

# An Exploration of *Kinner Akhada* and the Process of its Assimilation into *Akhada* System during *Kumbha Mela* at Prayagraj

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**KEYWORDS:** *Kinner Akhada*. *Kumbha mela*. Transgender. *Sadhu samaj*. *Mahamandelshwar*. Assimilation. *Akhada*.

**ABSTRACT:** *Kumbha mela* is the most significant religious gathering of Hindu pilgrims in India. Based on gender, the pilgrims are constituted of both males and females. However, in 2019, *Kinners* (transgenders) became the central theme of the *Kumbha* at Prayagraj. Religious assimilation of *Kinner Akhada* has unraveled the new gender perspective of *Kumbha mela*. During the *Kumbha*, *Kinners* could convince the traditional *sadhu samaj* (ascetic society) that they were also a part of this phenomenal event. Behavioural shift and claim of being a demigod in response to demand for entitlement of *Mahamandelshwar* to the *Kinners* was imperative in the process of assimilation. This event emphasizes a functional aspect of religion. The paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the *Kumbha* (2019) and *Maghmela* (2020, 2022) events at Prayagraj. The explorations made in this paper attempts to understand process of bridging the preexisting dichotomy between *Kinner* and *Kumbha*.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2019, an unimaginable event happened during *Kumbha Mela* held at Prayagraj (erstwhile Allahabad). The transgender community, under the banner of *Kinner Akhada* entered into the *Kumbhakshetra* (*Kumbha* premises) under the capable leadership of Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi (henceforth LNT), who herself is transgender. After the grand procession, LNT demanded a separate *Akhada* for *Kinners*. However, only thirteen *Akhadas* are recognized by the monitoring body of *Akhadas* i.e., the *Akhada parishad*. Their demand was a matter of discussion among the common citizen of Prayagraj and the *Naga sadhus* of *Akhada*. Since the day of the grand procession, called *Peshvai*, *Kinners* have been highly appreciated by the common folk of the city, and the

pilgrims attending *Kumbha mela*. During the *Kumbha* at Ujjain in 2016, *Kinners* first appeared and demanded for a separate *Akhada*, but the *Akhada parishad* categorically denied them. In light of the assimilation and recognition of *Kinners* in the traditional Hindu ascetic tradition, *Kumbha* 2019 was very relevant. Because the demand for separate *Akhada* was not fulfilled but the option of merger of the *Kinner Akhada* into other suitable *Akhada* was perpetuated.

*Kumbha* is a socio-religious manifestation of *sanatan sanskriti* which provides a powerful platform for emergence, exchange and dissemination of noble ideas for practice and propagation in the society. New religious and cultural standards are established and old existing ones are challenged and modified during *Kumbha*. It is important to understand how *Kinners* could claim their rightful place in sociocultural and religious life of the mainstream society through a process of prolonged sustained struggle for inclusion

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*South Asian Anthropologist*, 2023, 23(2): 191-197

in *Akhada* system in a democratic manner, particularly through dialogues. The present study attempts to identify the conditions in which *Kinners* could accumulate and impress a large section of society by participating in *Kumbha*. This study also tries to underscore the functional aspect of religion and how it can provide a space for inclusion of a traditionally marginalized section of the society.

#### MATERIAL & METHODS

Transgender culture is comparatively unknown for the non-transgender majority of Indian society. Many people see them with disrespect in contemporary society. Conducting fieldwork among them was challenging, however, *Kumbha* 2019 had been a significant opportunity for deciphering the cultural codes of the *Kinners*. As a participant observer of the *Kumbha* 2019, one of the authors (KA) conducted ethnographic fieldwork among *Kinners* using in-depth interviews and observation. Interviews were conducted with some of the *Mahamandleshwars*, including LNT and other *Kinner sadhus* assigned essential duties in *Kinner akhada* during the *Kumbha*. Data collection was challenging because *Kinner akhada* was in its formative phase and the members of *Akhada* were reluctant to share the information. During their struggle during 2019 *Kumbha* event, they hardly had any idea about the functioning of *Akhada*. However, they were highly motivated and committed for being recognized as a new entrant of the *Akhada* system. During interviews, they were frequently asked about systemic denial and exclusion of *Kinners*; hence, by keeping the subject's vulnerability, the author restricted himself to objective-oriented questions of *Kinner akhada* only. The fieldwork was conducted for a month during *Kumbha* 2019, 2020 *Maghmela* held in Prayagraj, and one of the authors (KA) followed them at Haridwar *Kumbha* in 2021.

#### RESULTS

Making and unmaking of *Kinners*: Hijras are psychological males with a feminine gender identity who adopt feminine gender roles and wear female clothing. They do not conform to the conventional male or female gender but combine and move between these gender identities (Mal, 2018; Jayadeva, 2017).

The existence of transgender has been seen as the third nature (*Tritiya Prakriti*) in India. The meaning of the *Tritiya Prakriti* in the *Kamasutra* differs from male-female *prakriti* (Kalra, 2012). Today, transgender in India is referred to as *Hizra* or eunuchs, but *Kinners* are pretty different from eunuchs because eunuchs are the product of genital mutilation or castration (Hogendorn, 1999). The reference is the cruelty that humans have inflicted on others by deliberately slicing off testicles (orchidectomy) and penis to gain strategic and political goals (Tsai, 1991). During the *Kumbha*, many visitors have frequently used the words *Hizra* and *Kinner* synonymously. However, *Kinners* have been given an important place in the sacred religious texts of Hindus, like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. In these texts, transgender has been used as a sign of mystical powers, referred to as *Kinner* (Srinivasan and Chandrasekaran, 2020).

The *Kinners* claims that they are demigods because they have the power to bless and curse. Visitors to the *Kinner akhada* also think alike about the *Kinners*. Therefore, compared to *Naga sadhus*, *Kinners* were approached more by common visitors irrespective of gender, age and religion. *Kinners* say they are *Gandharva* of the mortal world. *Gandharva* are believed to sing and dance in heaven and *Kinners* perform the same ritual on this earth. In the sacred epic of Ramayana, *Kinners* are represented as celestial singers. In the Ramcharitmanas, the reference of *Kinner* comes in Balkanda (7-D, 43-B, 84-C, 105, 182-B, 261-C, 264-A), Ayodhya Kanda- (133-A), Lanka Kanda-(9-D, 109-A), and Uttara Kanda-(11, 79-D). Here *Kinners* are mentioned with *Naga*, *Siddhas*, *Gandharva*, and God, who witness Ramayana's whole event. In Mahabharata, the character of *Shikhandi* and *Brihnala* were the transsexual in nature (Sinha and Bhattacharya, 2021).

During *Kumbha*, *Kinner akhada* had installed a portrait of *Ardhmarishwar* in their camp. *Kinners* claim to be demigods because they consider themselves as a manifestation of *Ardhmarishwar*. In the *Shiv Purana*, the discussion of *Ardhmarishwar* came from the creator's sense (Shastri, 1970). *Arvanai* cult in the Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu and the *Baucharamaata* in the Mehsana district of Gujarat are two major cults followed by the *Kinners* of India. *Aravani* and *Baucharamaata* are considered to be

demigods (Shah, 1961; Roy, 2014). In the camp of *Kinner akhada*, the *Baucharamaata*'s idol was established but the idol of *Aravani deva* was not present. During *Kumbha*, *Kinner*'s regularly depicted them in the context of demigod. Naga *sadhus* are well acquainted with the holy scriptures of Hindus, therefore, the references from the Ramayana (Mangharam, 2009), the Mahabharata, and the Puranas was enough to substantiate *Kinners* as demigods. On the other hand, common pilgrims have no problem in accepting them as a demigod. The magnificent arrangement, behavioural shift, regular interaction with the pilgrims, and the sacred lunar month of Magh galvanized their claim of divinity.

In the contemporary Indian society, people believe that *Hizras* have the power to bless or curse. They are usually linked with occupations of *tolibadhai*, begging, and sex work. During the ethnographic survey of *Kinner akhada* in *Kumbha mela* at Prayagraj in 2019, when people were asked about the reasons for having an interest in *Kinner akhada*, most of them responded that:

*"We are here for blessings from Kinner Maai. In the sacred event of Kumbha, good fortune will surely come into our life if we get blessings."*

The *Kumbha* happens under the tight security arrangement but people visiting the *Kinner akhada* have mixed reactions of affection and fear from them. This behaviour towards *Kinners* shows the stigma related to them in the mind of visitors. Role of tolerant cultural space as a mean of social change:

*"Ye padhe likhon ka shaher hai."*

(This is a city of educated people)

A retired Professor from the University of Allahabad, who also co-authored a book named '*Allahabad Vishwavidyalay Ke Kirti Stambha*' responded when the spectacular city entry (*Peshvai*) of *Kinner akhada* was described before him. The social acceptance of *Kinner akhada* in Prayagraj had not surprised the city dwellers. This city has a long history of cultural assimilation of different faiths and longstanding political and intellectual contribution to the formation of the modern India (Nath, 1986; Verma, 1993; Zaman, 2015). One very intriguing fact about the *Kinner akhada* is that it was established

just before the *Singhasth Kumbh*, held at Ujjain in 2016. They asked *Akhada Parishad* to grant legal recognition (The Economic Times, 2016). However, *Akhada Parishad* -the supreme body of *Akhada* that takes all the critical decisions regarding any amendment in its constitution- denied the establishment of the *Kinner akhada*. However, in Prayagraj *Ardha-Kumbha*, *Akhada Parishad* allowed *Kinner akhada* to establish, but with a shared existence in *Juna akhada* (Hindustan Times, 2019). Hari Giri, a prominent figure in *Akhada Parishad*, who facilitated the merger of *Kinner akhada* into *Shree Panchdashnam Juna akhada*, says that:

*"Prayagraj is the King of all pilgrim sites in India. This year is a special occasion that Kinners are accepted as part of the akhada system. Kinners are the legacy of our great Sanatana Dharma. We believe that everyone is the lineage of our ancestral sages. The Sanatana dharma is like our father. Over time, some odd times come when some stigma takes shape, leading to the exclusion of some sections from the mainstream of society. We believe everyone is equal before God and has an essence of Godliness. In the religious doctrine of Akhada, we consider no difference based on gender. Everyone prays to god, and god listens to every live entity existing in the world. God does not differentiate among devotees. These Kinners are subjugated and excluded from every sphere of life. The inclusion of Kinner is the correction of historical injustice; therefore, we welcome them."* (Hari Giri Ji Maharaj, February 2019).

During Haridwar *Kumbha*, 2021, some sections of orthodox people raised a strong voice against the *Kinner akhada*. At that time, the general secretary (*Mahamantri*) of *Akhada Parishad*, Hari Giri ji came forward and defended them. People from different backgrounds and *Sadhus-sanyasi* welcomed *Kinner akhada*. In the same way, the traditional brahmins also agreed to accept *Kinners* in the *Kumbha* with a separate structural identity. While questioning the viability of *Kinner akhada*, an old-aged traditional brahmin responded that:

*“You tell me where Kinnners will go? Kumbha mela is for all.*

*Here the souls of all living beings get salvation. There is no discrimination in front of Ganga, and it is a good sign that the people of this city welcomed Kinnners. We have to give respect to them.”*

(A brahmin, resident of Daraganj, Allahabad, interviewed, on 6<sup>th</sup> Jan, 2019)

*Kinnners* were fiercely targeted in Ujjain (2016) and Haridwar (2021), but they had negligible resistance in Prayagraj. The above statement represents the views ranging from orthodoxy to the modern perspectives on *Kinner* by the different backgrounds of people. Furthermore, this was the critical reason which secured the assimilation of the one of the most marginalized sections of Indian society. At the end day of *Kumbha*, LNT became emotional and said, “the city dwellers have given us immense affection; we can never forget it”.

#### *Identity Formation*

Identity is constructed in two forms; first, it is because of horizons of interpretation made possible by society, and the second, by virtue of one’s interaction with the other (De Ruyter and Conroy, 2002). In the case of transgender, identity formation shows an extreme form of social and personal construction. At the social level, they face marginalisation due to their differential gender identity. At the personal level, they must have to conform to a gender and convince themselves. *Kumbha* has dissolved the identity of *Kinner* by allowing them to merge with the *Akhada Parampra*. Naga Sadhu is respected due to its highest order of monastic tradition, where a man or woman leaves every material pursuit behind and lives in solitude to attain *Moksha* (Datta, 1888). The word *akhada* came from the Hindi word *akhand* which means unbreakable. Another meaning of *akhada* is a wrestling pit. Nevertheless, most of the Naga *sanyasi* say that the meaning of *akhada* is unbreakable and eternal. According to the beliefs of Naga *sanyasi*, *akhada* is a tradition as old as the Hindu dharma. They relate it to the Adi guru Shankaracharya, a philosopher who proposed the *vedantic philosophy* (Rukmani, 2006). Due to the

superiority of the *akhada* tradition in the Hindu religion, *Kinnners* preferred to establish a separate *akhada* for them. Because once they are accepted in the *akhada* tradition, they will receive greater respect from society, and the stigma related to them will vanish through assimilation.

In mainstream society, *Kinnners* are also respected to some extent when they come for *Badhai* during marriage and childbirth. However, after that they generally remain excluded. In an everyday *Kinner’s* life, respect is momentary, but *Kinner akhada* provided them sustainable respect when they are adorned with a designation like *Mahamandleshwar* and *Mahant*. We can see the response of a *Kinner* when she was asked what has changed after joining the *Kinner akhada*, and she replied:

*“We used to beg and sell our bodies earlier; people used to make insulting comments on us. Today Juna Akhada has accepted. See how much peoples love us; they touch our feet as they do for the other sadhus here in the Kumbha. Everything has changed.”*

(Ambika Maai (names changed), Interviewed in *Kinner akhada, Kumbha mela kshetra*, Sector- 12. Dated: 22<sup>nd</sup> Jan 2019, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh)

*Akhada* system was once recognised as a symbol of male dominance. However, as an ascetic military organization, it astonished the entire world by giving recognition to the *Kinnners* to participate in *shahi snan* (royal bath) and no resistance was shown towards them while performing other religious duties being followed by traditional *akhadas*. The Naga *sanyasi* claims authority over *Kumbha* in a way that they have history of struggling to protect the dharma. In the past, they also struggled against invasions in culture and the territory (Pinch, 2000). As against the Naga claims, *Kinnners* have no such history of struggle. So, on what basis *did Kinnners’* claim their religious status and rights in *the Kumbha Mela*? In the response to this question, one of the *Kinner* responded that:

*“We as Kinnners also protect the Dharma in a way that many Kinnners have converted into non-Hindu religions while we have not done so. Also, what we earn from Badhai (a kind of donation), we have built orphanages and*

*old age homes, conducted an awareness campaign against HIV and served the poor people too.”*

*Kinners* say it is a practical way to serve Hindu society. These ideological formations and claims as a demigod helped in the merger of *Kinner akhada* in the *akhada* system during the *Kumbha*. Finally, this merger led to the new AVATAR of *Kinner* not only into among themselves, but *Sadhus* and *Pilgrims* started to look at them with a new identity, *Kinner in the Kumbha*.

Global media and the common folk of the city appreciated the participation of *Kinner akhada* in *Kumbha*. During the *Kumbha mela*, the *akhadas* are identified by the grand city entry. All eyes focus on the grand city entry called *Peshvai*. There are thirteen *akhadas*, and the administration makes special security and traffic arrangement on this occasion. The pilgrims, city dwellers and media people generally wait for the *Peshvai* of various *akhadas*. In 2019, the *Peshvai* of *Kinner akhada* was extraordinary. People have never seen such a crowd flocking towards *Kinner akhada*. *Kinners* named his *Peshvai* as ‘*devatvayatra*’, translated as ‘divinity journey’. Many foreign visitors were also present on that day.

LNT was leading the *Peshvai*, on a camel with swords in her hands, depicting as representative of ‘*shakti*’. During *Peshvai*, she showered her blessings on visitors in *Abhayast Mudra*, a typical posture of palm and fingers imitating Hindu goddesses. She used to throw flowers and coins at the people attending the *yatra*. When she and other fellow transgender threw coins, people jumped on one another to grab the coins. That moment was spectacular. The heavy presence of the media and a full-page coverage was given on the next day in leading newspapers increased the charm and popularity of *Kinner akhada* manifolds in the entire Uttar Pradesh. Everyone was trying to see *Kinners* in *Kumbh* due to the impact of comprehensive media coverage and advertisement. Within the first week of camping, thousands of people visited the *Kinner akhada*. Due to such a massive influx of visitors, the Administration tried to manage the crowd, but to support the local Administration, *Kinner akhada* had to hire private guards in order to manage the crowd. ‘*devatva yatra*’ was the demonstration of power among the participants of

the *Kumbha mela*. During the entire event of the *Kumbha*, *Kinners* showed behavioural change. Even the novice in the *Kinner akhada* behaved in a polite way towards visitors. They performed all rituals which are generally practiced by the traditional *akhadas*. A *dharm dwaja* of *Kinner akhada* was seen from a distance. A daily *bhandara* (food charity), *bhajan sandhya*, *arti* and *darshan* to every visitor were the common practices. In addition, they also did *Shahi Snan* with the *Juna akhada*. However, the camp was not allotted to them where traditional *akhadas* were allotted. When any of the *sadhus* were seen to visit, the *Kinner akhada*, *Kinners* gave them proper respect. Further, *Kinner akhada* used to make regular comments on socio-religious issues during the entire period of *Kumbha*.

Many *Naga sadhus* have shown a very humble attitude and respect towards them. Some *Vaishnav sadhus* used to call them ‘*Sakhimaai*’. A massive poster of *Ardhnarishwar* and the idol of *Baucharamaata* were installed in the camp premises of *Kinner akhada* (Sheikh, 2010). The camp of *Kinner akhada* lasted for a long time because they got amazing support from the urban elite. During the entire *Kumbha*, *Kinner akhada* was in debate. In the end, the overall performance of *Kinner akhada* was similar to the traditional *Akhada*. The end of the event is followed by *dhnayvad yatra* (thanks giving march); no *akhada* followed this tradition in the history of *Kumbha*.

## DISCUSSION

The assimilation of *Kinner* in the *Kumbha* event shows the shifting dimension of gender discourse in the twenty-first century due to continuously evolving voices at the social and academic platforms. At the beginning of the *Kumbha*, some members of the *Akhada Parishad* were against the *Peshvai*, and they said that the existence of fourteenth *akhada* would be invalid. However, *Mahamandleshwar* of *Kinner akhada* LNT showed extraordinary courage and defied all efforts to defame *Kinners*. *Kumbha* has deconstructed the imageries of common folk who looked at transgender people as beggars on the streets, poking for money, expressing sexism in the train, and singing congratulatory songs. Organizational acceptance of *Kinners* by the *Juna*

*akhada* and social acceptance by the pilgrims as ‘*maai*’ could be considered a process of sanskritization because *Kinners* have their religious and social structure as the Naga have *i.e.*, a *Guru-Shishya* relationship. In *Kumbha*, this relationship becomes more open and pronounced. Now, *Kinners*, who got initiated (*dikshit*) from their Naga Guru, got their title as well. For instance, after *Kumbha*, many *Kinners* got ‘*Giri*’ title as their surname because the *Acharya Mahamandleshwar* (the supreme spiritual commander) of the *Juna akhada* is Swami Avdeshanand Giri. *Kumbha* has provided two forms of identification to the *Kinners*. The first one is the acceptance as a *kinner maai* and the second a surname of ‘*Giri*’ which is a part of *dashmanisanyas parmpara* (ten names monastic tradition). This organizational acceptance of *Kinners* by the *Juna akhada* and social acceptance by the pilgrims as ‘*maai*’ could be considered a sanskritization of their transgender identity.

Electronic and print media portrayed *Kinners* as those who challenged the dominance of religious orthodoxy (Hindustan Times, 2019). The signs and symbols used by the *Kinner akhada* and their categorical statement of a politically sensitive issue of *Ram mandir* served to their social and religious acceptance manifold during the *Kumbh mela* (Hindustan Times, 2019). Recognition of *Kinner akhada* during the *Kumbha* (2019) is yet another feat in the glory of transgender people in India. No doubt that *Kinners* have achieved well in almost all fields of mainstream society, but religious recognition in an orthodox Hindu tradition is exceptional.

Acceptance of *Kinners* into *akhada* system is an exposition of the inherent democratic and tolerant value system of Hindu dharma that can allow course correction after a convincing dialogue among stakeholders. Furthermore, it also expresses how *Kumbha* acts as the most significant platform for both parochialization and universalization of ideas, traditions and practices which are later adopted in their modified or sometimes transmuted forms and propagated by the common folks.

#### CONCLUSION

The strategic mobilisation and continuous struggle to secure a position in *Kumbha* Mela is not

an overnight decision of *Kinners*. Sacred Hindu texts provided a ground for a claim in *Kumbha*. However, many *Kinners* are still stuck in obscure social practices to secure their livelihoods. *Kinner akhada* does not represent the problems of all existing *Kinners* in India. The main challenge before *Kinner* is equal opportunity in all realms of life. It is not an easy task to get rid of the inertia of their social and economic practices. During the *Kumbha*, *Kinner*’s entered into the mind of the pilgrims, but they were not so successful in convincing different sects within the *akhada* system. The assimilation of *Kinner* in *Juna akhada* is challenged in Haridwar *Kumbha*, and it will probably be challenged in the next *Kumbha* too, which is going to be held in Prayagraj in 2025. *Akhada* tradition is the oldest and highest ascetic tradition regarded among the Hindus. People have seen it with an orthodox lens, but assimilation and recognition of *Kinners* showed the pathway for other sects to become more inclusive and liberal towards the transgender.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Authorities of *Kinner Akhada* and *Juna Akhada* are thankfully acknowledged for their cooperation during fieldwork.

#### NOTES

1. *Kumbha Mela* is held at an interval of every six years in the Prayagraj, and *Maha Kumbha* happens at an interval of twelve years. It is celebrated in a cycle of approximately 12 years to celebrate every revolution of *Brihaspati* (Jupiter) at four river-bank pilgrimage sites: Allahabad (at the confluence of Ganges, Yamuna and subterranean Sarasvati), Haridwar (Ganges), Nashik (Godavari), and Ujjain (Shipra). The festival is marked by a ritualistic dip at the river site. The pilgrims believe that bathing in these rivers is a means of atonement for past mistakes and that it also cleanses them of their sins.
2. The main participants of *Kumbha* include the *Naga Sadhus*, who are the members of *Akhadas*, the regimented body of warrior ascetics. There are traditionally thirteen *Akhadas*. The word *Akhada* evolved from the word *Akhanda* which means unbreakable in the context of tradition which remained continuous or uninterrupted since ancient times. A common belief about the *Akhada* is that the Adi Shankracharya founded it to protect Hindu dharma. The *Naga* sanyasi is an integral part of the *Akhada* who are not only trained warriors but also are trained in holy religious scriptures such as *Veda*, *Upanishads* and *Puranas*. These *Akhadas* are primarily male-dominated

bodies, but a small section of them are also constituted of female *sanyasis*. The most prominent participants of female ascetics are the members of *Juna akhada*, which is considered the biggest in number among all the *Akhadas*.

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