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What is the way out of elephant-human conflicts in TN? Experts weigh in

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A panel discussion was held in Coimbatore in the light of the recent case of the elephant Chinnathambi, who returned to the village he was translocated from.

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Saturday, February 02, 2019 - 15:36

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The return of the elephant Chinnathambi, who was translocated from Thadagam region in Coimbatore, back into the village he was removed from has renewed the debate on human-animal conflict.

While many online are tweeting with the hashtag 'Bring back Chinnathambi', a panel discussion on human-animal conflict witnessed some audience members raise questions about the translocation of the elephant as well.

Chinnathambi the elephant was translocated from the Thadagam region in the outskirts of Coimbatore after villagers lodged complaints that he was raiding crops and causing damage to life and property. The forest department officials



decided to tranquilize the jumbo, capture him and release him in the wilderness. [The NEWS Minute](https://www.facebook.com/T) ([/](https://twitter.com/thenews1))

Accordingly, he was released in the forest areas near Topslip, Valparai in the last week of January. However, within a week of its translocation, the jumbo came back to the village near Pollachi. While videos of his majestic walk through a narrow street went viral on social media – with many even sharing the video after adding a background score to it – people have now started to demand that the elephant be left alone. (<https://www.facebook.com/T>) (<https://twitter.com/thenews1>) (<https://www.youtube.com/ch>)

CR Jayaprakash, the Head of Journalism department in PSG College of Arts and Sciences, Coimbatore, who was a part of the panel on the human-animal conflict on Friday, said that this is a usual habit exhibited by the people on the ground. “When they enter villages, they are blamed as disruptors, attackers and killers. When the Forest Department acts on the complaints of villagers and translocate the animal, the same villagers will say that they shouldn't have done that,” he said.

He referred to the incident of another jumbo in the region, Madukkarai Maharaj, which died due to fractures on its forehead when it tried to break free from its cage in Annamalai. “He (Madukkarai Maharaj) was called as a crop raider. The department tried to translocate it and we lost the animal,” he added.

‘Stop them when they’re young’

Ajay Desai, an expert on elephants, said that awareness about the elephant’s behaviour is crucial to address such issues. “When the animal loses the fear of people, the problem of crop raiding intensifies,” he explained.

Ajay Desai said that it is easier to cultivate certain habits in elephants if they are introduced to those habits at an early age. “You let a problem grow, it becomes a serious issue. This elephant then gets used to human beings and walking in villages and towns,” he stated. Sharing his thoughts on the jumbo



coming back from the forest region into which the department released him, **The NEWS Minute** (7)
 Ajay Desai said that it is essential to ensure that the forest trail where the elephant is translocated has enough land and food resources to sustain an animal as big as an elephant. <https://www.facebook.com/T>

Ajay Desai also advocates leaving young male members of the herd into the forest alone. <https://twitter.com/thenews1>
 “The calves usually migrate out of their herd once they attain sexual maturity. That is when they move out of their group and start socialising with elephants from other groups. <https://www.youtube.com/ch>
 When the animals are young, there is also a higher possibility of them being accepted into another social group of animals. As they grow older, this adaptation becomes difficult. So targeting the elephants at a young age and then doing what is necessary would help in addressing this issue,” he added.

Human-animal conflict, a complex issue

Delving deep into the intricacies of the issue, Dr AJT Johnsingh explained that the conflict with elephants in the picture is not easy to tackle. Comparing the problem with the one involving tigers, he said that it has become imperative that humans learn to live with elephants now.

Explaining how the farmers’ troubles are also equally important, Ajay Desai said that it was a choice between the devil and the deep blue sea. “So either you have to condition the elephants right from the beginning or capture them later. The man-animal conflict is not as easy as we think it is,” he said, adding that corruption in urban planning departments makes things more difficult than they already are.

‘Government must look for alternate options’

Ajay Desai explained that farmers who are affected are often those who live have less than 2.5 acres of land. “They have no means of defending themselves from the elephants,” he said, adding that the approach of the government in tackling the conflict has not been scientific or sustained so far.



AJT Johnsingh also spoke about the settlements that are built to accommodate construction workers in places where a dam was to come up and said that well-built tents could solve the accommodation needed for the workers. “After the construction is over, they can dismantle the tents and take it with them. This will not damage the forest cover like how permanent buildings do,” he explained.



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He also added that the government must engage with the local tribes and tap into their knowledge of animals. Speaking to TNM after the panel discussion concluded, Dr Johnsingh said that the people belonging to the Malasar and Kurumba tribes in the Western Ghats have immense knowledge about the behaviour of elephants and that it would do the government a lot of good to engage them in addressing the conflict. “Sadly, nobody in the government seems to understand how important it is to keep the tribes in good spirits,” he rued.

([https://www.youtube.com/ch](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...))

The panel also included Dr Gopalan, a former scientist in the Botanical Survey of India, Herpetologist Nirmal Ulhas Kulkarni and Dr TV Sajeew, a scientist at the Kerala Forest Research Institute.

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