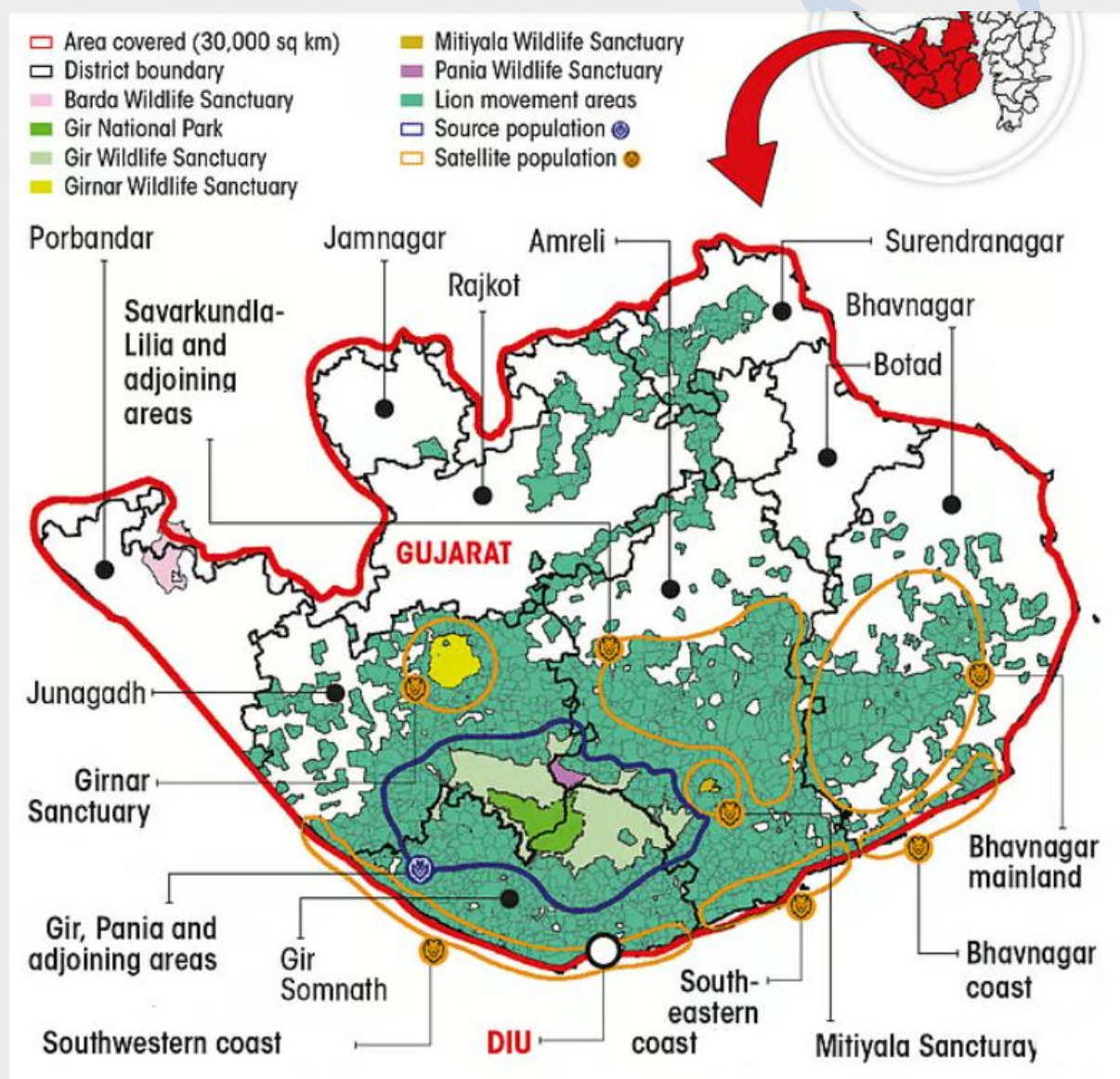


1. Asiatic Lions in Gujarat: Population Booms, but Challenges Loom**Lion Population Grows 32% in Five Years**

Gujarat's Asiatic lion population has increased significantly, rising by 32% between 2020 and 2025 to reach 891 lions. The number of adult females, a key indicator of future growth, grew by 27% to 330.

This growth continues a long recovery trend — from under 200 lions in the 1960s to nearly 900 today — thanks to strong conservation efforts and favorable conditions in Gujarat.

**Lions Spread Beyond Protected Areas**

While the core population still resides in Gir National Park and Paniya Wildlife Sanctuary (394 lions), more lions now live outside these protected zones. The lions have expanded their range

by 17%, now occupying 35,000 sq. km across 58 talukas in 11 districts, up from 30,000 sq. km and 53 talukas in 2020.

In the last five years, lions have colonized new areas including Barda Wildlife Sanctuary, Jetpur, and Babra-Jasdan. However, this spread has increased interactions with human settlements, raising the risk of conflict.

Habitat Limitations Threaten Long-Term Survival

Despite population growth, conservationists warn that the lions are "spreading thin." The lion's range has expanded by 430% since 1990, but the population has grown by only 214%. This is because Gujarat lacks large, quality forested habitats beyond Gir and a few small sanctuaries like Girnar and Mitiyala.

Currently, only 56% of lions live in forested areas. In non-forested zones, lion density drops significantly, and they often rely on livestock carcasses — raising the risk of disease.

Rising Conflicts and Limited Social Tolerance

Though Gujarat's people are known for their tolerance toward lions, close encounters have become more frequent. Reports mention retaliatory killings and unprovoked attacks, especially in human-dominated landscapes.

"Lions used to people are less wary and can be aggressive," noted wildlife biologist Dr. Ravi Chellam. While education campaigns and compensation for livestock losses have helped reduce tensions, the situation remains fragile.

Project Lion and Relocation Delays

In March 2025, Prime Minister Narendra Modi approved a ₹2,900-crore Project Lion to enhance and develop new lion habitats within Gujarat. However, experts emphasize the need to establish habitats outside the state as well, particularly to prevent epidemics and genetic stagnation.

The Supreme Court had ordered lion relocation to Madhya Pradesh in 2013, and though Kuno National Park was initially selected, Gujarat has resisted moving lions out of the state. The government has since limited relocation plans to within Gujarat, even though some lions have naturally migrated to Barda Wildlife Sanctuary, which is too small to host a large population.

Future Outlook: Numbers Alone Aren't Enough

While the lion population is growing, numbers alone don't secure the species' future. Experts argue that the focus must now shift to creating quality forest habitats, reducing human-lion conflict, and ensuring genetic diversity through strategic relocation.

Without these steps, the success story of Gujarat's lions could face serious setbacks.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Environment

Source: Indian Express & The Hindu

2. TASMAL Under Scrutiny: Supreme Court Slams ED, Allegations of ₹1,000 Crore Liquor Scam

What is TASMAL?

The Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAL) is a government-run monopoly that operates around 7,000 liquor shops across Tamil Nadu. It is responsible for the sale and distribution of alcohol in the state.

ED Launches Investigation into Alleged Scam

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) began investigating TASMAL in 2025 after receiving reports of large-scale financial irregularities. The probe was based on 41 FIRs filed by the Tamil Nadu Vigilance Department between 2014 and 2025 under the Prevention of Corruption Act.

Key allegations include:

- Overcharging customers by ₹10–₹30 per bottle.
- Kickbacks from distilleries to TASMAL officials.
- Bribery related to staff transfers and postings.
- Irregularities in transport and bar licence tenders.

ED's Findings So Far

- **Tender Manipulation:** Evidence of transport tenders awarded with incomplete documentation, mismatches in KYC details, and single-bid awards.
- **Fraud by Distilleries:** Five distilleries and three bottling companies allegedly worked together to inflate expenses, falsify records, and siphon off over ₹1,000 crore in unaccounted cash.
- **Illicit Cash Flow:** Bottling firms reportedly inflated sales figures to funnel cash back to distilleries. This cash was then used for bribes to secure bigger orders from TASMAL.

Supreme Court Intervention

On May 23, 2025, the Supreme Court stayed the ED's investigation and criticized the agency's actions.

Chief Justice of India B.R. Gavai questioned the legal basis of charging a government corporation like TASMAL under criminal laws, stating:

"How can a corporation commit an offence?... You may register against individuals. How [can you charge] a corporation in [a] criminal matter?"



Nation

ED Crossing All Limit: SC Stays Money Laundering Probe in TASMAL Liquor Scam in Tamil Nadu

Commenting on the raids, the apex court said: "ED is violating the Constitution. ED is really crossing all the limits."

He further rebuked the ED for:

- Overstepping its jurisdiction.
- Violating the federal structure of the Constitution.
- Ignoring the fact that Tamil Nadu had already filed its own FIRs.

Privacy Concerns Raised

Senior advocate Mukul Rohatgi, representing TASMAC, accused the ED of cloning employees' phones, calling it a breach of privacy.

Politics in the Background

The case unfolds amid rising political tension ahead of the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections. The ruling DMK has accused the BJP-led central government of targeting the state, while the BJP has focused on corruption allegations against the DMK regime.

What's Next?

The Supreme Court has paused the ED's investigation for now. The agency has been asked to submit a detailed response within two weeks.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express & The Hindu

3. Konkan Railway to Merge with Indian Railways: What It Means and Why It Matters

What is the Konkan Railway?

The Konkan Railway (KR) is a 741-km scenic and strategic railway line connecting Roha in Maharashtra to coastal Kerala, passing through Goa and Karnataka. Known for its 91 tunnels and 2,000+ bridges, the line is a crucial lifeline for both passengers and goods along the western coast.

Established in 1990 as a special purpose vehicle under the Ministry of Railways, KR began operations in 1998. It has functioned independently from Indian Railways as Konkan Railway Corporation Limited (KRCL), with ownership split between:

- Government of India: 51%
- Maharashtra: 22%
- Karnataka: 15%
- Goa & Kerala: 6% each

Why Is the Merger Happening Now?

While operationally important, KRCL has faced financial difficulties for years, struggling to fund upgrades and expansion. Maharashtra, the last state to approve the merger, agreed recently, clearing the path for full integration with Indian Railways.

Maharashtra's approval came with two key conditions:

1. The "Konkan Railway" name must be retained.
2. Indian Railways must reimburse Maharashtra ₹394 crore for its initial investment.

Both conditions have reportedly been accepted by the central government.

What Will Change After the Merger?



Once merged, KRCL will become part of Indian Railways, allowing for:

- Better infrastructure and service upgrades
- Increased train frequency and improved connectivity
- Enhanced security and maintenance
- More competitive fares
- Seamless ticket booking via Indian Railways platforms
- Standardised customer support systems

The merger also opens the door for new projects, better tourism potential, and local economic growth along the Konkan coast.

What's Next?

The Railway Board will now begin the formal merger process. This will involve:

- Restructuring employee roles
- Adjusting operational zones
- Revising service and vendor contracts

The full transition will take a few months, but passengers can expect a smoother, more integrated experience once it's complete.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

4. CBI Charges Ex-J&K Governor Satyapal Malik: Two Major Allegations Explained

Background

Former Jammu & Kashmir Governor Satyapal Malik, 78, currently hospitalized in Delhi with a urinary infection and sepsis, has been charged by the CBI in a corruption case related to a hydel project in Kishtwar, J&K. Malik had initially been examined only as a witness, and it was based on his allegations that the CBI filed the case in 2022.

Malik's Allegations: Two Key Scandals

1. Bribery Offer

In October 2021, Malik claimed he was offered a ₹300 crore bribe to approve two deals:

- One linked to Reliance Group (owned by Anil Ambani).
- The other involving an RSS functionary.

He said he refused the bribes, stating he came to J&K "with five kurta-pajamas and would leave with that."

2. Hydel Project Corruption

Malik alleged irregularities in awarding a ₹2,200 crore contract in the Kiru Hydel Project to Patel Engineering Ltd. He said proper tendering norms were ignored, and despite a decision to re-tender using reverse auction, the contract was handed to Patel Engineering without doing so.

Case 1: J&K Government Insurance Scheme

What Happened

- In 2017, the old insurance scheme with ICICI Lombard ended.
- J&K hired Trinity Reinsurance Brokers Ltd (TRBL) to float new tenders.

- Reliance General Insurance (RGIPL) won the bid with the lowest premium.
- The scheme launched in October 2018 and ₹61 crore was paid to RGIPL in advance.

Red Flags

- The payment was reportedly made without approvals from the Chief Secretary or the Governor.
- Employees protested the scheme due to high premiums and no opt-out.
- Malik cancelled the scheme, calling it "full of fraud."

Investigations

- The J&K Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) initially found no wrongdoing but recommended recovering ₹44 crore.
- The Finance Department later found irregularities.
- In March 2022, the case was handed over to the CBI, which filed an FIR naming RGIPL, TRBL, and unknown officials.

Enforcement Directorate Action

- In January 2024, the ED attached properties worth ₹36.57 crore, alleging dubious tendering practices.

Case 2: Kiru Hydel Project Contract

Project Details

- The Kiru Hydro Electric Project was estimated at ₹4,287 crore.
- The contract was for major construction works and was awarded to Patel Engineering Ltd in 2019.

Alleged Irregularities

- CVPPPL (the project authority) initially decided to cancel and re-tender the contract using e-tendering with reverse auction.
- However, the decision was overturned, and the contract was awarded without following new guidelines.

Other Issues

- The project faced criticism for sub-standard work and failure to provide local jobs, one of its main promises.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

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