Need for safety protocols

What is the issue?

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The Amritsar disaster shows that the government departments have not yet taken official protocols for safety at mass gatherings seriously.

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What is the background?

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- The tragedy took place at the backdrop of dussehra celebrations in Amritsar.
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- Scores of men, women and children of a migrant settlement adjoining a railway track had gathered to watch the effigy of Ravana being burnt.
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- As the effigy went up in flames, the organisers asked people to move back.
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- Many of them got on to the tracks on an embankment to get a better view.
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- The sound of the burning crackers from the effigy was so loud that the people on the railway track could not hear the approaching train which ran over the onlookers.
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- They failed to notice the approaching train and were crushed under its wheels.
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What are the concerns?

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- The tragedy could have been an entirely preventable carnage, had the efforts been properly taken.
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- But there is a frantic effort to pin responsibility on agencies and individuals,

and there are efforts to exploit public anger for political ends.
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- It points to the basic failure of the district administration and the police, which should have ensured law and order.
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- Though the reports suggest that the organisers of the event had obtained a no-objection certificate from the police, the role of the law enforcement machinery in crowd control becomes questionable.
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- The Municipal Corporation in Amritsar has tried to distance itself, claiming that its permission was not sought, although almost everyone in the city knew it was taking place.
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What should be done?

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- **Inquiry** - The magisterial inquiry ordered by the Punjab government should examine the actions of the revenue authorities and the police in organising the event.
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- It should also examine whether rules were ignored to favour the organisers who claimed proximity to some politicians.
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- **Role of NDMA** - Religious festivals in India are often overshadowed by deadly incidents such as stampedes and fires.
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- The National Disaster Management Authority has responded to these horrors by creating a guide for State governments and local bodies.
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- It also lays down a clear protocol to be followed for mass gatherings and festivals.
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- But whether this was followed by the Amritsar authorities in the planning of the Dasara celebrations is one of the questions that must be addressed.
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- **Planning** - There should be a transformation of the way in which such events are organised, with a lead agency in each State and district empowered to issue instructions, and in turn be accountable for public safety.
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- Also, there is a serious deficit of common spaces in cities, towns and villages

to conduct spectacular events safely.
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- This is incongruous in a populous country with a tradition of festivals and cultural gatherings.
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- **Awareness** - At Amritsar, trespass on the track was the prime reason for the accident.
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- A campaign to educate the public that railway tracks cannot be treated as commons, and vigorous enforcement, will reduce the probability of such incidents.
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- The Railways must identify hazard spots for train movement in heavily built-up areas and prevent trespass by barricading them.
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- Thus a culture of safety around these issues can take root if the governments serve as a responsible leader in this regard.
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Source: The Hindu

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