

## Discussion Guide

# Stampede at the Kumbh Mela: Preventable Accident?

2017

### Overview

This discussion guide accompanies the case, “Stampede at the Kumbh Mela: Preventable Accident?” The case discusses a stampede that took place at the Railway Station in Allahabad, India on February 10, 2013, causing 36 deaths and dozens of injuries. The station was crowded that day due to travelers arriving to participate in the Kumbh Mela, a Hindu ritual and festival that draws millions of devout pilgrims to the banks of the Ganges River in Allahabad every twelve years for spiritual purification. In 2013, February 10 was the festival’s most auspicious holy day, and it was estimated that 20-30 million visitors attended the Kumbh Mela on that day alone. The case shows how urban crowding can challenge urban and national infrastructure and advance resource planning, describes the types of accidents, injuries, and related health risks associated with such urban mass gatherings, and outlines preventive measures (actual and potential) that help mitigate related health risks.

Related materials available to accompany the case and discussion guide include an instructor’s note, role play exercise, glossary of terms, and annotated bibliography.

This case focuses on unintentional accidents and injuries, but may also be used in a teaching module or class that considers the challenges of all injuries and accidents in global health, including those that are intentional. Examples of common unintentional injuries include the effects of natural disasters, motor vehicle accidents, crowd collisions, occupational hazards, and related encounters or falls. Intentional accidents and injuries include suicide, domestic and gendered violence, and consequences of armed crime, conflict, or terrorism. The health conditions for, risks of, and responses to such injuries, for affected individuals and communities, will depend on the circumstance. Responses range from bandages to cross-border humanitarian responses to national health policy making (e.g., seat belt laws to reduce traffic accident injuries).

The discussion questions below offer a broad range of approaches. Depending on the class, teachers may choose questions and types of questions most useful for their specific students and classroom goals. Each question is followed by hints (*in italics*) to guide the teacher in facilitating answers.

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## Discussion Questions

Hints to guide the teacher in exploring answers to each question are given in italics in parentheses.

### a. Information-seeking questions

1. What happened at the Allahabad Railway Station on February 10, 2013?
2. Who was responsible for the safety of the crowds at the Kumbh Mela during the festival? (*Describe how responsibility was administratively divided between the nagri, the city, the railway station, and state or national responsibility*)
3. What measures are established to mitigate crowd-related health risks and how are these measures regulated? (*refer to the sections on “Crowd Flow Control,” “Ground Safety,” “Bathers’ Safety,” “Lost and Missing Person Surveillance,” and “Onsite Medical Care”*)
4. What factors caused the long delay between the stampede and medical care for the most seriously injured survivors? (*refer to section, “Where were the Doctors?”*)

### b. Analytical questions

5. How did the stampede at the Allahabad railway station happen?
6. How did the train station regulate crowd flow, compared to crowd flow control measures at the festival site? (*refer to sections “Will there be Enough Trains?” and “Who is to Blame?”*)
7. Why were Kumbh officials eager to prevent a stampede within the festival grounds? (*e.g., national reputation; pride in religious heritage; public relations; not wanting to repeat bad press of the infamous 1954 stampede*)
8. Think about the urbanization process of the temporary city of the Kumbh Mela, with its rapid building, rapid population growth, and large-scale transitions in supply and demand; what is the relationship between this “temporal urbanism” and risks to nearby or local infrastructure? (*e.g., the festival crowds posed a physical stress on a city designed for less people; food and business transport would have crowded the roads more than usual; the event left lots of trash; medical care depended on volunteers and students; effect on local hospitals*)
9. Discuss how the railway station stampede during the Kumbh Mela festival might be compared with risks and risk mitigation in other temporary cities such as refugee camps and emergency housing in humanitarian disasters. (*e.g., it was not just the high volume of people but also the panic caused by need to move quickly from one place to another that caused the stampede; like refugees, those most affected were mostly elderly, women, or poor; both use tents for housing; similar need to provide safe water and similar risks of disease due to food and accidents*)
10. What challenges does this case suggest about the public health perspective of managing a large religious event effectively, compared to a non-religious crowd event (such as a sports game or refugee camp)?

### c. Challenge questions

11. Why was the railway footbridge a preventable risk? (*e.g., if the train had not been redirected to a different track at the last minute, use of the footbridge would have been unnecessary; more alternative bridges across the tracks would have prevented the rush to that one footbridge*)
12. Who do you think had final jurisdiction over the footbridge? Why?
13. What social, cultural, or economic factors or determinants might also have played a role in the fact that most of the victims were women or children? (*people were hurrying; women and children were less able to move fast and may have been carrying heavier burdens or more dependent on family*)

members who were separated from them in the rush; the festival attracts elderly who want to die in religious purity; such persons may be sick or less skilled at hurrying through crowds)

14. How might medical service and care delivery to stampede victims have been improved? (see Dr. Shaikh's comments and suggestions)
15. What implications might this event have for global policies as they affect international relations, human rights, and global health? (e.g., the festival draws Hindus from many different countries, as well as tourists and journalists; the media and international presence could provoke or inspire health policy changes in other countries or in international organizations)

#### d. Action questions

16. What would you do to improve train transit safety during the Kumbh Mela if you were a
  - (i) Kumbh nagri appointed police officer? (e.g., these officers would have remained in the nagri except for travel to and from the festival; they would likely have little influence on train safety except through political connections)
  - (ii) Allahabad city employee? (e.g., lobby to build more footbridges; improve the Railway Station's healthcare services and available healthcare personnel; more liaison with the Kumbh Mela health care service teams during the festival to ensure that the good care available in the nagri is also available to pilgrims in Allahabad city if possible)
  - (iii) India Railways official? (e.g., leverage power to deliver total number of extra trains promised; prevent last-minute track changes for all trains during the festival; train Railway workers to provide emergency health care services and supplies; improve cell phone communications for crowd management; improve Railway clinic coverage and signage; more emphasis on use of and festival access to/from all four nearby train stations so people did not automatically crowd to the main station)
  - (iv) Physician or medical officer? (e.g., physicians are well-respected community leaders; leverage influence to improve all of the above)

#### e. Hypothetical questions

17. If the track change had been announced in advance, would that have kept the flow over the bridge safe? Why or why not? (e.g., would it have prevented use of police batons? What was needed for safety over the bridge, regardless of timing?)
18. Would you consider the outcome—36 dead and 39 injured at the stampede at the railway station on February 10—a mark of success for the 2013 Kumbh Mela, or a failure? Explain your answer. (e.g., review the section "Public Health at the Kumbh Mela" and discussion of past disasters; emphasize that the focus here is on preventable injuries; is a preventable injury ever a mark of "success"?)

#### f. Predictive questions

19. What do you think will happen at the next Allahabad Kumbh Mela (in 2025) at the Allahabad Railway Station? Explain your answer. (e.g., discuss: the festival's tradition of longterm planning; advances in telecommunications; what factors will influence whether there are changes in 2025 or not?)

#### g. Generalization questions

20. How does urban structure affect health in this story? What aspects of health are affected? (e.g., deaths and injuries were caused by limitations in an urban structure—station and city designs, road traffic access, urban structure of train tracks and timetables)
21. Name other aspects of health that you can imagine might be affected by being at the Kumbh during a stampede (whether in the stampede or not); explain your answer. (e.g., increased anxiety and fear for friends and family; all the usual health risks of close crowding even without a stampede, e.g.,

*infectious disease risks, water and sanitation; increased risks of motor vehicle accidents outside the stampede area)*

22. What other circumstances could benefit from lessons learned by the February 10 stampede? (e.g., *architectural decisions about new and renovated transportation centers; other mass gatherings and refugee camp design and administration; more anticipatory urban planning for roads, exit routes, and related transportation and housing options in areas currently at risk of rising sea levels or hurricane/flood damage due to climate change)*)

**Note:** The organization of questions into categories in this discussion guide is based on Austin JE. Teaching Notes: Communicating the Teacher's Wisdom. HBS Case Collection Background Note 793-105. Harvard Business School Publishing 1993. <http://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=23299>.