

Oppn slams govt for stampede, temple committee blames Dhonds

Critics question lack of crowd management and monitoring; point out that there were no ambulances and victims were taken to hospital in private vehicles

Team Herald

PANJIM: The State administration has come under heavy criticism from the Opposition and civil society for its failure to control the crowd at the Shirgao zatra, which resulted in a deadly stampede early Saturday morning, claiming six lives and leaving over 70 injured. While the opposition has squarely blamed the administration and the police for the tragedy, the Shree Lairai Temple managing committee has given the authorities a clean chit and instead attributed the chaos to the unruly behaviour of Dhonds (devotees who undertake the pilgrimage on foot).

Temple managing committee chairman Dinanath 'Dina' Gaonkar maintained that the stampede was solely due to the conduct of the Dhonds. "The government, police department or temple committee are in no way responsible for the chaos. There was no mismanagement on their part. The stampede was triggered

WHERE WAS THE CROWD MANAGEMENT PLAN?

Despite official claims of deploying 1,000 police personnel and using drones, was there a concrete, operational crowd control strategy?

WHY WAS THERE NO EMERGENCY RESPONSE INFRASTRUCTURE AT THE SITE?

Why were victims forced to rely on private vehicles for hospital transport, and where were the first-aid facilities?

DID THE ADMINISTRATION CONDUCT A PROPER RISK ASSESSMENT AHEAD OF THE ZATRA?

Was any simulation, drill, or contingency planning done for a crowd-related emergency?

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

WHO IS ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE BREAKDOWN IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT?

With the zatra declared a State festival, who in the government was responsible for coordination and oversight?

WHY WERE LESSONS FROM PAST TRAGEDIES IGNORED?

After similar incidents like the Maha Kumbh stampede, what preventive measures, if any, were adopted in Goa?

SHOULD THE TEMPLE COMMITTEE BEAR PARTIAL RESPONSIBILITY?

Given its role in organising the festival, does the temple managing committee share accountability, despite deflecting blame to devotees?

WHY WAS THERE A LACK OF COORDINATION BETWEEN STATE DEPARTMENTS?

Were police, health services, and local administration adequately briefed and working together?

WHAT PROTOCOLS EXIST FOR LARGE RELIGIOUS GATHERINGS IN GOA?

Is there a standard operating procedure (SOP) in place for events attracting tens of thousands of people?

WHY WERE EARLY SIGNS OF CROWD UNREST IGNORED?

Were there any reports or signals of potential overcrowding or tension before the stampede occurred?

because of the Dhonds," he reiterated.

However, the Opposition parties strongly disagreed, holding the administration responsible for a massive breakdown in crowd control and emergency preparedness.

Goa Forward Party president and Fatorda MLA Vijai Sardesai questioned how

such a disaster could occur despite government claims of having deployed over 1,000 police personnel and using drones for crowd monitoring. "Why did this happen if everything was supposedly in place?" he asked.

The Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) Goa unit also pointed fingers at the authorities, citing eyewitness reports

that indicated a complete collapse of crowd management systems. "The government had claimed that more than 1,000 personnel would be on duty and that drones would help manage the large crowds that always attend this zatra. But clearly, there was no crowd management plan, no infrastructure to regulate the

flow of people, and most critically, no emergency response mechanisms in place," said AAP State president, Adv Amit Palekar.

Mayem-based AAP leader Rajesh Kalangutkar, who lost two relatives in the tragedy, stated that many of the injured suffered serious fractures and received no first aid at the site. "Most

of them had to be rushed to hospitals in private vehicles. The government has failed at every level," he said.

He further criticised the government's lack of preparedness, pointing out that after the recent stampede at the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj, the BJP-led government in Uttar Pradesh learnt from Uttar Pradesh's mistakes. "Instead of genuine disaster and crowd management, the Pramod Sawant-led government only managed media optics through press conferences," Kalangutkar remarked.

Echoing similar sentiments, Goa Pradesh Congress Committee general secretary Manisha Usgaonkar held the government responsible for the "clear case of administrative negligence." "Despite having declared it a State festival, the government failed to provide adequate planning and organisation. This complete mismanagement has cost innocent lives," she said.

CONDOLENCES POUR IN

"Sad to know about the unfortunate incident of a stampede in Shirgao, Goa, which claimed several lives. I extend my condolences to bereaved family members and pray for the quick recovery of the injured"



- Droupadi Murmu, President

"Saddened by the loss of lives due to a stampede in Shirgao, Goa. Condolences to those who lost their loved ones. May the injured recover soon. The local administration is assisting those affected"

- Narendra Modi, Prime Minister

"The news of several devotees dying and many being injured in the stampede during the annual fair at Lairai Devi temple in Shirgao, Goa, is very saddening. I offer my heartfelt condolences to all bereaved families and wish a speedy recovery to the injured"

- Rahul Gandhi, Lok Sabha Opposition leader

"We are deeply saddened by the stampede at Lairai Devi temple in Goa where six people have died and nearly 30 are injured. Our heartfelt condolences to the families of the bereaved. Some victims are reportedly critically injured - we wish them a speedy and complete recovery"



- Mallikarjun Kharge, Congress President

"My deepest condolences to the families who have lost their near and dear ones in the tragic incident at the Lairai Devi Zatra at Shirgao. I wish a speedy recovery to the persons injured in the incident. I'm returning to Goa immediately and will also be discussing the matter with Chief Minister Pramod Sawant and local authorities, to extend maximum support and assistance to the affected"

- P S Sreedharan Pillai, Goa Governor

"Deeply saddened by the tragic stampede at the Lairai Zatra in Shirgao this morning. I visited the hospital to meet the injured and have assured all possible support to the affected families. I am personally monitoring the situation to ensure that every necessary measure is being taken"



- Pramod Sawant, Chief Minister

"In view of the unfortunate stampede at the Lairai Zatra, we have taken immediate and comprehensive steps to manage the situation. We have coordinated with 108, ensuring that five ambulances were dispatched to the site, with three stationed at Asilo and an additional three kept on standby until the situation stabilises"

- Vishwajit Rane, Health Minister

"I am deeply saddened by the tragic stampede at Shirgao Zatra, which claimed the lives of six devotees and left many injured. My thoughts are with the bereaved families who have lost loved ones. I urge everyone to pray for the speedy recovery of the injured and to stand in solidarity with the families who are grieving"

- Yuri Alemao, Leader of the Opposition

"The incident was a result of the failure of the local administration. The government is not involved in any serious governance. We demand that the government immediately declare an ex-gratia of Rs 1 crore each for the families of the deceased and a respectable amount to those who are fighting for their lives"



- Vijai Sardesai, President, Goa Forward Party

"We demand a thorough investigation into this massive failure, and to fix accountability at the highest levels, including district administration and Home Ministry. We demand an interim relief of at least Rs 1 crore to the families of those who have lost their lives, and Rs 10 lakh to those hospitalised due to injuries"

- Adv Amit Palekar, AAP Goa President

"Visited the Shree Lairai Devi temple and met with the temple committee and government officials to understand what led to the tragic Shirgao stampede. Collected a detailed report of the incident and it's clear that this tragedy could have been prevented"

- Amit Patkar, Goa Pradesh Congress Committee President

"We are saddened by the loss of innocent lives during the Shree Devi Lairai Zatra stampede. May the Almighty and Shree Devi Lairai give courage and strength to bear the irreparable loss of the victims and also the injured during this difficult time"

- Devanand A Naik, President, Gomantak Bhandari Samaj, Goa

"We are deeply saddened to learn of the tragic stampede at the Shree Lairai Devi Temple. It is important to reflect on the causes of what precipitated this first-of-its-kind incident in Goa and take precautionary measures to avoid such devastating episodes. The Catholic Church in Goa grieves with those who are grieving during this difficult time"

- Fr Savio Fernandes, Executive Secretary, Council for Social Justice and Peace

Eyewitness blames 'unruly' pilgrims, mismanagement

Team Herald

PANJIM: A resident of Quepem, an eyewitness to the stampede at the Shree Lairai zatra in his first-hand account, revealed the tragic incident was triggered by lack of proper arrangements, failure of the police to control the massive crowd and the alleged unruly behaviour of a section of devotees.

Vishal Gauns Dessai, a resident of Avedem-Kothambi, Quepem, who attends the zatra each year said, "This year there was a massive turnout of devotees and somewhere the arrangement appeared to be poor. There was mismanagement. The attitude of some of the Dhonds, who often push and offend devotees while proceeding towards the fire walking ceremony has to change."

According to him, the stampede occurred following verbal fights between two stall owners and another between a stall owner and a Dhond.

"Soon after the verbal clashes between the two stall owners ended, a massive group of persons headed towards the fire walking ceremony. Another fight broke out between a vendor and a Dhond where the

3 FRIENDS RESCUE CURTI RESIDENT TRAPPED BENEATH 25 PEOPLE

PONDA: True friendship was shown through action, as three youth from Curti displayed courage by rescuing their 24-year-old friend, Laxman Shinde, who was caught beneath approximately 25 people, during the tragic stampede at the Shirgao Zatra.

Laxman is currently undergoing treatment at the Ponda Sub District Hospital and is experiencing stomach pain. During the rescue, his friends Bhairu Zhore and Gangaram Zore also sustained injuries, but have since recovered.

According to Bhairu, they were in a queue on a slope when a sudden surge caused around 25 people to fall onto Laxman. Despite him being trapped, his three friends worked tirelessly and successfully pulled him out from under the crowd.

former accused the latter of damaging his bulb with a cane which led to the altercation."

"The devotees continued walking even as few cops were controlling the situation as the police higher-ups were escorting a VIP. These policemen could not control the massive crowd. Instead of using the ropes, the police should have used barricades. While the ropes may have been intended for convenience on the sloppy road, they offered little aid in managing the growing number of attendees. All this happened a few metres away from where we were

standing and in a fraction of seconds chaos broke out," he said. Terming the incident as unfortunate and sad, Dessai said the temple managing committee and the police should frame proper guidelines for devotees, particularly Dhonds. He recommended prohibiting stalls on both sides of the road in the future to improve crowd management.

Having attended the zatra with two friends, Dessai expressed his shock at this unprecedented tragedy and is now reconsidering attending on the main zatra day in the future.



The fire-walking ritual at the Shirgao Zatra takes place after the stampede tragedy on Saturday

Citizens want accountability, safety reforms after tragedy

Team Herald

MARGAO: In the wake of the stampede at the Shree Lairai zatra, which claimed 6 lives and left many dozens injured, citizens have expressed deep condolences and called for urgent accountability.

MLA Cruz Silva stated that the devastating event highlighted the critical need for robust crowd management at large religious gatherings.

"As we mourn this loss, we must act swiftly to ensure such tragedies are never repeated. I urge the authorities to conduct a thorough inquiry and to implement strict safety protocols to safeguard devotees in the future," he said.

Describing the incident as a national shock, Prabhav Naik of Maddganvcho Awaaz said expressions of sorrow are insufficient. "We need answers, accountability, and preventive action. This tragedy must not fade from memory."

Naik pointed out that this was the first year the Zatra was celebrated under its newly-declared status as a State Festival by the Government of Goa.

"With the festival's elevation, what special safety measures were introduced? Were adequate preparations made for the lakhs of devotees, especially during high-risk rituals like the night-time Homkhund?" he asked.

Raising a series of critical

questions, Naik demanded that the government release its disaster management plan for the event.

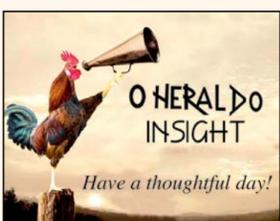
"How many times did the Disaster Management Authority meet ahead of the festival? How many ambulances, fire tenders, and water tankers were stationed at the site?"

He also questioned the Electricity Department's role: "What safety checks were conducted before issuing temporary power connections? Were all wires properly insulated and verified to prevent shocks and short circuits?"

Naik further raised concerns about amusement rides and temporary structures at the festival grounds.

FROM PAGE 1

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



This is the reason why it is crucial for the press to speak truth to power. To ensure that acting as the voice of the people, the media holds up a mirror to our leaders and our social institutions - highlighting that which is good, but more importantly, exposing all that is wrong, so that corrective measures can be taken.

As the old African proverb goes, whatever be the economy of the jungle, the lion will never eat grass. In Goa, O Herald has ensured that the credibility of the free press is protected, delving deep into people's issues to bring them justice when every other option seems lost to them. This is something that was recognised with The Lifetime Journalism Award in the media category at the prestigious Peoples' Awards 2025 held at the House of Commons in London recently.

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STAMPEDE HORROR MARS SHIRGAO ZATRA, 6 DEAD

According to GMC Dean Dr Shivanand Bandekar, 13 of the injured have been admitted in critical care, with five on ventilator support. Health Minister Vishwajit Rane further clarified that 22 patients are under treatment in other hospitals, including 18 at Asilo Hospital, three in CHC Bicholim and one in CHC Sankhali.

Stating that the health department and GMC took immediate and comprehensive steps to manage the situation, Rane said, "We coordinated with the 108 ambulance service, ensuring that five ambulances were dispatched to the site immediately after the incident, while three were at the North Goa district hospital. I am personally monitoring the situation at GMC, and heads of all departments have been directed to report on duty to ensure coordinated care."

QUIET, ANXIOUS AND EXHAUSTED: FAMILIES ON SILENT VIGIL AT GMC

"His ribs are injured, and he has a history of back problems. His face is swollen and red, and he can't speak at the moment. The girl he tried to save didn't survive," he said.

Doctors were still awaiting test results. "He's still in a critical condition," Sudanshu added. "He's just starting to speak a bit and open his eyes. His ribs are likely broken. He's 54 years old and will

probably be in the hospital for a few days."

Elsewhere in the hospital, Rajesh Kalangutkar mourned the loss of two relatives from Tivim, whose bodies lay in the mortuary. A resident of Mayem, Rajesh had attended the temple festival but left minutes before the stampede began.

"There's always a crowd during the zatra," he said. "The dhonds come from their ritual bath and arrive at the temple in large numbers. Around 2.30 am, there were hardly any police present. Everyone was in a queue, and there was a bit of pushing. Then the stampede started."

He went on, "Women were at the front, and a rope placed there caused some to trip. As the crowd pushed forward, people began falling over each other. Those at the bottom didn't survive."

Among those who died was Rajesh's 17-year-old nephew, Aditya Kalangutkar. "His face was completely smashed - he fell forward and people walked over him. He had just completed his SSC and enrolled in Class XI at a college in Mapusa. He was the only son and had a sister. His mother was with him as he fell, but there was nothing she could do."

Dr. Rajesh Patil, Medical Superintendent of GMC, said: "At 5.30 am on Saturday, 14 patients were admitted to the hospital, of whom one was discharged. Five are critical and are under treatment. One of them is improving and out of danger. The injuries involve rib fractures and maxillary sinus and operations are not needed. Presently, I am in touch with the superintendents at Asilo Hospital and in Bicholim and told them that they could transfer patients to us. We are equipped to handle the situation."