

Pandharpur shrine draws million pilgrims, Deshmukh offers prayers

Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh Monday led nearly a million devotees in offering 'maha puja' (special prayers) at the revered Pandharpur shrine on the auspicious occasion of 'Aashadhi Ekadashi', considered the hallmark of the annual pilgrimage here.

Joined by wife Vaishali, son Amit, daughter-in-law Aditi, several cabinet colleagues and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders Eknath Khadse and Pandurang Fundkar, the chief minister prayed to the reigning deity Lord Vitthal to ward off the threat of drought looming over the state, he told reporters after offering prayers.

Considered Maharashtra's 'Kul-devata' (reigning deity), the shrine attracts millions of devotees from all parts of the state on the 11th day (Ekadashi) of the month of Aashadh in the Hindu calendar each year, and the incumbent chief minister customarily offers worship to the deity on behalf of the state and the people.

Several thousands of devout pilgrims, called 'varkaris', from all over Maharashtra set out on foot for their annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur, about 150 km from Pune in Solapur district, up to a month in advance and reach the destination singing bhajans and chanting 'Vitthal, Vitthal'. Constrained by time and energy, others travel by trains or buses.

The real countdown to the pilgrimage, comparable to the annual yatras in Amarnath (Jammu), Puri (Orissa) or Pashupatinath (Nepal), begins a week before the Aashadhi Ekadashi with hundreds of pilgrims converging in Dehu and Alandi in Pune district and from their to Pune city for the final trek.

While the religious fervour of the devotees has to be seen to be believed, the synchronised arrangements made by umpteen temple trusts and religious groups besides municipal and state administrative bodies on the pilgrimage path have quite a few lessons for management gurus, say observers.

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