
The Anatomy of Panic: Availability Bias and Crowd Hysteria

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ABSTRACT

The case study explores how availability bias shapes human perception in high-stress situations through the experience of Meera Sharma at the Maha Kumbh Mela 2025. Meera's deeply ingrained fear, influenced by her grandmother's stories, dictates her response to a moment of panic triggered by a false rumor. The study examines how cognitive biases and herd mentality escalate mass hysteria, leading to irrational decision-making. Meera's journey highlights the contrast between perceived and actual risk. The study underscores the role of critical thinking and real-time communication in mitigating panic. The findings emphasize the need for structured crowd management and psychological resilience training at large public gatherings.

KEYWORDS: Availability Bias, Cognitive Bias, Herd Mentality, Crowd Psychology, Emotional Resilience.

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1. Introduction:

What if the fears that shape us are not born from what we see, but from what we've been told? What if, in a single breathless moment, your mind clutches not the truth before you, but the memory of a story once whispered in the dark?

The Echoes of Memory unravels a tale set against the vast, devotional tide of the Maha Kumbh Mela 2025—the grandest spiritual congregation on Earth. Here, where the sacred rivers converge and millions bathe in the hope of liberation, faith flows freely, but so does fear. In this sea of devotion stands Meera Sharma, a young girl from Vrindavan, whose soul is soaked in the stories of her grandmother—stories that shimmered with divine wonder and shuddered with remembered tragedy.

Among those stories, one clung to her most tightly: the tale of a deadly stampede, etched into her mind not through experience, but through emotion. And so, when a rumor of danger ripples through the crowd like a storm wind across still waters, Meera does not pause to reason. Her breath quickens, her heart races—not because she sees danger, but because she remembers it. The past rushes forward, eclipsing the present.

What follows is not merely an incident—it is a revelation. A mirror held up to the human psyche, where memory becomes prophecy, and fear, a self-fulfilling echo. This is a story of how minds collapse before bodies do. Of how the weight of remembered fear can shape reality more powerfully than fact. And yet, it is also a story of awakening—of how awareness can cut through illusion, and faith can outshine even the deepest shadow.

2. Background:

Meera Sharma, a 19-year-old Sociology student, grew up in a modest Brahmin household in Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh. Life in Vrindavan revolved around devotion. Temple bells echoed through the streets. Incense filled the air. Every corner whispered a story of Lord Krishna's leelas. Faith shaped every moment.

Her grandmother, Sushila Devi, carried these stories. She spoke of gods, warriors, devotion, and destiny. The Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Vedas lived through her voice. Each night, under the dim glow of a flickering Diya, she described her days as a Kalpvasi at the Kumbh Mela.

Rows of tents stretched toward the horizon. Pilgrims whispered prayers in unison. Ash-smeared ascetics meditated by the riverbanks. The Triveni Sangam, where the Ganga, Yamuna, and Saraswati merged, shimmered under the sun. She dipped her fingers in the water, feeling its sacred pull. "The waters here carry the essence of amrita. Pilgrims' cross lifetimes to seek this purity," she said with reverence.

Not every story carried warmth. Some held fear. One night, her voice trembled. She described the 2013 Prayagraj Kumbh Mela stampede. A sudden surge broke the serenity. Waves of people pushed and stumbled. Slippers tore from feet. Scarves lay trampled in the dirt. Divine chants turned into cries of terror. Meera listened, her heart pounding.

That story never faded. Fear gripped her. The Kumbh Mela became both a dream and a warning. Devotion soared. Danger lurked.

She admired the Kalpvasis. Men and women left behind comforts, living by the river with nothing but faith. They spent days in prayer, nights beneath the sky. Her

grandmother's words revealed a world where divinity and mortality intertwined. Purity and peril stood side by side. Meera felt the pull of the Kumbh grow stronger.

3. The Decision to Visit Maha Kumbh 2025:

In late 2024, Meera's family learned about the upcoming Maha Kumbh Mela in January 2025. Excitement filled their home. Meera longed to witness the rituals, the Shahi Snan, and the sacred Triveni Sangam. She had dreamed of this moment since childhood. Her parents decided to visit on Mauni Amavasya, January 29, 2025—the most auspicious, the most crowded day.

Money remained tight. They had no choice but to travel by train. The journey from Mathura Junction to Prayagraj tested their endurance. Crowds swallowed every compartment. People pressed against each other. Passageways vanished under waves of bodies. Toilets turned unreachable. Children clung to luggage racks. Elderly passengers struggled for air in the thick, unmoving heat. Every stop crammed more people inside.

Meera gripped her father's arm. Her breath quickened. Strangers pressed against her from every side. She scanned the mass of bodies, searching for space, for relief. The heat clawed at her skin. Sweat trickled down her back. The air smelled of exhaustion, of unwashed fabric, of too many people forced into too little space.

"Is this devotion?" she asked herself. Her chest tightened. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. The train rattled forward, but time dragged, each second heavier than the last. Panic crawled into her throat. A deep unease settled inside her. The journey had only begun, yet something inside her had already changed.

4. Arrival at Prayagraj:

Meera and her family stepped onto the platform at Prayagraj station. A vast ocean of devotees surged forward, moving as one toward the ghats. Their determination filled the air. Her grandmother's stories came alive in front of her. Pilgrims clutched prayer beads, lips murmuring hymns. Their eyes stayed locked on the horizon, drawn toward the sacred Sangam.

She stepped outside and felt something unexpected. A deep stillness settled inside her. Chaos swirled all around—loudspeakers crackled with directions, volunteers guided endless lines, queues snaked through the streets. Yet, beneath it all, something else pulsed. Devotion. Longing. A force greater than fear.

The scent of incense curled through the air. Devotional songs wove into the hum of voices. Meera walked through narrow lanes, heart pounding. Colorful tents stretched into the distance. Saints sat cross-legged, eyes closed, chants rising from their lips. Foreign pilgrims meditated by the river; drawn to something they did not fully understand but desperately sought. She saw herself in them.

She passed bhandaras. Giant pots bubbled with steaming food. Volunteers handed out plates with practiced hands. Pilgrims ate in silence, gratitude filling the spaces where words were not needed. Her grandmother's stories lived in every corner. Meera inhaled deeply. She had arrived, not just at the Kumbh Mela, but at the edge of something she could not yet name.

5. The Stampede - Bias in Action:

The family moved closer to the Sangam. The crowd thickened. Devotees pressed against one another, desperate for a space in the sacred waters. Chants rose and fell, carried by loudspeakers cutting through the dense air.

A murmur turned into a wave of fear. Someone whispered about a collapsed bridge near the ghats. Panic spread like wildfire. People shoved forward. Others tried to push back. The pressure of bodies surged in every direction.

Meera's breath hitched. Her grandmother's stories came alive. Screams. Abandoned belongings. A rush of bodies fighting to escape. She looked down. Scattered slippers littered the ground. Terror-stricken faces mirrored the nightmares she had imagined for years. Her chest tightened. Her vision blurred. The world spun.

"We're trapped," she whispered. Her voice barely escaped her lips.

Her father caught her trembling hand. His grip anchored her. He pulled her toward a police barricade, cutting through the frantic mass. Officers shouted orders. Disaster teams pushed through, restoring order. Slowly, the chaos settled.

The bridge had not collapsed. The panic fed itself, fueled by whispers and fear. Meera exhaled shakily. The stampede existed only in their minds, but the terror had been real. (Source: NDMA Report on Crowd Management, 2025).

6. Reflections and Learnings:

The journey back to Vrindavan remained silent. Meera stared out of the train window, lost in thought. The crowd pressed around her, yet the suffocating fear had vanished. She felt different. Her mind replayed every moment at the Kumbh. The rush of bodies. The chants echoed through the air. The fear that had gripped her. The devotion that had defined the experience.

She had imagined chaos. Instead, she had witnessed faith. Sadhus are standing motionless in meditation. Pilgrims are chanting in unison. Strangers breaking bread at bhandaras, bound by belief. The same energy that had frightened her had also united millions.

Her grandmother welcomed her with open arms. Meera sank into the familiar warmth, inhaling the scent of sandalwood and old books. Sushila Devi's eyes sparkled with curiosity. Meera spoke. The words poured out, each memory unfolding like a story of its own. As she spoke, realization struck.

She had not lived that fear. She had inherited it. The stories had shaped her vision more than reality itself. The Kumbh Mela, vast and unpredictable, had given her a truth beyond fear.

She had learned something powerful. The past could cast shadows, but faith, when clear, became light.

7. Conclusion:

As the echoes of ancient chants faded into the distance and the train slipped into the velvet hush of night, Meera sat unmoving—wrapped not in peace, but in the quiet thunder of questions she could not yet name. Around her, passengers dozed. Temples

and trees blurred past the window like fleeting memories. But within her, something had sharpened. Something had shifted.

She had gone in search of the sacred—drawn to the riverbanks by the promise of divine cleansing, of ancient waters that whispered liberation. But what she found was far less clear, far more human. Not salvation, but reflection. Not gods, but ghosts—stories not her own, yet etched into her very bones. Stories passed down in trembling voices by flickering lamps, soaked in reverence, but also in fear.

There had been no bridge collapse. No divine wrath. Only a rumor, a sentence spoken once and then echoed a thousand times until it roared louder than reason. And yet, wasn't that enough? The fear had been real. The stampede lived—if not in flesh and blood, then in thought and breath. Meera had run. Not because danger had come, but because she had remembered it. Or rather, because someone else had remembered it for her.

And so, she sits now, haunted not by what happened, but by what almost did.

What does that say about us, as people?

Perhaps we all walk through life wearing borrowed fears like invisible veils. Perhaps every choice, every hesitation, every shiver down the spine is not born in the present moment, but rehearsed in advance—through stories told to protect us, through memories not lived but deeply felt. If that's true..., can we ever truly call our reactions our own? Or are we simply actors in a play directed by unseen memories, our roles decided long before we step onto the stage?

Meera returned to Vrindavan. The bells still rang, the air still carried incense, her grandmother still waited with open arms. But something in Meera had been left behind—still standing at the Sangam, barefoot in the dust, watching the crowd with wide eyes, asking a question that refused to be answered.

Because now, she knows. Fear doesn't need facts to flourish. It needs only familiarity. A whisper. A memory. A face that flinches. And when it comes—sudden, wild, and without warning—will we stop to question its origin? Will we ask, whose fear is this?

Is it mine? Or merely passed down like a prayer no one remembers writing? And if we never ask..., What moments might we flee from that were never dangerous at all?

What truths might we abandon in the name of safety?

What futures might we destroy with the echoes of imagined pasts? The train keeps moving.

So does the crowd. The moment has passed. But the question remains, hovering in the space between silence and memory. And somewhere deep within, it waits.

For the next chant. The next whisper. The next girl with a thousand stories in her lungs and no way to know which ones are truly hers.

Exhibit 1: Character Profiles

Meera Sharma:

- 19-year-old sociology student from Vrindavan.
- Deeply influenced by her grandmother's stories.

- Dreams of attending the Maha Kumbh Mela. Struggles with fear.
- Experiences panic during the event. Realizes her fears were shaped by bias.

Sushila Devi (Grandmother):

- Elderly storyteller with deep faith and reverence for tradition.
- Lived through previous Kumbh Melas. Witnessed the 2013 stampede.
- Shapes Meera's perception through emotionally charged narratives.
- Represents the power of generational memory and its impact on fear.

Rajesh Sharma (Meera's Father):

- Practical, composed family man.
- Supports the pilgrimage despite financial and logistical challenges.
- Acts as a grounding force for Meera during the panic.
- Guides the family to safety. Reassures Meera post-event.

Exhibit 2: Factors Leading to Mass Panic

- False rumors spread by word of mouth.
- Dense crowd movements with no clear exit strategy.
- Emotional contagion fueling fear.
- Lack of real-time verified communication.
- Availability bias causing immediate association with past tragedies.

Exhibit 3: Preventive Measures for Future Gatherings

- Clear crowd control strategies. Multiple exit points.
- AI-based surveillance monitors movement patterns.
- Public education on cognitive biases and herd mentality.
- Official digital communication platforms dispel rumors.
- Trained volunteers assist in emergencies. Provide psychological first aid.

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