

## Rajya Sabha Member Parimal Nathwani's Struggle To Save Asiatic Lions

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25July, 2016by D P Sharan

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In fact, lions are believed to have been spotted north of the Narmada River in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in the past. They gradually started migrating towards Saurashtra and settled around Gir, in Gujarat that has, over the years, developed to be the only place in the world where Asiatic Lions are found.

If history of wildlife is to be believed, during British rule, only a dozen lions could survive the most heinous game of hunting by affluent people in particular. Subsequently, the Nawab of Junagarh and later, the Gujarat Government, issued successive directives to punish those hunting Lions.

The mythological and historical significance of this wild creature prompted wildlife lovers such as Rajya Sabha MP and Group President of Reliance Industries Limited Parimal Nathwani to restore it to its pristine glory by using his political and social clout. He has launched a virtual crusade to press for his demand: accord National Animal status to lions, divesting the tigers of their decades-old mascot-role.

Whether it was the order of the Supreme Court to relocate lions from Gir to elsewhere or the Government's decision to retain the declaration about the National Animal status to tigers, Nathwani has stood by the causes for protection and survival of lions. Likewise, whether it is in his capacity as a top honcho of the corporate world or as an MP, he has never held back to render his services for the wellbeing of lions and keeps on impressing upon the Union Government, inside and outside the Parliament, to grant the national animal status to lions by enacting a legislation.

A true wildlife lover, Nathwani has taken a vow to give back to the lions their pristine glory and protect this rare species of the big cat family from being extinct. He contends that no other wild animals in the epics of the country deserve the honour that lions do. He points out that the lion is not called king of jungle only today: the scriptures and histories of ancient kingdoms could not afford to ignore its importance and the king's throne used to be called 'Simhasan'. Simply put, the king's seat was as glorious as that of a lion.

A staunch devotee of Lord Krishna, he further claims that even Lord Krishna stated while describing his glory 'Mruganam Mrugendraham' meaning 'I am a Lion among beasts'. He points out that even our National Emblem features four Lions standing back to back -- that has been derived from the sculpture built by King Ashoka -- to show the bold face of the nation.

As such, even the apex court order about translocation of Asiatic lions from Gir sanctuary in Gujarat, could not deter Nathwani to withhold his crusade against a possible threat to the lives of Asiatic Lions of Gir. In his argument to the Supreme Court's decision about forming a committee to recommend shifting of Lions from Gir within six months, Nathwani claimed that Gir was the most suitable location for Lions in the light of its geographical and environmental location and moving them out from Gir could be detrimental to the on-going efforts to save this rare species from extinction. He contended that translocation of animals had never been conducive to the health of animals that were forced to survive in a changed environment and habitat.

In support of his argument, Nathwani ruled out the unfounded apprehension about wildfire and epidemic in Gir in the light of the fact that such natural calamities never break out in the area. He claimed that in the history of Gir and Gir Lions, neither forest fires nor epidemics had happened. In the light of the Supreme Court directive to the Centre for not importing Cheetahs from Africa to the Kuna sanctuary, Nathwani has asked the apex court to stop translocation of Lions from Gir too.

Nathwani was appalled when in a reply to his question in the Rajya Sabha by the Government he was informed about expenditure on conservation of Asiatic Lion in Gujarat. In its reply, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forest confided that in the past three years, Rs. 34.39 crore was released for conservation of Asiatic Lions while Rs. 488.58 was released under Project Tiger. Nathwani expressed anguish over the disparity in the Government's steps to protect the animal. Despite the fact that lions need more attention to increase their population, the Government authorities have failed to pay proper attention towards their conservation while sanctioning money for the purpose.

In order to cope with the intractable situation being faced by Lion-lovers to save this rare species for want of substantial support from the Government, Nathwani mobilized Rs.1 crore to cover about 1300 potholes in the Gir enclosure. Earlier, potholes meant to facilitate animals with water were uncovered and small animals often fell in to injuries or even death.

Notwithstanding the criticism Nathwani has received for his obsessive love for Lions, he has braved on. A section of wildlife activists reacted to his demand for conferring the status of National Animal to lions. His views were dubbed as a well-hatched conspiracy against Tigers. Nathwani had to, however, come out with the contention to explain the reasons why he had asked for special favours for lions. Nathwani said, "If I support Lions, it does not mean that I hate other animals and I am against the national animal stature to Tigers. I admire the on-going efforts to save Tigers across the country by the Government and different NGOs as well. But my contention to support lions is that lions are found in a single State of Gujarat while Tigers are found in many States. If we support lions by giving them the status of national animals, we can protect and promote this rare wild species like what we have done with the Tigers under specific sections of the law."

Nathwani claims, "In fact, on several occasions, I have taken up the issue of safety and security of the tigers. Both the animals are important to wildlife and need to be conserved with the best possible efforts. Tigers are found in 17 States and commendable efforts have been made to preserve them while Lions are found only in Gir of Gujarat. I believe that the time has come when the Lions should be accorded the status of National Animals and the Tigers should now be dispensed with the stature in the light of the fact that the Tigers have got enough projection over decades. Like financial support lent by the Centre under Project Tiger, funds must be allocated for survival of Asiatic Lions that are available only in Gir. The Union Government has spent Rs. 488.58 crore under Project Tiger while Rs. 48.71 crore for conservation of elephants. The Centre has also released total Rs. 206.09 crore under Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats in the past three years. But, incidentally, the Centre has sanctioned only Rs. 34.39 crore for Gir in the past three years. I propose to declare every animal as National Animal by rotation after a considerable period of 20 years."

He substantiates his demand for a National Animal status to Lions with the statistics about the growing population of Tigers under the Government's support. He adds that only with a substantial monetary support from the Centre, a remarkable increase in the Tigers' population from 1411 in 2008 to 1706 in 2011 could be ensured and at present, it has reached 2226 that is half of the world's tiger population. He sought such support from the Centre for the protection of Lions too by declaring them the National Animal.

Although his proposal to replace the Tigers with Lions as the National Animal of India may not evoke positive response from the pro-tiger activists in particular and a section of people of the country in general -who are unlikely to accept the Lion in place of Tiger as a National Animal -- Nathwani has claimed that he would continue his struggle for the cause of Lions till his last breath and even launch offensives against the system if necessary.

## **RAJYA SABHA MEMBER PARIMAL NATHWANI'S STRUGGLE TO SAVE ASIATIC LIONS**

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Main Business Rajya Sabha Member Parimal Nathwani's Struggle To Save Asiatic Lions



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