

Prayers, Panic, & Preventable Deaths: Faith Turned Fatal at Lairai Jatra

SURAJ NANDREKAR

The fiery spirit of Goddess Lairai was overshadowed by grief and outrage this year, as the centuries-old Jatra in Shirgao turned into a deadly stampede on May 3, leaving 11 dead and over 50 injured.

A damning report by the Fact-Finding Inquiry Committee (FFIC) has now exposed what many on the ground suspected: the tragedy was not an accident, but a catastrophic failure of planning, coordination, and accountability.

The report, which runs over 100 pages and includes testimonies from 50 officials, volunteers, and villagers, squarely blames institutional lapses across four departments: Police, Fire and Emergency Services, Public Works Department (PWD), and the Shree Lairai Temple Committee. Each of these, the report notes, "failed to uphold even the basic standards of crowd management and safety preparedness."

Police: Ill-Prepared and Indifferent

The North Goa Police, tasked with overseeing law and order for the Jatra that attracts over 2 lakh devotees annually, had not updated their crowd management plan in over five years. The report reveals that no drone surveillance, thermal cameras, or PA systems were deployed. Worse, the Jatra was not declared a sensitive event, despite clear indicators of risk.

The most damning revelation: only 43 police personnel were stationed for a crowd of 2 lakh—a stark violation of safety norms. No separate teams were assigned for VIP duty, crowd control, or stampede management, leading to confusion and inaction when panic spread through the village's narrow lanes.

SP Nidhin Valsan, who approved the deployment plan, admitted in his testimony that "not all senior officers visited the site prior to the event." A chilling oversight, considering the nightlong dhuni rituals involve walking over embers and dense smoke—a known cause of crowd anxiety.

Fire & Emergency Services: Missing in Action

The Fire Department, which plays a critical role in mass gathering safety, had no representation on the ground until the tragedy unfolded. The department failed to conduct a risk assessment, and fire tenders were

Came to seek blessings. Returned with ashes and unanswered questions



deployed outside the village, delaying their response during the critical 5 a.m. rush when the stampede occurred. No smoke extraction systems, emergency exits, or first responder protocols were discussed or implemented. "The Fire Department abdicated its responsibility," the FFIC report concludes.

PWD: Infrastructure Chaos

The Public Works Department (PWD) is tasked with ensuring that roads, access points, and infrastructure are festival-ready. However, the narrow village lanes, lack of proper barricading, and non-functional street lighting created a tinderbox of risk.

Most tellingly, the FFIC found that bamboo barricades collapsed under pressure, creating panic. No signage or

emergency evacuation plans were in place. An internal note showed that PWD officials never conducted a joint site inspection with other agencies.

Temple Committee: Unregulated Authority

While the Lairai Jatra is managed by the Shree Lairai Saunthan Committee, the FFIC found that the temple body functioned with little oversight. Despite collecting donations and charging for stalls, it maintained no coordination log with police or civil authorities. The Committee also failed to cap or regulate entry into the dhuni area, leading to overcrowding at peak hours. When the crowd surged during the pre-dawn ritual, volunteers were

CAUSE OF INCIDENT

The Committee has found that the immediate cause of the stampede was overcrowding on the pathway from Tali to Homkhand, particularly at the upper end of the sloped gradient near the RBL Bank Branch, Shirgao, aggravated by the unruly behaviour of the Dhonds and lack of proper crowd control measures (for the movement of Dhonds) at that location.

The crowd [dhonds] was permitted to enter the pathway from Tali in groups, which were subsequently channelled into a two-by-two queue formation after the end of the sloped gradient leading towards Homkhand. This arrangement resulted in a build-up of people on the sloped section, causing overcrowding in that area.

The overcrowding, coupled with attempts by some groups of dhonds to push forward through the crowd and their unruly behaviour, caused instability among devotees walking along the slope. As a result, it was given to understand that a person fell face-first on the sloped section, triggering a chain reaction in which several people behind and around her lost their balance and fell over one another.

Owing to the downward slope, limited visibility and the push of the crowd and unruly behaviour, the people approaching from behind were unaware of the fall and continued moving forward, leading to the stampede.

The stampede could likely have been averted with proper planning, risk assessment, and the implementation of effective crowd management strategies.

overwhelmed and had no training or communication devices to control the situation.

A Breakdown of Governance

The FFIC report reads like a catalogue of missed warnings. Letters from the local

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1. Goa Police

- Duties:** Maintain law and order, crowd control, VIP security, and event monitoring.
- Lapses:** Underestimated crowd size despite past data and expected turnout.
- Poor deployment: Only ~400 personnel for over 1.5 lakh people; key routes and crowd-prone areas were under-covered.
- No crowd management SOPs or disaster mitigation plans.
- Failure to coordinate effectively with other agencies (Fire, PWD, Temple Committee).
- VIP focus distracted resources from the general public's safety.
- Delayed response during the stampede—ambulance access was blocked, and evacuation was chaotic.
- Accountability:** Police were grossly underprepared and failed in proactive crowd management, which is their primary mandate during mass events.

2. Fire and Emergency Services

- Duties:** Emergency response, fire safety, rescue operations.
- Lapses:** No fire trucks, medical/rescue gear, or trained personnel deployed at the event site.
- No coordination with police or PWD for emergency access routes.
- Incomplete emergency response plan.
- Accountability:** Fire Dept's absence at the venue and lack of preparedness severely delayed the emergency response, risking more lives.

3. Public Works Department (PWD)

- Duties:** Infrastructure maintenance (roads, access paths), temporary arrangements (barricades, lighting).
- Lapses:** Roads were narrow and poorly maintained, impeding crowd movement and emergency vehicle access.
- No temporary road expansion or barrier system for crowd flow.
- Inadequate lighting and signage, especially near the 'homkund' and exit routes.
- No on-site engineers or supervision during peak hours

The Road Ahead

In its closing recommendations, the FFIC has called for:

- Mandatory safety audits for religious events with over 25,000 attendees.
- Deployment of AI-based crowd-monitoring tools.
- Creation of a Goa State Festival Safety Authority to streamline accountability.

For the people of Shirgao, however, the scars are raw. Many wonder how a celebration that symbolizes faith and fire could end in death and despair. As 80-year-old Devaki Gaonkar, a survivor of the stampede, puts it:

SUNDAY THOUGHT

India's Tactical Edge Exposed
Pak's Bluff in Operation Sindoor

In the high-stakes world of military strategy and geopolitical maneuvering, decisive actions speak louder than loud proclamations. India's execution of Operation Sindoor stands as a striking example of quiet

dominance backed by precision, planning, and technological superiority. A recent report published by The New York Times, backed

by views from global defence experts, has dismantled the Pakistani narrative and affirmed what many in India already knew — that Bharat was the undisputed winner in the brief but intense engagement before the ceasefire was announced.

Unlike previous military stand-offs, Operation Sindoor was not a reactive strike. It was a calculated, preemptive show of force that demonstrated India's ability to not just defend, but to deter and dominate. Pakistan's attempts to provoke a confrontation were met with clinical efficiency. India struck with impunity, choosing the time, place, and method of engagement. The use of Rafale fighter jets — armed with Meteor air-to-air missiles — proved game-changing in ensuring air superiority. Simultaneously, the S-400 air defence system effectively shielded Indian territory from any retaliatory strikes. The preparedness and coordination of the Indian Air Force, in tandem with real-time intelligence, thwarted multiple Pakistani attempts to hit targets within Indian borders.

According to defence analysts, the BrahMos missile system was India's ace up the sleeve. Its presence as a deterrent forced Pakistan to rethink the scale and scope of its response. Though not deployed in full during the operation, the threat of BrahMos strikes — fast, accurate, and near impossible to intercept — was enough to compel caution in Islamabad. The message was clear: escalation would come at an unacceptable cost.

What makes Operation Sindoor all the more remarkable is not just the military success, but the strategic restraint that followed. India achieved its

objectives without allowing the situation to spiral out of control. While Pakistan scrambled to craft a counter-narrative for domestic consumption, India allowed facts on the ground — and in international analysis — to speak for themselves. The New York Times report, far from any domestic political bias, revealed the scale of India's preparedness and exposed Pakistan's exaggerated claims of parity.

Furthermore, this operation has geopolitical ramifications. It sends a powerful signal to adversaries that India's red lines are not mere diplomatic rhetoric. They are backed by force, technology, and the political will to act when necessary. This reinforces India's position not just as a regional power, but as a responsible military actor — one that adheres to international norms even as it defends its sovereignty.

The real fallout of Operation Sindoor may be within Pakistan itself. Defence commentators have noted that the failed retaliatory attempts, combined with India's superior tactical moves, have led to quiet discontent within sections of the Pakistani military establishment. Once again, the myth of parity between the two nuclear neighbours has been shattered — not just militarily, but diplomatically and psychologically.

For India, the takeaway is that preparedness pays off. Investment in high-end platforms like Rafale, S-400, and BrahMos is not just about deterrence; it's about decisively winning engagements when they occur. The success of Operation Sindoor also underlines the importance of integrated command, real-time intelligence sharing, and technological superiority in modern warfare.

As the ceasefire holds, it is important that India continues to build on the momentum of this strategic success. Deterrence is not a one-time demonstration — it is a posture that must be maintained, upgraded, and communicated clearly.

In the final reckoning, Operation Sindoor was not just a tactical military operation — it was a strategic message, delivered with precision and restraint. And that message was received loud and clear — not just in Islamabad, but across global capitals.

Masterstroke

Virat Kohli's Retirement:
The Story Beneath The 22-yards

Ketan Nandrekar

When Virat Kohli announced his retirement from Test cricket, the nation was left stunned. The timing, the manner, and the abruptness of the decision have sparked more questions than answers.

This isn't just about a cricketer stepping down; this feels like a tale with unspoken chapters — chapters that, perhaps, only a few behind the scenes truly understand. To anyone who has followed Virat Kohli's journey, one thing stands out — his obsession with excellence. His unparalleled fitness levels, his hunger for runs, and the intensity he brings to the field are the stuff of cricketer folklore.

Looking at his physical and mental fitness, it's clear he had another 2-3 years of top-tier Test cricket in him if not more. Then why the sudden retirement? The chain of events preceding the announcement is telling. Discussions with chief selector Ajit Agarkar, reports of differing opinions, the carefully worded media interactions — it all points to

more than just a personal decision.

Just before Kohli's announcement came Rohit Sharma's retirement. Coincidence? Or part of a larger reshuffling plan ahead of the next cycle? Some point towards Gautam Gambhir's rising influence in Indian cricket's backroom strategies. Known for his sharp cricketering mind and equally sharp opinions, Gambhir is not one to shy away from bold calls.

His vision for Indian cricket may well have involved phasing out the old guard in favour of a fresh core.

If that's the case, it wouldn't be surprising if senior players like Kohli and Rohit found themselves nudged — if not outright pushed — towards the exit door.

Then there's the curious case of Kohli playing the Ranji Trophy right after the Border-Gavaskar Trophy. Why would a legend with one eye on retirement play domestic cricket, unless he was still seriously invested in the red-ball format? That performance, driven by passion and pride, contradicted the narrative of a player looking to step away. It was the act of a man who still believed he belonged. In the din

of speculation, one thing is certain — Virat Kohli's class is eternal. Yes, he had his lean patches. Who hasn't? But even in those, his presence on the field was commanding. No one, across formats, has matched the combination of his aggression, technique, and sheer mental toughness. Cricket fans don't just watch Kohli bat — they live every ball with him.

And while the likes of Sanjay Manjrekar, known more for their controversial takes than cricketering achievements, may nitpick, their criticism holds little weight against Kohli's legacy. Great players transcend statistics, and Kohli, with his 29 Test centuries and countless match-defining moments, has done just that.

Ultimately, the reasons behind his retirement may remain shrouded. But what's clear is this: Indian cricket hasn't just lost a master — it's lost a phenomenon.

And while Kohli may have walked off the Test stage, the echoes of his cover drives and the fire in his eyes will linger for generations.

Because as they say — form is temporary, but class, and legends like Kohli, are forever.

Ecology vs Equations:

NIO's Laid-Back Report Ignores Ground Realities

The NIO report simulated the Mahadayi water budget using rainfall data—but failed to validate findings with on-ground ecological assessments.

The study's assertion that diversions from Kalasa and Bhandura nalas would cause minimal disruption is being challenged by activists citing visible ecological degradation.

By Satyavatinandan Satrekar

A research paper published in 2023 by three scientists from the National Institute of Oceanography (NIO) — K. Anilkumar, D. Shankar, and K. Suprit — has landed in the eye of a storm in Goa. Their study, which modelled the water budget of the Mahadayi (Mhadei) river to assess the impact of Karnataka's Kalasa-Bhandura water diversion project, is now under fire from environmentalists, hydrologists, and local activists. Critics claim the findings dangerously underplay the real-world ecological devastation already unfolding in one of India's most sensitive biodiversity zones.

The Report That Sparked Controversy

Published in the *Journal of Earth System Science*, the study used rainfall mapping and runoff models to simulate how much water could be diverted from the Kalasa and Bhandura tributaries of the Mahadayi. The researchers concluded that:

- Diverting 1.72 tmc (48.7 Mcum) from Kalasa nala would have a "significant local impact" on parts of the Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary but minimal impact on the overall flow to the Mandovi estuary.

- Diverting 2.18 tmc (61.73 Mcum) from Bhandura nala would result in "minor" reduction of flow at the Goa-Karnataka border.

Their simulation, the authors claimed, improved on earlier data used by the Mahadayi Water Disputes Tribunal, allowing better predictions of river discharge at various points.

But while the paper remains a mathematical triumph on paper, its ground-level accuracy is now being seriously questioned. The Missing Fieldwork



Goa-based environmentalists are livid. One of their core arguments: not one of the researchers ever visited the Mhadei basin or the wildlife sanctuaries affected by the project.

"This is an armchair study using historical rainfall data and mathematical modelling. The authors have no clue what's happening on the ground — the destruction, the wildlife displacement, the forest loss," said a member of the Save Mhadei Save Goa movement.

Several experts have pointed out that rainfall data alone cannot represent the highly localized, terrain-sensitive, and ecologically interconnected systems that exist in the Western Ghats.

A Sanctuary Under Siege

Since 2006, Karnataka has been constructing open-cut channels and canals to divert water from Kalasa and Bhandura

nallas to the Malaprabha basin. According to local sources, by 2015, water that once fed the Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary was already being diverted. Now, activists warn that the Kalasa-Bhandura project is not just a hydrological experiment — it's an ecological catastrophe in motion.

Among the worrying ground realities:

- Human-wildlife conflict is surging, with reports of sloth bear attacks near Kankumbi rising.
- Elephant habitats are under threat, as forests are cleared for infrastructure.
- Karnataka Neeravari Nigam Ltd (KNNL) has submitted proposals to divert 28.44 hectares of forest land across Nerse, Manturga, and Bacholi villages for pump houses, substations, and pipelines.
- Five proposed bandharas (check dams) on the Surla nala

threaten tiger corridors that straddle Goa and Karnataka.

- A proposed diversion dam in Chorla village could cripple the flow to Vazra Sakhala waterfalls — a natural cascade plunging 147 metres, and a key feeder to the Valvont river.

Invisible Wildlife, Ignored Villages

Critics argue that the NIO study ignores the role of micro-tributaries and forest springs, many of which support wildlife and tribal villages in the Mhadei and Bhimgad sanctuary belt.

"What the NIO report doesn't capture is that the Bhandura and Kalasa nallas are lifelines for the flora and fauna. These are not just 'streams' — they are ecological arteries," said a Goa Forest Department official, requesting anonymity.

Water treatment plants at Sankhali and Padoshe, both downstream, are already experiencing seasonal stress,

attributed to declining flows. **No Wildlife Clearance, No Accountability**

Perhaps most damning is the accusation that Karnataka has persistently flouted environmental norms:

- Work on the Kalasa-Bhandura project has been ongoing for over 25 years without mandatory wildlife and environmental clearances.

- In Kankumbi, locals claim KNNL has destroyed over 3 km of Kalasa's natural course and 4 km of the Mahaprabha river near its origin.

- The rerouting has caused irreparable loss to the natural ecology and hydrology of the area, say local environmental watchdogs.

Goa's Next Move?

With growing evidence of ecological harm and the credibility of the NIO report under question, Goa-based organizations and researchers are now calling for an independent, ground-based environmental impact study — one that goes beyond rainfall charts and includes wildlife mapping, biodiversity indexing, and hydrological monitoring over seasons. The Supreme Court is expected to hear fresh arguments on the interstate dispute later this year. Activists hope the new evidence and growing dissent over the NIO study will bring the ecological cost of the Kalasa-Bhandura project back into legal and public focus.

The Bottom Line

In a battle where data and development are pitted against ecology and ethics, the real story may lie beyond the pages of a research journal. As bulldozers move in and streams dry up, Goa's forests and wildlife face a reckoning — one that no model, however sophisticated, can simulate.

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panchayat as early as March 2025 raised alarms about "inadequate preparation." Several villagers had flagged the issue of narrow lanes and uncontrolled crowds in previous years. But, as one villager put it during the inquiry: "Every year

we pray nothing goes wrong. This time, it did."

The Committee also noted no central command was established for the Jatra. "Each department functioned in silos, issuing routine letters but taking no real action," the report

states.

Political Fallout and Calls for Accountability

Following the release of the report, Chief Minister Pramod Sawant ordered a review of standard operating procedures for all large religious gatherings

in Goa. However, no official resignations have been tendered so far. Civil society groups are now demanding criminal negligence charges against key officials and the temple committee. A PIL is being prepared by

a group of citizens who lost relatives in the stampede. Advocate Meera Naik, who is representing them, said: "This was not a natural calamity. This was man-made, and those responsible must face consequences."

Celebrating Goa's Living Legacy: Heritage Festival 2025 Shines Light on Culture, Community and Continuity

Team GPN

Saligao: In the heart of Saligao, beneath the balmy Goan skies and the vibrant flutter of traditional buntings, the Heritage Festival 2025 drew to a spirited close—leaving behind echoes of dhols, heartfelt applause, and the unmistakable scent of authentic Goan cuisine. Held over three days at the picturesque Saligao Football Ground, this year's edition was a spirited reminder that Goa's identity stretches far beyond its famed coastlines and nightlife. It lies, instead, in the rhythms of its folk dances, the threads of its handwoven crafts, and the warmth of its community spirit.

Organised by the Department of Tourism, Government of Goa, the festival was not merely an event but a declaration—a celebration of the state's living heritage. More than a nostalgic glance into the past, it was a vibrant affirmation of Goa's traditions still flourishing today.

"The Heritage Festival is not just an event—it's a movement to preserve and promote the cultural wealth of Goa," remarked Minister for Tourism, Shri Rohan A. Khaunte. "From our folk dances and traditional music to our local entrepreneurs and self-help groups, this festival has given a platform to what truly defines Goa beyond its beaches."

True to his words, the festival was a showcase of remarkable cultural depth. Attendees were treated to enthralling folk performances, such as the colourful Goff dance, the warrior-like Veerbhadra, and the mystical Jagor—each steeped in centuries-old tradition and storytelling. The Portuguese-influenced Corridinho added a melodic, graceful flair to the evenings. Together, these performances painted a rich tapestry of Goa's multicultural legacy.

Music lovers found their hearts full with performances by some of Goa's most beloved musical talents. Sonia Sirsat & Band delivered soulful renditions of Fado and Konkani classics, while RAAGA – The Band, RASM Band, and Black Sapphire Band brought diverse genres to the stage, from fusion to contemporary Konkani beats. Each evening closed with these powerful performances, uniting generations in appreciation of Goa's artistic spirit.

Beyond the stage, the festival ground itself transformed into a bustling hub of heritage. Rows of heritage food stalls served traditional Goan delicacies—from sannas and sorpotel to bebinca and patoleo—enticing both locals and tourists. Artisans and self-help groups displayed meticulously crafted products including pottery, crochet, bamboo artifacts, and traditional textiles. For many, this was not just exposure—it was economic empowerment.

"It's encouraging to see such enthusiastic participation, which affirms our collective role in preserving Goa's intangible heritage," said Shri Kedar A. Naik, Director of Tourism. "The Department remains committed to supporting platforms that empower local communities while enhancing tourism."

Perhaps the most touching aspect of the festival was its emphasis on youth. The final evening featured performances by young Goan artists, from traditional dance troupes to budding musicians, signalling the importance of passing on heritage through generations. These young performers were more than just participants—they were inheritors of a vibrant legacy and active custodians of Goa's cultural future.

The Heritage Festival 2025 was not just an event to witness but an experience to live. It brought together the past and present in a celebration that resonated with pride, unity, and joy. As Goa continues to evolve as a modern tourism hub, such festivals serve as crucial reminders that its richest assets lie in its stories, its people, and its timeless traditions.

In Saligao this May, Goa didn't just showcase its heritage—it celebrated its soul.





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