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Chinna Thambi, a wild tusker, who was recently translocated from Chinna Thadagam forest range in Coimbatore region, sustained injuries in the process.

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The video of a wild elephant being pursued by forest department officials in Chinna Thadagam forest range in Coimbatore region of the Western Ghats was circulated on social media on Friday. ‘Crop raiding elephant’, ‘notorious rogue tusker’ were some of the suffixes given to Chinna Thambi, a wild elephant aged around 25 years.



The video also showed two other elephants, a female and a calf, romping around Chinna Thambi, preventing the officials from taking him away. This delayed their capture by several hours. Later, with help from three other Kumki elephants, giant logs and thick ropes, the mammal was loaded into a JCB vehicle to be translocated to the Topslip region in Anamalai Tiger Reserve (ATR). The operation was named 'Chinna Thambi Gaja Yatra' by the forest officials.

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The 'rogue' tusker

Chinna Thambi was reported to the forest department by a few farmers from the region as a 'rogue' elephant that was destroying crops. Vinayagan, another member of Chinna Thambi's herd, too used to be known as a 'crop destroyer' and hence in a similar operation was translocated to Mudumalai just last month.

Based on farmer complaints that these elephants were destroying their croplands, forest department officials swung into action to capture and translocate Chinna Thambi on Friday. In an operation that lasted several hours, Chinna Thambi, weighing about 4 tonnes, was darted thrice with 14 ml of tranquillisers to facilitate the process.

While the tusker was being directed into the JCB with the help of a Kumki (tame/domesticated) elephant, both its tusks were damaged. The animal also sustained injuries in the process.

Is TN forest department well equipped for such operations?

Animal rescuer Antony Rubin tells us Chinna Thambi's relocation operation was poorly planned by the department. "We really can't predict the dosage of tranquilliser in such cases. It varies from animal to animal, depends on what food they had, their reaction to sedatives, etc. Elephants tend to get aggressive when agitated. After sedating the animals, the officials will have to give it some



time for the sedative to kick in. In this case, they constantly kept triggering him. The elephant never got the time to calm down. It was a poorly executed operation,” he says.

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N Sadiq Ali, Founder of Wildlife and Nature Conservation Trust says the department lacks severely when it comes to technology.

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“Scientifically, we are quite backward. The sedatives like Xylazine are very expensive and sometimes we might have to borrow from neighbouring ranges.”

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The weight of the mammal too, they estimate based on sight. In countries like Africa, they have better scientific methods to gauge it,” he says.

However, Dr Manoharan, who was a part of the operation, says, “It was well-executed operation and Chinna Thambi’s capture took much lesser time compared to Vinayakan.”

Arun, from People for Cattle India (PFCI), tells us the case of Madkkarai Maharaja, another tusker who allegedly had caused casualties. “They caught him on a Sunday morning and same day evening he was dead. The officials reasoned that in a bid to escape, the elephant banged its head in its enclosure’s walls and killed himself. But overdosage could be a reason,” he says.

According to a report in The Hindu

(<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Coimbatore/%E2%80%98Madukkarai-Maharaj%E2%80%99-died-due-to-multiple-fractures-on-the-forehead/article14397026.ece>), the animal’s post mortem confirmed that it suffered multiple fractures on its forehead and a torn muscle (few centimetres long) at the forehead.

Arun, however, alleges that the real reason can never be found. “We only know what they tell us. But the real question we should be asking is why translocate a wild animal in the first place? When man-animal conflict happens, the officials always take the side of the human,” he says.



Is translocation the ideal choice?

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“Why to translocate elephants in the first place? They’re not coming to the airport or railway station. They’ve been in that region for a long time. We are ones who encroach upon their lands,” says Arun. <https://www.facebook.com/T>

But he adds that this is a much better option than turning wild elephants into kumkis. “The Court has made multiple orders and thanks to them they will not be converted into kumki elephants. Converting an adult wild animal is the cruellest process ever. But again, I’d say, translocation is not the step forward.” <https://twitter.com/thenewsminute> [https://www.youtube.com/ch](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...)

In this case, while one group of farmers had rallied for Chinna Thambi and Vinayagan’s translocation, another section of villagers have been protesting against it. “Both Vinayagan and Chinna Thambi have not caused any casualty. When Maharaja died, the entire village mourned his loss. Only a particular section of farmers tend to raise these requests for translocating. Elephants play an important role in forest and there are a majority of people who don't want him to be taken away,” says Arun.

Sadiq Ali adds, “In this case, Government began work based only on people’s requests.”

Both Arun and Antony tell us the only way to avoid such situations is not in translocation but in reducing encroachment. “I’ve been conducting awareness programs for farmers in the fringes to not grow crops that attract elephant. Crops like sugarcane, maize, banana are a definite no. Instead, they can plant chillies, if they must. Ideally, farmers should maintain a 150-metre radius around reserve forest areas. I’d say the tribals are better equipped to live in harmony with wild animals. They have no conflict or casualty. They understand wild animal’s behavioural pattern better,” says Arun.

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