

Full solar eclipse turns day to night in Asia

July 22 2009, By ERIC TALMADGE , Associated Press Writer



A total solar eclipse is seen in Varanasi, India, Wednesday, July 22, 2009. The longest solar eclipse of the 21st century pitched a swath of Asia from India to China into near darkness Wednesday as millions gathered to watch the phenomenon. (AP Photo/Saurabh Das)

(AP) -- From the Ganges River in India to remote islands of the Pacific, the sun rose Wednesday only to vanish again, allowing the stars to twinkle into view in the longest total solar eclipse this century will see - a celestial show that inspired awe and fear in millions across Asia.

Revelers launched fireworks and danced in Shanghai, while on a remote Japanese island, bewildered cattle went to their feeding troughs thinking night had fallen. And in [India](#), a woman was crushed to death as thousands crowded the banks of the Ganges River for a glimpse.

The skies darkened first in India just after dawn, then a wide swath of Asia was blackened as the eclipse moved eastward over southern Japan

and then off into the Pacific Ocean. In some areas, the eclipse lasted as long as six minutes and 39 seconds.

In the sacred Indian city of Allahabad, Hindu holy men wearing beads and gripping spears donned special glasses to watch, while women and children viewed the spectacle through X-ray films.

Along the banks of the Ganges, thousands of devotees turned out to pray, chant and bathe in the waters, which were dotted with women in colorful saris and bare-chested men, all wearing dark glasses. Those who watched from the Ganges town of Varanasi had some of the best views in India, with the sun blotted out for almost four minutes.

The gathering was marred when a 65-year-old woman was killed and six people injured in a stampede at a river bank where about 2,500 people had gathered, said police spokesman Surendra Srivastava. He said it was not clear how the stampede started.

Others in India were gripped by fear and refused to go outdoors. In Hindu mythology, an eclipse is said to be caused when a dragon-demon swallows the sun, while another myth says the sun's rays during an eclipse can harm unborn children.

"My mother and aunts have called and told me stay in a darkened room with the curtains closed, lie in bed and chant prayers," said 24-year-old Krati Jain, who is expecting her first child.

Total eclipses are caused when the moon moves directly between the sun and the Earth, covering it completely to cast a shadow on Earth. Wednesday's was the longest since July 11, 1991, when a total eclipse lasting six minutes and 53 seconds was visible from Hawaii to South America. There will not be a longer eclipse until 2132.

In many regions across Asia the view was obscured by cloudy weather, but skies above some Indian cities cleared minutes before the eclipse began at 6:24 a.m.

People were not so lucky in some other regions.

On the tiny Japanese island of Akuseki, where the eclipse lasted six minutes and 25 seconds, more than 200 tourists had to take shelter inside a school gymnasium due to a tornado warning.

But when the sky started to darken, everyone rushed out into the schoolyard, cheering and applauding.

"The sky turned dark like in the dead of the night. The air turned cooler and cicadas stopped singing. Everything was so exciting and moving," said island official Seiichiro Fukumitsu.

Some villagers said their cows gathered at feeding stations as darkness fell, apparently mistaking the eclipse as a signal it was dinner time, he said.

In Tokyo, elated children wearing red-and-gray framed glasses turned their faces skyward to watch the sun disappear at the Sunshine International Aquarium. Even a seal had a pair of yellow sunglasses perched on his nose for the event.

The view from much of China, including Beijing, was blocked by heavy clouds and smog. But some areas, such as coastal Zhejiang province, were treated to a partial eclipse and watchers celebrated, setting off fireworks near the Qiantang River.

Coastal Shanghai also was under a light drizzle in the morning, but the sky still darkened fully for about five minutes.

Holding a big green umbrella and wearing special glasses, Song Chunyun was prepared to celebrate in a new white dress.

"I want to enjoy the special day," she said before dancing and singing in the rain with her two sisters.

At a Buddhist temple in the Thai capital Bangkok, dozens of monks led prayers at a Buddhist temple to ward off evil.

"The eclipse is bad omen for the country," said Pinyo Pongjaroen, a prominent astrologer. "We are praying to boost the fortune of the country."

In Myanmar, Buddhists went to Yangon's famed Shwedagon pagoda, where monks in scarlet robes viewed the eclipse through telescopes.

Bringing flowers and fruit to ward off misfortune, some of the faithful warned friends and family not to sleep through the eclipse for fear of bringing bad luck.

"We all got up early this morning and prayed at home because our abbot told us that the [solar eclipse](#) is a bad omen," said 43-year-old teacher Aye Aye Thein.

On the Net:

<http://www.eclipse.org.uk/>

<http://mreclipse.com/>

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Citation: Full solar eclipse turns day to night in Asia (2009, July 22) retrieved 19 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-07-full-solar-eclipse-day-night.html>

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