

STAMPEDE HORROR MARS SHIRGAO ZATRA, 6 DEAD

Over 70 injured as rush for walk of fire ritual turns deadly late at night

Team Herald

BICHOLIM: Six people were killed and over 70 injured in a stampede during the Shree Lairai Devi Zatra at Shirgao in the wee hours of Saturday, marring the festivities at one of Goa's biggest festivals that draws thousands of devotees every year.

Between 50,000 and 1 lakh pilgrims had crowded the narrow lanes near the temple precincts around 2.30 am for the fire-walking ceremony that is one of the highlights of the festival. According to eyewitness accounts, the devotees were hemmed in by thick ropes on a downward slope for crowd control, but a couple of women slipped and fell, sparking the stampede.

Vishal Gauns Dessai, a resident of Avedem-Kothambi, Quepem, who attends the zatra each year and was also present this year, said, "There was a massive turnout of devotees and the arrangement appeared to be poor. There was mismanagement. The attitude of some, who push ahead while proceeding towards the fire walking ceremony was to blame."

The victims have been identified as Tanuja Kawthankar, her nephew Aditya Kawthankar, Yashwant Kerkar — all from Tivim — Surya Mayenkar of Sattari, Pratibha Kalangutkar of Cumbharjua and Sagar Nandarge of Mathwada-Pilgao.

The injured were rushed to Goa Medical College and Hospital, Asilo North Goa District Hospital in Mapusa, and Community Health Centres in Sankhali and Bicholim. Chief Minister Pramod Sawant rushed to the hospitals early in the morning before ordering an inquiry into the incident by a fact-finding committee headed by Revenue Secretary Sandip Jacques. He also announced an ex-gratia of Rs 10 lakh for the families of the deceased and Rs 1 lakh for the injured.

"We will make the inquiry report public. Going forward, precautions would be taken for all temple festivals across the State to prevent such unfortunate incidents," Sawant said.

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Quiet, anxious and exhausted: Families on silent vigil at GMC

Team Herald

BAMBOLIM: It was a typical hot summer day, but at Goa Medical College and Hospital (GMC), a heavier stillness hung in the air — not just from the weather, but from the tragedy that had struck in the early hours of Saturday.

Ambulances had brought in the injured from the stampede at the Shree Lairai Devi temple in Shirgao — a disaster that left six dead and more than 70 injured.

Fourteen of the wounded were admitted to GMC, while oth-



BATTLING FOR LIFE: A victim on life support at GMC; (top) an injured person being wheeled into hospital and the stampede at the Lairai Zatra

ers were taken to hospitals across the State. The bodies of the deceased were placed in the hospital's mortuary. Outside the critical care ward, relatives waited — quiet, anxious, and exhausted — as medical staff moved in and out of the ICU. Nurses worked quickly and doctors appeared occasionally, only to be intercepted by desperate families seeking news. Most returned with little more than brief updates: treatment was ongoing, and further details would follow from the chief medical officer.

Among those keeping vigil was Sudanshu Harlankar, who had originally come to the hospital to care for his father. He now found himself waiting for news of his uncle, Sujay Harlankar, who had been injured in the stampede.

"My uncle was trying to help a young girl who had fallen behind him. While attempting to rescue her, he fell, and about 50 people trampled him. He was badly crushed," Sudanshu added.

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HOW THE TRAGEDY UNFOLDED

FRIDAY EVENING

● Thousands from Goa, Maharashtra, and Karnataka gather for the Shree Lairai Devi Zatra in Shirgao

● Over 400 cops, including a DySP-level officer and women officers, are deployed to manage the crowd

SATURDAY, POST-MIDNIGHT

● Narrow approach roads to the temple become overcrowded as the fire-walking ritual approaches

● Around 2.30 am, some women trip over a rope barrier placed for crowd control

● Panic spreads quickly, leading to a stampede as devotees fall over one another

MEDICAL RESPONSE

● Victims rushed to Goa Medical College & Hospital (GMC), Bambolim, Asilo District Hospital, Mapusa, CHC Sankhali and CHC Bicholim

● 5 ambulances dispatched via 108 emergency service, emergency helpline 104 remains active

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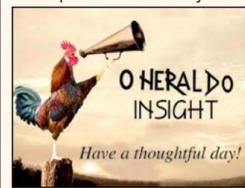
Whatever be the economy of the jungle, the lion will never eat grass

Notes from the newsroom on World Press Freedom Day



Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains. European philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau said this over two centuries ago, but his words are relevant more than ever today. This is especially true for modern-day India. The digital age of the internet might have opened up the world on our phones, but it has also put the country's citizens in shackles. Misinformation, false propaganda, fake news — there are many handuffs that tie us down in our quest for truth and knowledge.

It is sobering to remember that on World Press Freedom Day, which was on Saturday, India's rank on the World Press Freedom Index was 151 — 11 spots down from what it was a decade ago. From this number, it is obvious that all the pillars of democracy — and not just the fourth pillar,



which is the free press — have grown weaker in the world's biggest democracy.

The question is, how did that downside happen? The executive and legislature are both perceived to be losing their effectiveness, and for the people, their hope and faith is pinned first on the judiciary and next, on the free press. A free press acts as a watchdog, exposing corruption, questioning authority, and giving voice to the marginalised.

Moreover, the freedom of the press is intrinsically linked to the public's right to information. Citizens rely on unbiased reporting to make informed decisions — whom to vote for, which policies to support, how to engage with civic life. If the media becomes an echo chamber for the powerful, or succumbs to corporate and political influence, the flow of truthful information dries up, and with it, public trust in democratic institutions.

In this war against fake news and propaganda, the victory of the press is actually a victory of the people.

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THREE-DAY MOURNING, FESTIVITIES CANCELLED

The Goa government has cancelled all State-sponsored events, festive programmes, and public celebrations for the next three days as a mark of respect and mourning for the victims of the temple stampede.

TOP OFFICIALS TRANSFERRED, INQUIRY ON

In the wake of the tragedy, the Chief Minister has transferred five senior officials: District Collector Sneha Gitte, Superintendent of Police (North Goa) Akshat Kaushal, Deputy Superintendent of Police (Bicholim) Jivba Dalvi, Deputy Collector (Bicholim) Bhimnath Khorjuvekar, and Police Inspector Dinesh Gadekar. A fact-finding committee has been constituted, headed by Revenue Secretary Sandip Jacques. The committee is expected to submit its report by Sunday morning.

₹10 LAKH FOR KIN OF DECEASED

The State government has announced an ex gratia compensation of ₹10 lakh for the families of those who lost their lives in the stampede, and ₹1 lakh each for those who sustained serious injuries.

BITS Goa students talk about pressure-cooker environment

ELSA ANGEL ROSE

PANJIM: For students at BITS Pilani, Goa, who have been horrified and numb following the tragic suicide of a 20-year-old student, the "unfair" grading system with less holidays, and the sadistic mentality of a few professors have made their life unbearable.

The second-year student, a native of Lucknow, was found hanging in his hostel room at 10.15 am on Thursday. This is the third such incident in the Goa campus of BITS Pilani in five months.

In an attempt to unearth more details, O Herald tried getting in touch with students of the institute. The students at first were unwilling to speak about the tragic incident at the institute, but only a few raised their concerns on condition of anonymity.

A student of BITS Pilani, Goa said, "The boy was decent in studies, had an active social life, was about to become coordinator for the photography club next semester, hence it's confusing why he committed suicide."

A final year student alleged, "Here, certain professors are extremely sadistic, it's a pretty hostile environment, Mpower cell (Mental health Initiative of BITS) is for the campus to show to the world that we have a support system, and not to receive any lawsuits, perhaps. Anything the administration does is a

well-thought-out PR drive. I am desensitised to this at this point. The college has psychologists, not psychiatrists, so usually they give motivational talks, but it does not offer us a substantial solution to our problem, maybe it is because they are not trained like a psychiatrist."

Dear Students, Owing to sudden, unfortunate circumstances, any student who is unable to take any of the comprehensive exams will automatically be given makeup for those exams. The makeup for the missed exam will be scheduled towards the end of July before registrations for the next semester. We will make the necessary arrangements for the same. For any exam related queries, please contact Prof. Bijju K, Prof. Gaurav Dar or Prof. Radhika V.

Excerpt from communication sent out by BITS Pilani Goa to its students

Another student said, "Those who have committed suicide are dual degree students; they have a strenuous curriculum. Academic pressure is high, secondly, grading is rigid unlike lenient grading system followed in other campuses of BITS across India, and thirdly the social environment over here is a mix of people from different parts of the country given the location of this institute."

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Colombo flight searched for Pahalgam terror suspect

PTI, COLOMBO: Sri Lankan police on Saturday searched a flight arriving here from Chennai after being tipped off that a suspect linked to the Pahalgam terror attack could be on board, a police spokesperson said.

A statement from the national carrier SriLankan Airlines said that its flight arrived at Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport from Chennai at 11.59 am and underwent a comprehensive security inspection upon arrival.

"The search was carried out in coordination with local authorities following an alert from the Chennai Area Control Centre regarding a suspect wanted in India who was believed to be on board," the statement said.

The aircraft was thoroughly inspected and subsequently cleared for further operations, it said, adding, however, the next scheduled service to Singapore was delayed.

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