

“From Chaos To Courtrooms: Legal Responsibility In Public Stampedes”

Author: - S. SHANTIYOTI SINGH AND ANANYA JAIN

I. INTRODUCTION

A stampede denotes a sudden, uncontrollable rush of people, often culminating in tragic outcomes including severe injuries or even fatalities. Such catastrophic events are alarmingly common in scenarios involving large, dense crowds, and their occurrence persuasively illustrates the dire consequences of inadequate crowd management and insufficient safety planning.

In large democracies such as India, which routinely host religious mega-events, political rallies, major concerts and sporting extravaganzas, the risks are magnified. Recently, on 4th June 2025, a celebratory gathering outside M. Chinnaswamy Stadium at Bengaluru, following the Royal Challengers Bengaluru’s IPL victory, escalated into a deadly crush, claiming eleven lives, attributed to overcrowding, lack of proper exits, and suspect coordination between private organisers and civic authorities.¹ Similarly, on 15th February 2025, platform overcrowding and train delays at New Delhi Railway Station triggered a stampede on footbridge 14–15, resulting in eighteen deaths as panicked pilgrims rushed to board trains for the Maha Kumbh.² Perhaps most harrowing was the tragedy of 29th January 2025, during Mauni Amavasya at the Maha Kumbh Mela in Prayagraj, where a barrier collapsed amid a sea of pilgrims, which led to at least thirty deaths and dozens more injured.³ Each of these calamities, though differing in setting and scale, bears the common hallmarks of systemic negligence, overcrowding, poor planning, and swift, chaotic human movement.

These events inevitably raise the central legal issue concerning the attribution of liability in the aftermath of a stampede. The responsibility may lie with the private event organisers who failed to adequately plan for crowd safety and ensure secure passage. It may also extend to the government agencies or law enforcement authorities, whose lapses in crowd control, surveillance, or emergency preparedness contributed to the incident. In some instances, the actions or behaviour of individuals within the crowd may also play a contributory role. Ultimately, liability may not rest on a single entity but rather emerge as a composite responsibility shared among multiple actors, depending on the circumstances and the degree of each party’s negligence.

II. CAUSES OF STAMPEDE

Effective crowd management is the linchpin of safety during mass gatherings. Yet, across multiple incidents, authorities have consistently underestimated the crowd size, failed to deploy sufficient manpower, and allowed operational chaos to prevail. The infamous Hathras stampede in July, 2024 exemplifies that a religious congregation surged forward, seeking to touch a holy man’s feet, as police presence proved grossly

¹ Sucheta, *Chinnaswamy Stadium Stampede | Karnataka HC declines to give interim relief to RCB Marketing Head, Nikhil Sosale against arrest*, SCC ONLINE (June 6, 2025), <https://www.scconline.com/blog/post/2025/06/06/chinnaswamy-stadium-stampede-nikhil-sosale-rcb-marketing-head-arrest-karnataka-hc-legal-news/>.

² Sanjay Kumar Sah & Gonika Arora, *15, including 3 children, dead as Kumbh rush triggers massive stampede at New Delhi Railway Station*, INDIA TV (February 15, 2025), <https://www.indiatvnews.com/delhi/new-delhi-railway-station-stampede-platform-number-14-15-latest-update-several-passengers-rescued-in-unconscious-condition-2025-02-15-976410>.

³ The Hindu Bureau, *Maha Kumbh stampede developments: 30 dead, 60 injured in Prayagraj; judicial probe ordered*, THE HINDU (Jan 30, 2025), <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/maha-kumbh-mela-2025-stampede-in-prayagraj-on-mauni-amavasya-live-updates/article69153214.ece>.

insufficient.⁴ Similarly, at Bengaluru's Chinnaswamy Stadium in June, 2025, a celebratory crowd estimated at over 4,00,000 overwhelmed a venue designed for far fewer, aggravated by conflicting announcements, poor coordination among organisers, and an overextended police force.⁵ Where crowd density exceeds three to five persons per square metre, the potential for violence and suffocation escalates dramatically. In each case, planning deficits, communication breakdowns, and manpower shortages signified a fundamental failure in crowd stewardship.

The physical environment plays a pivotal role in crowd safety. Narrow exits, inadequate signage, and outdated infrastructure can transform even well-intentioned gatherings into lethal pressures. Urban planners flagged that Bengaluru's existing infrastructure, characterised by restricted gate layouts and narrow corridors was wholly unfit for a crowd the size of RCB's victory celebration. Likewise, expert analysts across India's pilgrimage sites repeatedly warn of structural vulnerabilities, narrow riverbank pathways, unstable railings, and bottlenecked bridges are recurrent features in stampede-prone zones. Railway environments are equally at risk. On 15th February 2025, a fatal stampede occurred at New Delhi Railway Station, triggered by severe overcrowding on platforms 14 and 15. The situation was aggravated by delayed train operations and passengers slipping on a congested footbridge. This incident highlights the critical need for infrastructure modernisation and strategic capacity planning, as densely populated transit hubs remain highly vulnerable to such preventable tragedies.

Police and security personnel serve as the gatekeepers of order, yet their failure can directly precipitate disaster. At Hathras, insufficient policing, often managed largely by volunteer groups created a law-and-order vacuum during critical moments. In Bengaluru, not only was police deployment underwhelming, but confused orders surrounding the grant and withdrawal of permission also aggravated the chaos.⁶ Similar observations emerge from global cases during the Itaewon tragedy, that took place in Seoul, South Korea in 2022, crowd surge was made worse by outdated police practices, narrow alleyways left unregulated and delayed official response. Law enforcement cannot be treated as a mere backup. It must form an integral, well-resourced, and proactive component of crowd safety planning.

III. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Under the law of torts, a stampede may constitute a case of negligence, defined as the breach of a duty to take reasonable care, resulting in foreseeable harm. Organisers of public events, whether private entities or state actors, owe a duty of care to all attendees. The standard of care is heightened in contexts where large crowds are anticipated, and failure to adhere to basic principles of crowd control, risk mitigation, and emergency preparedness can amount to actionable negligence.

Additionally, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, contains provisions that may be invoked where criminal negligence is involved. Sections such as Section 106(1) (causing death by negligence) and Section 125 (endangering life or causing hurt by acts of rash or negligent conduct) have been invoked in past stampede cases, particularly where dereliction of duty by organisers or authorities is evident. Further, Articles 21 and 47 of the Constitution of India impose a duty on the State to ensure the right to life and public health.

⁴ New Indian Express, *Hathras stampede: Judicial panel calls out severe overcrowding, mismanagement and negligence as causes*, NEW INDIAN EXPRESS (March 06, 2025), <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2025/Mar/05/hathras-stampede-judicial-panel-blames-negligence-by-officials-mismanagement-seeks-deeper-probe>.

⁵ Prajwal D'Souza, *Chinnaswamy stampede: Four, including RCB marketing manager, arrested*, DECCAN HERALD (June 06 2025), <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/karnataka/bengaluru/chinnaswamy-stampede-four-including-rcb-marketing-manager-arrested-3573945>.

⁶ Sarah Shamim, *What caused the deadly stampede in Hathras, India?*, ALJAZEERA (3 Jul 2024), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/3/what-caused-the-deadly-crowd-crush-in-hathras-india>.

The Disaster Management Act, 2005, though primarily geared toward natural calamities, imposes duties on state and district authorities to prepare for and respond to mass casualty events. Sections 22 and 24 of the Act mandate district authorities to coordinate with event organisers and law enforcement in drafting and enforcing safety protocols, including crowd control mechanisms.

IV. IDENTIFYING LIABLE PARTIES

Private event organisers, whether they are religious bodies, political parties, concert promoters or sports franchises, bear primary responsibility for ensuring the safety of the attendees. They are expected to undertake due diligence regarding venue capacity, crowd control arrangements, security deployment, emergency response systems, and compliance with statutory guidelines.

The police, municipal authorities and district magistrates have a regulatory and supervisory obligation to evaluate and approve event plans, monitor real-time compliance and take preventive action where safety norms are breached.

Where a stampede occurs within a private premises such as a theatre, mall, or stadium the venue owner or operator may be liable for failing to provide safe ingress and egress, or for failing to implement crowd dispersal plans. Where a mass event occurs under the watch of the State, particularly religious gatherings such as the Kumbh Mela, the relevant disaster management authority has a statutory obligation to deploy resources, prepare SOPs and coordinate agencies. Failure to do so may lead to vicarious liability of the State under constitutional tort principles.

V. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of stampedes, while often regarded as spontaneous tragedies, invariably stems from a convergence of systemic failures across crowd management, infrastructure, enforcement, and emergency preparedness. The multicausal nature of these disasters underscores that legal liability cannot rest on a singular actor, rather it must instead reflect the composite responsibility of event organisers, venue owners, law enforcement authorities and the State. The adoption of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, with its enhanced criminal provisions on negligence, alongside tortious liability under State and constitutional mandates, signals a more rigorous legal stance toward accountability. Compliance with statutory regimes such as the Disaster Management Act, coupled with proactive crowd-control measures, detailed standard operating procedures, and rigorous enforcement, is no longer optional but essential to safeguard public welfare. Through these reforms, India can fundamentally strengthen its framework for managing mass gatherings by prioritizing safety as a proactive obligation rather than a reactive measure, thereby mitigating the risk of future casualties and ensuring that accountability is clearly defined and fairly enforced.