

THE UNCERTAINTY OF JUMBO ASSIGNMENTS

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March 10, 2023 12:15 am | Updated 01:33 am IST

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The legendary kumki Kaleem of the Anamalai Tiger Reserve at the Kozhikamuthi elephant camp. | Photo Credit: Wilson Thomas

Sometimes, even after spending an entire day on the field, journalists may have to return to the newsroom without a report. Reporting on the capture of wild elephants is one such unpredictable assignment as these operations can go on even for over a week.

It is now common to capture wild elephants which frequently damage crops and cause human casualties in villages bordering forests in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, home to the largest population of Asiatic elephants. Villages close to the Western Ghats in Coimbatore district of Tamil Nadu witness the frequent movement of pachyderms. An order for the capture of a wild elephant is usually made after repeated incidents of crop damages and human casualties. In a few cases, wild elephants are tranquilised and captured for treatment.

In June 2021, I went on one of my longest assignments of uncertainty. [An operation had been launched](#) by the Tamil Nadu Forest Department [to capture and radio-collar a wild elephant nicknamed Baahubali](#), known for its physique and its swashbuckling entry, or “mass entry” as it is called in Tamil films, into villages. With fellow journalists, I travelled from Coimbatore to Mettupalayam at the Nilgiri foothills for nearly a week, but returned only with brief reports on the elusive animal. When the operation started, the Department brought its [most trusted kumki Kaleem](#) and two others. As days passed, and there was no sight of Baahubali, an official told us that the jumbo had possibly stayed away after sensing the smell of the *kumkis* who were staying at a timber depot. The operation was finally withdrawn as Baahubali mostly remained unseen. To the wonder of officials and journalists, the tusker once again began making its “mass entry” into the villages after the operation was called off.

Earlier, in February 2019, I went to report on the operation launched to capture [a crop-raider named Chinnathambi](#) from a village near Tiruppur district. The tusker had been captured from Thadagam valley in Coimbatore district in January and translocated to the Anamalai Tiger Reserve, around 100 km away. But it began to stray into the villages of neighbouring Tiruppur again. The elephant embarked on a journey that lasted for about two weeks through villages, intermittently camping at places to devour its favourite snacks – sugarcane and banana. I covered the last three days of the operation from the field. I camped at a coconut grove along with fellow journalists, where we often got tender coconuts from the kind farm owner. As movement of the elephant was unpredictable, we were advised to stay at a distance in the grove, which was separated by a canal from the sugarcane field where the elephant hid.

[Chinnathambi was finally captured](#) in a seven-hour-long operation and sent to a *kraal* (wooden enclosure) in the Anamalai Tiger Reserve. Now, as a *kumki*, [Chinnathambi has completed two successful elephant-capturing operations](#).

Reaching areas where elephant capturing operations take place is often a tough task due to lack of proper roads. In December 2018, after a few days of tracking, the Forest Department located their target, a tusker fondly called Vinayagan, on the forest fringes of Thadagam Valley. Vinayagan was considered Chinnathambi's groomer. Logistical support, including earth movers and *kumkis*, were on standby for the operation. A forest veterinarian shot a dart with the first dose of tranquiliser at around 6 a.m. at the elephant, an hour before I could reach the spot on my motorcycle. In my hurry, I left my expensive helmet on my bike and trekked to the spot. The operation lasted for about nine hours. The elephant was finally loaded onto a truck and taken to Mudumalai Tiger Reserve. Planning a few reports in my mind, I quickly walked to my two-wheeler. But as I had expected, someone had stolen my helmet.

wilson.t@thehindu.co.in

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