

Sacred tree, political storm: Why BJP is under pressure in the state

Protest over felling of the state tree forces govt to rethink as Amrita Devi Act demand gets louder

Hamza Khan Jaipur, February 10

RAJASTHAN CHIEF MINISTER Bhajan Lal Sharma on February 5 announced that the state would bring a law to protect the khejri tree — a revered Ashoka tree with wish fulfilling tree, and recognised as the state tree — following a growing agitation led by sadhus and members of the Bishnoi community against large-scale felling of desert trees.

Three days later, Sharma met a delegation of "revered saints and enlightened members of the Bishnoi community" at his residence. In photographs shared from the meeting, the CM is seen bowing before Ramanand Maharaj, Pithadhishwar of Mukti Dham Muktan in Bikaner, who has emerged as a central figure of the agitation.

The developments came in the backdrop of a mahapadwa that began on February 2 in Bikaner, around 275 km north-west of Jaipur. Unlike traditional mahapadwas, the gathering — comprising sadhus, Bishnoi community members, environmentalists, farmers and local residents — grew with each passing day, spreading to neighbouring districts and drawing support from leaders across the state.

What lent the protest a "sacred" character was not just the khejri tree at its centre, but the large presence of saffron-clad sadhus leading the agitation. Demand for Amrita Devi Act At the heart of the protest is the demand for an Amrita Devi Act — a special law for the protection of trees in Rajasthan, particularly desert species such as khejri.



Environmental activists and members of the Bishnoi community take part in the Save Khejri Movement, protesting against the proposed cutting of Khejri trees for a solar power plant, in Bikaner.

Nearly 300 years ago, Amrita Devi Bishnoi of Khejarli village and her three daughters laid down their lives to prevent the felling of khejri trees ordered by Marwar ruler Maharaja Abhay Singh for the construction of his palace. In the days that followed, 663 members of the Bishnoi community were killed while hugging trees as the king's men chopped them down. The sacrifice later inspired the Chipko Movement in the 1970s.

Acharya said the proposed law should categorise desert trees such as khejri, rohida, peepal and bargad, which cannot be transplanted and take centuries to mature. "Such trees should not be cut under any circumstances. If they are, there must be stringent punishment, including imprisonment and heavy fines. The solar policy also needs changes to protect trees," he said, adding that he lost five kilograms during the hunger strike.

Explaining the core concern, Acharya said, "It is about breath. If trees exist, it breaths exists. If they are felled, temperature rises, biodiversity collapses and the ecosystem dies."

The ordinance sparks 'misunderstanding' The agitation was triggered by a December 3 briefing by Law Minister Jogaraj Patel on the Rajasthan Jan Vishwas Ordinance, aimed at "cess of living and ease of doing business" on the lines of the Centre's Jan Vishwas Act.

The ordinance declassifies provisions in 11 Acts, replacing imprisonment with monetary penalties. Patel had said that under the Rajasthan Forest Act, 1953, penalties for tree cutting were raised from Rs 100 to Rs 1,000 for the first offence and doubled for repeat violations.

Acharya said the statement caused widespread "bhranti" (misunderstanding). "People have been demanding stricter protection, and instead heard that penalties were increased to just Rs 1,000. The minister also failed to differentiate between general forest laws and a specific law for khejri. In absence of a government clarification, the message of a weak penalty spread like wildfire," he said.

Independent MLA Ravindra Singh Bhatti claimed in the Assembly that over 26 lakh khejri trees were cut in Rajasthan in the last 15 years. "Rajasthan has reached a point where its state tree khejri, state bird godwin and state animal camel are all on the verge of extinction," he said.

Environment Science Professor Anil Kumar Chhangani of Maharaja Ganga Singh University, Bikaner, estimates that at least 50 lakh khejri trees have been felled in five western districts alone over the past decade. Citing a 1985 CAZRI study, he said khejri density ranged from a minimum of 25-30 trees per hectare to about 150 across the state.

"The rise of solar plants and clearing of native vegetation leads to immediate loss of oxygen, increase in temperature and collapse of agriculture, grazing and biodiversity," he said. Congress MLA Rita Choudhary alleged that illegally felled khejri is sold at a mandi near the Haryana-Jhunjhunwara border and transported across state lines.

Protest spreads The agitation expanded through hunger strikes, Kalash yatras and other forms of support from groups such as the ABVP. At its peak, over 500 people were on hunger strike, with several hospitalised. Protesters joined from neighbouring districts and states, and demonstrations spread to Hanumanagar, Srianganagar and Jalore.

After ministers assured action, some protesters called off their hunger strike. However, confusion followed as the government instructed the ban on khejri felling to Bikaner and Jodhpur divisions, prompting demands for a statewide prohibition.

On Tuesday, the protest continued, with disappointment setting in among the protesters. Acharya said that, "The axes of the woodcutters are heavy, but our hearts are more in numbers... Whatever CM Ashok Gehlot's decision is not much, it's just a little bit."

Former CM Ashok Gehlot described the agitation coming after the protests over Aravallis as "an auspicious sign," calling the felling of khejri trees "heartbreaking" and stressing the need to balance development with nature.

With the BJP-led Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) government in power, Rajee also extended support, saying, "Khejri is not an ordinary tree; it is sacred and worshipped. Rising above politics, we must protect it."

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Rajasthan Deputy Chief Minister Diya Kumari finalises a Budget document in Jaipur on Tuesday.

Finance Minister Diya Kumari to present Rajasthan Budget today

Press Trust of India Jaipur, February 10

RAJASTHAN DEPUTY CHIEF MINISTER and Finance Minister Diya Kumari will present the state Budget for the 2026-27 fiscal year on February 11.

Diya Kumari will present the third consecutive Budget in the House at 11 am.

The Budget session of the state Assembly began on January 28 with an inaugural address by Governor Haribhau Bagade.

Deputy Chief Minister Prem Chand Bairwa said the Budget would be inclusive and cover all sectors.

BJP state president Madan Rathore said the Budget would

be in the interest of youth, farmers, women and all sections of society.

"This will be the third Budget of the Bhajan Lal government which has been dedicated to overall development of the state. The Budget would be inclusive and will be of interest of youth, farmers, women and common people," he said.

Japanese tourists missing in Jaipur

Jaipur: Two Japanese tourists have gone missing from Jaipur, police said on Tuesday.

Ashok Nagar Station House Officer (SHO) Mot Lal Sharma said that a missing persons complaint was registered by the driver of a taxi that was hired by the tourists.

The two Japanese men came to Jaipur from New Delhi and stayed at a hotel on February 7, the officer said. According to the SHO, the taxi driver took both to a restaurant in the Ashok Nagar area on the night of February 7, but they did not return.

"The driver waited for them till the morning of February 8, but they did not contact him. They also did not reach their hotel after which the driver approached the police and lodged a missing persons complaint on Monday," he said. SHO Sharma said that CCTV footage of the area is being examined.

Southern Command chief reviews 'Exercise Rudra Shakti' at Pokhran

Pune: Lieutenant General Dhilip Seth, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Southern Command, on Tuesday reviewed an all-arms manoeuvre exercise with live firing conducted by the Army's Rudra Brigade at the Pokhran Field Firing Ranges in Rajasthan.

The live firing exercise focused on further enhancing combat integration and operational effectiveness through synchronized employment of mechanized forces, artillery, air defence units, Army Aviation assets, including ALH-WSH and Apache helicopters, along with Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) and Counter-UAS capabilities, said the release.

During the review, Lieutenant General Seth interacted with troops and commended all ranks for their exemplary training standards, professionalism and operational preparedness.

PTI

2 members of Ravi Godara gang held after car chase in Gujarat: Police

Brendan Dabhi Ahmedabad, February 10

THE DETECTION OF Crime Branch (DCB) of Ahmedabad City Police on Tuesday said they arrested two members of the Ravi Godara gang, wanted by the Rajasthan Police in a car trafficking racket. The two were in Gujarat as part of attempts to expand their gang's activities. Police identified the arrested accused as Aman alias Bacha (Ehsanji Saiyad), 25, and Subhash alias Chintu (Pirozkhath Pathan), 26, both residents of Kota.

The Crime Branch detectives arrested the two major blow to organised crime," saying that the "The Ahmedabad Crime Branch has apprehended two notorious fugitives from Kota, Rajasthan, following a high-stakes, seven-hour tactical operation. The duo, linked to the infamous Ravi Godara gang, was reportedly attempting to establish a criminal foothold in Gujarat. Intelligence suggests the two recently integrated with the Ravi Godara network and migrated to Ahmedabad with the intent of spreading their extortion web and identifying local targets."

Both accused have long history-sheets with over 20 offences to their names including organised extortion, attempted arms, targeted shootings and MIACT activities. Inspector IN Ghosra told The Indian Express, "Our team received information that gangsters wanted by the Rajasthan Police were in Ahmedabad looking to expand their illegal activities in Gujarat, especially extortion, and were looking to operate here. We carried out technical analysis and through human sources, identified phone numbers and vehicle registrations. On the intervening night on February 9 and 10, we chased the car for several kilometres between Vasna and Veljapur before apprehending them."

The Ahmedabad Crime Branch is currently coordinating with Rajasthan Police. Following the completion of preliminary legal formalities, the suspects will be handed over to the Kota Police for further investigation, officers said.

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