

O HERALDO

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Copter crash a grim safety warning on pilgrim route

The tragedy that unfolded on Sunday morning, when seven lives were lost in a helicopter crash near Gaurikund en route from Kedarnath, is not an isolated incident but the latest in a series of troubling warnings. Within just one month, there have been five serious helicopter-related incidents in the Char Dham region, including emergency landings and crash-landings due to poor weather and mechanical issues. The statistics are not only alarming - they are damning.

Despite repeated reminders from aviation experts, officials, and even weather patterns themselves, the helicopter operations in Kedarnath and surrounding regions continue to function under a cloud of negligence, mismanagement, and, disturbingly, corporate greed. What was once an option for ease of access for pilgrims, many of whom are elderly or unable to make the grueling trek, has now become a high-stakes gamble with life.

The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has suspended operations of Aryan Aviation following Sunday's accident. In an earlier accident on June 7, a helicopter made an emergency landing on a highway in Rudraprayag. Other firms like Kestrel and TransBharat, are now under scrutiny for violating Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), flying under hazardous weather conditions, and executing turnaround times that are dangerously short. A helicopter that landed at Kedarnath at 5.18 am took off again just one minute later. Such a schedule, which prioritizes flight volume over safety checks, is not just aggressive, it is reckless.

The repeated accidents - from the May 8 Gangotri crash that killed six, to emergency landings on roads and school playgrounds - reflect systemic issues in how helicopter services are regulated in this mountainous terrain. Controlled Flight Into Terrain (CFIT), as the probable cause of the June 7 crash, points to avoidable human error combined with environmental oversight. Thick fog, zero visibility, and clouding in the valley are well-documented and predictable occurrences. Why then, were helicopters cleared for flight in such conditions?

The answer, as multiple sources have suggested, lies in a dangerous blend of commercial pressures and regulatory laxity. Helicopter operators reportedly charge Rs 4,000 to Rs 10,000 for the short Guptkashi-Kedarnath trip and up to Rs 1 lakh for longer flights from Dehradun. With each helicopter making as many as ten round trips daily, the profits are enormous. But these earnings are being made at the cost of lives.

The Uttarakhand Civil Aviation Development Authority (UCADA) and the DGCA have now ordered enhanced monitoring, posted officials to oversee operations in real-time, and reduced flight frequency. These are steps in the right direction, but they are reactionary, not proactive. If anything, they only underscore how little oversight existed before the tragic incidents forced the authorities' hands.

According to state data, more than 66,000 pilgrims have used helicopter services since April this year. The surge in spiritual tourism, while beneficial to the local economy, must be balanced with a rigorous safety infrastructure. That infrastructure is either missing or inadequately enforced.

Routine weather assessments, mandatory pre-flight safety checks, pilot experience thresholds, air traffic monitoring, and strict penalties for SOP violations should be non-negotiable elements of any air service - particularly in a region as treacherous as Kedarnath. Yet, reports show that even basic norms were being bypassed or ignored altogether.

It has come to light that two other helicopters operated by TransBharat Aviation were flying in similarly unsuitable weather, leading to six-month license suspensions for the pilots involved. This is not coincidence; this is the culture. A culture of disregard for safety, enabled by authorities who either failed to enforce regulations or looked the other way.

Pilgrimage should not cost people their lives. It is time for the Uttarakhand state government and central civil aviation authorities to impose a comprehensive overhaul of helicopter services in the region.

This should include:

Mandatory weather clearance for every flight, with automated grounding systems during unsafe conditions.

Enforceable SOPs with punitive action against violations - not just suspensions but permanent blacklisting for repeated offenders.

Independent audits conducted randomly and frequently.

Regulated flight frequency and turnaround times - no more one-minute turnaround windows that compromise mechanical checks.

Pilot experience and training criteria specific to mountain flying, which involves high-risk navigation and weather unpredictability.

Real-time command and control rooms, as announced, must be activated and publicly accountable.

Transparency for pilgrims - they should be informed of safety risks, operator safety records, and current weather conditions before boarding.

Lastly, a cultural shift is needed. Operators must be reminded that they are flying pilgrims, not ferrying tourists for leisure. The terrain, the weather, and the stakes are vastly different. This is not a sector for shortcuts.

comment



MARIAN PINHEIRO

Goa taxi drivers' issue - A leadership failure and a governance deficit

The taxi industry in Goa has been a cornerstone of the state's tourism and transport infrastructure. However, in recent years, taxi drivers have expressed significant grievances, leading to widespread strikes and protests. Goa's taxi industry has evolved over several decades, transitioning from a small-scale, informal sector to a more organised service catering to the growing tourism industry. As tourism expanded, the demand for more standardised and reliable services increased, leading to the establishment of taxi unions and associations.

As of recent estimates, Goa has approximately 27,000 registered tourist taxis. Over the past two decades, the number of registered taxis in Goa has witnessed a significant increase. From approximately 6,483 taxis in the year 2000, the number surged to 27,076 by 2020, reflecting a substantial growth trajectory.

Tourists primarily require taxis for airport transfers, sightseeing tours and inter-city travel. The demand fluctuates based on seasonal variations, with peak periods necessitating a higher number of available taxis.

Assuming that an average of 10,000 tourists arrive in Goa per day during the peak season, an average 3 tourists per taxi, with 4 rides per day, then about 1000 taxis will be needed to meet the daily transportation demand during the peak season.

Tourists primarily require taxis for airport transfers, sightseeing tours and inter-city travel. The demand fluctuates based on seasonal variations, with peak periods necessitating a higher number of available taxis



This means Goa has far greater number of taxis than required. The rapid increase in the number of registered taxis has led to concerns about market over-saturation, with more drivers competing for a limited number of passengers, potentially affecting earnings and service quality, hence a livelihood issue for the taxi owners. There is a governmental lapse, in allowing registration of such huge number of taxis in Goa, without any planning and necessary study of ground realities.

Like what is happening with destruction of agricultural land, even forest land to build multiplexes and housing complexes, without assessing the need and the carrying capaci-

ty of the region in terms of the availability of essential services. Due to this faulty planning, water and electricity scarcity is glaring at the local population - a potential reason for future public unrest and violence.

The government's introduction of app-based taxi services, particularly GoaMiles, has been a major point of contention. Taxi unions argue that these platforms threaten their livelihoods by introducing competition from both local and out-of-state drivers. They contend that the app-based model undermines traditional fare structures and bypasses local regulations, leading to unfair competition. Furthermore, the prevalence of illegal taxis operating without proper licences has created an uneven playing field, undermining the livelihoods of licensed drivers. Taxi drivers face significant economic challenges, including rising fuel costs, maintenance expenses and competition from illegal operators. Many drivers report that they are unable to earn a sustainable income, with some working long hours without adequate compensation.

The introduction of app-based services has further strained their earnings, as these platforms often offer lower fares and higher commissions. The system of tourists renting vehicles is another cause for their concern.

Having created these messy situations, which are making conflicts between groups inevitable, government officials instead of taking sides should act by inventing and implementing suitable measures to gainfully use the excess human resources now in the form of taxi drivers. Even if all the taxis in Goa agree to join the app-based taxi services, like GoaMiles, the issue will not be resolved because there are much more taxis in Goa than required. There is a fundamental livelihood issue, which if not fulfilled will turn into a law-and-order issue. It is now the responsibility of the Government, which gave permission for taxis in the State, without assessing the need and viability to find solution to this planning error. There has to be a plan or scheme for alternative occupation for these excess number of taxi drivers considering their acquired skill sets and their abilities to acquire more and even modern computer-based skill sets.

To address the economic challenges faced by taxi drivers and promote sustainable development within the sector, the establishment of a govern-

ment-sponsored Cooperative Credit cum service society, may be a viable option. May be setting up an automobile industry like a workshop or manufacturing unit or an ancillary automobile-based industry for these excess drivers to earn their living. Or funding to rehabilitate those willing to take up alternative vocations with in the State, thus enhancing States productive capital. Or may be even training those interested in mechanised forming or animal husbandry, as Goa needs to move from a consumer State to a Producing state in agriculture and allied products.

May be use the Management institutions in the State to scientifically study the situation, man power resources and viability of their alternative avocation or income earning strategies.

A literate state like Goa should provide leadership and initiative rather than just trying to appease central leadership to secure one's positions of power. Goa is looking for a thinking and acting government rather than a self-praising one. It's not enough for government to create smart cities. Governance demands a nuanced understanding of economics, digital technology and social dynamics. Intelligence in leadership helps protect democratic institutions. Look at how during the COVID-19 pandemic, countries with intelligent, science-informed leadership, such as New Zealand and South Korea, were able to manage the crisis with significantly better outcomes than those that relied on populism.

Democracies exist to serve their people. Hence, governments must be "people-friendly in policy and practice". A concerned government is one that governs with a sense of moral responsibility and ethical purpose. It is driven not just by political calculation but by a sincere desire to uplift its people, protect the vulnerable, and ensure justice.

As the world enters an era of rapid technological change, with artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and digital surveillance, transforming economies and societies, smart and concerned governments with Intelligent leadership, who can grasp the practical necessities, is a democratic imperative and they determine whether a Nation can overcome challenges, protect rights, grow its economy sustainably, and foster unity in diversity.

(The writer is a professor of law & an education consultant)

people's edit

THE 'ACCIDENTAL' COOK

ANANTHA PADMANABHAN

The notion that "a man can't cook" was a familiar one, often voiced by my grandmother during my early childhood.

A fantastic cook herself, she took pride in her culinary skills and would often tease my grandfather for his inability to even brew a decent filter coffee.

Her days began early, producing elaborate South Indian meals single-handedly.

The previous day's trip to the market was a ritual, meticulously selecting vegetables for the next day's feast.

By 7:30 am, his lunch was packed, ready for his 7:45 am departure. Soon after my grandfather left for work, my uncle and aunt also departed for their respective jobs. By 8:15 am, I was ready for school, my favourite curd rice and homemade mango pickle packed with care.

Dinner was served hot at 7:30 pm, and by 9:15 pm, with the All India Radio news finished, the lights were out.

During my adolescence, I moved to my parents' place, where I discovered my mother's talent for multi-cuisine dishes, a reflection of our diverse neighbourhood. Breakfast at eight o'clock in the morning was a mix of rotis, puris, and the occasional South Indian delight. Lunch for my father at quarter past twelve meant my mother's cooking was complete by half eleven. Dinner was a later affair, at ten o'clock in the evening, with bedtime at half eleven.

My job, which involved postings to different places, led to a life of varied locations and unpredictable meal times.

After getting married, with my wife's shift work, our routine often revolved around a one o'clock brunch and a late dinner. Sundays brought breakfast from a nearby café and an earlier nine o'clock dinner.

To cut a long story short, the Covid-19 lockdown gave me a chance to have a go at cooking. Soon after I retired, I took up cooking as a hobby. I stopped buying ready-meals, including snacks, and initially had a go at preparing some simple side dishes.

My job, with all the moving around, had shown me the diverse and exciting world of street food across India. The speed, the ingenuity and the incredible flavours packed into simple preparations always fascinated me. Perhaps it was the nostalgia for those culinary adventures, or maybe it was the challenge of mastering those seemingly effortless techniques, but I found myself drawn to recreating those iconic street food dishes.

This exploration soon led my daughters to dub me their "street food chef".

Both my sons-in-law regularly pop round to enjoy my masala dosas, upma, and idlis.

One Sunday, after polishing off a generous serving of my upma, my usually reserved elder son-in-law exclaimed, "This is even better than what we get in that famous South Indian restaurant!"

That seemingly simple compliment, coming from him, known for his quiet nature, was a testament to how far I had come in my culinary journey.

My wife jovially remarks now and then that I've outdone her cooking to score brownie points.

My only regret is that my grandmother is no longer with us, otherwise I would have got her to say, "men can also equally cook well."

I remember countless instances during my childhood when my grandfather's attempts at even the simplest kitchen tasks were met with gentle teasing, reinforcing the unspoken notion that the kitchen was a woman's domain.

It would have been a powerful moment to demonstrate to my grandmother that those traditional roles aren't as rigid as they once seemed, and that even this "accidental" cook could truly find his calling in the kitchen.

Acute shortage of beds in govt hospitals

Goa has reportedly been ranked as the top-performing state in healthcare among the North-East, Hilly Regions, and smaller states of India, according to the CareEdge State Ranking Report 2025. The state achieved this recognition through strong performances in various sectors, including financial, infrastructure, economic, and social development. Goa's healthcare infrastructure surpasses that of many other states.

The system functions effectively from primary to tertiary levels. However, primary healthcare centers require assessment. Goa Medical College is central to the healthcare infrastructure that serves Goa and even the nearby states. It must be said that one of the primary needs of any hospital is the availability of beds for the patients.

For any patient, getting a hospital bed is the first step towards getting admission in the hospital and subsequent treatment. It must be said that beds are readily available in private hospitals. However, it is not the case in government hospitals. Here patients are being accommodated on stretchers, wheelchairs and even on the floor for lack of sufficient

beds. It is learnt that there is an acute bed shortage plaguing the South Goa District Hospital. Doctors and citizens have reportedly suggested that the hospital's top two floors be opened to accommodate more beds and patients. It does not seem proper for the government to push for a medical college or a nursing college on the top two floors of the district hospital when there is scarcity of beds for the patients.

Adelmo Fernandes, Vasco
Life is so unpredictable

You go for a vacation, and terrorists shoot you dead. You go to a trophy parade and it ends in a stampede. You are crossing a bridge and it gets swept away in the river currents. You board a helicopter to go on a pilgrimage and the chopper crashes in bad weather.

You board a flight, it ends up in a fireball. You are studying in your hostel or having lunch in the mess and a plane falls on you. You go for a polo match and a bee gets stuck into your throat triggering a fatal allergic reaction. 2025 has been annus hor-

letterstotheeditor

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ribilis for the world and India in particular, you never know when your time is up. So live a meaningful life, laugh often, be of use to others not as privileged as you, don't carry grudges, forgive your enemies and love your near and dear ones while you are still alive. These are the things for which the world shall remember you long after you have left the realm of mortals.

Vinay Dwivedi, Benaulim
Ban group picnics at dangerous places

A young police constable from Porvorim who had gone for a picnic along with a group of friends was reportedly drowned while bathing in a water-filled quarry at Tivim (a popular yet risky spot for locals during the monsoon season) on Sunday evening.

Well, today most youngsters are habitually seen going (despite of repeated warnings from the government) for their weekend group picnics near such dangerous abandoned quarries, ponds, waterfalls, rivers, lakes/similar natural water bodies across the state, especially dur-

ing the monsoons and finally get drowned at such isolated places.

The government should take a very serious note of the above fact and take a strict action against such type of irresponsible people for going on picnics in groups to bathe during the monsoons at such dangerous places to prevent further tragedies from occurring in Goa in future.

Jerry Fernandes, Saligao
Water meters are faulty

In some cases the water meters are faulty of the consumers that they give reading invariably. These meters just measure volumetric flow of fluids flowing through them without any specificity for water. Especially in government residential quarters where some of the meters are seen faulty and even the bills are generated for minimal. The GI pipes are rusted and severe leakages of water on pipelines. They are even losing revenues dues to this faulty meters and leakages. This is a major discrepancy in intermittent water supplies. Many water meters, especially older

models, can become faulty over time. They may misread water usage due to mechanical wear, leading to inflated readings. Most of the pipes laid are either damaged or have become old and this results in frequent leakage. The PWD should survey water leakage and fix leaks to reduce the unaccount for water or non-revenue water. The objective is to increase the revenue by identifying leakages and faulty meters.

K G Vilop, Chorao
Treat all accident victims with dignity

All accident victims must be treated with equal dignity and compassion, irrespective of their position in the class hierarchy. All accidents, be it in air, road, or rail, are equally tragic and demand equal political and media attention. The 14-year-old boy Akash Patni was sleeping under a tree in front of his family's tea stall at the time when the Air India plane crashed into the B J Medical College hostel. A flying and burning piece of metal from the aircraft struck him in the head and engulfed him in flames. His family members deserve equal compassion at par with the family members of those who lost their lives due to the plane crash.

Sujit De, Kolkata