

From Festivals to Stadiums: The hard lessons behind India's deadly stampedes

By Prof. Amar Sapra | Jun 19, 2025

When massive crowds turn deadly, it's not just bad luck-it's a failure of planning, policing, and personal responsibility



A large number of people in an enclosed space is not unlike a tinderbox: all that is needed is a small spark. Image: Shutterstock

This year has been particularly bad for crowd management in India. At least four major incidents have been widely reported: the Kumbh Mela (January 29), New Delhi Railway Station (February 15), the Lairai Jatra festival in Shirgaon, Goa (May 3), and the most recent Royal Challenger Bangalore's (RCB) victory celebration in Bengaluru (June 4), in which people have died due to overcrowding.

Given our large population, large crowds are common in India, especially at religious events. For example, on festivals, thousands of people routinely gather in temples. Yet, stampedes rarely occur.

Usually, it is due to good luck, and sometimes, it is due to good planning. A large number of people in an enclosed space is not unlike a tinderbox: all that is needed is a small spark. Good luck arises when there is no spark, which keeps the crowd calm.

The spark almost always arises when some people get impatient or panic, usually because they do not progress towards their goal, such as a darshan or a dip during an auspicious period. Some of them push their way around, resulting in a stampede. Panic or impatience was a key factor in all four incidents cited above. For example, there were rumours at the New Delhi Railway Station that a train's platform had changed, and some people panicked that they would miss their train. Then, they tried to push through a crowded footbridge, resulting in a stampede.

Some people will get impatient and try to push their way around if their goal is not met, which is a crucial aspect of crowd psychology and an essential component of any crowd management plan. For example, whenever crowds swelled at the Sangam Ghat during the recently concluded Kumbh Mela, the routes to the ghat were elongated by erecting barriers. This made sure that crowds kept moving, which kept them calm. At the same time, it gave police extra time to evacuate ghats for the incoming crowd.

Another key aspect of crowd management is not to let large crowds gather in any enclosed space in the first place. If large crowds must be entertained, for example, at railway stations during festivals, then the solution is to create holding areas where people wait till their turn comes. Even in holding areas, an understanding of crowd psychology is critical. They must get accurate information about the train schedule if it is a railway station. Plus, people must move.

Indian police routinely handle large crowds, and plenty of know-how is available. Large political rallies are almost always smooth. The mere presence of police often keeps people in control, even when planning is less than perfect.

How to prevent stampedes, then? The solution has three key elements: organisers, police, and people. First, the organisers. Given that police can usually manage crowds, organisers of large events must inform the police in advance whenever they expect large crowds to show up. They must also defer to the police instructions and arrangements. Conversely, they must be held accountable for any such incident if they do not inform or listen to the police authorities.

Second, the police. As I said above, the police are usually able to control the crowd. However, in general, their focus is on controlling the flow rather than preventing a crowd buildup in the first place. This works fine so long as enough police force is available. However, if the crowd significantly exceeds the police personnel, then they may just ignore the police instructions, as what happened outside the gates of the Chinnaswamy stadium in Bengaluru.

Finally, the people, as in us. In public discourse after the recent tragedy in Bengaluru, I have not seen any commentary on the general public's responsibility. If crowds are swelling, we must recognise that it is a tinderbox, and it may be better to walk away. Our safety is our responsibility as well. No celebration is worth risking our lives. At the same time, we must recognise that stampedes are artificial disasters. Stampedes only occur when some people in the crowd get impatient, and they

have no qualms about pushing their way around to get what they want, even if it results in a few deaths, which is both criminal and immoral. The ironic part is often that the goal is divine blessings. While other anti-social behaviours routinely get called out, it is unfortunate that unruly conduct in large crowds has not received the same criticism.

Professor Amar Sapra, Production and Operations Management, IIM Bangalore.

Views are personal.