

# Stampede at Indian temple kills 63

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10 March 2010

A tragic incident near the town of Kunda in the state of Uttar Pradesh last Thursday once again highlighted the abject poverty facing tens of millions throughout India.

More than 10,000 poor people had gathered at an ashram from villages in the surrounding Pratapgarh district on news that free food, clothes, utensils and sums of 20 rupees (45 US cents) were to be handed out. Desperate not to miss out, people in the crowd surged forward. The entrance gate collapsed and a stampede occurred. At least 63 people—37 children and 26 women—died in the crush and 64 more were injured.

Sita Devi Paswan, whose leg was fractured, said people had run out of patience. “We had been waiting for three hours since 9 a.m. I was waiting behind 500 people. When the gates opened, the people were trying to push in and enter as quickly as possible. There was a sound of a crash and people began running,” she told the press.

As news of the tragedy spread, the authorities at all levels of government attempted to find a scapegoat, avoid any responsibility and score political points off one another.

Last Friday, just one day after the disaster, a preliminary report to the state government blamed the ashram management for the deaths. According to the report, the organisers had failed to provide adequate crowd control measures—no public address system was available. The district police were told of the event but were only asked for 10 to 15 officers. An engineer found the entrance gate to be poorly constructed.

Undoubtedly, the ashram management exhibited an indifference to the plight of the thousands of rural poor gathered outside the complex, waiting for hours for small handouts. But the report is a rather transparent attempt to absolve the district administration, state and central governments of any responsibility, not only over the specific incident but for the hardship that

drives people to such desperate lengths.

According to ashram spokesman Rajneesh Puri, the district administration had been informed about the feast a week in advance, but no assistance was provided. The event is held annually to commemorate the death of the ashram head’s wife. A state assembly member told the media that “everybody in Pratapgarh is aware that a gathering of this magnitude takes place here on this day”.

On the same day that the preliminary report was filed, the police registered a criminal negligence case against the ashram management. Ashram leader Kripaluji Maharaj had fled the scene after the stampede, but reappeared after police assured his safety. In a bid to deflect public anger, the ashram has offered money to the injured as well as the families of the dead, along with promises to assist with education and health care.

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which forms the Uttar Pradesh state government, claims to represent the dalits, previously known as the “untouchable” castes, and other oppressed social layers. In reality, the BSP is the vehicle for relatively privileged dalits who have exploited the country’s reservation system (affirmative action in favour of lower castes) to further their careers. Despite its claims to represent the dispossessed, the BSP supports the corporate elite’s pro-market agenda and has made no serious effort to provide land to the dalits, who make up a grossly disproportionate share of the landless. More recently, the party has attempted to broaden its base by promoting a “Dalit-Brahmin brotherhood” with high-caste Brahmins.

BSP leader and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati issued a press statement appealing to the national government to provide “decent compensation to the families of those who have lost their lives or were injured in the unfortunate stampede”. She said her government was unable to provide assistance “because

of the acute financial crisis currently facing the state”.

Mayawati’s political rivals were quick to pounce on her statement. Digvinjay Singh, a senior Congress party leader, declared that it was “really shameful” that Mayawati had refused to provide any compensation. “Mayawati has millions of rupees to build parks, to get statues of elephants and others installed, but has no money for the poor women and children who have lost their lives,” he said. The Congress party currently leads the central government in New Delhi.

Not to be outdone, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) denounced Mayawati’s comments as “patently inhuman”. “How can Mayawati say her government has no funds for the stampede victims? It is unbelievable that a large state like Uttar Pradesh does not have funds for giving compensation,” BJP spokesman Ravi Shankar Prasad said. He asked how much money she had spent on erecting her own statues.

It is true that Mayawati’s lavish spending on memorial parks and politically symbolic statues amount to an abuse of public funds. But the Congress and the BJP are cynically seeking to utilise the tragedy for their own political purposes.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh offered his condolences and announced compensation from the National Relief Fund of 200,000 rupees (\$US4,400) to the next of kin of the dead and 50,000 rupees for the seriously injured. Congress further exploited the incident by sending Rahul Gandhi, the party’s general secretary, to the Pratapgarh district to meet victims’ families.

The tragedy took place on the border of the two lower house, or Lok Sabha, seats held by Gandhi and his mother, Congress president Sonia Gandhi. As well as holding power in New Delhi, the Congress Party ruled Uttar Pradesh for more than four decades after Indian independence in 1947 and is directly responsible for the appalling social conditions in the state.

Congress’s support in Uttar Pradesh collapsed in the early 1990s after its turn to pro-market restructuring worsened the plight of the poor and created widespread discontent, which was exploited by the BJP as well as various regional and caste-based parties. Rahul Gandhi’s visits to dalit villages in Uttar Pradesh are a desperate attempt to rebuild support for Congress in the state.

While claiming to represent all oppressed layers in

India, including Muslims, the BSP has no qualms about entering alliances with the Hindu supremacist BJP. The BSP has twice formed a coalition government in Uttar Pradesh with the BJP, most recently in 2002. Just nine months after a BJP-sponsored communal pogrom in Gujarat resulted in the deaths of nearly 2,000 Muslims, Mayawati appeared alongside Chief Minister Narendra Modi in support of the BJP in the 2002 Gujarat state election.

None of the political parties even refers to the root cause of last week’s tragic stampede: the grinding poverty facing broad layers of the population throughout India. With around 180 million people, Uttar Pradesh is India’s most populous state and one of its poorest. An estimated 42 percent of people live below the official poverty line. The rural labourers and landless peasants, whose wives queued up at the ashram last week, are among the most oppressed.

In a rare speech in January 2009 referring to conditions in Uttar Pradesh, India’s Vice President Mohammed Hamid Ansari pointed out that life expectancy was just 56 years, compared to 74 years in the state of Kerala. A health survey in 2005–06 found that around half of women aged 15 to 50 and 85 percent of children under 3 years were anaemic, and that half of all children were stunted and underweight. Infant mortality was 73 per thousand live births in the state, whereas it was 57 for India as a whole. Less than 10 percent of households had access to piped drinking water, compared to an all-India figure of 42 percent. Access to electricity and toilet facilities was also well below the national average.

None of these issues will be addressed by any of the political parties in the wake of last week’s disaster. They are all jointly responsible for this social catastrophe.



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