shoes were scattered in the Pashupati area hoping to get a good business. While most vendors selling everyday items went unnoticed, vendors like Ayush Rai, were seen selling green blocks prepared by mixing *bhaang*, *khawa* and sugar. As Rai stood openly displaying the intoxicating concoction on the roadside, he was continuously being probed by interested and curious bystanders.

Order amid chaos

Unfortunately, not everything was fun and games. Pashupatinath area is intensely crowded almost every year during Mahashivaratri and it was no different this year too.

It was noisy and polluted — there are only the most rudimentary waste disposal facilities and sanitation. On top of that, the parking area was littered with waste and paper plates. Lack of public toilets in the periphery of Pashupatinath Temple was a major problem faced by the visitors. Riverside areas under the Tilganga bridge had become an area for open defecation. The mobile public toilet stations were positioned at several areas of the Pashupatinath temple on the day of Mahashivaratri however, people had to sit through long lines to use them, which might be why people opted to defecate in open areas away from public view. There is going to be a great deal of clean-up after Pashupa's biggest human gathering. But despite all the chaos, one could sense the harmony and a collective identity and faith amidst the diversity.

face of those little children who sat comfortably atop their elders' shoulders looking at the fun fare unfold from an elevated position.

Apart from these, several organisations, devoted to philanthropic causes were serving the visitors free of cost. From free food, snacks, water, herbal tea and juice to medical services, there were several temporary booths catering to the thousands of devotees relentlessly. "Uncontrolled and unmanaged crowd means unforeseen injuries," shared Bishweshwar Yadav of Nepal Yadav Seva Samiti, an organisation which has been offering free medicines, basic check-ups and first-aid services through trained medical personnel during Mahashivaratri for the last 25 years. "This is the only time of the year when we get to align religious virtue of charity by serving thousands of people in a single day," Yadav added.

However, nearby the main entry of the temple, a group of cricket fanatic youth were spotted supporting a different cause altogether. Twelve young members of *fourtine* of Nepali Cricket seemed disinterested in the religious agenda of the occasion and were there to collect donations for Dharmus-Santali Foundation. "We are passionate about the sport and want to help the construction of international cricket stadium in any way we can which is why we are here today," said one of the group members Rohit Adhikari.

Police authorities on the other hand, were visibly struggling to control the crowd in midst of urban pandemonium. Since the temple covers a great land area, several entry points and other areas of the temple were barred by the authorities and no one was allowed entry. The impatient visitors were either