On 15 July 1927, an angry mob of workers stormed the Palace of Justice in Vienna and set it on fire—an unprecedented event that sent shock waves through Europe for years to come. It began as a spontaneous demonstration against an offensively unjust acquittal of three members of a right-wing organization accused of murdering a striking worker, but turned into a rapidly growing mass rally in front of Austria’s highest court. The Social Democratic leadership, completely unprepared, feared unrest and decided against an organized protest march, trying instead to calm the incensed masses with speeches. But it was too late. Elias Canetti, then a student in Vienna, recalls:

From all districts of the city, the workers marched in tight formation to the Palace of Justice, whose sheer name embodied the unjust verdict for them. It was a totally spontaneous reaction: I could tell how spontaneous it was just by my own conduct. I quickly biked into the center of town and joined one of the processions.

The workers, usually well disciplined, trusting their Social Democratic leaders, and satisfied that Vienna was administered by these leaders in an exemplary manner, were acting without their leaders on this day. When they set fire to the Palace of Justice, Mayor Seitz mounted a fire engine and raised his right hand high, trying to block their way. His gesture had no effect: the Palace of Justice was burning.
The word “samuuha” in Sanskrit signifies a crowd, multitude or assemblage. Crowds play a significant role in the moral and narrative content of several of the spiritual and epic writings of the Vedic and Classical periods in South Asian history which are the main repositories of the Sanskrit language. While “samuuha” has survived into our own time through “prakrit” (vernacular) languages such as Hindi which grew out of Sanskrit, its modern usage differs quite markedly to that found in the ancient texts.

According to Vaman Apte’s authoritative dictionary, the immediate equivalent for the English word ‘crowd’ is the Sanskrit “samuuha”. While Apte supplements this explication with ‘multitude’, ‘assemblage’, ‘collectivity’, ‘aggregate’, ‘number’, ‘flock’ and ‘troop’, other noted Sanskrit-English dictionaries provide additional elaborations which, when combined with Apte’s, give us a better idea of the broader semantic field in which “samuuha” exists. The dictionaries of Theodor Benfey and Monier Monier-Williams, both products of the orientalist philology of the nineteenth century, also relate “samuuha” directly to ‘crowd’ but also to ‘kinsmen’ and ‘heap’, ‘association’, ‘corporation’, ‘community’, ‘sum’, ‘totality’, ‘essence’ and ‘sweeping together’, respectively. It is useful to draw on these specific and associative meanings when considering the significance of “samuuha” in key Sanskrit writings and its legacy in the modern world.

Many of the major sacred texts and epics written in Sanskrit were composed during the Vedic period, prior to the birth of Christ in the Western calendar. As non-vernacular texts written in the esteemed language of purity written in the esteemed language of purity written in the esteemed language of purity

Once the large and amorphous mass of demonstrators had become an uncontrollable mob, Vienna’s police chief gave the order to shoot into the crowd—an action that brought a quick and bloody end to the protest. Eighty-nine people were killed and hundreds critically injured. As Heimito von Doderer writes at the end of his novel The Demons, one could hear “constant shooting coming closer from a nearby street, a volley of shots actually.” Moving in closed ranks, the police became “armed troops, advancing in step, firing and driving everything before them.”ii The crowd quickly disbanded, realizing that the battle against the heavily armed police was hopeless. The brutal shooting brought back memories of the war, but now civilians were the enemies. It was an unequal match; they had no chance against the police’s heavy weaponry. The uprising yielded little except the realization of the masses’ absolute powerlessness when faced with armed opposition. The aftershocks of this event were momentous: there were no more spontaneous rebellions by the urban masses against injustice and misuse of power. Their fear and resignation benefited the subsequent fascist governments across Europe for the next two decades.

In 1932, five years after this debacle, Ernst Jünger claimed in Der Arbeiter (The worker) that the old masses—those storming the Bastille, those involved in street uprisings and political gatherings, and those still cheering the outbreak of the war in August 1914—were a thing of the past. “The actions of the masses,” he declared as if referring to the events in Vienna, “have lost their magic wherever they meet resolute resistance, just as two or three old warriors behind an intact machine gun have no reason to be worried even when told that a whole battalion was approaching. Today, the masses are no longer able to attack, they can no longer even defend themselves.”iii

In Vienna it was, ironically, the leaders of the Social Democratic Workers Party who immediately denounced the behavior of the revolutionary masses as reckless, imprudent, and irrational, using a terminology that dates back to Gustave Le Bon’s well-known treatise of 1895, Psychologie des foules.iv When the Social Democrats convened for a party congress in October 1927, three months after the event, they reiterated their critique of the undisciplined and lawless masses and emphasized the importance of transcending class differences for the sake of social harmony. Henry Ford, the car manufacturer, had indeed replaced Karl Marx; consumer capitalism had superseded communism; and “practical solutions” had triumphed over ideology.v

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iii Ernst Jünger, Der Arbeiter (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1932), 115. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

and perfection that Sanskrit was regarded to be, these texts either issue moral injunctions or didactic messages through narratives involving the interplay of relationships – often involving war and conquest – between gods, kings and mortal humans. It is within this thematic structure that the figure of the crowd or multitude is often invoked in order to reflect the singular might and greatness of the higher being to which crowds are juxtaposed.

In the hymns of “Rigveda”, reputed as being the earliest and most significant of the “Vedas”, and composed between 1500 and 1200 BC, the figure of the crowd plays just such a role:

‘Agni, the God resplendent, giver of great joy, has on his lovely vehicle encompassed the lands with might./Let us with pure laudations in his house approach the high laws of this nourisher of multitudes.’ (3, Hymn 3, Ln. 9)

‘Indra has conquered the mighty in his wars./Men strive in multitudes to win his friendship.’ (10, Hymn 24, Ln. 8)

‘He who has a store of herbs at hand is like a king amidst a crowd of men, Physician is that sage’s name, fiend-slayer, chaser of disease.’ (10, Hymn 97, Ln. 9)

In the legendary historical-spiritual epic Vyasa’s “Mahabharath” (circa 1400 BC) – a mythological tale of a feud between two families in which thousands are killed – crowds feature even more significantly and are often spectators at battles and competitions and bear public witness to expressions of triumph and defeat:

‘The citizens consisting of thousands […] came out and gathered to behold the fight. The crowd became so great that it was one solid mass of humanity with no space between body and body.’ (Bk. 23)

‘When the Parthas entered the city, thousands upon thousands of the citizens came out to behold the sight. The adorned squares and streets, with the crowds swelling with each moment, looked beautiful like the ocean swelling at moonrise.’ (Bk. 34)

Elsewhere in the “Mahabharath”, crowds are described as a ‘pressure of bodies’ (Bk. 173), ‘a vast concourse’ and ‘an agitated ocean’ (BK. 236), and the epic quality of the events it narrates is in no small way a result of the vast numbers of people who gather to witness them.

Another key Vedic text, the “Laws of Manu” (circa 1280 BC), contains spiritual injunctions for the living of everyday life. Here crowds
are invoked as markers of the public domain of social life and can be seen to represent the divide between the public and the private, the sacred and the profane. For example, the “Laws of Manu” state that the “Vedas” must not be recited under certain conditions, one of which is a gathering of a ‘crowd of men’ (Bk. 04, Ln. 108). In its legal prescriptions, the “Laws of Manu” declare that ‘a crowd [of villagers]’ must be present during trials in addition to litigants and witnesses (Bk. 8, Ln. 254).

The couplets of Valmiki’s “Ramayan” (circa 250 BC) also feature crowds in much the same way as other Sanskrit spiritual texts, as undifferentiated masses marked in contrast to the character(s) at the center of attention. As an example, Ram’s victorious entry into Ayodhya is worth citing at some length:

“Such were the townsmen’s words/Heard by the gathering countryfolk,/Who from the south, north, east, and west/Stirred by the joyful tidings gathered./And led by their eager longing/To Ram’s consecration sped./Villagers from every side/Filled the city of Ayodhya./This way and that way the crowd strayed,/And made a murmur long and loud./Like when the full moon fl oods the skies,/And the ocean’s waves rise with thunder.” (Bk2., Canto 2)

Although Vedic Sanskrit had ceded considerable ground to its Classical form by the time Valmiki composed the “Ramayan” – indeed, as early as the grammarian Panini’s Ashtahayai about 500 BC, Vedic Sanskrit had become somewhat anachronistic – “samuuha” continued to be used in reference to crowds and can be found in some of the later writings of the Classical period. For example, it features in Kalidasa’s plays and poems as well as in the writings of the poets Somadeva and Jayadeva in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, after which Sanskrit had been largely supplanted by a number of “prakrit” languages such as Hindi and Pali, the spiritual language of Buddhism. Nevertheless, Sanskrit continues to be extremely highly regarded as a spiritual and scholarly language and many attempts have been made to ‘sanskritize’ certain “prakrits” in order to refine them.

The word “samuuha”, however, remains in use today, albeit in a slightly different way to its deployment in the Sanskrit texts cited above. In modern Hindi and Nepali, among the closest “prakrits” to Sanskrit, “samuuha” refers to a collectivity or organization produced in the spirit of community and service, banded together, for example, by a common humanitarian goal and often with a

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**TESTIMONY**

**Dolores Park, Dyke March, June 2**

Tirza True Latimer  
**writer, San Francisco**

Dolores. Imagine naming a baby for pain. Imagine spending your life responding to that name. A woman’s name. Dolores Park. Today, there are only women here. Or, if you think that the word “women” only makes sense within a patriarchal, heterosexual syntax, there are no women here.

Dolores Park is the staging ground for San Francisco’s annual Dyke March. Speakers and performers, vying for the attention of those assembled, tax an over-amped sound system to its limits from a black stage erected where the grass ends and the concrete begins. But the dykes, sitting on the lawn in clusters, dressed to the nines, undressed, underdressed, standing with their arms around each other in the thick of the action, standing with their hands in their pockets at the margins of the gathering, shifting from foot to foot, are not easily distracted from their own pursuits; they scope out the comings and goings, the rows of kick-standed motorcycles framing the green; they converse, they embrace, they comb the steadily growing crowd of lesbians, greeting passers-by, known and unknown, avoiding or soliciting the gaze of ex-lovers, future lovers. We are all lovers today or we wouldn’t be here.

By the time the gathering swells into a crowd and takes to its feet to become a demonstration, a march, the park can no longer contain its dyke population. Ten thousand? Fifteen thousand? Twenty? Who’s counting?

Standing on the steps of the Mission Dolores Basilica, my lover and I watch the marchers go by—ten or twenty abreast—for an hour. We are struck, uplifted, by the variety of marchers reclaiming these streets with their bodies in the name of dykes—all colors, sizes, shapes, ages, and styles jostling each other, cuddling, sparring, signaling in a range of languages and body languages that frustrate any impulse to generalize.

How long have I been grinning? The muscles around my mouth ache. I am surrounded by people whom I do not know but whom I do not perceive as potentially hostile. A novel experience. Thrilling.

My lover and I join in at the tail end of the parade. Leaning out the windows of the Victorian houses that line the parade route, Castro-dwellers whistle and cheer. Our brothers. They give their streets over to us gladly. In a few hours, this ad hoc legion
basis in shared experiences. Thus, “samuha” in modern India and Nepal can be found in the titles of various community organizations and social movements and, in this sense, corresponds more closely with some of the renderings in Monier-Williams’ dictionary.

Conversely, quite another word for ‘crowd’ exists in modern Hindi: “bheedh.” Rather than invoking an image of throngs gathering to bear witness to the epic feats of gods and kings, this word refers more accurately to a crowded market or bus-stop; in short, to congestion more than a gathering of spectators or a reverent mass. This ostensible splitting of “samuha” and the crowd from Sanskrit to the present time is, perhaps, a product of the phenomenon of the modern crowd itself, an example of the ways in which language changes to express new social and cultural realities in new contexts.

The word “samudra”, meaning the ocean in Sanskrit and Hindi, and remarkably close in its phonemic structure and associative meaning to “samuha”, is still used to refer to the ocean...

What will these few hours of taking to (and taking over) the streets—of loving each other in public—mean to us in a week? A month? How long will the power of these sympathetic bodies bolster us?

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Entry by Peter Samuels