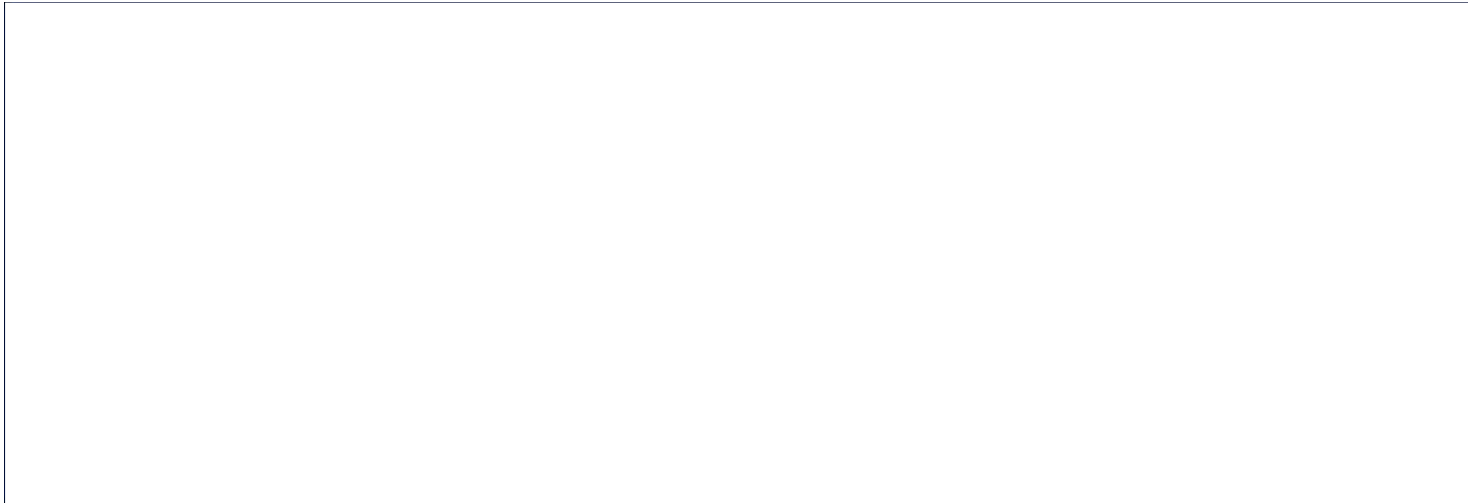


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Premium

With less than 150 Great Indian Bustards remaining in the wild, what's driving their extinction?

The Centre has told the SC that it is not possible to comply with the court's order to put power lines underground, even as they crisscross the Godavans' habitat. What exactly is the nature of the threat, and what has the Centre argued?

Written by [Jay Mazoomdaar](#) [Follow](#)

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The GIB's last refuge in the Thar and Kutch is crisscrossed by a dense network of power lines. The region is heavily harnessed for solar and wind energy. (Photo credit: Devesh Gadhavi)

The Supreme Court last week said it will review its April 2021 order to bury underground all power lines in the habitat of the Great Indian Bustard (GIB), after the Centre found the order “practically impossible to implement” over long distances.

The court created a seven-member committee that will suggest steps to protect and conserve the GIB, identifying critical areas where power lines may have to go underground.

With fewer than 150 individuals of this large, ostrich-like bird species left in the wild, the critically endangered GIB is caught in a deadly maze of power lines that criss-cross its last refuge in the Kutch and Thar deserts of western India. As these vast, open landscapes also carry the promise of abundant solar and wind energy, the high-tension networks evacuating power are only getting denser with new projects proposed every year.

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A dead GIB in Rajasthan's Khetloi village. Even four power line-induced deaths can make the species go extinct within 20 years, according to an assessment made by WII in 2020. (Photo credit: WII/Bipin CM)

Following the deaths of a number of birds due to collisions with power lines over the years, the top court three years ago ordered that the overhead transmission network should be sent underground in key habitats of the GIB.

Why power lines kill bustards

Power lines pose a risk to all flying birds. In 2020, a study carried out by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) in 4,200 sq km of GIB habitat in and around Desert National Park (DNP) in Rajasthan estimated that power lines killed around 84,000 birds of multiple species every year.

GIBs are especially vulnerable because of their narrow frontal vision and large size. Unlike some birds that have a panoramic vision around the head, species like raptors and bustards have extensive blind areas above their heads. When they

stretch their head forward to scan the ground below, they fly blind in the direction of travel.

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In an affidavit submitted in court in March 2021, the Ministry of Power said: “They cannot detect power lines ahead of them from far. As they are heavy birds, they are unable to manoeuvre across power lines within close distances.”

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The 2020 WII study estimated that a “conservative estimate of 4 power line induced mortalities per year was sufficient” to cause the extinction of the GIB within 20 years. Acknowledging the urgency, the SC in April 2021 ordered the lines to be buried “irrespective of the cost factor”.

Arguments of the Centre

In an affidavit submitted to the SC this February, the Centre said taking lines of 66 KV and higher voltage underground was not feasible for the evacuation of bulk power due to constraints such as transmission losses, maintenance challenges, multiple cable joints, increased time requirements, and concerns of safety.

“The cost implications of undergrounding of all power lines in the large area identified are very heavy — running into many thousands of crores,” the Centre said. “The cost of externalities that will burden the nation”, it said, were “huge” and “disproportionate”.

The affidavit also said that harnessing renewable power from high-potential areas of Rajasthan and Gujarat was “essential for meeting rising power demand... and India’s international commitments on climate change”.

On ground, a reality check

On March 5, 2020, Power Minister R K Singh told Lok Sabha that underground cable systems of 220-400 KV voltage were “an integral part of the Modern Day Power Transmission Infrastructure”.

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However, the minister explained, due to higher reactive compensation requirements and higher costs compared to overhead systems, underground cables are being used on a case-by-case basis for short distances. His answer annexed a list of 54 underground power lines — the longest being a 320KV line over 32 km.

In its 2021 order, the SC listed two types of power lines — those that would install bird diverters, and those that would be converted to underground lines, if feasible, within a year.

In Rajasthan, 25 transmission lines with a total length of 1,342 km were to install bird diverters. Only four of these lines, of 104 km cumulative length, were to be laid underground. All four are 33 KV lines, and the longest stretches 45 km.

A summary cost estimate put the total expenses of installing bird diverters across 1,342 km and undergrounding 104 km at Rs 287.16 crore, which “could be reduced to approx Rs 150 crore by opting for economic but quality diverters”.

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While the Centre’s affidavit protested against spending “many thousands of crores”, none of the four 33KV lines — budgeted at only Rs 59 crore for 104 km in Rajasthan — have been laid underground in the three years since the SC’s 2021 order.

Over this period, a court-appointed committee appraised applications for new power lines of around 2,356 km through the GIB landscape in the Thar, and 98% of the length for overhead laying.

Other threats faced by GIB

Power lines are not the only threat to the GIB. Free-ranging dogs have proliferated alarmingly in the Thar landscape. In 2017, feral packs accounted for up to a third of Chinkara depredation in the DNP.

While GIBs continue to be hunted sporadically, the widespread use of pesticides in farmlands poses a greater risk to the bird. Loss of grassland, particularly nesting sites, and an erosion of support from local communities are other concerns.

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In its affidavit, the Centre said the government was working to save the bustard through initiatives such as captive breeding and habitat restoration and protection. Despite teething troubles, efforts at captive breeding succeeded at Sam in Jaisalmer district, when two GIB females laid eggs in captivity and a chick was hatched through artificial incubation in March 2023.

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However, the purpose of captive breeding is to supplement the wild population, which is possible only when a sizable habitat is freed of hostile infrastructure. "Burying cables is the priority, since bird diverters are not foolproof. Where undergrounding is not feasible, we should buy the best diverters and spend well on their maintenance. The government has enough CAMPA funds [meant for

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compensatory afforestation and improvement of wildlife habitat],” a former member of the Rajasthan State Wildlife Board said.

Not green energy vs wildlife

A forest officer who has served in DNP cautioned against pitting sustainable development goals against the survival needs of a species. “Godavan (GIB) is the flagship species of the grassland, and the state bird of Rajasthan. We cannot greenwash its potential loss in the name of renewable power,” he said.

A WII researcher who has worked on the species stressed the danger of “an infrastructure overdrive” in the desert. “We need to demarcate how much land we can devote to installations for harnessing the sun and wind without damaging the desert ecology,” he said.

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In its order passed on March 21, the SC was inclined to modify the scope of burying power lines from 88,636 sq km of potential GIB area to 13,696 sq km of priority GIB area in Rajasthan and Gujarat. On his part, M K Ranjitsinh, the petitioner in the case, has asked that at least 20,890 sq km of GIB habitat be freed of overhead lines.

The expert committee appointed by the court has until July 31 to make its recommendations.

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