

The Faces Of Kumbh Mela



Amidst a cacophony of humanity, Fredric Roberts' photos of the 2013 Kumbh Mela isolate the individuals, and through that, his images tell the broader story

BY CATHERINE MARSHALL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FREDRIC ROBERTS

It was just after 3 a.m., and Fredric Roberts was descending a hill above the Ganges River in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The fine white soil that advanced from the riverbank all the way up into the surrounding countryside shimmered in ghostly puffs about his ankles as he walked. Golden light from nearby campgrounds bounced off the inky black water. Roberts stopped and looked upon the river and the deluge that appeared to be flowing out from it—thousands upon thousands of people, swathed in saffron robes and peasants' attire and saris and turbans, carrying in their hands jugs of Ganges water and marching slowly toward him, like salmon swimming upstream.

"I kept saying, 'Well, what's going on?' And they said, 'This is the auspicious day, the planets are all aligned, so we got here at midnight and now we're going home.' And I said, 'Where are you going, where is home?' And they said—Roberts pauses here and opens his arms wide—"Home is *everywhere*."

It was a moment that defined most poignantly for Roberts the unwavering devotion of a people drawn to this junction by a common thread: their Hindu faith. The American photographer, who has been traveling to India since 1974, had returned to document the world's largest human gathering, the Kumbh Mela. The event is held every three years, alternating between





The triennial festival of Kumbh Mela puts a deeply spiritual aspect of Indian culture on display. The concentration of the devoted, combined with the ever-present, sometimes overwhelming colors of India, attracts eager photographers from around the globe. Most photographers are seduced by the cacophony of colors and their images fail to delve beyond that outer layer of the Kumbh Mela. When he journeyed to Allahabad for the 2013 Kumbh Mela, Fredric Roberts waded through the distractions, and he captured the essence of the festival in the faces of the people who make it so special.

Allahabad, Ujjain, Nasik and Haridwar. Each of these cities, according to Hindu lore, was splashed with a droplet of the nectar of immortality that fell from the *kumbh* (pitcher) during a fight between the gods and the demons. Today, the melas held in commemoration of this spiritual tussle attract millions of faithful; they come from all over India and beyond to receive blessings from holy men, partake of religious discourse and cleanse their sins in the river beside which each city sits.

Allahabad's festival, held every 12th year, is the largest and most auspicious of the four events, for it's here that three holy rivers converge: the Ganges, the Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati, which is said to emerge from the earth's crust at the Sangam, the very point at which the other two waterways touch. And the 2013 mela was made more special still by the simultaneous occurrence of a rare planetary alignment that last occurred 144 years ago. It was on the day of this astrological event that Roberts met the pilgrims moving in slow procession back up the riverbank. By the conclusion of the 55-day-long festival on March 10, his encounters with pilgrims would expand beyond his imaginings; around 100 million Hindus would have surged to the banks of the river and taken a holy dip.

"There's some form of sainthood that derives from having gone in that water," Roberts explains. "You see what people will go through to get there, and fight through the crowds, and get down into the water, and then come back and be exhilarated by this. It was a marvel to me."

That wonderment is apparent in the



images Roberts captured during his six-week-long project. They evoke the joy that miraculously exists amidst capacious, tightly packed crowds, and suggest intimacy rather than the fleeting connections that so often link the photographer to his subject. This rejection of the cliché in favor of authenticity—apparent in all of Roberts' work—isn't something he consciously strove to achieve, he says. Rather, it emerged organically from the relationships he formed with those he encountered on his journey: pilgrims, *sadhus* (holy men), *naga sadhus* (naked holy men), gurus and swamis.

"If you have a real relationship with someone and you take a picture that reflects that, then you've broken through the clichés. It's not just one of these

instantaneous things where you smile at somebody and they smile back and you think you have a relationship—you have to really spend time with them and they have to hang around with you enough to sense an honest emotion," he explains. "Once that feeling [of weariness] dissipates on its own—and it has to dissipate on its own—then you have that relationship and they'll open up."

It's a technique Roberts has intuited during 13 years spent roaming the globe as a photographer, living with local communities in countries like Bhutan, Cambodia, Myanmar and India, capturing their lives in pictures and, in some cases, documenting the dying days of ancient cultures. This creative pursuit is a world away from his former life as

an investment banker, during which he spent three decades haggling with people intent on one thing only: the gathering of monetary riches. Today, it's the poor he most often communes with, and they have shown him a world

tually, the swami approached him and said, "Weren't you here yesterday?" and so the barriers crumbled. Finally, Roberts took out his camera and began to shoot.

"Swami Ji and I would sit and talk and form a relationship, and the sadhus

in the Juna Akara is a "once-in-a-lifetime" shot he took of the newly inducted nagas gathered around a fire. No one would recognize it as an iconic picture, he concedes, but it's a sacred vision that few outsiders ever get to witness.

On the morning of the most auspicious bathing date, Roberts fought the flow of people and made his way downhill. Approaching the riverbank, he found himself amidst a crowd of people so large and unyielding, he thought he was going to die. Twenty million pilgrims had come here to wash away their sins.

"They just lifted us up, as if we were in a stampede," he recalls. "We had no control over our feet. The crowds just took us where they wanted to go."

Roberts' best images weren't shot on that day—it's hard to find one's bearings in the midst of such chaos. Photographs are always secondary to the experience, he says, and cameras should never be allowed to rob you of the joy of the moment. Consequently, he returned home with a legacy far more enduring than mere images: a pure and absolute reverence for the pilgrims he met on his way.

Concludes Roberts, "That they would take everything they owned and put it on their heads and walk and take trucks and buses and trains and get there, regardless how far, regardless of what percentage it took of the money that they had, and live on the side of the road and sleep on those streets just to get that holy bath and then to go home—I mean, to be around that many people with that kind of powerful fervor is quite an exquisite experience." *OP*



ABOVE: Roberts connected with naga sadhus, Hindu ascetics, by handing out prints of his photos to show the work he was doing. This genuine and gentle approach enabled him to engage with and photograph this group of newly inducted nagas.

more enriching by far than the one he left behind.

But it was hard to tell rich from poor in the ashrams that towered above the tent cities carpeting the shores of the Ganges—expensive cars wedged up around their facades, gurus wafting by on a scent of money, pilgrims clustering together in orange knots, ash-caked naga sadhus sucking on *chillums* (pipes), wearing the gold watches and strings of pearls gifted to them by pilgrims and delivering blessings upon the faithful for a few rupees each. Out on the streets, council workers sprinkled antiseptic lime about and pilgrims flowed across bridges and took boats out to the Sangam. On and on these people went, restless in their spiritual quest.

Roberts stepped into this melee carrying with him the most important piece of equipment a photographer could possess: his eyes. He made his way to one of the big ashrams where, day after day, one group of sadhus after another would file in, sit down in rows, eat their meal and file out again. The ritual drew Roberts in emotionally—the lines of orange sadhus, the fervor of the people listening to lectures delivered by Swami Ji. Even-

pushing their way in to lunch would see me two or three or four days in a row and they would start talking to me. And so I wasn't just a tourist with a camera," he says.

The ashrams became Roberts' emotional bedrock. Soon, he was ready to venture into the Juna Akara, headquarters for naga sadhus undergoing induction; the men were about to forsake all material comforts to live as ascetics, foraging for food, meditating in sub-zero temperatures, relying on strangers for kindness. It was almost impossible to engage with these people. Fortuitously, Roberts' entrée into the Juna Akara was enhanced by advice from photographer David Ducoin, whom he met at the mela. Ducoin suggested he make prints at Allahabad's only photography shop and hand them out to his subjects as an act of goodwill.

"I got to know a couple of the nagas, and when I brought back the printed photos to them, they said, 'Okay, this guy's different.' They gave me real access. If you're a bump-and-run guy who's there for three days, you don't have time to do this. You have to be a long-termer."

The fruit of Roberts' gentle tenacity



Fredric Roberts' work is exhibited widely. He has published three books and will conduct a series of photography workshops among disadvantaged communities for the Save the Children foundation in 2014. Go to www.fredricroberts.com.

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