

O HERALDO

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When Devotion Turns Deadly

The ghastly stampede at the Prayagraj Mahakumbh has once again exposed the systemic failures that plague mass gatherings in India. The official death toll, oscillating between 35 and 40, was only confirmed at 30 by the government a staggering 17 hours after the incident. The response was marked by bureaucratic opacity, with officials merely holding a brief, three-minute press conference where they offered vague justifications instead of taking responsibility.

DIG Vaibhav Krishna's statement—attributing the stampede to broken barricades and the chaotic rush of devotees—does little to address the fundamental question: why was the administration so ill-prepared for an event of such magnitude? The government's claim that VIP protocols were abolished rings hollow when the very cause of the disaster appears to be a poorly managed crowd control system. This was not an unforeseen calamity; it was an inevitable consequence of negligence.

This tragedy is not an isolated incident but part of a long, grim history of stampedes at the Kumbh Mela. The most haunting parallel dates back to February 3, 1954, when a stampede on Mauni Amavasya killed 800 people in Prayagraj. Then, too, an overcrowded gathering and mismanagement led to disaster. Reports from that time suggest that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's visit exacerbated the crowd pressure, leading to chaos. The lesson from that calamity was simple—limit VIP interference and enhance security. Nehru subsequently banned VIP visits to prevent a recurrence. Yet, nearly seven decades later, we find ourselves reliving the same horror

As devotees' lifeless bodies were being retrieved from the sacred banks of the Triveni Sangam, another grand event was unfolding miles away. At 6:23 AM on the same day, India celebrated a historic milestone as ISRO successfully launched its 100th satellite, NVS-02, into space from Sriharikota. The stark contrast between these two events—one showcasing the nation's scientific prowess and the other exposing its administrative incompetence—paints a grim picture of our misplaced priorities.

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Stampedes have become a tragic routine at religious festivals. In 1986, 200 people perished at the Kumbh Mela in Haridwar. In 2003, Nashik's Kumbh Mela saw 39 dead and over 100 injured. The 2013 Prayagraj Kumbh witnessed another deadly stampede, killing 42 and injuring 45 after a footbridge collapsed at the railway station. The pattern is clear, yet the authorities continue to repeat the same mistakes. Each time, inquiries are promised, committees are formed, and reports are buried—only for another tragedy to strike.

The victims of these tragedies are invariably the poor, the marginalized, and the devout masses who place their faith not just in religious rituals but also in the state's ability to protect them. Who is accountable for their deaths? The media, which extensively covered the Mahakumbh, did little to highlight the glaring safety lapses beforehand. A fire at the Kumbh Mela just days earlier had already exposed the administration's inefficiency, yet no corrective action was taken to prevent further disasters. Why did the government not use this as a wake-up call?

In the wake of the tragedy, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath urged people not to spread 'negative news.' Instead of offering a heartfelt apology or taking responsibility, his government chose damage control over accountability. The script is all too familiar—blame the crowd, form an inquiry committee, and move on. Just last year, a stampede at a religious gathering in Hathras claimed 122 lives. A retired High Court judge was assigned to probe the incident. The outcome? Predictably, nothing changed.

Such incidents underscore how faith, when intertwined with administrative incompetence, becomes a perilous trap. The Uttar Pradesh government aggressively marketed the Mahakumbh, drawing millions of devotees, but failed to ensure their safety. Now, in a desperate bid to control the damage, authorities have shut down eight entry points, declared the fairground a no-vehicle zone, and deployed over 60,000 security personnel. If these measures were possible now, why were they not in place earlier? If the administration had been proactive rather than reactive, 30-40 innocent lives could have been saved.

comment



LUIS DIAS

SAF, free for the majority of its events, still require a smartphone and knowledge of the registration process, which while easy for those who know how, can be a deterrent to the less tech-savvy, and intimidating to the poor. A random visit to any festival venue would corroborate that it attracts a largely middle-to upper-class audience



A day later, a visitor who had come for the festival dropped in and made this interesting observation to me: Even if one had all the time in the world from the start to the end of the festival, it would be impossible to take in everything on offer. Granted, that is not the intent of the festival, that one person is able to go to everything, but that there is "something for everyone." But my friend's comment did point to a feeling of sensory overload. And I know taste is subjective, but the feedback from many in my circle was that a significant proportion of what was on offer was below par, forgettable as soon as one left the space.

Bigger is not Better

I was present at Nagalli Hills for the closing day of the 2024 Serendipity Arts Festival (SAF) and heard the speech made by the festival's founding patron Sunil Munjal.

It was a variation on the theme in all his closing speeches at every festival, a summary of what had been offered at this edition, and thanking all those involved. This time he quoted (if I remember right) an impressive number, over 2000 performers and 22 venues.

Among those that took a bow along with him, unless my eyes and ears deceived me, I could neither see nor hear any Goan representation on the dais. (Goans are also conspicuous by their absence in the testimonials on their website, apart from predictable ones from politicians).

Munjal also inferred in his speech that the completely booked-up 'River Raaga' Mandovi cruises were reflective of a surging interest in Indian classical music, and I disagree completely. It is the sunset cruise that is the draw for the majority rather than the music, just as it is the setting rather than the content that attracts people to the Monte Music festival. The same fare in a less scenic ambience draws far fewer numbers and a different demographic.

So the question is, what does Panjim, Goa's tiny pocket-size capital, and what do its residents benefit from ever-bigger, ever-grander tamashas?

The stunning performance of the Shillong Chamber Choir in Old Goa as part of the Exposition celebrations, and more recently Marie Bejstam's 'Songs of Hope 2025' choral workshops and end-of-workshop concert lend even more weightage to the maxims, "Bigger is not Better", and "Size doesn't matter." It is the quality of the content that matters. A choir of a handful of singers can be much more impactful than a mammoth choir interested only in volume, not substance.

The big festivals, be they IFFI (International Film Festival of India) or Serendipity, (I refuse to classify Sunburn as a festival in my book) cater best to the out-of-town dedicated visitor for those festivals, or the retired or semi-retired, especially the neo-Goan with time and money on their hands. The IFFI registration fee this year was quite steep for the working-class, who would at best be able to take in a couple of films of their choice after work, if they were lucky enough not to find the film booked-up. IFFI's erratic scheduling adds to this barrier.

SAF, free for the majority of its events, still require a smartphone and knowledge of the registration process, which while easy for those who know how, can be a deterrent to the less tech-savvy, and intimidating to the poor. A random visit to any festival venue would corroborate that it attracts a largely middle-to upper-class audience.

But the traffic chaos along Panjim's roads due to these festivals, compounded by the insane, never-ending haphazard smart city roadworks the last few years, makes commuting to work and the school run a nightmare for everyone, already worsened by a deluge of tourist traffic in privately-owned and rented vehicles.

I was approached by a PhD student from Birmingham for his research on "the making of a place image of Panjim through the SAF." The positives are apparently, the "place branding," generating employment and "boosting tourism."

But the much more tangible outcomes, affecting all

residents across the board, are the negatives: Traffic congestion, traffic jams, aggravation of already existing parking woes, noise pollution, air pollution, huge disruption to our routine in terms of commuting to work, school run, grocery shopping etc.

Yet, like so much else in Goa today, the expectation is that the resident Ponnjekar should just "grin and bear it", endure all the disruption and nuisance aspects of these events, because "it's good for Brand Goa" (even if our quality of life was so much better before such a concept even existed), or that "it's good for the economy and tourism" (even though that "good" is not passed down to the majority of the residents in terms of basic infrastructure, like decent roads or public transport or garbage disposal or security and a police presence to avoid parking misdemeanours or traffic indiscipline or when resident-versus-tourist or visitor conflicts occur).

Panjim, and in broader terms Goa, have become just a clichéd backdrop for huge extravaganzas. While there was much to celebrate about SAF 2024, so much of it could have been translocated anywhere else. Those events or installations did not reflect what Panjim as a city brings to the table.

If the SAF is really serious about enriching the cultural life in Panjim and Goa, it should rethink its current format and offer smaller, intimate events around the year instead of a big shebang over 8 days every December. It certainly has the budget and sponsors to make it possible.

To use western classical music as an example: SAF could bring in chamber ensembles (the Arties festival, the Symphony Orchestra of India (SOI) Chamber Orchestra and its Chamber Masterworks series) from Mumbai to Goa at various points in the year. It would fill woeful gaps in Goa's cultural event calendar. Goa is starved for high-calibre western classical music events; and smaller impresarios cannot afford hosting the above events. It would raise the bar for live performance here a great deal.

(Dr. Luis Dias is a physician, musician, writer and founder of Child's Play India Foundation. He blogs at luisdias.wordpress.com)

people's edit

INDULGENCE – A PRICELESS GIFT OF GOD'S MERCY

MOLLY FERNANDES

Almost a month, since the Holy Doors were opened. Yes, Pope Francis delivered "Spes Non Confundit," ("Hope Does Not Disappoint") papal bull on May 9, 2024 in front of the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican. This decree states that the year 2025 will be a year of Jubilee. The doors were opened on Dec. 24, 2024, and will be closed on Jan. 6, 2026.

The theme is centered around pilgrimage, as Francis states "travel to Rome in order to experience the Holy Year and to all those others who, though unable to visit the city of the Apostles Peter and Paul, will celebrate it in their local Churches."

A jubilee year is also known as a "Holy year", a special year of remission of sins and universal pardon. It is a time of spiritual renewal, pilgrimage, and reconciliation that occurs every 25 years.

The concept is rooted in the biblical tradition found in the Old Testament, where a jubilee year occurred every 50 years, and was marked by the forgiveness of debts, liberation of slaves, and the return of land to its original owners. The occasion is set by counting off "seven Sabbaths of years," or seven times seven years. The fiftieth year; then, is to be the Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:8-10). Its purpose was to re-establish a proper relationship with God, with one another, and with all of creation. Christian Jubilee formally began in the Roman Catholic church in 1300, instituted by Pope Boniface VIII.

The Jubilee Year invites everyone to an intense experience of God's love. One of the special signs of the Jubilee Year is the granting of indulgences to the faithful – a priceless gift of God's mercy. On May 13, 2024, Cardinal Angelo De Donatis, the head of the Apostolic Penitentiary, issued a decree providing Catholics with the opportunity to gain indulgences.

A plenary indulgence is a grace granted by the Catholic Church through the merits of Jesus Christ to remove the temporal punishment due to sin. The indulgence applies to sins already forgiven. A plenary indulgence cleanses the soul as if the person had just been baptised. Despite the rule that only one plenary indulgence can be obtained per day, the faithful who have carried out an act of charity on behalf of the souls in Purgatory, if they receive Holy Communion a second time that day, can obtain the plenary indulgence twice on the same day, applicable only to the deceased (this must take place within the Eucharistic celebration).

To obtain an indulgence, one has to have detachment from all sin; sacramental confession and Holy Communion; and pray for the intentions of the Pope. These three conditions can be fulfilled a few days before or after performing the works to gain the indulgence, but it is appropriate that Communion and the prayer take place on the same day that the work is completed.

A single sacramental confession is sufficient for several plenary indulgences, but frequent sacramental confession is encouraged in order to obtain the grace of deeper conversion and purity of heart. For each plenary indulgence that is sought, however, a separate Holy Communion and a separate prayer for the intentions of the Holy Father are required.

In Goa, Cardinal Filipe Neri Ferrão, Archbishop of Goa and Daman inaugurated the Jubilee Year on 29 December 2025, at Se Cathedral Old Goa, urging Catholics to embrace the year as a time of spiritual renewal and growth.

The Catholics in Goa can gain indulgence by entering the doors of one of the three Parishes: St Jerome's Church, Mapusa, Se Cathedral, Old Goa and Holy Spirit Church, Margao. So, during this year, let us nurture the hope and love that is placed into our hearts, gain indulgences and reignite the flame of our faith in our own hearts and share the light of that faith with those in darkness.

Stray dog attacks on the rise in State

In yet another canine attack, a foreigner was mauled by five dogs on the Mobor beach stretch on Tuesday, once again bringing to the fore the safety of tourists and other visitors to the beach. It is a fact that the number of stray dogs on the beaches has increased by leaps and bounds and it is scary to go for a walk on the beach alone, especially after dusk.

Be that as it may, stray dogs may attack humans due to a combination of factors including fear, hunger, protecting their territory, feeling threatened, previous negative experiences with humans and sometimes even rabies. Reducing the stray population can help mitigate the risk of dog attacks. Animal rights experts said the only long-term solution to the issue is sterilization and vaccination of stray dogs.

Over a period, as the dogs die natural deaths, their numbers dwindle. It is pertinent to note that stray dogs are significantly more likely to attack when they are in packs, as their pack mentality can trigger aggressive behavior, especially when defending territory or feeling threatened, making them a much greater danger compared to a single stray dog. Within a pack, dogs can communicate with each other easily, potentially coordinating an attack on a perceived threat. It may not be possible to free all the beaches in the state of stray dogs due to its porous nature. However, those stray dogs which move in packs need to be

trapped and moved to the dog shelter.

letterstotheeditor

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All letters must contain correct postal address and telephone number. Letters are liable to be edited for brevity.

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Adelmo Fernandes, Vasco
Public drinking is a nuisance!

A few youngsters were rounded up and taken to the police station on Tuesday afternoon for sitting at isolated places and openly consuming alcohol in the close vicinity of the ITI training school, Mapusa by the police.

Well, liquor is indeed destroying thousands of Goan families and today if our students and youngsters too are seen getting addicted to alcohol at a very tender age then that's due to the free availability of alcohol in the nooks and corners of the State.

Unfortunately, the government of the day, despite of knowing the seriousness of the above fact still issues licenses and allows people (especially outsiders) to set up more and more whole-sale liquor outlets every few metres in the state just for the sake of wooing domestic tourists here and keeping them in high spirits in Goa.

If the government really wants to stop people from drinking alcohol publicly and save the State's image, then it should stop decorating the state with those whole-sale liquor outlets everywhere, especially near educational institutions, places of worship and impose hefty fines

on tourists consuming alcohol at public places and on those driving their vehicles under the influence of alcohol etc.

Jerry Fernandes, Saligao

Leopard sterilisation: a fine balance needed

Due to an increasing leopard population and rise of attacks on human settlements, and the resultant human-leopard conflicts, Maharashtra government has again mooted sterilisation of leopards in the state.

Predominantly, farmers have borne the brunt of leopards attacks. Maharashtra has the third highest leopard population in the country. Both male and female leopards are planned to be sterilised and the Centre's nod is awaited. But people in the know-how of wild life have opposed the idea.

Additional scientific research on the issue is needed, they aver. It can be said that an augmentation in the rescue efforts like providing more rescue vehicles and cages is an effective option. Furthermore, more and more water bodies have to be provided for the leopards. Monetary support to agriculturists for fencing their fields has to be enhanced. Farmers have to be adequately supplied with electricity during day time to ward off the big cats.

Animal rights activist Maneeka Gandhi has said that the need

of the hour is to prevent illegal hunting of wild animals like boar which are the leopard's prey. Since humans are encroaching into the leopard's territory, and not the other way around, a fine balance in the issue is crucial.

Ganapathi Bhat, Akola

Well deserved honour for Jasprit Bumrah

India pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah is definitely the right person to win the prestigious Sir Garfield Sobers Award for ICC men's Cricketer of the Year. Perseverance, hard work, consistency and the ability to improvise and exploit ones skills to reap the maximum in what one does undoubtedly makes him a modern era legend.

His accuracy, calculation, ability to perform under pressure and the precise skill to read his opponents weakness make him a master bowler from whom the younger cricketers can learn a lot.

M Pradyu, Kannur

Mandavi elevates tribe's cultural heritage

It is heartening to note that little known flute-maker Pandi Ram Mandavi, hailing from Chhattisgarh's Narayanpur district, has been chosen for the Padma Shri award this year, recognizing his exceptional craftsmanship in traditional instruments and

wood art. Commendably enough Mandavi has elevated his tribe's cultural heritage to a global audience through his intricate art form. His efforts in training over a thousand artisans and showcasing his work in numerous countries underscore his role as a cultural ambassador, contributing significantly to the preservation and promotion of Bastar region's artistic practices. Flute is a significant wind instrument, known for producing enchanting melodies. And thanks to Pandi Ram Mandavi for taking this globally famed bamboo instrument to dizzying heights through his meticulous craftsmanship.

Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai

Bumrah deserves all the praises

India pace sensation Bumrah has been honoured as the ICC Men's Test Cricketer of the Year for 2024, following an extraordinary year in which he shattered records and delivered match-winning performances across the globe. By joining the elite club of Indian bowlers to have taken 70 plus wickets in a year, along side legends like Kapil Dev, Anil Kumble, and Ravichandran Ashwin, Bumrah's 2024 performance was unparalleled. His ability to succeed across conditions-spanning South Africa, Australia, and the subcontinent-highlighted his versatility and class. While Bumrah deserves all the praise he must be made the captain for the format in tests.

A P Thiruvadi, Chennai