Celebrated in symbol, abandoned in reality.

■ Goa's State Animal on the Brink: The Silent Struggle of the Gaur

By Satyavatinandan Satrekar

Majestic, powerful and symbolic of the wild spirit of the Western Ghats, the Gaur (Bos gaurus), Goa's state animal, is today struggling for survival. Once a dominant presence in the dense forests of the Ghats, this magnificent species now faces an uncertain future, threatened by shrinking habitats, escalating human conflict and systemic neglect.

Declared the state animal of Goa for its strength and grace, the Gaur was listed as a vulnerable species on the IUCN Red List as early as 1986. Nearly four decades later, the dangers confronting it have only intensified. Large-scale destruction of natural forests, monoculture plantations and expanding horticulture have steadily eroded its habitat, pushing the animal closer to human settlements and increasing conflict.

The forests of the Western Ghats and surrounding regions have traditionally been strongholds of the Gaur. The very geography and culture of Goa reflect this association. Villages like Gavane, located between the Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary and the Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary, draw their names etymologically from the Gaur, locally known as Gavo. Similar village names in Ponda and Canacona also point to the deep-rooted presence of this animal in Goa's landscape and collective memory.

The Gaur is the largest wild cattle species in the world, native to the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. Often mistaken for a bison, it is in fact genetically closer to wild cattle. Locally referred to as Gavo redo, the animal is powerfully built, with a high convex ridge on its forehead between the horns. Adult Gaurs can weigh up to 1,500 kilograms, making them both imposing and vulnerable in an increasingly fragmented environment.

Gaurs are territorial animals, requiring a habitat range of nearly 50 square kilometres. They live in structured groups, usually comprising eight to twelve individuals, led by a dominant female. As herbivores, they depend on forest vegetation, feeding on leaves, fruits, young shoots, flowers and tree bark. The loss of forest diversity has therefore struck at the core of their survival.

As natural habitats

On The Brink…

- The Gaur, Goa's state animal, has been listed as vulnerable since 1986 and continues to face rapid habitat loss.
- Destruction of forests, monoculture plantations and horticultural expansion have intensified human Gaur conflict across the state.
- Villages such as Gavane in Ponda and Canacona trace their names to the Gaur, highlighting its deep cultural and ecological roots in Goa.
- Gaurs require large forest territories and depend on diverse vegetation for survival, both of which are shrinking rapidly.
- Rising incidents of Gaurs falling into canals, trenches, and being killed while crossing railway lines and highways have been reported, especially in Pernem taluka.
- Despite legal protection, poaching for meat and horns continues, with past cases revealing extreme cruelty.
- The Gaur was declared Goa's National Games mascot in 2023, even as its numbers continue to decline in the wild.
- Experts stress the urgent need for water holes, grass plots and mixed fruit plantations to reduce conflict and prevent further loss.

After Loss, a Push to Protect Young Minds

After Tragedy, a Reckoning: How Goa's Institutions Are Reworking Student Mental Health Support

The recent meeting of the District Level Monitoring Committee for South Goa was not just another administrative exercise. It came against the sombre backdrop of repeated student suicide cases, including six deaths linked to the BITS Pilani Goa campus over recent years. Each loss has left unanswered questions, shaken families and unsettled the wider academic community. Together, they have forced institutions and authorities to confront a difficult truth. Academic excellence alone cannot substitute for emotional safety.

Chaired by South Goa Collector and District Magistrate Egna Cleetus, the meeting focused on implementing Supreme Court and National Task Force guidelines on student mental health and suicide prevention. Senior officials from the police, higher education, health, social welfare and technical education departments were present, signalling a growing recognition that student distress is not an isolated campus issue but a systemic one.

For BITS Pilani Goa, the scrutiny is particularly intense. The institute's reputation for academic rigour has long attracted students from across the country. But the pressure that comes with high expectations, competitive environments and emotional isolation has also drawn attention, especially after the spate of suicides that sparked national concern. The aftermath has pushed the institute to rethink how it supports students beyond classrooms and laboratories.

Addressing the committee, BITS Pilani Goa Dean Suman Kundu outlined a series of initiatives that reflect a shift from reactive responses to structured, preventive care. Counsellors, psychologists and a psychiatrist have been engaged to address stress, anxiety and depression. Mental wellness and rejuvenation camps are now regular features, designed to help students pause, reflect and recalibrate in an environment that often rewards constant performance.

At the heart of the campus response is an integrated framework that attempts to embed mental health into daily institutional life rather than treat it as a crisis-only intervention. Programmes like Mitr, a faculty-led hostel outreach initiative, encourage informal conversations between students and teachers, breaking down the distance that often exists in highly competitive academic settings. Sethu, a structured mentorship system, ensures that every student is linked to a faculty mentor, creating a formal support channel that goes beyond academic guidance.
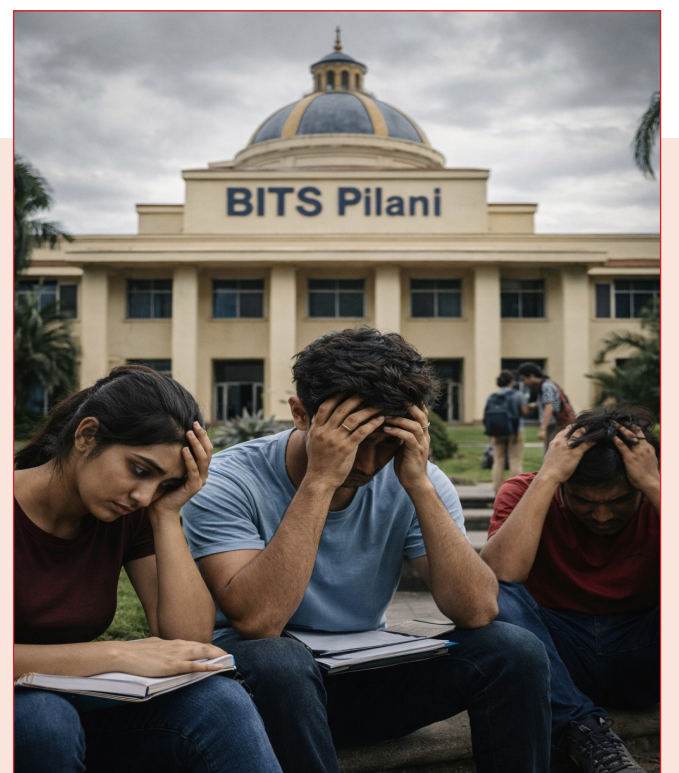
Peer support has also been strengthened, acknowledging that students often confide first in fellow students rather than authority figures. Mental Health Buddies, run in collaboration with the Rahat Trust, TAG, an anonymous student support group, and a peer mentorship programme for freshers aim to create safe spaces where distress can be voiced without fear of judgement

Crumbling Trust in Goa's Co-operative Banking Sector

Suraj Nandrekar

The collapse of confidence in Goa's cooperative banking sector has reached a worrying low. After the crises involving the Mapusa Urban Co-operative Bank and the Madgaon Urban Co-operative Bank, the latest troubles at the Tirumala Co-operative Bank have dealt yet another blow to investor faith. For ordinary depositors, this is no longer a series of isolated failures. It is a pattern that points to deep structural weaknesses, regulatory lapses and an alarming disregard for accountability.

Co-operative banks were created to serve local communities. They were meant to provide accessible credit, encourage savings and support small businesses, traders and farmers who often find mainstream banking distant or impersonal. In Goa, these institutions have traditionally enjoyed a strong base of trust. Depositors believed their money was safe because these banks were rooted in their towns, run by familiar faces and overseen by regulators. That trust is now severely shaken.

Each successive crisis has compounded the damage. Depositors who watched the turmoil at Mapusa Urban and Madgaon Urban are now confronting fresh uncertainty with Tirumala Co operative Bank. For many, savings accumulated over decades are tied up in these institutions. The emotional toll is immense. Anxiety replaces security, and confidence in the entire co-operative system erodes, regardless of whether other banks are financially sound.

What makes the situation especially troubling is the sense that warnings were ignored. Governance failures, weak internal controls and politically influenced management have long been flagged as risks in the co operative banking space. Yet corrective action has often come too late, usually after depositors are already affected. This reactive approach has left investors feeling unprotected and betrayed by both management and regulators.

Regulatory oversight must bear a significant share of the responsibility. While cooperative banks fall under multiple layers of supervision, accountability appears diluted. Inspections and audits seem unable to detect or deter mismanagement in time. When intervention does occur, it is often abrupt, leaving depositors confused, fearful and scrambling for information. Transparency has been poor, communication inconsistent and reassurance largely absent.

The ripple effects extend beyond individual banks. As trust collapses, depositors begin to withdraw or avoid co-operative institutions altogether. This hurts genuine, well-run cooperative banks that depend on public confidence to function. It also pushes small savers towards informal or unsafe alternatives, undermining financial inclusion and local economic stability.

Political interference is another uncomfortable reality that cannot be ignored. Many co-operative banks have boards dominated by individuals with political affiliations rather than banking expertise. This blurring of roles erodes professional decision-making and fosters a culture where accountability is secondary to influence. When things go wrong, responsibility is diffused, and depositors are left bearing the consequences.

The way forward demands more than temporary assurances. There must be a comprehensive overhaul of governance in the co-operative sector. Fit and proper criteria for board members should be strictly enforced. Regular, independent audits must be meaningful rather than procedural. Early warning systems should trigger timely corrective action before banks reach a crisis point.

Equally important is depositor protection. Clear communication, access to information and swift resolution mechanisms are essential to restoring even a fraction of lost confidence. Authorities must demonstrate that safeguarding depositors is a priority, not an afterthought.

Goa cannot afford the continued erosion of trust in institutions meant to serve its people. The troubles at Tirumala Co-operative Bank should be treated as a final wake-up call. Unless structural reforms are undertaken urgently and decisively, the co-operative banking sector risks losing its relevance and credibility altogether. Rebuilding confidence will take time, but without accountability and reform, that process will never begin.

Female Tourists from Foreign Versus Desi Cool Dudes

Irfan Iqbal Gheta

Goa is back in the news. Or rather, Goa's world-famous beaches are back in the news, once again for all the wrong reasons.It feels like déjà vu. Same story, different year. Old problems dressed up as fresh controversy. And once again, Indian men are being named and shamed, often with sweeping generalisations and little nuance.

Spare a thought, then, for the poor female tourists. Or perhaps, equally, for the poor male tourists who seem to lose all sense of proportion the moment they spot a woman sunbathing or taking a dip in the sea.

A bikini-clad tourist, or a woman dressed freely by beach standards, appears to overwhelm senses dulled by alcohol and bravado. Add crashing waves, holiday mood and the illusion of anonymity, and you have a combustible mix.

Enter the modern beach predator: armed not with charm or courtesy, but with the latest smartphone mounted on a selfie stick. The mission is clear. Get clicks. Get likes. Go viral. And, if possible, get lucky. The classic cool-dude-in-Goa syndrome thrives on a twin fantasy of instant fame and instant intimacy.

Conversations begin with casual greetings. Greetings become forced familiarity. Soon, personal space disappears under the excuse of a "perfect angle" or a "memorable photo". Privacy is treated as optional, consent as negotiable. All for a frame that might fetch online attention.

The attitude is disturbingly casual. Boys will be boys. We are here to have fun. These are our beaches. Who are you to object? This sense of entitlement defines the self-styled cool dude.

Fueling this behaviour is a long-standing myth whose origins are unclear but whose impact is obvious: the belief that foreign women are sexually available, curious about Indian men, and open to advances. It is a fantasy sustained by insecurity, cinema clichés and social media exaggeration. If a "friendship" develops, great. If not, move on to the next target.

The real question is how to break this mindset. This is not merely a law-and-order issue, nor is it only about protecting Goa's image as a tourist destination. At its core, the problem is psychological and cultural.

It reeks of an inferiority complex, mixed with an unhealthy obsession with white skin and foreign validation. Why this desperate need to seek approval or attention from women simply because they come from another country?

Perhaps it is time to flip the narrative. We are Indians. We do not need to prove our masculinity through harassment or humiliation. Confidence is not measured by how aggressively one intrudes into another's space.Imagine, for a moment, a reversed headline: "Female Tourist Caught Behaving Inappropriately with a Desi Cool Dude on a Crowded Goa Beach." It sounds absurd precisely because the power dynamics, assumptions and stereotypes are so deeply ingrained.

Wishful thinking, perhaps. But unless we question these attitudes openly and honestly, the same stories will keep resurfacing. Different year. Same beach. Same shame.

Roopa Kunkolienkar:
Reviving Goan Heritage Through Architecture and Art

BY MAHIMA SHETKAR

Goa is known for its vibrant culture, historic architecture, and rich artistic traditions—but keeping that heritage alive in the modern world is no easy task. Roopa Kunkolienkar, an architect and interior designer, has taken up this challenge with passion, turning her vision into a living showcase of Goan art and craftsmanship.

Growing up in a joint family in Goa, Roopa's love for design was nurtured early. "During my childhood, I split summers between my mother's and father's homes," she recalls. "I would notice the details—the windows, the railings, the traditional patterns—and even as a student, I was drawn to the stories behind these designs." Her father's research into Goan heritage and architecture further deepened her fascination, inspiring her to pursue studies in archaeological and heritage projects in Mumbai and Pune.

Roopa's professional journey spans architecture and interior design projects, but the turning point came during the COVID-19 pandemic. "Freelancing slowed down, and many artisans were left unemployed," she explains. "That gave me the time and opportunity to focus on my dream: connecting people with Goan culture, history, and traditional craftsmanship."

This vision led to the creation of Goa Decor, her boutique, which functions both as a studio and a showcase of Goan heritage. From furniture to handcrafted decor, each piece reflects centuries-old techniques and designs from the Chalukya, Kadamba, and Portuguese eras, reinterpreted for contemporary use. "The idea was to make Goan art accessible not just to locals but also to visitors who want to take a piece of our culture with them," Roopa says.

The journey was not without challenges. Early prototypes were costly, and coordinating with artisans required patience and persistence. "I met carpenters, weavers, and craftsmen across Goa, many of whom had lost work during the pandemic," she recalls. "It took multiple rounds of prototypes and adjustments, but the moment the first pieces were complete, everything felt worth it."

Goa Decor today is more than a business; it is a platform to revive and celebrate Goan art, giving artisans a livelihood and creating meaningful experiences for visitors. "It's about passion from the heart," she emphasizes. "If you commit fully and face challenges with determination, even the toughest obstacles can be overcome."

Influenced by Goan icons like Padma Bhushan Mario Miranda, Roopa continues to blend history with modern design, ensuring that every creation tells a story of tradition, culture, and pride. For Roopa Kunkolienkar, architecture is not just about buildings—it's about preserving heritage, supporting communities, and keeping the soul of Goa alive for generations to come.

How One Map Goa is changing the way Goa plans & builds
Unlock endless possibilities with One Map Goa

▶ **DITE&C empowers citizens, businesses and planners through its visionary One Map Goa GIS Portal**

Not too long ago, finding accurate land or infrastructure information in Goa meant sifting through stacks of paper records, visiting multiple government offices and relying on outdated maps. Whether you were a citizen trying to locate a nearby hospital, a business scouting for the right investment location or a planner mapping future infrastructure, the process was slow and fragmented. But that reality quietly changed in 2024

With the launch of One Map Goa, the state took a decisive step toward simplifying how people access and understand spatial information. Developed by the Department of Information Technology, Electronics & Communications (DITE&C) in collaboration with Goa Electronics Limited (GEL), the One Map Goa GIS Portal brings together Goa's geospatial data onto a one user-friendly digital platform accessible from a phone or laptop, anywhere in the world.

For citizens this means everyday convenience. By consolidating data from 32 government departments into 273 layers, the portal creates a unified view. It allows land records, infrastructure and public services to coexist on a signal map.

Whether you're looking for the nearest school, hospital or public utility, trying to measure the distance between your hotel and the beach or checking what infrastructure exists around your neighborhood, tools like Nearest Me, Around Me and Measure turn complex spatial data into simple answers.

Users can also bookmark locations, compare areas and even export maps as PDFs for offline use. The portal also encourages participation through a built-in feedback system.

For planners and government departments, One Map Goa is far more than a visualization tool.

Advanced GIS editing and full audit trails allow departments to monitor and update assets in real time. From tracking government vehicles to mapping infrastructure, the portal enables precision planning, reduces inefficiencies and supports data-driven decisions. The system is also integrated with national initiatives like PM Gati Shakti and local Smart City projects, ensuring alignment with broader development goals.

More than just a map, One Map Goa is transforming how Goa is planning, building and growing. By putting spatial information into the hands of citizens, planners and investors alike, the Government of Goa is laying the foundation for a smarter, more inclusive and future-ready state.

The Streets Awake! Goa Carnival 2026 Brings the "Viva" Back to the Sunshine State

MAHIMA SHETKAR

As the warm February sun bathes the Mandovi River, Goa is poised to transform into a kaleidoscopic realm of rhythm, color, and unbridled joy for the 2026 Carnival. Governed by the decree of the mythical King Momo to "eat, drink, and be merry," this four-day extravaganza is the state's most beloved colonial legacy, serving as a grand, hedonistic crescendo before the solemnity of Lent. From the cobblestoned Latin Quarter of Fontainhas to the sandy fringes of the south, the air is thick with the scent of sea salt and the infectious chant of "Viva Carnival," signaling a time when social barriers dissolve and the entire state dances as one.

The festival's heartbeat lies in its spectacular float parades, a traveling theater of Goan identity that snakes through the major cities. Giant, whimsical effigies bob above crowds, depicting everything from traditional fishermen and toddy tappers to satirical takes on modern politics, all set to the brassy, soulful tunes of live bands and the rhythmic strumming of guitars. Dancers in feathered headdresses and masked jesters engage the throngs, blurring the lines between performer and spectator, while the streets become a canvas of red and black—the signature colors of the festival's dramatic finale.

Beyond the parades, the Carnival unlocks a vibrant community spirit, giving locals the cherished opportunity to set up their own food stalls along the festive routes. These pop-up kitchens become the true gathering points of the festival, where families and home cooks share their delicious creations in these shared spaces that the magic happens: barriers dissolve as people from all walks of life come together over steaming plates and cold drinks. In this collective feast, the act of eating becomes a celebration of unity, proving that the heart of Goa beats strongest when its people are gathered together.

Goa Carnival 2026 Schedule

February 13 (Friday): **Porvorim (Curtain Raiser)**

February 14 (Saturday): **Panaji (The Grand Parade)**

February 15 (Sunday): **Margao**

February 16 (Monday): **Vasco**

February 17 (Tuesday): **Mapusa & Morjim**

Goa Book Festival 2026 Turns Panaji into a City of Stories

Panaji has slipped into a different rhythm as the Goa Book Festival 2026 opens its doors, turning the heart of the capital into a lively meeting ground for books, ideas and culture. Held at the D.B. Bandodkar Ground, the festival has brought together readers of all ages, writers, publishers and artists, creating a space where literature feels both celebratory and accessible.

With over 200 publishers participating, the scale of this year's festival is hard to miss. Stalls brim with books across genres and languages, reflecting the linguistic and cultural diversity that defines Goa. From contemporary fiction and poetry to history, philosophy and children's literature, the range ensures that every visitor finds something that speaks to them. Many linger, browsing leisurely, flipping pages, and striking up conversations with publishers and fellow readers.

What gives the festival its charm is not just the volume of books, but the sense of community it fosters. Schoolchildren arrive in excited groups, parents guide young readers through colourful displays, and elderly visitors browse with the calm familiarity of lifelong book lovers. The atmosphere is unhurried, inviting people to pause and engage rather than rush through.

The festival also goes beyond the printed page. A series of cultural programmes adds depth to the experience, blending literature with art, music and performance. Workshops for children encourage creativity and storytelling, while exhibitions and curated spaces celebrate Goa's cultural and literary heritage. Musical performances and interactive sessions lend the event a festive energy that carries through the day.

One of the most striking aspects of the festival is how it brings together different generations. Conversations flow easily between authors and readers, between young writers seeking inspiration and seasoned voices sharing experiences. In these moments, the festival feels less like an event and more like a living dialogue.

Open from morning to evening, the festival has made reading approachable, with books available at affordable prices and events designed to welcome first-time visitors as much as seasoned bibliophiles. There is no pressure to buy or participate, only an invitation to explore.

As the Goa Book Festival continues to grow, it is carving out a distinct place in the state's cultural calendar. In Panaji, for these few days, stories take centre stage — reminding us that in a fast-moving world, the simple act of reading still has the power to bring people together.

Celebrated in symbol, abandoned in reality.

Despite being legally protected across its range, the Gaur continues to face poaching for meat and horns. A particularly disturbing incident came to light nearly 25 years ago in Mollem, where eight Gaurs were brutally killed through electrocution by a pineapple plantation owner. The incident underscored the extreme consequences of unchecked conflict and weak enforcement.

Today, the struggle has intensified. Shortages of drinking water, food and fodder in forests force Gaurs to stray dangerously close to human settlements and agro-horticultural plantations. In Pernem taluka, reports of Gaurs falling into Tillari canals, trenches, and dying while crossing railway tracks and highways are increasing. Summer months further worsen the crisis, as dehydration and hunger drive the animals into perilous zones.Ironically, even as their numbers dwindle, the Gaur was celebrated as Goa's official mascot, Moga, during the 37th National Games in 2023, symbolising power and resilience. The symbolism, however, rings hollow against the reality on the ground.Urgent intervention is needed. Creating water holes, developing grass plots, and undertaking mixed fruit plantations within forest areas are essential to reduce conflict and ensure the animals' survival. Without such measures, the Gaur's decline will continue unchecked.If this apathy persists, Goa risks witnessing the gradual extinction of its own state animal.
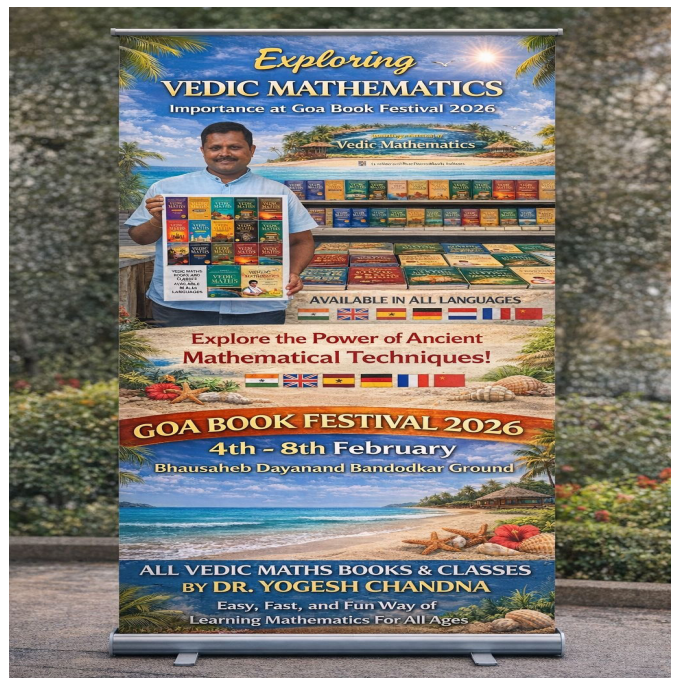
After Loss, a Push to Protect Young Minds

or stigma.Professional care has been expanded through the Mpower Centre, which now includes psychologists, therapists and psychiatric support, backed by round-the-clock medical services. Helplines, COOJ counselling services and Myndwell assessments are intended to help identify warning signs early, before distress escalates into crisis. Faculty members and wardens have undergone Mental Health First Aid and Gatekeeper training, equipping them to recognise behavioural changes and intervene sensitively.Academic reforms are another pillar of the response. Liberal evaluation practices, spaced examinations and curriculum restructuring are designed to reduce burnout. Courses like BITS K101, which focuses on physical well being and creativity, reflect an attempt to balance intellectual demands with personal development. Innovation initiatives such as Challengathon and a 24 by 7 Innovation Lab offer alternative outlets for student energy beyond grades and rankings.

Campus life itself is being reshaped. Extended sports facilities, open gyms, shuttle services, upgraded hostels and longer library hours aim to improve quality of life. Safety measures including CCTV coverage, X ray screening and a zero tolerance policy towards misconduct are intended to ensure that students feel secure within campus boundaries.