

# India's Maha Kumbh Mela draws 15 million

The festival, held every 12 years, attracts more than 400 million visitors, both Indians and tourists alike

SAURABH SHARMA

Nearly 15 million Hindus, six times the number expected, took a dip in freezing waters seeking absolution of their sins on Monday, the first day of India's festival that could draw the world's largest single gathering of humanity.

Held every 12 years, the Maha Kumbh Mela or Great Pitcher Festival, as the religious event in the city of Prayagraj in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, is called, attracts more than 400 million visitors, both Indians and tourists.

State Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said 15 million devotees "earned the holy benefit of bathing in the uninterrupted and clear Triveni," or the confluence of the rivers.

Officials had expected the first ritual dip to draw 2.5 million visitors, followed by a "royal bath" on Tuesday reserved for ascetics, in the belief that it absolves them of sin and confers salvation from the cycle of life and death.

As many as 40,000 police officers are on guard to provide security and help manage the crowds, while surveillance cameras equipped with artificial intelligence AI capabilities will ensure continuous monitoring.

"It is our festival," said ascetic Hazari Lala Mishra, who took the holy dip himself before sunrise, which is considered an auspicious time. "[It is] the only festival for hermits and monks, and we wait for it desperately."

Amid public warnings to walk in lines without halting anywhere, droves of marchers headed for bathing positions to await sunrise at the confluence of the



Hindu pilgrims take a dip in the sacred waters of Sangam, the confluence of Ganges, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati rivers, during the Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj, India, on Monday. NIHARIKA KULKARNI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

three holy rivers, the Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati.

Advancing toward the waters' edge in the winter morning fog, they chanted invocations such as "Har Har Mahadev" and "Jai Ganga Maiyya" in praise of the Hindu deities Lord Shiva and Mother Ganga, who personifies India's holiest river.

"I am excited but now scared because I didn't expect this crowd," said Priyanka Rajput, a fashion model from Delhi, the capital, who accompanied her mother. "This is my first Kumbh and I came here only because my mother is very spiritual."

The Kumbh originates in a

Hindu tradition that the god Vishnu, known as the Preserver, wrested away from demons a golden pitcher that held the nectar of immortality.

In a 12-day celestial fight for its possession, four drops of the nectar fell to earth, in the cities of Prayagraj, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nashik, where the festival is held every three years in rotation.

The Kumbh held once in 12 years in this cycle has the prefix maha (great) as its timing renders it more auspicious and it attracts the largest crowds.

A showcase mix of religion, spirituality and tourism like no other in India, the event offers a

test in crowd management for authorities in the world's most populous country who must balance arrangements for millions while retaining its sanctity.

A temporary city sprawling over 4,000 hectares has sprung up along the river banks with 150,000 tents to house the visitors, and is equipped with 3,000 kitchens, 145,000 restrooms and 99 parking lots.

Authorities are also installing as many as 450,000 new electricity connections, with the Kumbh expected to consume more power than 100,000 urban apartments require in a month.

Indian Railways has added 98 trains to make 3,300 trips carry-

ing festival visitors, in addition to regular services to Prayagraj.

Uttar Pradesh is governed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which hopes that a successful Kumbh Mela will burnish its efforts to reclaim and glorify India's religious and cultural symbols.

That has been a plank for the party's Hindu base promised since Mr. Modi swept to power nationwide in 2014.

"The Maha Kumbh embodies India's timeless spiritual heritage and celebrates faith and harmony," Mr. Modi said in a post on X.