

## O HERALDO

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## Goa must stay vigilant as Covid-19 resurges

The spectre of COVID-19, a pandemic that reshaped the world, is creeping back into focus across Asia, and Goa cannot afford to lower its guard. Reports from Singapore and Hong Kong indicate a sharp rise in cases, signalling a gradual return of the virus to the region. In India, the situation is no less concerning, with active cases climbing to over 250, driven by the highly transmissible JN.1 variant and its descendants. While Goa has reported only one case — a septuagenarian currently under treatment — this is no time for complacency. The lessons of the past must guide our actions today to prevent history from repeating itself.

The current surge, most pronounced in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra, with sporadic cases in Delhi, Puducherry, Karnataka, and Gujarat, underscores the virus's persistent ability to adapt. Maharashtra has reported two deaths in Mumbai, though both patients had severe underlying conditions, highlighting the ongoing threat to vulnerable populations. The JN.1 variant, a descendant of the Omicron BA.2.86 lineage, is fuelling this uptick. Its mutations, including the LF.7 and NB.1.8 sub-lineages, enhance its transmissibility, with a specific mutation in its spike protein making it 1.5 times more infectious than earlier variants. This, coupled with waning immunity due to reduced antibody levels, has created a fertile ground for the virus to spread.

The symptoms of JN.1 mirror those of earlier strains: fever, dry cough, sore throat, headache, runny nose, and exhaustion. Notably, some cases have reported increased gastrointestinal issues like diarrhoea, a reminder of the virus's evolving nature. While health authorities assure us that nearly all cases in India are mild and do not require hospitalisation, this does not diminish the need for vigilance. The virus's history teaches us that small sparks can ignite large fires if left unchecked.

Goa, with its vibrant tourism industry and dense social interactions, is particularly vulnerable. The single reported case should not lull us into a false sense of security. Cases will only be identified through increased screening. Ignorance is not bliss — it is foolishness. The state must ramp up testing, particularly for influenza-like illnesses (ILI) and severe acute respiratory infections (SARI), to detect and isolate cases early. The Union Health Ministry's robust surveillance systems, including the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP), provide a framework that Goa must leverage to stay ahead of the curve.

The return of COVID-19 demands a return to precautions we once practised diligently. Wearing masks, especially for those with flu-like symptoms, is a simple yet effective measure to curb transmission. The elderly and immunocompromised, who remain most at risk, should be particularly cautious. Updated guidelines from health authorities urge staying current on vaccinations and boosters, practising hand hygiene, and isolating when symptomatic. These are not new rules but proven strategies we have sadly let slip. A national survey revealed that 79% of respondents in Punjab see no need for masks, a troubling sign of fading vigilance that Goa must avoid.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a rare and humbling event in modern history. It brought mankind to its knees, forcing entire populations indoors, disrupting education, livelihoods, and lives. A whole new lexicon — social distancing, RT-PCR, quarantine — entered our vocabulary, reflecting the profound changes it wrought. Students lost college years, adults lost jobs, and countless lives were cut short. Yet, humanity fought back, fast-tracking vaccines and building resilience. Today, with immunity and knowledge on our side, we are better equipped to confront this challenge. But this advantage is meaningless if we fail to act.

Goa's response must be proactive, not reactive. The state's health infrastructure, bolstered by lessons from the pandemic's peak, is well-prepared, but preparedness alone is not enough. Hospitals must intensify monitoring, and the public must embrace preventive measures. The recent surge in Southeast Asia — Singapore's cases rose from 11,100 to 14,200 in a week, and Thailand reported 33,030 cases in mid-May — serves as a warning. India, and Goa in particular, cannot assume it will remain unscathed. The film festival cluster in Goa, where JN.1 cases were previously detected, shows how quickly the virus can spread in social settings.

We cannot afford to forget the hard-won lessons of the past. The pain of lockdowns, the fear of uncertainty, and the grief of loss must spur us to act decisively. Increased screening, mask-wearing, and adherence to health guidelines are not burdens but necessities. Goa's tourism-driven economy and close-knit communities make it imperative to act swiftly. Let us not wait for a single case to become a cluster. By implementing these measures with resolve, we can protect our people and preserve the vibrant spirit of our state. The virus may mutate, but our determination to fight it must remain unwavering.

## comment



SOTER D'SOUZA

## Lives lost, Lessons ignored: Goa's public spaces are turning deadly

Goa woke up earlier this month to the shocking and sad news of a horrific stampede, a first-time occurrence at a religious event, in which six precious lives were lost and several devotees injured. The myth that such incidents could only occur in other States but not in 'sosegado Goem' was shattered. For many, this incident brought back the memory of the deadly Mahakumbh tragedy some months ago in Uttar Pradesh.

It was lately in the month of March that the Sree Lairai Devi zatra at Shirgao, Bicholim, which draws thousands of devotees and tourists every year, was declared a State festival by the Government of Goa. Just a day before this unfortunate tragedy, it was widely publicised that the government has enhanced security arrangements for this year's zatra with a record number of police personnel deployed with drones, riot control vehicles and plain clothes police officers for effective crowd management, to ensure a safe and smooth passage for the devotees.

This popular religious festival has been organised for decades and has always drawn huge crowds but never witnessed such a disaster. Besides some minor incidents which were heard of in the past, wherein some or the



other devotee suffered from minor burn or other injuries in the melee, there has never been an incident of such magnitude leading to loss of lives. Some are now alleging that there have been a couple of deaths in the past which went unreported. Whether such deaths were related to lack of safety or health issues is uncertain.

Amidst all the allegations and counter allegations flying around was a mischievous accusation about the government ensuring safety and security for church events at Old Goa, and ignoring the same when it comes to temple fes-

tivals. Are we to believe that there are no more popular temples in Goa which conduct their religious events in an orderly manner with or without government assistance? The orderliness one witnesses at Old Goa's religious events is not the result of the government intervention, it has a lot to do with the culture of devotees in their places of worship.

So, is this tragedy a failure of the organisers and government machinery? Or, could it be a consequence of the commercialisation of religious festivals coupled with a deteriorating civic culture witnessed in Goa?

As usual, it only takes the loss of lives for the government and citizens to wake up and take notice. Such tragedies are converted into occasions for either deriving political mileage or for settling political scores. It follows the usual pattern of denial, blaming, scapegoating, and projection to muddy the waters and dodge the truth, only to be forgotten no sooner another sensational issue surfaces. If the incident is politically embarrassing, then a fact-finding team is constituted and soft targets picked up for a dressing down with no conclusive outcomes.

The unfortunate incident at Shirgao should not be seen in isolation from the government's utter disregard for public security and safety in several other areas of governance. It was just one among the many tragedies waiting to happen sometime or the other, a build up from years of safety precautions being ignored by overconfident organisers and devotees. The Government's safety and security measures are more about reducing deaths on paper, and ignores the serious disabilities for life of victims who survive and the medical costs incurred by the State and their family for the treatment.

The confusion leading to a stampede is nothing different from the chaos we see in public spaces caused by overcrowding and illegal encroachments due to failures in planning and implementation. The linesmen losing their lives due to electrocution while discharging their duty is about disregard for prescribed safety standards by those in authority. The recent Verna bus accident which claimed two lives is the horrific reality of Goa's

pathetic public transport system. There are fatalities on our roads practically every single day due to vehicular accidents, but all we see is the farce of road safety weeks. The recent raids by FDA on eateries and quality of food items in our markets exposes the lack of health safeguards. It is all about a moral crisis with absolutely no consideration for public health and safety when it comes to making a quick buck.

Can a selfish and irresponsible mentality prevailing in society be expected to behave any differently when it comes to discipline in places of worship?

With civic discipline on the decline, consideration for one's own safety and that of others is terribly lacking all around. For jingoism mistaken as nationalism the concepts like 'Empathy', 'Safe distance' and 'Right of way' are too colonial, giving rise to a jungle raj. The public has enough time to condemn religious terrorism but refuses to denounce the terrorism unleashed in their immediate locality by the absence of basic public health and safety standards for the government's infrastructural projects. Citizens silently surrender to all sorts of compromises and failures of the government and organizers of events when it comes to public safety standards.

When citizens themselves submit to unsafe conditions, whether in religious places, on roads or in other situations, who should be considered the villains and victims in such fatal incidents? Increasing police presence cannot be a substitute for the lack of civic discipline and responsibility. With unpredictable weather conditions due to climate change, the rampant hill cutting, excavations, land filling and other activities undertaken by bypassing basic planning, engineering and safety codes are inviting fatal disasters. Many more precious lives could be lost with the growing abuse in community spaces resulting from a toxic politics and governance which is spinning out of control.

*(The author has worked with community initiatives related to Drug and Alcohol Abuse Prevention, Panchayati Raj, Anti-Corruption, Environmental Protection and Social Justice.)*

## people's edit

## THE SECOND PRIZE

CHANDER GUPTA

Toeing the government policy, the month of September was observed as 'Hindi Maah' (Hindi Month) and September 14 as Hindi Diwas (Hindi Day) in the Public Sector Bank (PSB) I have since retired from. The objective of commemorating Hindi Month and Hindi Day has been to promote and encourage the use of Hindi in official work, especially in Hindi-speaking areas. Various competitions were held to test the proficiency of employees in the knowledge of Hindi. Winners were felicitated and feted.

This episode dates to Hindi Month approximately 20 years back. Our Zonal Office announced an essay competition in Hindi for employees working under its jurisdiction, which was wholly a Hindi-speaking region. Different topics were given for officers and clerical staff. Those adjudged 1st, 2nd and 3rd in the respective category would be entitled to prizes.

I was heading one of the branches in the zone. Always keen to write, I composed the essay in Hindi on the given topic complying with the word limit. I submitted my entry to the Rajbhasha Vibhag (Official Language Department), nodal office for Hindi at the Zonal Office. Presuming a tough competition as our zone consisted of around 200 branches, I did not fancy a chance at the podium.

After a few weeks, I received a call from the Rajbhasha Vibhag to intimate that my entry for the essay competition had been adjudged 2nd, belying my own expectations. I was further told that the winners would be felicitated during the ensuing Performance Review Meeting. I brimmed with joy that my essay had won second place at the zonal level.

On the D-Day, I reached the zonal office fifteen minutes before the meeting was to commence. Since there was time, I first landed in the Rajbhasha Vibhag to meet the officials there to thank them for bestowing honour by choosing my entry for the second spot. After greeting me, they made an interesting revelation. I took their leave to hurry for the conference room where the prizes for Hindi Month competitions were to be distributed.

At the venue, I took a seat among the participants. I had presumed that the prizes would be given away at the beginning of the Performance Review Meeting so that the winners could leave after collecting their respective prizes. However, the deliberations for the Performance Review began first. As I was not a participant in the P-Review Meeting, it became very boring for me to wait the entire day sitting in the Conference Room to listen to the heated discussions on business. Being scared of seniors, I could not even leave in the middle.

At long last, the meeting drew to a close. By that time everyone looked weary and in haste to leave. But Rajbhasha Officials, who were waiting in the wings with trophies, requested our General Manager to give away the prizes to the winners. When my name was announced, I strode up to the General Manager to receive the prize amidst ritualistic applause. Impulsively, I requested the GM to let me speak a few words. Getting the nod, I revealed to the audience what I had been told by the Rajbhasha Officials in the morning. The surprising news, which brought the entire house down with laughter, was that there were only two entries in the competition in which I won the second prize.

## Crocodiles may wander onto flooded roads

It is learnt that over the past three days, Goa has recorded the highest for the pre-monsoon period in the past one decade. The incessant heavy showers have resulted in flooding of roads and water entering the houses in low-lying areas. One fallout of this flooding, which is many-a-times overlooked, is the presence of crocodiles on the roads and at times even entering the homes.

A crocodile was reportedly rescued from a residential area at Coelhowaddo in Britona-Penha da Franca in the wee hours of Thursday. During heavy rainfall, crocodiles may be displaced from their usual habitats in rivers and canals and wander onto roads or into residential areas when there is flooding as they seek refuge elsewhere. Incidentally the mugger or marsh crocodile is the most common type found in Goa and is also the most dangerous to humans.

In the past, crocodiles have been spotted in residential areas in Curchorem, Parsem, Vaddem in Vasco, Cavelossim and several other places. In a rare and alarming incident, recently a woman was seriously injured after being attacked by two crocodiles while washing clothes at a riverbank in Saton-Dabal leaving the woman with severe injuries before nearby residents could intervene.

It is absolutely necessary for the citizens living near water bodies to be alert to such dangerous situations. Barking of stray dogs or pet dogs at night can be a vital sign of such an unwanted and dangerous guest in

the neighbourhood. The Forest Department needs to be quick to respond to distress calls and rescue the crocodile before it attacks humans and pets.

Adelmo Fernandes, Vasco

## Need to be vigilant at all times

Operation Sindoor against Pakistan and the PoK based terrorists was implemented effectively and well. However, we should not allow that euphoria to extend indefinitely and blind us to new threats from our enemies.

In most attacks on us, we have been caught with our guard down and allowed the terrorists mostly to take advantage of the situation and kill our innocent people. We also need to remember that the terrorists who attacked the tourists at Pahalgal still remain at large and have not been caught though almost a month has passed. The test of our security establishment is when they are able to intercept, apprehend and eliminate the terrorists who dare attack us and catch those who escape quickly.

Srinivas Kamat, Mysore

## Will Goa embrace app-based taxis?

The newly introduced Goa Transport Aggregator Guidelines 2025 aim to reshape the state's transport sector by bringing all taxis and motorcycle taxis under a uni-

fied App system. This move is expected to make commuting more efficient, transparent, and accessible, marking a significant shift in how people travel across Goa.

With ride-hailing services revolutionising urban mobility in Mumbai and Bengaluru, Goa now has the opportunity to integrate popular aggregators into its network, ensuring a seamless transport experience for both tourists and locals. The benefits extend beyond convenience—app-based taxis will also help reduce vehicular congestion on Goa's roads. With fair and standardised fares driving high demand, more people will opt for shared rides instead of using personal vehicles, curbing the excessive number of private cars clogging the streets.

However, for these guidelines to be truly transformative, the government must ensure strict implementation. Simply introducing a policy isn't enough—active enforcement and strategic infrastructure improvements are essential to maximize its impact. Goa must take cues from cities that have successfully blended technology with commuter convenience, ensuring that public transport evolves without succumbing to vested interests.

Will Goa finally break free from outdated transport inefficiencies? The answer hinges on the government's willingness to push forward and prioritize mobility over political resistance. The time for hesitation is over—Goa's commut-

ers need action.

Everette Assis Telles, Margao

## Arrest inhuman brutes immediately

It is paining that while our sisters who have been widowed by the terrorists who killed their husbands in cold blood in Pahalgal are still struggling to come out of their great sorrow and the nation is praying that they should come out of their grief soon, the utterances of some of our leaders do not appear to subscribe to this intention.

Sindoor on the forehead of our Indian sisters is considered sacred because it is a symbol of holy matrimony. When our military mission against Pakistan was called 'Operation Sindoor', we believed and appreciated that it was named so, as the operation was to avenge the dastardly act of the terrorists which snatched the Sindoor of our sisters.

In the circumstances, recently while announcing various projects in Rajasthan, Prime Minister Modi thundered, "it is not blood which flows in my veins but 'boiling' sindoor!" and he also compared the sacred Sindoor to the gun powder used by the armed forces in 'Operation Sindoor'. One wonders what type of an impact his speech would have made on our widowed sisters who have lost their Sindoor.

Right now, what our sisters

expect from PM Modi is not this type of rhetoric on their lost Sindoor but immediate arrest of the four terrorists who are still at large after killing their husbands in cold blood and maximum punishment rendered to those inhuman brutes.

Tharcus S Fernando, Chennai

## Let our children touch earth again

The 1990s witnessed vibrant scenes across India—villages, towns, even city corners echoing with Kabaddi chants, children chasing Pithu targets, or crafting strategies in "Chor-Sipahi." These games were not merely a pastime.

They were instruments of character, courage, and community. Traditional games like Kabaddi, Gilli Danda, Kushti, and Konchay nurtured strength, discipline, patience, and teamwork. Others like Pithu, Bhurey, and Hide-and-Seek sharpened reflexes, decision-making, and social bonding. Most importantly, these games connected children to the soil, to the sun, and to one another.

Today's youth, overwhelmed by screens and isolated routines, needs these games more than ever—to regain purpose, build physical fitness, and reclaim confidence. Their revival in schools, madrasas, parks, and local events could be a powerful tool against addiction, apathy, and aggression. Let us return this joyful inheritance to our children—not just to play, but to become.

Mohammad Hasnain, Muzaffarpur