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Rewilding the Godawan: Great Indian Bustard Chicks Enter Jaisalmer's Soft-Release Tunnel

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ENVIRONMENT

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Rewilding the Godawan: Great Indian Bustard Chicks Enter Jaisalmer's Soft-Release Tunnel

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✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

Three Great Indian Bustard chicks were released into a purpose-built rewilding tunnel at the Godawan Conservation Centre in Ramdevra, Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, on 26 July 2026. Forest officials described it as the programme's first move from captive breeding towards reintroduction into the wild.

WHAT A REWILDING TUNNEL DOES

Captive breeding solves only half of an extinction problem. It produces birds, but it produces birds that have been reared by humans, fed by humans and sheltered from every hazard they will meet outside. In birds, this creates **imprinting**, the fixing of species and habitat recognition during a narrow early window. A chick imprinted on a keeper does not reliably recognise its own kind, does not develop normal anti-predator responses, and does not learn to forage across a shifting desert landscape.

The rewilding tunnel is a soft-release enclosure designed to break that dependence before liberation. It reproduces the physical conditions of the Thar at scale, admits natural weather and light, and removes the human handler from the bird's field of experience. The three chicks will spend roughly **four months** inside under continuous **CCTV surveillance**, with human contact minimised, before being released into **Desert National Park**.

Facility parameters

PARAMETER	DETAIL
Location	Godawan Conservation Centre, Ramdevra, Jaisalmer, Rajasthan
Cost	Rs 9.25 crore
Dimensions	About 160 m long, 64 m wide, 14 m high
Cohort	Three chicks, the first such release
Duration inside	About four months
Monitoring	Continuous CCTV, minimised human contact
Intended release site	Desert National Park

The captive population supplying these birds sits at the two Jaisalmer conservation breeding centres, **Sudasari** and **Ramdevra**, run jointly by the **Wildlife Institute of India (WII)** and the Rajasthan Forest Department with support from the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)**. As of April 2026, the combined population at the two centres had reached **82 birds**, built up through egg harvesting from the wild, artificial incubation, natural pairing and artificial insemination.

THE SPECIES AND WHY ITS BIOLOGY MAKES IT FRAGILE

The Great Indian Bustard, *Ardeotis nigriceps*, called **Godawan** in Rajasthan and designated the **State Bird of Rajasthan**, is one of the heaviest flying birds in the world. It is also, by any measure, among the most endangered.

Conservation status listings

INSTRUMENT	LISTING	EFFECT
IUCN Red List	Critically Endangered	Highest threat category before extinction in the wild
Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972	Schedule I	Highest level of legal protection and penalty in India
CITES	Appendix I	International commercial trade prohibited
Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS)	Appendix I	Parties must give strict protection and restore habitat

The wild population has been estimated at around **150 birds**, a figure reported by India to the thirteenth Conference of the Parties to the CMS, with over ninety per cent concentrated in the **Thar Desert** districts of **Jaisalmer and Barmer** in Rajasthan. Small residual groups survive in Gujarat's Kutch, and in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, most of them too few and too isolated to be demographically viable.

The species' life history explains why recovery is so slow. The Great Indian Bustard is a **ground-nesting** bird of open grassland and scrub, laying a **single egg** per clutch in a shallow scrape with no structure to protect it. Incubation and chick-rearing fall entirely on the female. Males display at traditional sites in a **lek**, an assembly where females select among competing males, which means breeding is concentrated in a few known locations and is easily disrupted by disturbance. Sexual maturity comes late and the reproductive rate is low. A ground nest in open country is exposed to free-ranging dogs, foxes, monitor lizards, crows and trampling by livestock, and a single lost egg is a lost breeding season.

THE POWER-LINE PROBLEM AND THE SUPREME COURT

The dominant proximate cause of adult mortality is **collision with overhead power transmission lines**. The bustard has a narrow frontal field of vision and heavy body mass with limited manoeuvrability, so it detects thin conductors too late to turn.

This became the subject of **M.K. Ranjitsinh and Others v. Union of India**. By an interim order dated **19 April 2021**, the Supreme Court directed that low-voltage power lines across roughly 99,000 sq km of potential and priority bustard habitat in Rajasthan and Gujarat be laid underground, with bird diverters installed in the interim.

On **21 March 2024**, a bench of the then Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, Justice J.B. Pardiwala and Justice Manoj Misra modified that order on applications by the Union ministries of Environment, Power, and New and Renewable Energy. The Court held that a blanket prohibition across so vast an area lacked a sound basis, that undergrounding high-voltage lines was technically and financially difficult in desert terrain, and that constraining transmission would set back India's renewable energy commitments under the [Paris Agreement](#). It substituted the blanket direction with an **expert committee** to determine the scope and feasibility of undergrounding and to identify priority areas.

The judgment's lasting significance lies elsewhere. Reading **Articles 14 and 21** together with **Article 48A** and **Article 51A(g)**, the Court articulated a **right against the adverse effects of climate change**, holding that the right to life and the right to equality are incomplete without protection from a destabilised climate. It is the first explicit recognition of such a right by the Supreme Court of India, and it framed bustard conservation and solar expansion as two limbs of a single environmental obligation rather than as opposed interests.

THE REAL TEST IS HABITAT, NOT HUSBANDRY

Three points deserve careful thought.

First, release without habitat repair is release into a mortality trap. A soft-release tunnel corrects imprinting; it cannot correct a landscape strung with conductors. Unless undergrounding is completed in the priority zones identified by the expert committee, and unless **bird diverters** are mandated and audited on the lines that remain overhead, the birds that leave Ramdevra will encounter the same hazard that emptied the wild population.

Second, the renewable-energy trade-off is genuine, not rhetorical. The Thar carries India's largest concentration of solar and wind capacity, and evacuating that power requires transmission corridors that cross bustard range. The honest answer is spatial planning rather than either blanket prohibition or blanket permission: notify bustard conservation-priority areas, route new corridors around them, and accept higher costs inside them.

Third, a founder population of this size faces a genetic bottleneck. Eighty-two birds descended from a limited number of harvested eggs will lose heterozygosity quickly without a formal **studbook** and managed pairing across both centres. The **Houbara bustard** breeding and release programme in Abu Dhabi, which has run for decades at large scale, is the standing comparator for both pedigree management and post-release survival monitoring.

Desert National Park, spread across Jaisalmer and Barmer and notified in 1980, covers about **3,162 sq km** and is one of the largest national parks in India. Its protection alone is insufficient, because bustards range widely across unprotected community grazing land and *orans*, the sacred groves of western Rajasthan, where pastoralist tolerance has historically kept the bird alive. Conservation that ignores these households will fail; community stewardship incentives, compensation for grazing restrictions and paid nest-guarding roles are what convert local people into custodians.

The species is covered under the **Species Recovery Programme**, a component of the centrally sponsored **Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats** scheme of the MoEFCC, and the **National Board for Wildlife**, chaired by the Prime Minister, is the **apex** body whose clearance governs projects in and around protected areas and eco-sensitive zones. The **Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS)**, whose surveys and advocacy first drew national attention to the bustard's decline and which pressed for the species to be considered as the national bird, remains a central scientific partner. Rajasthan's own **Project Great Indian Bustard**, launched on 5 June 2013, provides the state-level framework within which the Ramdevra facility sits.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3: Conservation, biodiversity and environment; **environmental impact assessment**; species recovery programmes; the renewable energy and biodiversity trade-off.

GS Paper 2: Judicial intervention in environmental governance; **statutory** and institutional bodies; India's obligations under international conventions.

Prelims pointers:

- Three Great Indian Bustard chicks entered the rewilding tunnel at the Godawan Conservation Centre, Ramdevra, Jaisalmer, on 26 July 2026.
- The tunnel cost Rs 9.25 crore and measures about 160 m long, 64 m wide and 14 m high.
- The chicks will remain about four months under CCTV surveillance before release into Desert National Park.
- The combined population at the two Jaisalmer conservation breeding centres reached 82 birds as of April 2026.
- Scientific name *Ardeotis nigriceps*; local name Godawan; State Bird of Rajasthan.
- Status: IUCN Critically Endangered, Schedule I of the Wild Life (Protection) Act 1972, CITES Appendix I, CMS Appendix I.
- Wild population estimated at around 150 birds, over ninety per cent in the Thar Desert of Rajasthan.
- Desert National Park, notified in 1980 across Jaisalmer and Barmer, covers about 3,162 sq km.
- In *M.K. Ranjitsinh v. Union of India*, the interim undergrounding order of 19 April 2021 was modified on 21 March 2024, which also recognised a right against the adverse effects of climate change under Articles 14 and 21.
- Rajasthan's Project Great Indian Bustard was launched on 5 June 2013.

★ FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

THE REWILDING FACILITY:

Site: Godawan Conservation Centre, Ramdevra, Jaisalmer, Rajasthan

Cost: Rs 9.25 crore

Dimensions: about 160 m long, 64 m wide, 14 m high

First cohort: three chicks, released 26 July 2026

Stay: about four months under continuous CCTV, minimised human contact

Two breeding centres in Jaisalmer: Sudasari and Ramdevra

Captive population: 82 birds as of April 2026

THE SPECIES:

Scientific name: *Ardeotis nigriceps*; local name Godawan; State Bird of Rajasthan

IUCN Red List: Critically Endangered

Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972: Schedule I

CITES: Appendix I; CMS: Appendix I

Wild population: around 150 birds, over ninety per cent in the Thar Desert

Breeding biology: ground nest, single-egg clutch, lek display, late maturity

INSTITUTIONS AND LAW:

Desert National Park: notified 1980, Jaisalmer and Barmer, about 3,162 sq km

Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun: scientific partner for captive breeding

Bombay Natural History Society: long-standing research and advocacy partner

National Board for Wildlife: apex advisory body, chaired by the Prime Minister

Species Recovery Programme under the Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats scheme, MoEFCC

Project Great Indian Bustard, Rajasthan, launched 5 June 2013

KEY CONCEPTS:

Rewilding tunnel: a large soft-release enclosure where captive-bred birds acclimatise to natural conditions before release

Imprinting: early-life fixing of species and habitat recognition, disrupted when chicks are reared by humans

Lek: a traditional display ground where males compete and females choose mates

Bird diverter: a reflective device fixed to overhead conductors to make them visible to birds in flight

Genetic bottleneck: loss of genetic diversity when a population passes through a very small number of founders

Studbook: a managed pedigree record used to plan pairings and preserve genetic diversity in captive populations

Sources: Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, PIB, The Hindu

Source: Rewilding the Godawan: Great Indian Bustard Chicks Enter Jaisalmer's Soft-Release Tunnel — Ujjyari.com
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