



Voices of Non-Hindus

LOS ANGELES

“Primal and Powerful Event”

I'VE BEEN HERE NOW FOR THREE WEEKS, BUT ONLY OVER THE LAST TWO OR THREE days, as we get closer to February 10, is the enormity of it becoming manifest.

Suddenly there are huge crowds of people walking the streets with their bags on their heads, so many that you can't even drive a car on the road. I've never seen anything with this power anywhere in the world, and I've been to many places for many big events. You hear repeatedly how enormous it all is, but there's no imagining it until you see it.

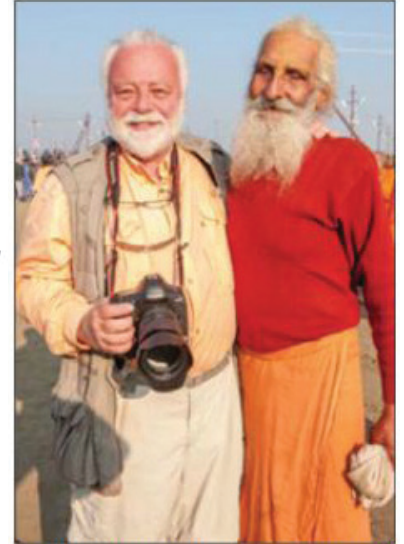
Honestly, my feelings about the Kumbh run the gamut. First, I see the very poor people who are devoted and God fearing, who come here for that spirituality and purification. They come because of their fundamental beliefs, and they come in huge numbers. Then I see the very rich, who come to give thanks for what they have. Then there are the sadhus, who come to be with a lot of people like themselves, in an event that's very primal and powerful.

The Sadhus

Most powerful for me has been the time I've spent with the sadhus, listening to them talk about their general beliefs, their religion, philosophy of life and the way their lives have been conducted. It has reinforced in me the feelings I had about my own life and how I conduct myself. I've learned about people who are willing to completely dedicate their life to their beliefs and their philosophies. They are people with vast knowledge and great sensitivity. A lot of the sadhus I've met are simple country people, but just as dedicated and committed as the very big and evolved sadhus. It's impossible not to respect them.

Photographing the Nagas

To a foreigner, the nagas seem like a very fine concept. Many of them are warriors, as has been explained to me. All of them, to me, seem very aggressive. I was suspicious because they do not allow you to take a picture of them without paying money. This is an impossible environment for me to photograph in. It's a commercial relationship. I'm not being myself, and they are not being themselves. When I've gone to a village in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Odisha or Madhya Pradesh, I sit with people for three or four days, go to their house, have tea with them. When I finally take a picture, there is a relationship, and the picture reflects that relationship. Here, when I give money, what do I get in return? Am I getting a person who's posing because he's been paid to pose, or do I get the essence of the person? That's the dilemma for me as a photographer.



Fredric Roberts, 70, is a professional photographer who spent six weeks at the Kumbh