

How is India responding to crowding disasters? | Explained

Why did things get out of hand at actor Vijay's political rally in Tamil Nadu? What are the crowd control protocols in place? Are these measures statutory? Where have the most enforceable initiatives emerged? Should responsibility of managing crowds be fixed on organisers?

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Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) president and actor Vijay during a rally in Karur. File. | Photo Credit: M. Moorthy

The story so far: On September 27, a political rally by actor and Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) founder Vijay in Tamil Nadu's Karur district ended in a fatal crowd crush in which 41 people were killed. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin appointed a one-person commission headed by retired judge Aruna Jagadeesan to examine the tragedy's causes.

He said rules for public events would be framed once the commission submitted its report.

What happened in Karur?

The event was part of Mr. Vijay's first State-wide political tour. TVK organisers initially presented a list of four central business locations in Karur for the rally, but the police rejected them as they were too congested and instead granted permission for Velusampuram on the Karur-Erode road, where other political parties had previously held events. The organisers said Mr. Vijay would speak at 12 p.m., and supporters began assembling from 9 a.m. He was delayed however, and as the day wore on, **the crowd grew steadily, with several thousands gathering in the evening**. By the time Mr. Vijay reached Karur from Namakkal around 6 p.m., his convoy could not access the meeting spot because of the crowd. The congestion worsened when the gathering was forced to make way for his vehicles. Witnesses described having no space to move. Residents also recalled younger people climbing poles and transformers to get a glimpse of the actor while others said the event's timing coincided with evening wage disbursements for textile workers, adding to congestion in the area.

As the programme began around 7.20 p.m., people started fainting in the crowd. When the situation deteriorated further, Mr. Vijay departed from the spot and ambulances began to arrive soon after, taking injured people to government hospitals in Karur, Namakkal, and Tiruchi. By nightfall, dozens were reported dead and scores injured. Many of the 41 people who died were young adults aged 18-30.

What has India done to manage crowds?

At the national level, **the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPR&D) published its most recent Comprehensive Guidelines on Crowd Control and Mass Gathering Management in June 2025**. **These guidelines, intended for police and other law enforcement agencies, emphasise scientific crowd management practices. The National Disaster Management Authority has maintained its "Managing crowd at events and venues of mass gathering" guide since 2020 alongside "suggestive frameworks" for crowd management plans. These documents recommend advance risk assessment, detailed site layout plans, predetermined ingress and egress routes, real-time monitoring, and communication protocols. The National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM) has run training modules to handle large congregations as part of its capacity-building programmes.**

After the crowd crush at a New Delhi railway station in February, the Indian Railways updated its manuals for around 60 stations with high footfall by introducing holding areas, better dispersal zones and crowd monitoring, among others. These measures are mostly advisory, however, and not statutory.

Editorial | An avoidable tragedy: On the TVK rally, the stampede in Karur

What measures have States introduced?

Following a deadly stampede outside M. Chinnaswamy Stadium in Bengaluru in June 2025, the Karnataka government tabled the Crowd Control (Managing Crowd at Events and Venues of Mass Gathering) Bill, 2025. This instrument covers political rallies, conferences, cultural programmes, and other events, and fixes responsibility on organisers. It also empowers district magistrates to cancel or redirect events, regulate the use of loudspeakers, and impose fines and imprisonment for violations.

Watch: What really happened on the night of Karur rally stampede

The Uttar Pradesh State Disaster Management Authority issued the Guidelines for Managing Crowd at Events of Mass Gathering, 2023 — a document that formalises measures for religious and cultural events. The Gujarat Institute of Disaster Management prepared training materials that include technical instructions on calculating site capacity, planning exits, training volunteers, and ensuring first aid and fire safety. After a stampede at the Mansa Devi temple in Haridwar in July, the

Uttarakhand government ordered safety arrangements at major temples to be updated and directed authorities to remove encroachments around shrines.

The Maharashtra government introduced a Bill in 2025 empowering the Nasik-Trimbakeshwar Kumbh Mela Authority to authorise temporary townships and bypass certain urban planning norms so that facilities can be created for large gatherings.

Local enforcement agencies have supplemented these steps with operating protocols. After the Bengaluru incident, for instance, the Karnataka police circulated a new Standard Operating Procedure to control crowds at public functions and detailed responsibilities for coordination between departments, medical preparedness, and fire safety.

In many districts across States, the police have also directed organisers of large religious or political gatherings to prepare crowd management plans, limit crowd size, deploy medical teams, set up temporary barricades, and divert routes. These orders are still only administrative and aren't backed by a law. Most State-level initiatives have also been introduced after specific accidents: the Uttarakhand directives followed the Haridwar stampede; Tamil Nadu's announcement after the Karur rally deaths; Karnataka's Bill after the stadium incident; and Maharashtra's Bill after incidents related to the Prayagraj Kumbh Mela.

What is scientific crowd control?

According to prevailing scientific wisdom, safely navigating a crowd depends on controlling its density and sidestepping hazardous flow patterns. Modelling studies have shown that the risk of a deadly crush escalates when crowd density approaches 5 persons per sq. m. Since cameras on drones linked to computers on the ground can continuously monitor crowd density, not using such technologies to manage crowds is seen as a shortcoming.

Second, crowds should never be channelled into bottlenecks, slopes or counter-flows because they magnify pressure and destabilise movement. In a moving crowd, individuals are advised to move diagonally, towards the less dense edges, and to avoid resisting the flow. Because compressive asphyxia rather than trampling is the main cause of fatalities, individuals should keep their forearms across the chest to protect their breathing space and maintain balance with staggered footing. If one is knocked

down, rolling to the side and shielding the head and neck while attempting to rise quickly is recommended.

Finally, people should avoid rigid barriers such as fences, walls or stages where pressures against the body can rise dangerously. Stopping to retrieve dropped items or to film in dense flows must be avoided since even brief obstructions can create waves of turbulence.

For organisers, the best practice requires real-time monitoring by trained crowd managers, routing the passenger traffic in only one direction, arranging for multiple exits, using unambiguous signage, public address messaging, and on-site medical facilities.

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