

The great Indian bustard has a new ally: its human neighbours

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[Musa Khan, one of the trained naturalists, scanning the GIB's grassland habitat. Photo by Sumit Dookia](#) About 122 of the estimated 150 critically endangered great Indian bustard (GIB) remaining in India today are in Rajasthan, concentrated near the Desert National Park in the western front. A project by a wildlife biologist couple to involve the local community in GIB conservation, that also indirectly gives them monetary benefit, has had a ripple effect over the last two and half years, inviting interest among a larger section of people. [The project trained a select group of youngsters to become nature guides who, in turn, help the conservationists keep track of the location of the GIBs and also inform the forest department of any attempts of poaching of any wildlife in the area.](#) *While the captive breeding programme of the GIB aims at species recovery, safeguarding the habitat and building local support would ensure that those captive-bred birds and others in the wild can thrive in their natural environment.*

Twenty-three-year-old Radheshyam Pemani Bishnoi in western Rajasthan is one of the fortunate few who has seen the critically endangered great Indian bustard (GIB) in the wild. But it was not until about two years ago that he became aware of its dwindling population – from an estimated 1,260 in 1969 to around 150 in India today. Of these, around 122 are in Rajasthan, concentrated in the Jaisalmer district. Working part-time as a nature guide as part of the

Godawan

(GIB) Community Conservation project in this part of the country, Bishnoi now helps map the location of the bird whenever he spots one, tips off the forest department about any attempts by poachers, and spreads awareness among other locals to ensure its habitat is safe. He has also reported four deaths of the GIB in the last two years. This involvement of the local community is crucial in conserving the GIB and its natural habitat, thereby ensuring its conservation in the long term, believe Sumit Dookia and Mamta Rawat, the wildlife biologist couple who initiated the community conservation project. Humans and wildlife often share habitat, and if one were to look back, the GIB, which was once found commonly in the grassland landscape of Rajasthan, had peacefully co-existed with the local community. Yet, for a long time, the local community did not identify themselves with the GIB conservation efforts and shared a sour relationship with the forest department. The reasons were varied.

Less than 150 of the critically endangered great Indian bustard remain in India, mostly found in Rajasthan. Photo by Radheshyam Pemani Bishnoi. Historically, the Houbara bustard or MacQueen's Bustard (similar to the GIB) was once a commonly hunted bird, and India would officially invite royal guests from foreign countries on hunting expeditions. This was until the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 came into being. Although it became illegal thereafter, the GIB continued to be hunted, mainly for the consumption of its meat. "But most of these poachers or hunters were from outside. Few of them were locals, supported by outsiders," Dookia said. These cases have now become rarer, especially with increased awareness among locals. Tourism, however, brings along its own pitfalls. Locals say that sometimes tourists who visit Jaisalmer, the closest town to the Desert National Park (DNP) whose vicinity marks the habitat of the GIB, want to taste such "exotic meat". The hotel owners go out of their way in abiding by their wishes. Two such cases were reported in early 2012. Then, there was the issue of land rights. According to Dookia, ever since the DNP was proposed to be a national park in 1981, there had been uncertainty over displacement in all the 70-75 villages in the 3,162 sq km of the DNP area. The cumulative result of all these underlying issues was a conflict between the forest department and the local community. Some of the problems still exist, Dookia said, but after 2012, the forest department started taking initiatives to resolve some of these issues. "It was realised that it is not possible to shift such a big population from the DNP. Plus, the GIB had also restricted its movement to a small part of the DNP area in the course of the last 40 years," he said. It was around this time that dialogue was started with the village communities.

Wildlife biologists Mamta Rawat and Sumit Dookia with some of the community volunteers of the great Indian bustard conservation project. Photo from Sumit Dookia.

Involving the community in protecting GIB Meanwhile, Dookia, who hails from western Rajasthan and is well-versed with the socio-cultural dynamics of the local communities, apart from being aware of the issues pertaining to the GIB, decided to approach the forest department to work together in taking the GIB conservation efforts from the lab to the people. He and his wife, Rawat, suggested a project in which local youth from the DNP surrounding villages were trained as nature guides by the forest department. This, he said, would not just hone their skills and provide economic benefit, but, with more awareness, also instill a sense of pride and ownership towards the bird, thereby making them the GIBs' guardian and saving its habitat. Govind Sagar Bharadwaj, who was the Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife Division), Jodhpur at that time, recalled the enthusiasm with which they took up Dookia's initiative, and why he felt it was so crucial. "When it comes to protecting an endangered or critically endangered species, the state alone cannot do everything. True, there are laws like the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 in place but even for implementation of the laws, we need support (of the community)," Bharadwaj told Mongabay-India. "It is because of this, such initiatives are important. The GIB does not get as much attention to be saved as, say, the tiger, and so awareness is very important—about the bird in itself as well as its habitat, the grassland ecosystem." And so, in 2015, a batch of 25 young men from 10 villages closest to the DNP was selected for the nature guide training programme. Conducted by the forest department, with wildlife biologists like Dookia himself as mentors, the youngsters were trained over five sessions of two days each. Musa Khan was one of those trained and certified by the forest department as a nature guide. "The training gave us a lot of information about birds and with experience over these last few years, I have learnt even more," he said, adding that work comes in bulk during the tourist season, between October to March. "Migratory birds also come in big flocks during that time and so we have a lot to show to tourists who book us. During (tourist) season I am busy almost 25 days a month and it helps me earn a decent sum," Khan added. Most of the people in this part of the country work as animal herders or grazers or have small businesses. Agriculture, because water is scarce, is not a major livelihood option. Having an additional skill, therefore, has helped locals like Khan earn an additional income. This works towards their idea of an Open Concept Project, said Dookia. While he and Rawat, whose NGO, the ERDS (Ecology, Rural Development and Sustainability) Foundation, supports the project structurally, it does not offer any direct financial benefits to the volunteers. "We help instead in capacity building. We have linked them with well-known birding tour agencies and also helped source equipment like binoculars, spotting scopes and bird identification guide books through a donation by a Zurich-based NGO, Binoculars4Charity," he said. As word got out and these trained guides started getting enquiries from tourists, particularly to have a glimpse of the critically endangered GIB, their confidence in their work grew. More importantly, they started wearing their identity — *hum Godawan ke ilake se hain* (We are from the GIB area) — with pride. This developed a sense of ownership for the bird. Now, whenever they see a GIB, they immediately inform Dookia's team about its location. "This is helping us develop the yearly distribution of the GIB in the entire GIB Arc landscape and generate maps," Dookia said.

Radheshyam Bishnoi, one of the volunteers with the Godawan (GIB) Community Conservation project, collecting data. Photo from Radheshyam Bishnoi. Khan said that it is relatively more common to spot GIBs outside the DNP and near their villages in winters. “Monsoon is their breeding season and they mostly stay within the DNP enclosures when they lay eggs. But during winters, they usually venture out and it is during this time that we see them the most,” he said. Bishnoi, the other nature guide, added that if a GIB ventures close to an agricultural field in search of food, he and the others talk to the farmer and asks him to leave the bird (or birds) undisturbed. “Two years back, a GIB had laid eggs in the field of a farmer who grew *sevan* (kind of grass, for fodder). I spoke to the farmer and even promised him some kind of compensation for leaving the bird undisturbed,” the 23-year-old, who hails from the Dholia village, about 150 kms from DNP, said. Among the main threats to the GIB are habitat loss, stray dogs, poaching, and obstacles on their flight path, like overhead power lines and windmills. “I have reported four GIB deaths to the forest department till now. Three of them were killed by overhead power lines and one by a stray dog,” Bishnoi told Mongabay-India, “In good news, I have also rescued two GIBs. One was stuck in a fence around a field. Villagers know my work, so they call me whenever such a problem arises.” Not all 25 of those trained, however, are as actively involved as Khan or Bishnoi — only five-seven are, Dookia said. But such has been the influence of the work of these few volunteers that friends and acquaintances from their networks are coming up to learn all about birds and animals, especially the GIB. Bishnoi, for instance, was not one of the 25 trained but was “motivated” by someone who has. [Director of Desert Nation Park and other forest department officials investigating the death of a GIB, reported by volunteer Radheshyam Pemani Bishnoi. Photo by Sumit Dookia.](#) “So, in a way, we are getting information from a network of more than a hundred local people about the GIB and other wildlife-related issues,” Dookia said. The work of the nature guides, or Godawan Friends, is not restricted to the GIB and they help Dookia’s team document other birds and animals of the grassland landscape as well. Similarly, they keep a watch out for poachers and tip off the forest department about any such attempts on any wildlife. The arrest of four people this April found to be involved in the poaching of Chinkara near the DNP was, in fact, based on a tip-off from these local people. “Over the last two years, these Godawan Friends have given information on more than 10 poaching cases. These were of the spiny-tailed lizard, chestnut-bellied sandgrouse, Indian fox, and of course, the chinkara,” he said. Also on the GIB conservation front is the captive breeding programme in the DNP which has been successful so far—a young chick hatched this March. Calling it “long-due”, Dookia said that it is “one of the last resorts to save any wild species”. “But ex-situ conservation approach only helps in species recovery and we must work simultaneously for in-situ conservation of the remaining habitat for the birds to thrive when they are released in the wild, say, after 25 years, as per the current captive breeding project,” he said. Dookia and Rawat are now also working on encouraging farmers in the GIB Arc landscape to switch to organic farming that is not just beneficial to them in the long-run but also to the environment. “We believe that the GIB and its habitat can be saved only if the local community supports it,” he finally said, “And I am happy that they are responding positively to it.”

[Of the roughly 150 Great Indian Bustards left in India, 122 are found in Rajasthan. The birds and humans often share landscapes too. Photo by Radheshyam Bishnoi.](#) First published by [Mongabay India](#) on 10 June 2020