

## Building on missions

What the Indian state should learn from the Mahakumbh

**T**he Mahakumbh Mela, which began on Monday and will last 45 days, is a triumph of organisational ability and ingenuity. It will likely be the largest human gathering in history; over 400 million visits are expected to take place. Before 9:30 am on the first day of the festival, in fact, six million had already arrived and bathed at the confluence of the two sacred rivers in Allahabad. Those numbers will likely be eclipsed on Tuesday, the day of Makar Sankranti. Managing such a vast throng is an extraordinary challenge, but one that the Indian state somehow manages every time the Kumbh or Mahakumbh rolls around. Some see this as a cause for celebration, even optimism. If the state can conduct such globally significant events without mishap, surely an all-round improvement in governance is possible?

In fact, this view gets it entirely backward. The success of “mission mode” enterprises within government such as the Kumbh Mela is symptomatic of a broader malaise. State capacity in India has always been severely limited. Historically, this constraint has been overcome not through broad expansions of ability and upskilling of state functionaries but through prioritisation and the creation of “missions”. In the 1970s and 1980s, India had Project Tiger for wildlife preservation, and Operation Flood, which transformed India’s dairy sector. Subsequently there was the oilseeds mission; the Delhi Metro, which carved out its own administrative space; and multiple others. These successfully achieve limited aims. But they do not always create a broad spillover of expertise into other related domains of policy and governance. In fact, they often suck up the most skilled, experienced, and forward-thinking individuals from elsewhere in government. Their successes are more a reflection of the fact that political prioritisation allows them to short-circuit political and regulatory obstacles and to create new, if temporary, institutions. The wrong lessons are taken from their success: People assume that this shows the capability of the Indian state rather than showing the need for removing such constraints overall. This is the same problem as is observed with special economic zones, or SEZs; rather than removing the regulatory requirements that hold back manufacturing and exports, SEZs create local or limited carve-outs to those requirements.

This should not, in any way, detract from the actual achievements of such missions, especially the Mahakumbh. Instead, the need is to identify the learning that has external validity. For example, if a mission has been successful because bureaucrats involved have been chosen for their expertise, how can this be replicated across government? If mission mode programmes manage to avoid the delays imposed by certain regulations, then should not those regulations be revised in general, to improve project execution across the board? If the links between the public and private sector are managed well in such mission mode programmes, can similar mechanisms not be implemented elsewhere? Instead, the success of missions is often personalised; they are seen as reflecting the abilities of specific administrators or bureaucrats, rather than demonstrating a functional problem with how the Indian state approaches problems. Politicians may be satisfied with a state that can effectively implement missions while being inadequate elsewhere because the importance of political choices and prioritisation is enhanced in such a system. But it is clearly suboptimal from the point of view of the average citizen. Celebrate the Mahakumbh Mela by all means. But also learn the correct lessons from its success.