

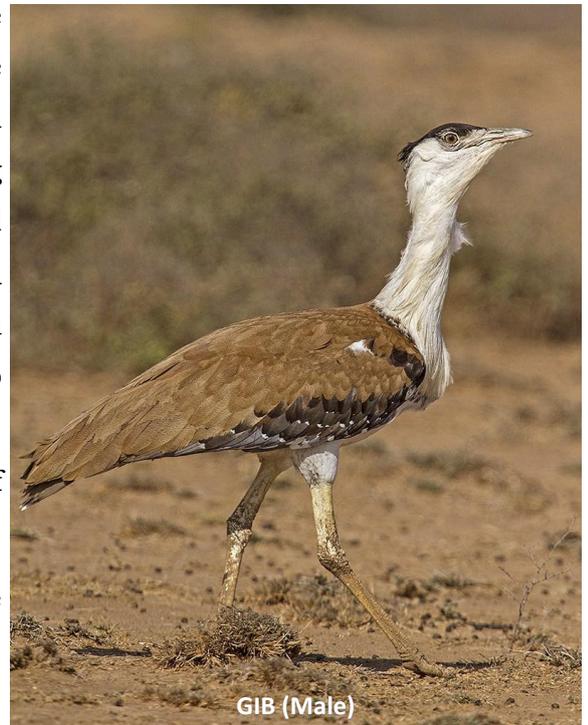
The Last GIBs of Gujarat



Many of you would be unaware about the **GIB (Great Indian Bustard)**, a bird species shown in various photographs in this article. There is nothing to hesitate about it, because probably thousands or even lakhs of people in India are completely unaware about this bird. So, before we go ahead with this article, let's have a brief introduction about this majestic bird species.

GIB is an Indian bird. Today less than 250 GIBs are left on the face of earth. It's a one meter tall bird that prefers to live in the grasslands during its breeding season (during monsoon in Gujarat), and for the rest of the time of the year i.e. during winter and summer, it prefers to live in open undisturbed land and/or harvested fields of *Sorghum* and *Millet*. They feed mainly on the insects, and hence GIB is truly a **'farmer's friend'** and its presence can never be problematic to the farmers. Moreover, GIB also feeds on the small reptiles, berries or fruits of *Zizyphus* and *Capparis* and fallen grains of the harvested agricultural fields.

The GIBs are surviving mainly in India. In our nation they are surviving in the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. According to one estimation, there are about 60 to 70 birds in Rajasthan, less than 30 in Gujarat and a total population of less than 30 birds surviving in rest of the states. Albeit, on the basis of scientific studies, its global population is believed to be between 50-249 individuals which means that there are more than 50 but less than 250 GIBs struggling to survive across the globe.



GIB (Male)

'The Last GIBs of Gujarat'

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Till 1950-60s, GIBs were sighted in the Saurashtra region and Kutch district of the Gujarat State. Gradually, the habitat of this species came under pressure of agriculture and other development, which resulted into the loss of habitat for the species. In addition to this, the rampant hunting of GIB was also prevalent which resulted into a steep decline of its population. Here, it is very much essential to understand that this species lays mostly one egg per year, hence the recruitment rate is also very low and slow. All these situations have collectively led the species to the verge of extinction.

In 1960s, Salim Ali, a well-known ornithologist of India, had recommended this species as the **'National Bird'** of India and had informed that this would make the common men aware about the importance of this species which would help in its conservation. Unfortunately, his dream couldn't be completed and as per his assumption the population of GIB dwindled down rapidly. As per a study carried out in 1969, there were about 1260 GIBs in India then, this number has declined to less than 250 birds today. The bird that was declared as 'threatened species' in the 1980s, has come on the verge of extinction today. Despite this, today most of the people in India are unaware about the GIBs and its existence in Gujarat State.

We all feel proud of the existence of Asiatic Lion in Gir and Indian Wild Ass in the Little Rann of Kutch which is surely a good thing. Sadly, at the same time the presence of the GIB, locally known as **Ghorad** in Gujarat, which is our **'Natural Heritage'** is vanishing from our minds. Extinction of a species from the mindset of the society before the actual extinction of the species from wild, is the worst thing that can happen to any individual species. In Gujarat, the GIB is surviving in the Abdasa and to a certain extent in the Mandvi taluka of the Kutch district. The GIB has the distribution range of about 1000 sq.km of which 250 sq.km is a very crucial and sensitive habitat for the GIBs. It's an apathy that for such a rare bird, a mere 2 sq.km of area in Kutch, i.e. 'The Kutch Bustard Sanctuary', has been declared protected. Owing to the small size of the sanctuary, most of the GIBs in Kutch are struggling to survive outside the protected area. These areas consist of revenue lands of approx. 30 villages and few small patches owned by the Gujarat Forest Department. Unfortunately, all these areas are termed as **'waste land'** which are actually the prime wildlife habitats.



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Recently in the year 2013, the Hon. Govt. of India had released a very detailed and scientific guideline for the recovery of the critically endangered GIB. As per this guideline, development of power-lines, windmills and pylons can be fatal to this species. And hence, it is recommended that none of such infrastructural development should be allowed in or around the bustard habitat. In the recent past, the mortality of GIBs has been reported due to the collision with power-lines in Maharsashtra, Rajasthan and Gujarat. During the year 2014, one adult female GIB had died in Abdasa taluka of Kutch district in Gujarat due to the collision with power-line. It is also interesting to note that various scientific researches have revealed that the bustards have a poor vision and hence the probability of their collision with the power-line is much higher than the other species. Even a single death due to the anthropogenic activities, can leave a fatal impact on the entire population of a species like GIB, especially when the species is on the verge of extinction, laying mostly one egg per year and which needs human support for the long term survival.



An adult female GIB died in Abdasa during the Year 2014

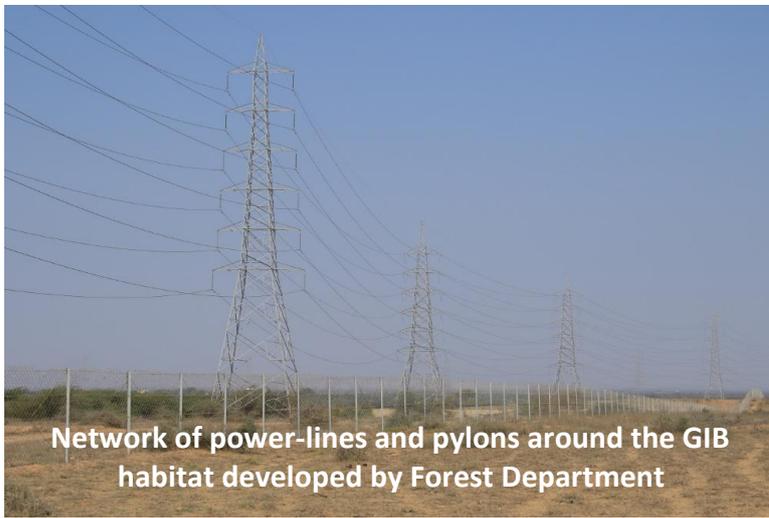
Unfortunately, in Abdasa taluka which is the last home for the GIBs in Gujarat, a huge electric power substation is being developed by the GETCO (Gujarat Energy Transmission Corporation LTD), right in the middle of most important flying areas of the species. Major work of this development has already been initiated in the area. This substation is being developed in an area from where regular movements of the species have been observed. Currently, the pylons for the two High-Tension Power-lines of 220 kV each have been installed. Each of these lines have 13 cables at an exact height at which the GIBs fly. Hence, the mortality of GIBs due to the collision with such power-line in near future is very much certain.

After putting lots of efforts, the Gujarat Forest Department have succeeded in developing a suitable and secured habitat for the GIBs in this area. Even today, good growth of grass and suitable habitat for GIB, developed by Forest Department, can be seen in this area. To provide a suitable and undisturbed breeding ground to the species, the Forest Department has also installed chain-link fencing in this area and has developed safe breeding enclosures. Fortunately, as a result of such hard work, three chicks of GIBs have survived in the year 2016. But GETCO has planned its activities in a very tactful way in the same area by which they do not have to seek 'No Objection Certificate' from the Forest Department.

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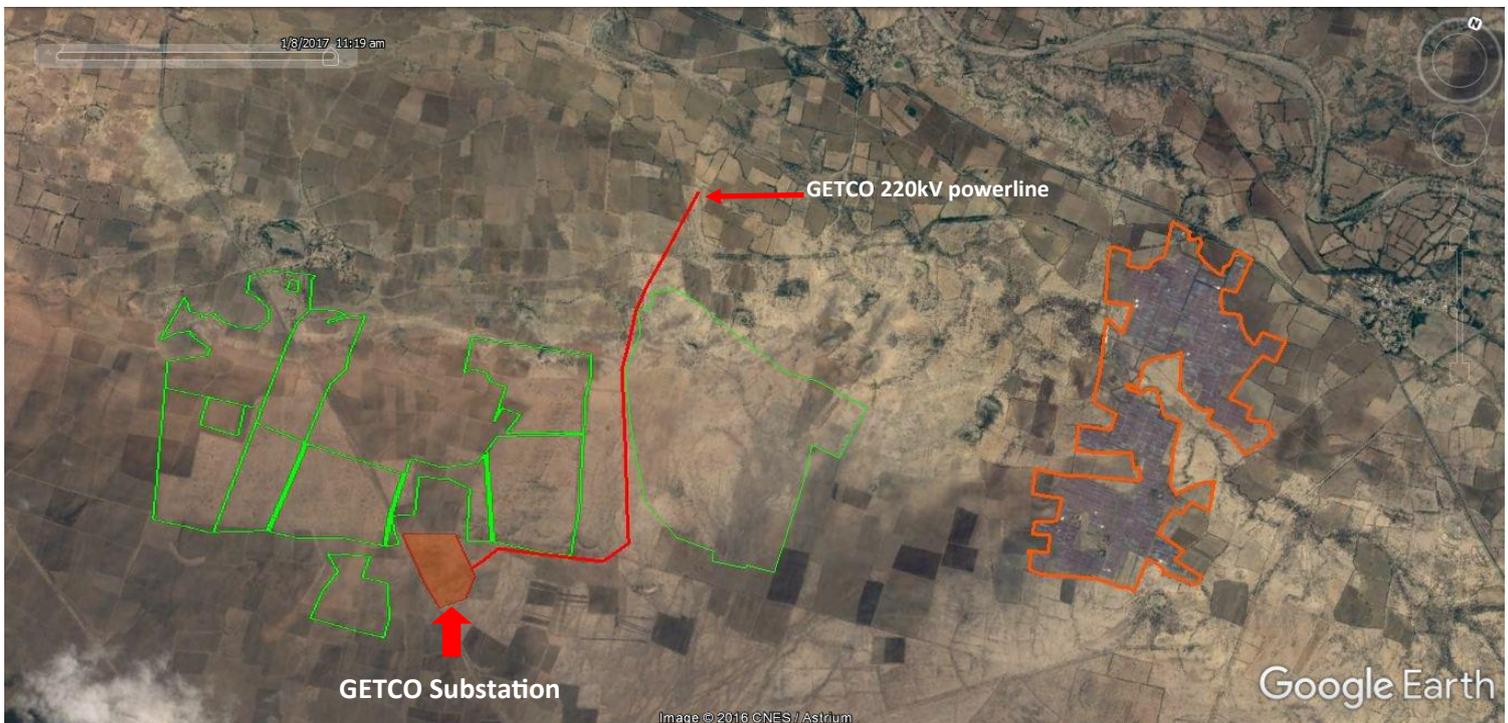
Network of power-lines and pylons around the GIB habitat developed by Forest Department



Installation of new pylons adjacent to the boundary of the forest plot

Installation of the pylons and other developmental activities is being done by the GETCO adjacent to the forest areas, but outside its boundary. Due to such developmental methods, the GIB habitats have been surrounded by the network of power-lines and pylons which will ascertain the extirpation of GIB - **'The Pride of Kutch'**.

The following map shows how such developmental activities are being done around the GIB habitats, developed by the forest department, while the villages on both sides viz. Bhachunda and Konathiya, have similar areas for such development. If this development would have been done in those areas it would have not been fatal to GIBs.



GIB habitats owned by Forest Department



Solar Power Plant

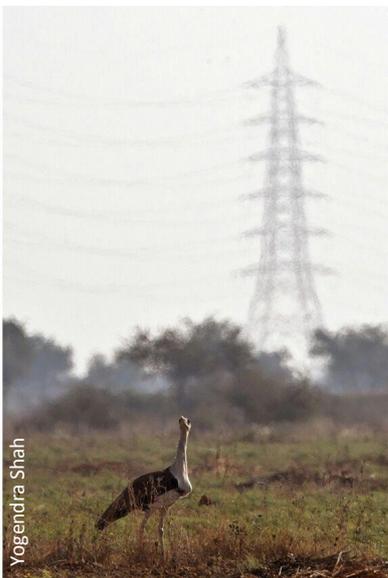
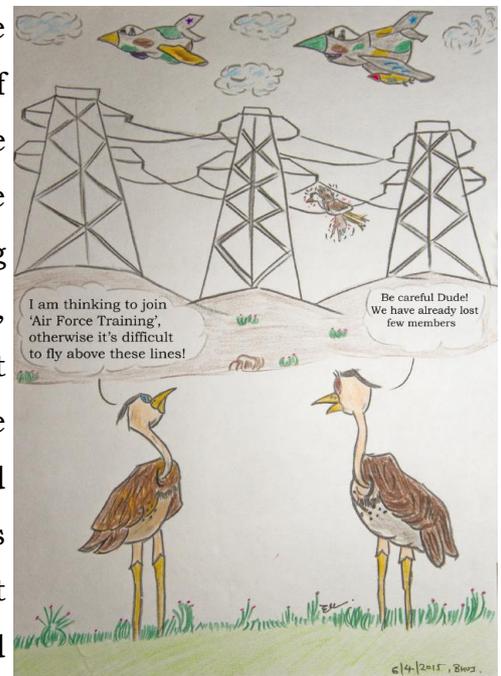
Map showing the locations of GETCO substation and power-lines around GIB habitats

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Most of the time, our society has a belief that the nature conservationist or ecologists are always against all kind of development. Hence, whenever they request the Hon. Government for any matter, they are considered as the 'Barriers of Development' and their request are being overlooked. While in reality, if their suggestions are sought, they will be able to suggest the mitigations and measures that need to be considered while implementing the project to leave minimum effect on the wildlife and environment of the related area. No naturalist would ever wish to make the villagers suffer and to hinder the development of any village. They just wish that where, what and how things should be implemented so that minimum disturbance is caused to the ecology.



GIB or Power-line ?

When the large numbers of flamingos, state bird of Gujarat, died due to the collision with the power-lines in Khadir region of Kutch, the power-line was made underground which is an appreciable action taken by the Hon. Government and concerned officers. Currently, GIBs are facing similar threat. Does it mean that only when these power-lines will take a toll of GIBs by killing them only then the Hon. Government will decide to take actions about it?

With a request to take immediate actions in this matter which can be fatal to the GIB, TCF (The Corbett Foundation) based in the Abdasa taluka of Kutch has written a letter to the Hon. Chief Minister of Gujarat. It has also been requested that bird diverters should be installed on the power-lines that has been erected, and all the future power-lines in this area should be made underground.

This area is the last home of GIB in the Gujarat state, if anything happens to them due to the development of non-bustard friendly activities and if the birds die Gujarat will lose its GIB forever.

GIB should not become a species of recent era which was allowed to get extinct when every information to save it from vanishing was available.

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What can be done?

Everyone should write a letter to Hon. CM of Gujarat and Hon. PM of India and request for following things

- Installation of bird diverters on existing power-lines
- In future, all the power-lines to be installed in this area should be made underground
- GETCO substation can be shifted to the nearby villages like Konathiya and Bhachunda