



TATHASTU
Institute Of Civil Services

DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS

8th December, 2025



TATHASTU
Institute Of Civil Services



9560300770



www.tathastuics.com



enquiry@tathastuics.com

Plot No.B 22, Bada Bazar Road, Old Rajinder Nagar, New Delhi-110060

Topics Covered

- 25 dead in fire in Goa Nightclub, Pg-1
- Balance not swing, Pg-6
- Surveillance apps in welfare, Pg-6
- Chaos foretold, Pg-6
- Natural Farming , Pg-14
- Banni Grasslands (Science Section)
- Exercise Harimau Shakti 2025

Page-1

25 dead in fire in Goa nightclub; probe finds fireworks use; 4 held

Five tourists, 20 staffers killed; club was operating without licences and emergency exit doors, says FIR; 100 people were in the dance area on first floor when fire erupted, say police; three officials suspended as Chief Minister orders investigation

Rishikesh Bahadur Desai
ARPORA

A massive fire erupted at a nightclub in north Goa just before midnight on Saturday, leaving 25 people dead and six injured. The initial police investigation found that the blaze was caused by a fire show with "electric firecrackers", organised without precautions or permits at the Birch by Romeo Lane nightclub in Arpora, 25 km from Panaji.

The absence of emergency exit doors in the nightclub resulted in the space turning into a death trap. The club was operating without licences and permissions, according to the first information report (FIR). More than 100 people were in the dance area on the first floor when the



Reduced to dust: The charred interior of the nightclub that caught fire in Arpora, Goa, early Sunday. AP

fire erupted, and some ran downstairs to the kitchen, where they were trapped with the staff. Most of the deaths were caused by suffocation.

The owners, managers, and event managers have been charged with culpable homicide and causing death due to negligence, among other charges, but

questions have also been raised about the failure of the State and local administration to enforce rules, allowing the nightclub to operate illegally. Four peo-

ple have been arrested so far, but the club's owners are yet to be nabbed. Three government officials have been suspended.

CM orders probe

Chief Minister Pramod Sawant directed the State's Chief Secretary and Director-General of Police to identify and act against the government officials who allowed the club to operate, despite it violating safety rules. A committee comprising the South Goa Collector, Deputy Director of Fire and Emergency Services, and Director of Forensic Laboratory will probe the incident and submit a report in a week.

CONTINUED ON

» PAGE 10

RELATED REPORTS ON

» PAGES 3, 10

25 dead in fire in Goa nightclub; four held

Late on Sunday night, three government officials responsible for allowing the nightclub to begin operations in 2023 were suspended - Siddhi Tushar Harankar, then Director of Panchayats; Shamila Monteiro, then Member Secretary of the Goa State Pollution Control Board; and Raghuvir Bagkar, then Secretary of Village Panchayat Arpora-Nagao.

Of those killed, 20 were staff of the nightclub, all migrant workers, including four from Nepal. Five of the dead workers hailed from Uttarakhand, three each from Jharkhand and Assam, two each from Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, and one from West Bengal, according to a list released by the State government on Sunday night.

Five tourists also died in the inferno, including three from one family in Delhi, along with another tourist from Delhi and another from Karnataka.

An ex-gratia of ₹5 lakh will be paid to the kin of each of the deceased and ₹50,000 will be given to the injured from the State Disaster Management Authority Funds, the Chief Minister said, adding that arrangements will be made to take the mortal remains of the victims to their native places. President Droupadi Murmu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah, among others, expressed grief over the tragedy. Mr. Modi said that an ex-gratia of ₹2 lakh would be given from the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund to the next of kin of the deceased, and ₹50,000 for the injured.

Pyro guns and crackers

Initial investigation by the police led to the plausible conclusion that sparks from pyro guns and crackers ignited inflammable materials like palm leaves, plastic, fibre, and foam packaging on the ceiling and the decor towers on the dance area of the first floor.

A police officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that the organisers held a fire show, without taking precautions and without obtaining due permissions from competent authorities. "It seems they used pyro guns to spice up the ambience when dancers were performing Bollywood film numbers. This led to the sparks that caused the tragedy," he said.

On Sunday morning, Goa DGP Alok Kumar had said that investigators were suspecting a gas cylinder blast, but it was later confirmed that the cylinder exploded on the ground floor kitchen only after the blaze spread from the first floor.

The club lies on the backwaters of the Baga river, and is connected to the main road by a narrow lane. It is cut off by a small water body on one side and the river Baga on the other, making it difficult for the three fire engines to reach the front gate in the early hours of Sunday. The police had to shift the survivors away from the main road and clear the road by moving other vehicles before the first fire engine could even enter the main gate.

No fire safety precautions

The FIR said that "the owners, partners, manager, event organiser and other managing staff of Birch by Romeo Lane, Arpora... without taking proper care and caution, without providing fire safety equipment and other safety gadgets, organised a fire show at their restaurant/club which resulted in a serious fire due to which 25 innocent people succumbed to death and also caused injuries to tourists and staff, in spite of having full knowledge that organising such a show may lead to serious fire accidents..." Several violations of fire safety norms are also listed.

The FIR charges the accused with offences under BNS sections 105 (culpable homicide not amounting to murder), 125 (act endangering life or personal safety of others), 125 (a), 125 (b) and 287 (negligent conduct with respect to fire or combustible matter) read with section 3 (5) (common intention).

(With PTI inputs)

Balance, not swing India needs to assert strategic autonomy by engaging both Russia and West

Although the India-Russia relationship goes back decades, the strategic partnership and practice of annual summits marked 25 years this year, with President Vladimir Putin's visit to Delhi last week. It was his first visit to India since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, which ranged the entire West against Moscow, and particularly Mr. Putin himself, who has an international criminal court (ICC) warrant in his name. He has made it clear in recent days that he does not intend to accept the U.S.'s peace proposal without changes, and has stepped up attacks into Ukraine, which has further heightened tensions with Europe. To have invited Mr. Putin at such a time indicates that the Modi government is sending a message to Moscow and western capitals. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to receive Mr. Putin in person, and for the government to accord him a state visit, both actions for the first time in its tenure, send the message that Mr. Putin remains a friend despite western attempts to isolate him. The second is that while Mr. Modi consistently speaks of peace efforts, he will not be goaded into criticising Russia for the war. The third is that as geopolitical factors including stringent sanctions on Russian and Indian oil companies and the U.S. tariff surcharge of 25% are pressuring India into giving up these imports, India still seeks other ways of engaging Russia economically. To that end, in describing the takeaways from the Modi-Putin meet, officials have highlighted the labour mobility agreement, an MoU to jointly set up a urea plant in Russia, and the adoption of the economic road map launched during Mr. Modi's 2024 Moscow visit. The road map includes encouraging more trade, developing connectivity using maritime corridors, and mechanisms to enable a national currency payment system to circumvent sanctions.

However, the two sides did not announce any agreements in strategic areas that the West would be sensitive to – for defence hardware, nuclear power projects and space cooperation. Despite Mr. Putin's offer of "uninterrupted" oil supplies, India also announced no plans to step up oil imports. This will make the goal of \$800 billion in bilateral trade by 2030 more difficult. The omission of strategic issues from the agenda is a sign that the government remains aware of western concerns, taking care not to upset current negotiations with the U.S. and the European Union on trade agreements and high-level visits, even as Mr. Modi referred to ties with Russia as the "Older, firmer, deeper" relationship. While balancing ties with two sets of partners inimical to each other, however, New Delhi must be mindful that asserting strategic autonomy will require taking consistent steps with both, rather than pendulum movements from one to another.

Surveillance apps in welfare, snake oil for accountability

It is increasingly common to see cleaning staff photographing or filming themselves at work. This is meant to ensure that they do their job. How effective it is, is anybody's guess.

The lack of accountability of government employees manifests itself in many ways in India – they may be absent from work, may come late or leave early, may not work in a time-bound manner, and may expect bribes.

The biometric era
Somewhere along the line, digital tools emerged as the magic wand for this vexatious problem. For instance, years ago, some governments in India introduced biometric attendance to ensure punctuality. In some cases, if biometric attendance was not marked on time, employees were threatened with punitive action. At that time, in Khunti Block (Jharkhand), some conscientious officials worked after office hours to complete online tasks that required connectivity ("digital paperwork") because Internet bandwidth improved in the evenings. With the system of clocking in and out, their emphasis shifted from getting the work done to marking biometric attendance in a timely manner. In Rajasthan, a Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) that studied the impact of biometric attendance on absenteeism among government nurses found that, in the long run, it resulted in lower attendance.

Take another example. In the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), official worker attendance is widely inflated to siphon off wages. Wage expenditure is booked on the basis of fudged attendance and either shared with participating "workers" (job card holders who do not actually work) or pocketed entirely by the masterminds.

In response, the government introduced the National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS) app in 2022. The NMMS app requires a photograph of workers at the worksite to be uploaded twice a day. It was meant to put an end to fudged attendance records. The app might succeed in forcing worker presence at the NREGA worksite, but it cannot guarantee that they do any useful work once they are there. In the most egregious cases workers were not even showing up twice a day to mark attendance: the masterminds were uploading random photographs. They worked out that the NMMS app only needs a jpeg file: irrelevant photographs and photographs of photographs can do the trick.

A July 2025 circular of the Union Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) lists seven such malpractices. Fudged photographs replaced fudged signatures to inflate attendance and the racket continued, more or less as before.



Reetika Khara
is Professor of Economics at IIT Delhi

Around the same time, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MoWD) made "Facial Recognition Technology" (FRT) compulsory for Take Home Rations (THR). The reasoning is familiar: THR packets for children and pregnant and lactating mothers do not reach them. Making it mandatory to upload the mother's photograph (with blinking) on the Poshan Tracker is supposed to ensure that she does not get cheated. The Poshan Tracker ostensibly does a real-time match of the live photograph with an on-record photograph.

An Anganwadi worker in Nuh (Haryana) who was struggling with connectivity, a crowd and the clunky app, said matter-of-factly, "those who want to cheat will continue", i.e., nothing prevented an Anganwadi worker from refusing THR packets to mothers after they have jumped through the hoops of Poshan Tracker's FRT.

This loophole was documented in 2017 when the Aadhaar-Based Biometric Authentication (ABBA) was made mandatory for Public Distribution System (PDS) rations. It was the same logic again: ABBA would ensure that only person A could receive their benefits. This meant that the elderly and persons with disabilities who would request neighbours or relatives to pick up their rations, could no longer do so. Person A (sick, old, or immobile) would have to show up in person. Many began to be excluded as a result.

Subsequently, some States put an 'override' mechanism in place, at least on paper. Meanwhile, PDS ration dealers would make people authenticate – biometrically – for their full quota of rations, while giving them a bit less (in 2017, in Jharkhand, an accepted norm was 4.5 kilograms instead of 5 kg). ABBA resulted in "pain without gain".

Limited effect

In many States across India, a number of tasks done by Auxiliary Nurses and Midwives (ANMs) require geo-tagging or photographic evidence. For instance, uploading photos of a breastfeeding mother is proof that the ANM had done breastfeeding counselling. This results in a perverse situation: uploading a photo without counselling would not get her into trouble, but counselling without the photo upload would. In a tribal area of Andhra Pradesh, another ANM said that she was compelled to move around for connectivity in order to log a home visit on the app. She looked visibly hurt as she showed us a "show card can't be used" she got soon after: as she had moved more than 300 metres to log the home visit and the app red-flagged her visit as fraudulent. Such surveillance apps, in accountability clothing, demotivate sincere workers.

At best, such apps can have a limited impact

on accountability. But accountability itself is a limited achievement.

Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen (2025) urge us to go beyond accountability (which "can induce people to do what someone else wants them to do") towards responsibility (as it "includes what people themselves want to do in the public interest").

The tech-fixes described above cannot foster responsible behaviour, and cannot help self-motivate workers to act in public interest. The current obsessive fixation with tech-fixes diverts attention from the larger goal of improving work culture and changing social norms. It blinds us to other pathways to get there. For instance, few ask how is it that even in areas with poor accountability, so many nurses, teachers, doctors and cleaners work diligently?

A case of agnotology

Returning to accountability in welfare programmes, the government is consciously ignoring the failures of tech-fixes. For instance, even though the MoRD officially acknowledged that the NMMS was being "misused and manipulated", in July, the MoWD made FRT compulsory for THRs in July. Moreover, having admitted to the failure of NMMS, the MoRD responded by ordering "100% verification of all uploaded photographs" each day in all gram panchayats.

There is a carefully cultivated ignorance towards new problems created by apps: exclusion (in the PDS, of the elderly, and the immobile for whom ABBA fails; in NREGA, of workers whose photographs could not be uploaded on NMMS), inefficiency (distribution of PDS rations and THR packets takes much longer), new forms of corruption (claiming ABBA failures even when it is successful), privacy invasions (uploading photographs of breastfeeding mothers), identity fraud, and worker demotivation.

The stubborn refusal to learn is baffling. It raises questions about the possible capture of decision-making by vested interests to create assured markets for their products. The infrastructure for surveillance apps (devices including smartphones for all frontline workers, electricity, point of sale machines, hard drives, servers, Internet data, authentication services) is not cheap. Tech companies are doing today what the tobacco and refined white sugar industry did in the past – cultivate ignorance about the harms from their products to stall corrective action. The government is playing along.

Science historian Robert Proctor uses the term agnotology, how and why various forms of knowledge have "not come to be", for this phenomenon. Put simply, tech-fixes are snake oil for accountability in welfare.

Chaos foretold

Indigo seems to have wilfully misread the plan for changes to crew duty hours

Controlled flight into aviation chaos is an apt phrase to describe what Indigo, India's largest private airline, caused since last week during peak travel season, the golden month of December. The widespread disruption, which continues in the domestic sector, saw a spectrum of passenger distress – social, holiday and business plans disrupted, medical patients in anguish, senior citizens in agony and even defence personnel posted at the Siachen Glacier left stranded midway while rushing home, in south India, for a 10-day break. There are many more untold stories at airports across India. Interestingly, the airline's international flights were estimated to be less than 10% of the cancellations, as they ensure a higher revenue flow but also tough passenger compensation rules. The carrier's official explanation was 'unforeseen operational challenges', from technology glitches, schedule changes, weather conditions, and the implementation of updated crew rostering rules (Flight Duty Time Limitations, or FDTL). At the heart of the issue was the airline's baffling misreading of the last reason cited – of the two-phase plan by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) to regulate flight crew duty hours, in alignment with global safe practices. These include an increase in the mandatory weekly rest period for pilots from 36 hours to 48 hours, a weekly cap on landings between midnight and early morning from six to two, restricted pilot flying hours on flights extending into night hours, and personal leave not being counted in the 48-hour weekly rest period. The regulations, initially proposed in early 2024, had a final implementation date set from November 1, 2025.

With the issue finding resonance in Parliament, there were appeals made to the airline's management to restore services. DGCA data show the airline having disproportionately increased its domestic flights from 14,188 in summer to 15,044 in the winter schedule against an availability of 4,551 Airbus flight deck crew. Even though responses have been sought from and directives issued to the airline, in addition to fare caps introduced for other airlines, the meltdown has only raised a core point – why the aviation market, largely a private airline-run duopoly, was allowed to slide into disorder as seen in the Ministry's responses much after the upheaval. With temporary waivers in the FDTL having been granted to the airline as a one-time measure to help it restore its schedules, pilot bodies are right in flagging what they term as a dilution of safety measures and crew welfare. The lessons are clear: the Indian air passenger deserves better compensation and rights. And the regulator must ensure stringent monitoring, without fear or favour, of every airline, big or small.

Page-14

Top agricultural research body urges varsities to start courses in natural farming

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) Director-General M.L. Jat has written to the Vice-Chancellors of all State and Central agriculture universities, as well as universities with agriculture departments, urging them to launch undergraduate and postgraduate courses and research programmes in natural farming.

Though natural farming was already offered as an elective subject in various institutions and four universities had dedicated courses on the subject, it is the first time that the ICAR has urged all affiliated colleges and State government institutions to introduce courses on the topic.

Natural farming has emerged as a subject of national importance, says ICAR D-G

In the letter, Dr. Jat said natural farming had emerged as a subject of national importance, aligned with India's strategic priorities for sustainable agriculture and farmer welfare. He said the B.Sc. (Hons.) agriculture - natural farming programme, developed as per the Sixth Deans' Committee recommendations and National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 guidelines, has already been finalised, approved, and circulated to all agricultural universities. "Some universities have

successfully initiated this programme from the academic year 2023-24, marking a transformative milestone in agricultural higher education. I hope remaining universities will introduce this course by next academic year," he said.

On strengthening postgraduate education and advanced research on the subject, he said that given the expanding national demand for chemical-free food systems, resilient agro-ecosystems, soil health restoration, and low-emission farming, it was imperative that the State agricultural universities, deemed universities, and Central agricultural universities develop PG programmes in natural farming and allied domains.



Grassland soils, not trees, anchor India's climate resilience

Grasslands play a crucial role in the building and maintaining of healthy soils, primarily through their deep, fibrous root systems that stabilise the ground, enhance soil structure, and promote the storage of carbon; unlike forests, where most biomass is above ground, grassland productivity is concentrated below at root level

Tushar Pathade
Abi T. Vankar

“Wastelands”. That’s how India’s biodiverse semi-arid grasslands and savannahs have been undervalued ever since the British colonial era. For the masters, the woody forests of the subcontinent fuelled industrialisation, while the grassy biomes served no purpose in their timber-driven colonisation.

Much of post-independence policy and jurisprudence drew heavily from the erstwhile rulers and “wastelands” made their way into land records and government policy. In 1985, a National Wastelands Development Board was created to bring a more scientific basis “to identify, classify and develop the wastelands” towards more productive uses. Ravines, scrub lands, degraded scrub forests, degraded pastures, grazing lands, barren rocky areas, glaciers and snow-covered mountains, along with mining or industrial wasteland and degraded plantation land, were all classified as wastelands.

For decades, studies have shown that far from being a wasteland, these savannah grasslands are flourishing ecosystems that not only harbour unique biodiversity but also provide livelihoods to millions of pastoral communities. Take Maharashtra, for instance. The State’s livestock economy was valued at over ₹59,000 crore in 2018-2019, a massive 50% more than in 2015-2016, and that’s just one year.

What lies beneath
Grasslands play a crucial role in building and maintaining healthy soils, primarily through their deep, fibrous root systems that stabilise the ground, enhance soil structure, and promote long-term carbon storage. Unlike forests, where most biomass is above ground, grassland productivity is concentrated below ground, creating dense root mats that improve water infiltration, reduce erosion, and buffer soils against drought. These roots continually deposit organic matter, enriching soils with stable carbon compounds that can persist for centuries. Grassland soils also support diverse microbial and fungal communities that drive nutrient cycling and maintain soil fertility. When grasslands are degraded, covered, or afforested, these below-ground processes are disrupted, leading to compaction, erosion, loss of soil organic carbon, and reduced ecosystem resilience.



Savannahs and scrublands provide livelihoods to millions of pastoralists. HARISH VADHANAM

As the climate crisis worsened, the importance of carbon sequestration in ecosystems moved to the forefront of global discussions. Research began pouring in from around the world, showing that grasslands hold enormous potential for carbon sequestration. Thus, in addition to their role as an abode of diverse wildlife and their socio-economic importance, we now know that grasslands store a huge amount of below-ground carbon, which remains undisturbed even by fire. A pioneering initiative in Solapur’s semi-arid grasslands signalled a shift in the Maharashtra State forest department’s perception of these ecosystems. The Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) which manages funds collected for the conversion of forest land to non-forest for developmental works, decided to use a part of this for restoring degraded grasslands.

CAMPA, authority of the Maharashtra forest department restored degraded patches of grassland in the Maharashtra forest range of Solapur district over several years. Native grasses such as *Dactyloctenium aegyptium*, *Chrysopsis fulva* and *Cenchrus setigerus* were raised in a nursery and then later planted in situ after the first monsoon showers.

Subsequently, a study was conducted by researchers from Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment, Bengaluru and The Grasslands Trust, in partnership with the forest department to understand the impacts of these restoration activities on soil, including

After two years, the restored sites showed an increase of 21% SOC compared to the untreated site, and a massive 50% more than the untreated site by the third year. These findings highlight how grassland restoration paves the way for India to meet its climate goals

carbon sequestration. This study compared restored plots of different ages (one, two and three years) to an unrestored site, and to an undisturbed old-growth grassland. The study revealed that the restored grasslands showed a significant increase in the soil organic carbon (SOC) at the treatment sites compared to the control sites.

After two years, the restored sites showed an increase of 21% SOC compared to the untreated site, and a massive 50% greater than the untreated by the third year. These findings highlight how grassland restoration from the CAMPA funds paves the way for India to meet its climate goals.

Another recently published study by researchers at ATRÉE has documented the remarkable carbon sequestration potential of the Banni Grassland in the Kutch district of Gujarat. Once celebrated as the largest tropical grassland in Asia, Banni suffered decades of policy mistakes that promoted large-scale planting of the invasive mesquite (*Nelema juliflora*). This rapidly transformed vast open savannahs

into dense, impenetrable thickets, degrading both ecology and pastoral livelihoods. The study reveals a striking pattern: restored grassland patches, locally known as *savda*, store the highest levels of soil organic carbon (SOC), followed by wetlands and dense woodlands. The lowest SOC values were found in mixed woodland stands and saline grasslands. What makes Banni especially noteworthy is that these restored patches were revived by the community itself, first by removing Prosopis and allowing native perennial grasses to regenerate.

Carbon-rich and arid
The Maldhari pastoralists manage these areas through rotational grazing, controlled harvest of standing biomass, and careful monitoring of grass recovery. Across its four major land-use types, Banni stores 27 metric tonnes of carbon up to 30 cm soil depth, with an average SOC density of around 120 tonnes of carbon per hectare. This places Banni among the most carbon-rich arid ecosystems globally, demonstrating that healthy grasslands, not invasive trees, underpin true climate resilience in drylands.

Banni also shows the way forward: restoring native grasses, removing invasive woody cover, and placing pastoralist communities at the centre of governance. Participatory, community-led grassland management is not just a restoration method—it is the restoration outcome. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reminds us that soils hold twice as much carbon as the atmosphere and all living biomass combined. In an era of rising temperatures and more frequent forest fires, the relative stability of SOC in grasslands—protected beneath the soil surface—is an advantage we urgently need to recognise.

Banni and Maharashtra teach us a profound lesson: our strongest climate solutions lie beneath our feet. The deep roots of native grasses have been storing carbon for millennia, long before the word “sequestration” entered our vocabulary. India’s climate-resilient future will not be achieved merely by planting trees; in many places, especially in our drylands, it will come from restoring ecosystems where the soil still remembers how to breathe.

(Tushar Pathade is a policy analyst and Abi T. Vankar is director, Centre for Policy Design at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, Bengaluru. tushar.pathade@atree.org, avankar@atree.org)

THE GIST

Far from being wastelands, grasslands are flourishing ecosystems that not only harbour biodiversity but also provide livelihoods to millions of pastoral communities; in Maharashtra, the livestock economy was valued at ₹59,000 crore in 2018-2019

Grasslands hold enormous potential for carbon sequestration; in addition to being an abode for wildlife, and their socio-economic importance, we now know that grasslands store a huge amount of below-ground carbon, which remains undisturbed even by fire

The Banni Grassland stores 27 metric tonnes of carbon up to 30 cm in depth, with an average SOC density of 120 tonnes of carbon per hectare; this makes it among the most carbon-rich arid ecosystems globally, demonstrating that grasslands, not trees, underpin true climate resilience

Harimau Shakti 2025: India, Malaysia Strengthen Defence Ties with Joint Exercise in Rajasthan Desert
India and Malaysia have launched the fifth edition of Exercise Harimau Shakti 2025 in Rajasthan. The joint military training focuses on counter-terror drills, tactical coordination, and interoperability, strengthening bilateral defence ties and enhancing preparedness for UN-mandated operations.

