

WHEN THE CROWD HOLDS THE CAMERA

*Smartphones, Protest, and
How the State Keeps the Peace*

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FREE SAMPLER

The opening chapters

Introduction — The Age of Crowds

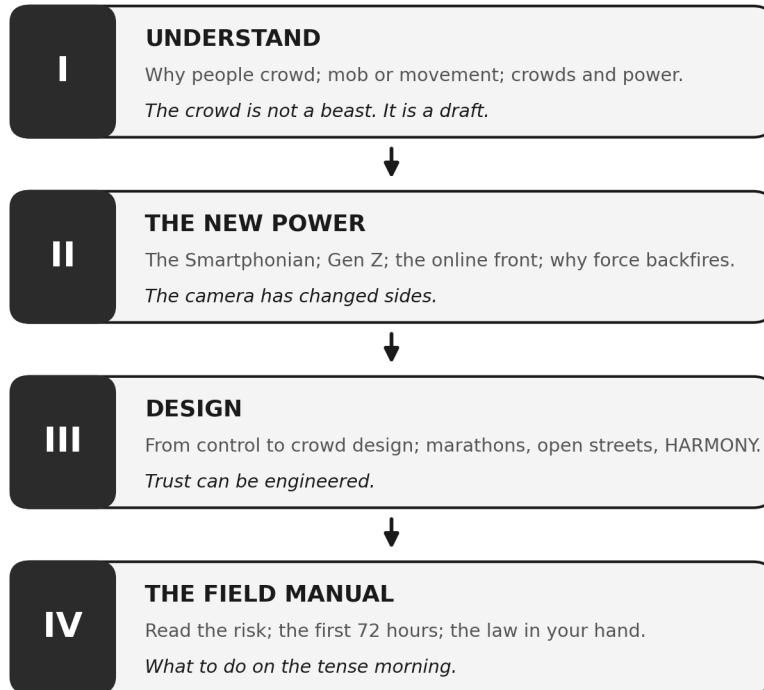


Figure 1 — The argument, in four movements.

Panchkula, early morning. The sun is barely up as I stand on a wide avenue watching something I never saw in my first decades in uniform. For years I had closed streets for VIP convoys or riot lines, always braced for a crowd to turn. This November morning we had barricaded the road for the opposite reason. It was Raahgiri Day — a day of the streets — an open invitation to the public to take back the road. As the light spread, they came: families on bicycles, teenagers with cricket bats, elders with yoga mats. Within hours more than ten thousand people filled the car-free stretch, cycling, dancing, drawing flowers in chalk on the asphalt. A boulevard built for engines had become a playground. The crowd was not an adversary to be managed. It was a community rediscovering itself.

I had been trained to read a crowd warily, as a volatile mass one spark from chaos. Here was the rebuttal, in plain sight. No one had ordered these people out; they came because they wanted something modern life had taken from them — open space, company, a few hours without fear. Watching their faces I understood a simple thing the old training had no room for: under the right conditions, a crowd reveals the best in us. A crowd becomes what we design it to be.

That is the argument of this book. And it could not be more timely, because the crowd itself has changed.

A New Era of Crowds

In this century, crowds have become more visible, more volatile, and more decisive than ever. Digital connection has woven a new social fabric that can stitch thousands of strangers together

in minutes. A single post can put people on the street overnight. In France, the Yellow Vests coalesced through Facebook — more than three thousand local groups, nearly four million members — a movement that appeared almost from nowhere, leaderless and intensely focused. Today's crowd runs on internet time. A demonstration that once needed weeks of organising, a leader, and a stack of leaflets now needs only a hashtag and a group chat. Protests are faster, flatter, and far harder for rigid hierarchies to control.

The demographics feed the fire. We are living through the largest youth generation in history; more than forty per cent of the world is under twenty-five, much of it in fast-growing cities, with aspirations that outrun the slow channels of formal politics. So they spill into the streets. And they are hyper-connected — every smartphone a broadcast station, every local gathering instantly visible worldwide. A march over fuel prices in one country can trigger a solidarity rally an ocean away. When economic collapse drove Sri Lankans to force out their president in 2022, it emboldened others facing the same hardship; prime ministers in Bangladesh and Nepal were swept out in the years that followed. In a connected age, unrest in one country's streets is rarely an isolated event. It is part of a planetary ripple.

That connection also makes crowds dangerously fast. They swell without organisers, and their mood can turn in an instant. One clip of a raised baton at dusk reaches millions before dawn; a single rumour can flip a peaceful rally into an angry surge. And because it all unfolds under cameras, a heavy hand that once went unseen now becomes international news by morning. The crowd today is watched round the clock and from every angle at once — by a hundred phones the state cannot see the other side of — and it has lost, for good, the unwitnessed corner in which the old playbook was written. Power today is as much about the signal as the street. Yet for all that volatility, these crowds are also vital — a safety valve when other channels fail, and a vehicle for solidarity in a fractured world. From the Arab Spring to the climate strikes, they have driven the century's transformations. We have entered an Age of Crowds, in which the fate of governments will be decided in squares as much as in parliaments.

Old Playbooks, New Realities

Our handling of crowds, though, is stuck in the past. Over a century ago Gustave Le Bon declared the crowd inherently irrational — “isolated, a man may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian.” That 1895 verdict cast a long shadow. Generations of officials were taught to fear the gathering and to reach, by reflex, for the baton, the tear gas, the barricade. In a slower, more deferential age, suppression could pass for order. Not now. Even seasoned officers admit, quietly, that the old playbook is failing. Modern crowds assemble where no rulebook anticipates — a mall, a highway, far from any parade route — and they are decentralised and on the move. How do you decapitate a leaderless movement? How do you cordon a flash mob? The questions baffle institutions still working in analog.

The cost of the mismatch grows by the year. Cling to force, and you risk not just a moral failure but a strategic one: a mishandled crowd can delegitimise a government in hours. We have seen it repeatedly — one heavy-handed dispersal lighting the spark for something far larger. Aggressive tactics that look decisive on the day often summon a bigger crowd the next. Around the world officials reach for the tear gas because it is what they have always reached for. But crowd behaviour has outrun crowd control. We are answering smartphone-era movements with typewriter-era tactics.

From Control to Design

There is another way, and it starts with a different premise: crowds become what we design for. Control was never the foundation of order; trust was. To engineer trust is to recognise that a crowd carries legitimate desire, and to build ways of meeting it halfway: to stop reacting with coercion and start creating settings where public energy runs in a useful direction. I learned this on the ground, often the hard way. Over three decades I stood on both sides of the old us-versus-them line — leading security against angry demonstrators, and stepping unarmed into the same crowds to listen. Treat a crowd as an enemy and it often obliges. Treat it as a partner — as your own community — and it can transform.

I have watched it happen — in a riot-scarred town in 2016, where a plain community run put men who would not speak to one another after the violence on the same start line, moving the same way for an hour. The full story waits in the Preface and in Chapter 10. I saw it again with Raahgiri, which began as a quirky Sunday experiment and became a standing bridge between citizens and the state — parents and marching bands and health camps, and police officers who, for once, were participants rather than enforcers. Give people dignity, purpose, and a voice, and the gathering turns from havoc toward harmony. The question for anyone responsible for public order is no longer “How do we stop the crowd?” but “How do we channel the human urge to gather into something that builds?”

About This Book

What follows is part memoir, part field manual. You will find scenes from protests and public events, the psychology and history that explain why people gather, and concrete strategies drawn from real successes and real failures.

The book moves in four parts. Part I asks why we gather at all, and draws the line — older than any smartphone — between a mob and a movement, and the theatre every crowd stages for the state watching it. Part II turns to the crowd the connected age has actually produced: the rise of the hyper-connected “Smartphonian,” the generation now filling the world’s squares, the information war fought on the screen before it ever reaches the street, and the colonial reflex of force that still misfires against all of it. Part III turns from diagnosis to practice, through three experiments I built and watched work, each reaching a wider ring of the public than the last: a sports talent hunt that met a child’s aspiration before it could curdle into anger, a marathon that turned that same energy into solidarity across a whole district, and Raahgiri, a Sunday ritual that threw the state’s own streets open to everyone, no pretext required. Call it a ladder rather than three separate ideas — each rung a fresh, wider way to meet the public in joy instead of only in confrontation. Part IV is the toolbox: how to read flashpoints early, use space and communication rather than force, and deploy trained “coolants” who calm a crowd from inside it instead of charging it from outside. Along the way I introduce a simple design framework — HARMONY: Honour, Aspiration, Ritual, Music, Order, Narrative, and Yielding space — for turning confrontation into cooperation.

My hope is that by the last page you will be convinced of what took me a career and a few hard mornings to learn: the crowd is not the enemy. It never was. What has changed is its speed, its density, and its reach. Our methods must change too. Meet the crowd with suspicion and force, and we make the havoc we fear. Meet it with imagination and respect, and we give the best of

our collective nature room to show itself. People will keep gathering — to seek meaning, to demand change, to celebrate and to mourn. The only real question is whether we fight the crowd, or learn to work with it.

PART I — Understanding the Crowd

“It is only in a crowd that man can become free of this fear of being touched.” — Elias Canetti

Chapter 1 — More Pilgrim Than Officer

I remember the press of humanity at dawn on the banks of the Ganga. The Kumbh Mela, India’s great river pilgrimage, was at its peak. I had come not in uniform but in awe, more pilgrim than officer. The air shook with chant and the hum of a million bare feet on wet sand. An ocean of people stretched past the horizon, and yet it did not crash into chaos — it moved in slow waves. No central commander. No loudspeaker barking orders. People flowed in unison to an invisible rhythm: prayer, belief, belonging.

For a moment I shut my eyes and let the current carry me, and I felt something I had never felt on duty — a deep safety in togetherness, an electricity running through the whole. This crowd was not a problem to be managed. It was a living thing with its own order. And the order was no accident. It was design, centuries old, woven from faith and trust.

When I opened my eyes, one question stayed with me: why do people crowd? What pulls millions of us together, across cultures and centuries, into these great human tides?

Hold that dawn in your mind through this chapter — because according to the most influential book ever written about crowds, it should not have happened.

The mob in your academy notes

Every officer carries a picture of the mob in his head, and most of us think we drew it from experience. We did not. We inherited it — from a book published in 1895.

That year Gustave Le Bon, watching the mass upheavals of his day with alarm, published *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, and described the crowd in near-mystical terms: a new creature, a “collective mind,” that appeared whenever people massed together. The creature, in his telling, was savage. “By the mere fact that he forms part of an organised crowd,” he wrote, “a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilisation.” Alone, a person might be reasonable and decent; in a crowd, he turns impulsive, credulous, easily led. The book became one of the best-selling scientific books of its era, and its verdict sank deep. Police chiefs and politicians nodded along. Even Freud took it seriously. The mob you were warned about in training — mindless, dangerous, waiting for a spark — is Le Bon’s mob, over a century old and still on duty.

Now set his theory against that dawn on the Ganga. A million people pressed together, no commander, no orders — by Le Bon's account, humanity several rungs down the ladder, a disaster waiting for its spark. What I felt instead was the safest I have ever been in a public place. One of us was wrong about crowds, and I had the advantage of standing in one.

The thinkers who came after Le Bon kept correcting the picture. Freud, in 1921, looked at the inner tie: a group, he argued, is bound by emotional bonds — shared attachment to a leader, identification with one another. His crowd is a kind of family, intoxicating because it answers a primal hunger for belonging, dangerous because conscience thins when responsibility is shared. He at least saw what Le Bon missed: the same bond can release deep affection or deep aggression, depending on where it is led.

The novelist Elias Canetti, in 1960, came closer still to what I felt on that sand. He noticed how the crowd rewrites the ordinary senses. We normally dread the touch of a stranger; packed into a dense crowd, that dread dissolves, and the very pressure of other bodies becomes a comfort. "It is only in a crowd," he wrote, "that man can become free of this fear of being touched." Inside it, people feel equal — a professor and a labourer shout the same slogan, a banker and a sweeper stand in the same river. To Canetti the crowd was neither evil nor irrational but primordial, holding the seed of both destruction and renewal. Rulers, he observed, both fear it and feed on it: the tyrant dreads the mob that could topple him and craves the adoring mass at his rally.

But the decisive correction came from the people who did what Le Bon never did — went into crowds and took notes. Watching the protests of the 1960s and '70s, the sociologists Ralph Turner, Lewis Killian, and later Clark McPhail found crowds far more orderly than the legend allowed. Their finding is simple and clarifying: people in a crowd do not shed their sense of right and wrong. Faced with a new situation, they mill, read one another, and quickly settle on fresh norms to guide the group. Someone calls "sit down," and a sit-in is born; a few begin tending the injured, and a volunteer aid post appears. McPhail spent years inside protests, rallies, even riots, notebook in hand, and documented crowd behaviour as small groups coordinating inside the larger mass, deciding on the fly — not mayhem, but improvised order. Later fieldwork by Stephen Reicher and Clifford Stott confirmed what anyone who has stood in a crowd of like minds senses: it can be empowering, even euphoric, not only enraging.

The "group mind" is not destined to be a beast. It can just as easily be the voice of a shared conscience, or the roar of common hope. A century of study, reduced to one line an officer can use: the crowd is not mad until something — often the way it is handled — drives it mad.

Built to gather

Why does the pull run so deep? Because we are built for it. Picture our ancestors on the open savanna. Alone, a human was easy prey — to predators, to hunger, to a hostile band. Together, a group was strength: more eyes to catch the circling lion, more hands to drive it off. Those who cooperated and bonded survived and passed on their genes. Over the millennia, evolution rewarded not only strong arms and sharp wits but the ability to connect and combine. One leading idea, from the anthropologist Robin Dunbar, holds that our outsized brains grew partly

to manage the complexity of group life — big brains for big tribes. Connection became as basic to us as food; isolation registers in the brain something like hunger.

The crowd is that instinct, scaled up, and it feeds three needs an officer should learn to tell apart.

The first is **safety**. To stand in a crowd is to feel less alone against the world. A lone woman speaking against injustice on a street corner is quickly silenced; in a crowd of thousands she is emboldened, protected by the mass.

The second is **belonging**. Over a century ago the sociologist Émile Durkheim described the collective effervescence of group ritual — the swell of shared feeling that makes the self feel merged with the whole. “By shouting the same cry, pronouncing the same words, making the same gesture,” he wrote, people “become and feel as one.” Anyone who has sung with an entire stadium, or stood in a candlelit vigil as silence sweeps a crowd, knows the sensation. It is not soft sentiment: psychology counts belonging among our basic needs, and chronic loneliness damages health as surely as smoking.

The third is **voice** — the crowd lets us express what a single life cannot. Joy wants company: the dancing wedding, a million strangers hugging in a square at midnight. Grief seeks a crowd too, in the vigil and the mass funeral, as if sorrow can only be carried collectively. And anger and hope, to become a political force, almost always need a crowd. **One person shouting on a corner is a crank; a hundred thousand marching on a capital, and the nation has to listen.** Oppressed people have always found this out: together, we have weight.

Even our chemistry agrees — being with others releases dopamine and oxytocin, the bonding hormone; isolation trips the stress response, as though we were under threat. We are wired to gather. A crowd at peace — singing, clapping, moving as one — can be among the most life-affirming sights there is.

The crowd the state did not summon

And yet crowds frighten us — or rather, they frighten those who watch from outside, and above all those in power. The fear has a vocabulary: mob, rabble, herd, masses. Authority tends to presume a gathering is mindless and dangerous until proven otherwise, still running Le Bon’s Victorian spectre a century past its expiry. Even orderly protest marches get branded “hate marches”; even peaceful assembly is warned against as “mob rule.”

The reflex is old and consistent, from colonial empire to modern democracy, and it has a body count. In 1919, British troops fired on an unarmed crowd at Jallianwala Bagh — most of it gathered to protest the Rowlatt arrests, the rest Baisakhi fairgoers; in 1989, a regime turned its guns on its own citizens at Tiananmen. Those are the extremes. The milder version plays out constantly, whenever riot police confront citizens who were largely peaceful and, in doing so, summon the very chaos they feared. **Treat people like a mob and they may become one. Treat them with dignity and they tend to return it.**

Notice, though, what power forgets: it leans on crowds too. The election rally, the national-day parade, the state funeral, the victory celebration — these are crowds blessed by authority, welcomed rather than feared. So it is not the crowd as such that unsettles the state. **It is the**

crowd it did not summon and cannot script. A spontaneous protest, a grassroots movement, a flash mob — these alarm officials precisely because they are the public's will expressed outside the orchestration of power. And here is the irony: cracking down on such a crowd is the surest way to turn quiet discontent into open fury. Crowds have a sharp sense of justice; when they feel wronged, the mood turns. Meet them with respect, treat them as partners rather than enemies, and the opposite happens — the crowd, feeling heard, polices itself. The same crowd met with batons erupts. The difference lies in whether we arrive with fear or with hope.

The paradox is that the crowd is so often built of hope. To join one is usually an act of optimism — a belief that something good can come of people standing together. The protester believes a collective voice can bend the arc toward justice; the pilgrim believes that together they will touch the divine; the reveller believes in the plain joy of celebrating as one. From inside, a crowd can feel orderly, meaningful, even sacred, however it looks on the evening news. One reporter who covered large marches wrote that they were among the most orderly, family-filled gatherings he had ever seen — grandparents and children walking together, policing their own — even as ministers denounced the same crowds as unruly mobs. That gap between the crowd's reality and the official story breeds mistrust on both sides: protesters grow cynical at being called a mob, and authorities, steeped in fear, reach for ever harder measures.

From fear to design

Put the threads together — crowds are universal, they are more orderly than their reputation, they answer needs as deep as hunger, and how they behave depends heavily on how they are met — and a conclusion follows. If crowds are inescapable, and if they carry both danger and promise, the task is neither to worship them nor to dread them, but to understand and design for them.

The Kumbh, where this chapter began, is not orderly by luck. It is orderly by design: authorities raise a temporary city for millions, with routes and signage and sanitation, and a cultural script paces the movement of the crowd. People wait for hours, willingly, because the waiting itself carries meaning, and because they trust that their turn will come. The crowd trusts the space, and the space trusts the crowd. And when the design fails, the Kumbh kills — as it did in 1954, at the Allahabad station in 2013, and again on the Mauni Amavasya morning of 2025, when a pre-dawn crush at the Sangam left dozens dead by the official count and more by independent ones. The deaths do not disprove the design; they mark, with terrible precision, exactly where it stopped — a blocked route, a barrier in the wrong place, a density no plan had budgeted for. The same gathering is both the proof of what design can do and the price of the yard it does not cover; we will settle that ledger in Chapter 13. Modern crowd engineering is the attempt to recreate that mutual trust in settings without a river or a god to supply it — in a protest, a stadium, a city street.

If you carry one tool out of this chapter, carry the three needs. The next time you stand in front of a gathering, ask which one it is feeding — safety, belonging, or voice. A crowd seeking safety scatters under pressure; a crowd in the grip of belonging holds together and answers as one body; a crowd that has come for voice cannot be dispersed until it feels heard — only relocated, angrier. Which need is on the ground in front of you decides what your options really are, long before anyone reaches for a megaphone.