

# The Asian Reporter

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## Nepal opens Everest to climbers

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## Endangered rhino heading to Indonesia

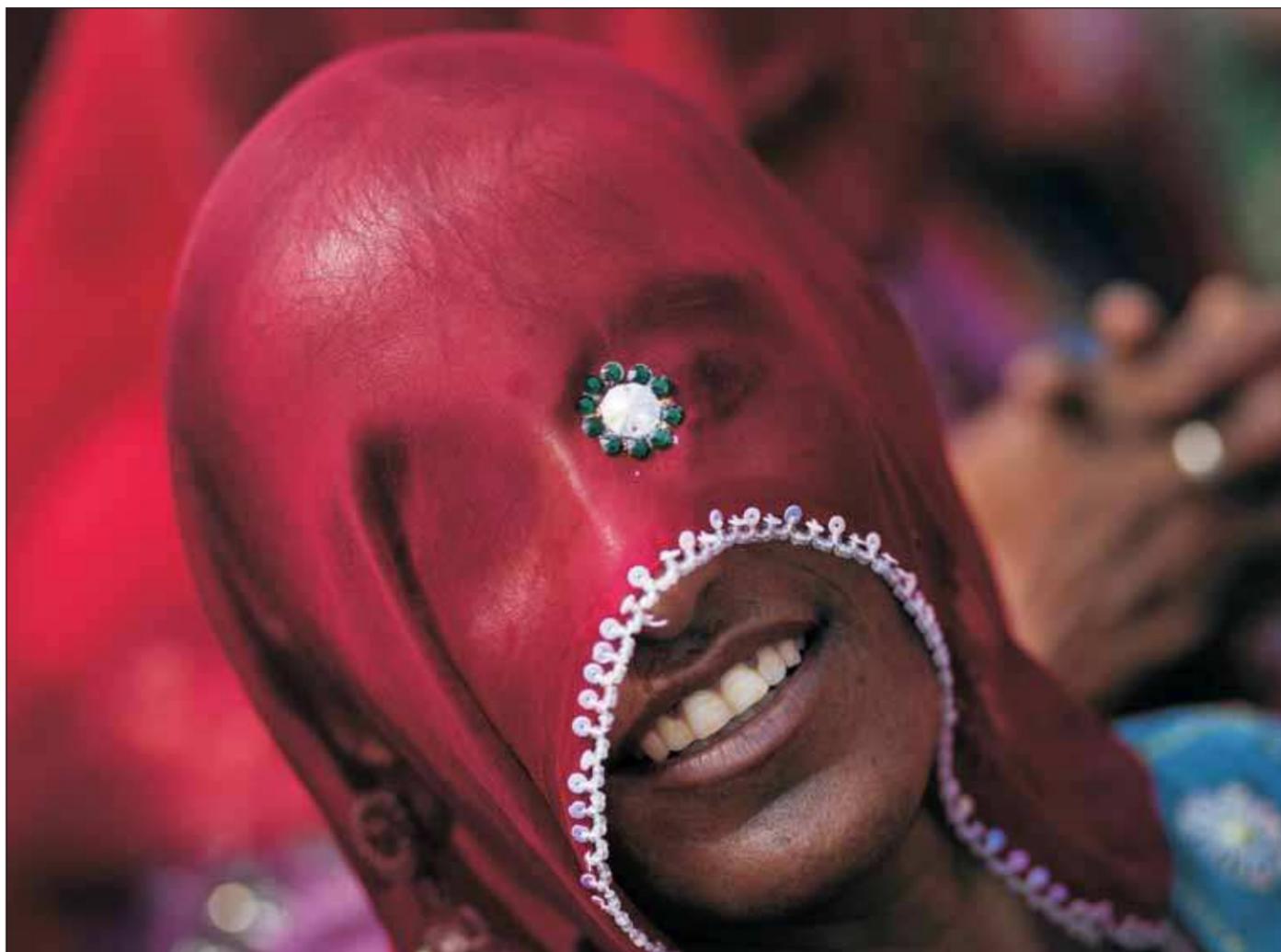
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## Three major career firsts for Asian athletes

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# Hindu holy men lead bath rituals in Indian river



**AUSPICIOUS ABLUTIONS.** A Hindu woman from Rajasthan participates in a religious procession during the Kumbh Mela, or Pitcher Festival, in India. Hindus believe that taking a dip in the waters of a holy river during the festival will cleanse them of their sins. The festival is held four times every 12 years. The Kumbh Mela derives its name from a mythical fight over a pitcher of holy nectar. (AP Photo/Bernat Armangué)

By Aftab Khan  
The Associated Press

**N**ASIK, India — Brass bands played and people passed out fruit and cookies as hundreds of thousands of Hindu holy men and believers plunged into the Godavari River to wash away their sins on the first “royal” day of bathing at one of the world’s largest religious gatherings.

The Kumbh Mela, or Pitcher Festival, is expected to draw millions over nearly two months, though August 29 marked the first of several auspicious days for ritual bathing.

More than 15,000 police officers maintained heavy security, with some ushering bathers out of the water as soon

as they’d taken a dip in order to keep crowds from growing. The last time the festival was held in Nasik, scores of people died in a stampede triggered by a *sadhu* (a Hindu holy man) who threw coins into the crowd.

“During the last Kumbh, we watched from a building, we could see only heads and not the ground,” said Nasik resident Kishore Agharkar, adding that the crowds were not building up this year as during the four festivals he’s witnessed previously in his neighborhood.

The bathing began with a crowd of *sadhus* leading a procession to the waterfront. Some had arrived atop mini-trucks because police would not allow them to use the more traditional transportation mode

— elephants. Once the ash-covered *sadhus* completed their ablutions, the public was then allowed into the water.

Some people walked three miles from their temporary tents to the waterfront in the west Indian city, where vehicle traffic was entirely blocked off and shops closed.

The Kumbh Mela derives its name from a mythical fight over a pitcher of holy nectar. According to Hindu mythology, gods and demons waged a furious battle over the nectar they needed to achieve immortality. As one of the gods fled with a pitcher of the nectar across the skies, it spilled on four Indian towns — Allahabad, Nasik, Ujjain, and Haridwar. The Kumbh Mela is organized four times every 12 years in those towns.

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