**Conflict with pachyderm pathways**

The recent death of a Kadar tribesman in Tamil Nadu’s Anamalai Tiger Reserve in an elephant attack has left the indigenous community and conservationists in shock as Kadars are known to co-exist with wild elephants for ages. This is the latest glimpse of the escalating human–elephant negative interactions in Tamil Nadu, largely stemming from reasons including habitat degradation, developmental works in forest buffers and obstructions in critical elephant movement paths or corridors, which link two or more habitats.

Taking serious note of the imminent danger, the Tamil Nadu government formed a panel to identify elephant corridors. The panel, headed by Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests V. Naganathan, reassessed the existing corridors in the State, including the ones identified in studies conducted by the Project Elephant Division of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change and the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) in the past.

The panel released a list of 42 elephant corridors a month ago and invited comments from the public on the draft report till May 5. The environmentalists hailed the report, as it doubled the number of corridors in the State against the 20 corridors identified in the Project Elephant Division’s report in 2023 and 19 corridors identified by the WTI.

The elephant population in Tamil Nadu stood at 2,961 in 26 forest divisions according to the synchronised census done in southern States in 2023. The conflict scenario is intense in Coimbatore, Gudalur, Hosur and Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve (STR), leading to the deaths of elephants and humans.

‘Unnatural deaths’

As per the Tamil Nadu Elephant Death Audit Framework, a total of 1,593 elephants died of various reasons in the State from 2010, of which 168 were classified as ‘unnatural deaths’. Electrocution was the main cause of these unnatural deaths followed by bait bombs, poisoning, road accidents, train collisions and hunting.

Most unnatural deaths occur outside forests when elephants traverse through the forest peripheries as they prefer flat lands for movement between habitats. They often get electrocuted while trying to enter plantations protected by farmers using AC-powered illegal fences.

Many elephants got electrocuted after getting in contact with sagging power lines when they traversed through villages on forest peripheries. Bait bombs or crude explosives meant to hunt wild animals like deer and wild boar also claimed the lives of some of the pachyderms.

Biologists and elephant experts believe that securing elephant corridors and ensuring safe movement paths for elephants could curtail a lion’s share of such deaths. These corridors also help in maintaining sustainable populations of the national heritage animal, with rich genetic diversity.

The draft corridor report, however, did not satisfy every stakeholder, as expected. A few farmers’ organisations opposed the report, for reasons ranging from fear of losing land adjoining forest areas and imposition of restrictions, including increased buffer zones outside forests.

The Communist Party of India wanted the government to withdraw the draft. The party’s district committee in Erode district, where the STR is situated, claimed that the notification of the corridors mentioned in the draft would affect the livelihood of local people. The 161-page draft was not made available in Tamil and limited time was given for comments, it charged.

AIADMK General Secretary and Leader of the Opposition Edappadi K. Palaniswami also wanted the draft to be released in Tamil to comprehend the plan better.

Meanwhile, Kadeswara C. Subramaniam, State president of the right wing organisation Hindu Munnani, alleged that the draft report was a plot to restrict people’s access to temples in forests.

In the wake of these objections, the Forest Department has now decided to hold public hearings in each forest range district before it finalises its report and submits it to the government. Hopefully, a meaningful dialogue would emerge from these hearings and an amicable solution for peaceful human-animal coexistence could be found.