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

#### **Why in News?**

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.



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.

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.

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."

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".

### **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. 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.

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.

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." a former member of the Rajasthan State Wildlife Board said.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment

Source: Indian Express

## 2. PM Modi speaks of returning Rs 3,000 crore attached by ED to West Bengal's poor: How ED attaches cash

### Why in News?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently said he was exploring "legal options" to return nearly Rs 3,000 crore attached by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in its raids in the state to the poor people of West Bengal.

During a phone call with Amrita Roy, BJP's Krishnanagar candidate for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, the PM said: "This is poor man's money. Someone gave money to be a teacher, someone gave money to be a clerk.... I am taking legal advice, and if my legal advice is given to the new government, they will have to make legal arrangements, rules, and ways to return the money of the poor," the PM told Roy. The BJP released the audio clip of the conversation. Later, the TMC claimed that the conversation "severely violates the Model Code of Conduct" and that the PM made "unwarranted monetary promises..."

### How are seizures made?

ED is mandated to conduct searches at the premises of suspects in a case under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). ED generally approaches the suspect with a search warrant and conducts searches. The recoveries made during the searches are seized in the presence of independent witnesses who have to sign the seizure memo.



### What does ED do with the seized cash and gold?

Earlier, the cash seized by the agency was deposited by the concerned administrative zone into fixed deposit accounts opened by them. The money remained in the account until the case was decided. If the accused got convicted, the cash so attached (given that it was proved to be proceeds of crime), would be deposited in the

government treasury. If the case ended in acquittal, the entire amount, along with interest, would be returned to the accused.

Seized gold or other valuables would be deposited in a locker. In 2018, however, the entire system was rationalized and now the money gets deposited directly in the treasury through

personal deposit accounts. Concerned zones now open deposit accounts in the name of Enforcement Directorate with the State Bank of India. These accounts do not generate any interest on deposits. The rest of the procedure for both cash and gold remains the same.

### **What happens after seizure or attachment?**

The purpose of attachment is to deprive an accused of the benefits of the attached asset. The law also provides for the property to remain out of bounds for the accused until the trial is complete.

After ED attaches or seizes any property, including cash, it has 180 days to get a confirmation on the said seizure from the Adjudicating Authority of the agency. Once the attachment has been confirmed, the ED can take possession of the seized property. In case it is an immovable property, the ED can issue eviction notice to the property owner and take possession of it.

The Adjudicating Authority order, however, can be challenged in the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) Appellate Tribunal and further in the high court which can stay the order, restore the property to the owner or clear the way for ED's possession of the asset.

### **What happens when ED attaches a running business, such as a hotel?**

As a rule, running businesses are not shut down or taken possession of following confirmation by the Adjudicating Authority. However, if the accused does not get legal protection from the tribunal or the high court, the ED has powers to claim all the profits from the operation of the commercial premises, such as a hotel. These profits are again deposited in deposit accounts of the agency. The entire money would be returned to the accused if he/she is acquitted.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

Source: Indian Express

## **3. Understanding the Impact of AI in the 2024 Elections**

### **Why in news?**

In the unfolding drama of India's 2024 election season, a new player has emerged: artificial intelligence (AI). With the rise of deepfakes – AI-generated videos and images – questions about their influence on electoral integrity and the democratic process have come to the forefront.



### **The Rise of Deepfakes in Political Messaging**

Deepfakes have become increasingly prevalent in political messaging. From Arvind Kejriwal's message delivered through his wife to M.K. Stalin's synthetic appearances alongside his late father, M. Karunanidhi, deepfakes are reshaping

the landscape of political communication.

What's concerning is not just their proliferation, but also their believability. AI technology has advanced to the point where these fake videos and images are indistinguishable from reality, making it easier to manipulate public perception and potentially sway electoral outcomes.

### **Government Intervention and Industry Response**

Recognizing the potential threats posed by deepfakes, the Indian government has taken steps to regulate AI usage in political contexts. The Ministry of Electronics and IT issued advisories to AI companies, urging them to ensure transparency and accountability in their technologies. However, these advisories have sparked controversy, with some AI players pushing back against what they perceive as government overreach. This tension highlights the complex relationship between technology, regulation, and democracy.

Meanwhile, in response to these developments, ethical AI initiatives have emerged. Start-up founders like Senthil Nayagam are leading efforts to promote responsible AI use in politics through initiatives like the Ethical AI Coalition Manifesto. These efforts aim to establish guidelines for AI usage that prioritize democratic values and electoral integrity.

### **Diverse Applications of AI in Political Campaigns**

While deepfakes dominate the conversation around AI in politics, there are other, less controversial applications of AI in political campaigns. Personalized phone calls and targeted messaging are examples of AI technologies being used to engage voters in innovative ways.

For instance, Divyendra Singh Jadoun's firm specializes in creating "ethical" AI content for political parties, including authorized translations and interactive chatbots. These applications demonstrate the potential of AI to enhance political communication without resorting to deception or manipulation.

### **Assessment of AI Impact on Elections**

Amidst concerns about the influence of AI on elections, experts offer varying perspectives on its potential impact. Some emphasize that while AI presents new challenges, traditional forms of misinformation remain prevalent. Others highlight the broader challenges of automated content distribution and micro-targeting.

Political observers closely monitor the strategies adopted by parties, particularly the BJP, known for its early adoption of technology in elections. The BJP's use of social media and digital campaigning serves as a case study for how AI technologies are reshaping electoral strategies.

### **Future Perspectives on AI in Digital Campaigning**

As the 2024 elections unfold, the role of AI in politics will continue to evolve. Calls for shared principles and ethical guidelines underscore the need for a collective approach to regulating AI in political contexts.

Ultimately, the 2024 elections serve as a pivotal moment in understanding the impact of AI on democracy. How political parties navigate the opportunities and challenges presented by AI will shape the future of electoral campaigning and democratic governance.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Hindu