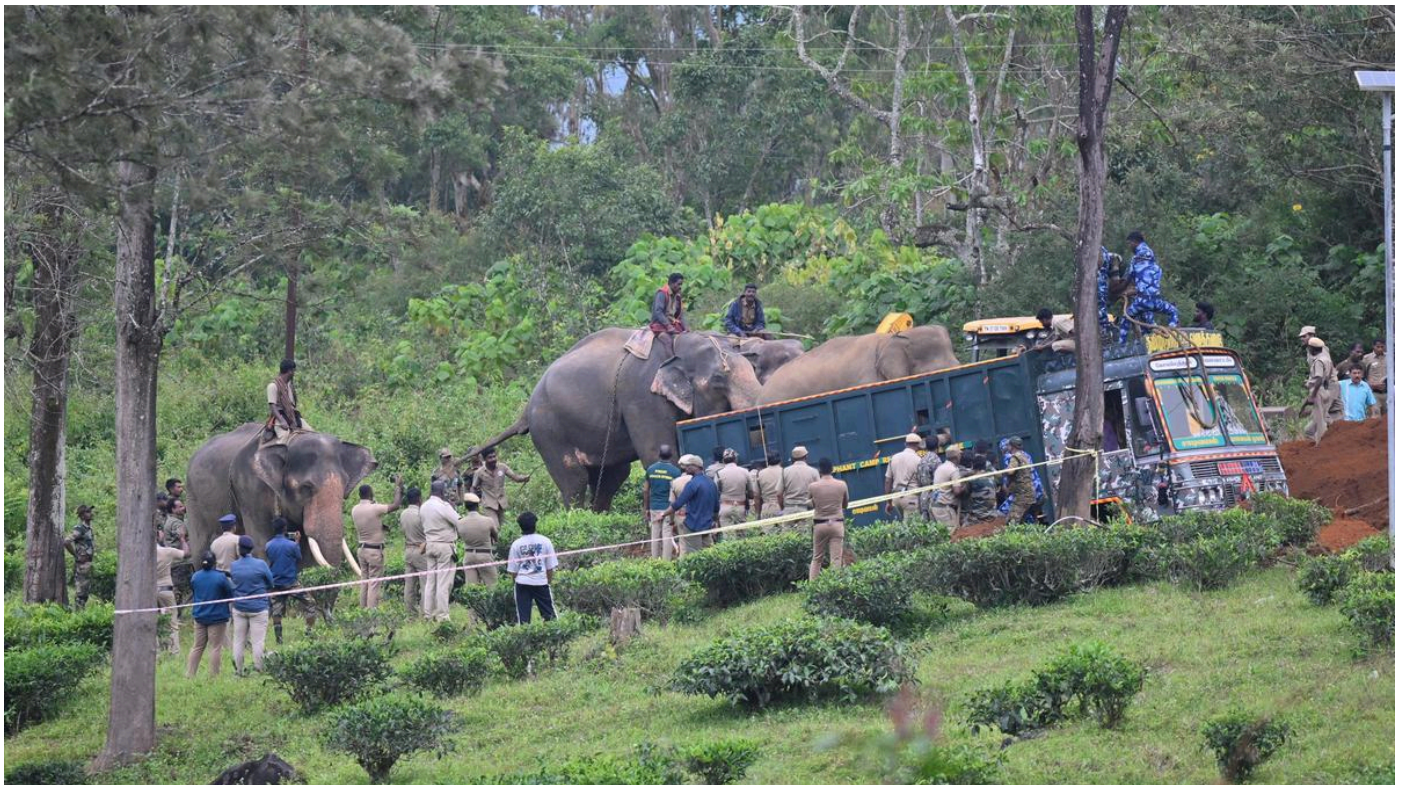


# Tamil Nadu election 2026: Negative human-wildlife interactions a major issue in Gudalur constituency

The constituency is home to a considerable number of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, including the Kurumbas, Kattunayakans and Paniyas.

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ROHAN PREMKUMAR



An elephant being captured by the Forest Department and loaded into a truck near Gudalur. File | Photo Credit: M. Sathyamoorthy

It has been only a month since two plantation workers were killed in an accidental encounter with a wild elephant in Devarshola, Gudalur – the constituency at the forefront of negative human-animal interactions in Tamil Nadu, where a mix of flawed government policy, tolerance of encroachers on unsettled land over many decades and

shrinking habitats for wildlife have led to the perfect concoction for the region becoming one of the most prone to antagonisms between humans and wildlife.

“There is almost zero chance for politicians who are pro-wildlife to win the MLA seat in Gudalur,” said N. Sadiq Ali, founder of the Wildlife and Nature Conservation Trust, who said that negative human-animal interactions are politicised to gain votes each year. “While politicians try to outdo each other in taking a tough stance against wildlife, almost no one wants to address the underlying factors causing it, including habitat loss, urbanisation and disappearance of animal corridors due to encroachments,” he said.

Most of the issues in Gudalur stem from the government dragging its heels over finding a solution to the ‘Section 17’ lands classified under the Gudalur Janmam Estates (Abolition and Conversion into Ryotwari) Act, 1969, which are over 35,000 acres of unsettled lands which are disputed between the government and settlers.

R. Ranjith, co-ordinator of the O’Valley Makkal Iyakkam, said that basic amenities such as electricity, water connections and others are denied to people who have settled on Section 17 lands over many decades. “Recently, the government has also filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court that residents other than Adivasis and Sri Lankan repatriates in Section 17 lands are encroachers,” said Mr. Ranjith, stating that this classification jeopardises the livelihoods of thousands of residents in the region who could face eviction.

### Gudalur

The constituency has become a hotspot for negative human-animal interactions in The Nilgiris, necessitating immediate contingency measures that strike a balance between prioritising the needs of human and animal communities.

**Civic issues**

- The main road that cuts through Gudalur town is no longer able to accommodate the amount of vehicular traffic that uses it.
- Lack of health facilities for its residents.
- Bordering Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, the town still does not have adequate facilities for tourists.

**2021 Assembly election result:**  
Pon Jayaseelan of the AIADMK defeated S. Kasilingam of the DMK by a margin of **1,945 votes**

**Electors before SIR:**  
**Total: 1,77,800**  
Men : 86,289  
Women : 91,508  
Others : 3

**Electors after SIR:**  
**Total: 1,83,888**  
Men : 89,206  
Women : 94,675  
Others : 7

**Number of polling stations**  
**238**

**Persistent problem:** Gudalur for a very long time is facing human and animal conflict. M. SATHYAMOORTHY

He added that the government must protect small farmers who have settled on less than two acres of land and issue pattas to them.

Gudalur also lacks basic, essential amenities, like hospitals, said S. Sivasubramaniam, general secretary of the Gudalur Consumer Protection Association. Mr. Sivasubramaniam said that despite being upgraded to a government headquarters hospital, many patients visiting the Gudalur Government Hospital are referred to the Ooty Government Medical College and Hospital or to Kerala for treatment due to a lack of doctors and medical equipment.

“Gudalur town itself needs wider roads, as the town has expanded beyond its carrying capacity. So an alternative route, possibly from Mel Gudalur that circumvents the town and joins Thorapalli will alleviate traffic problems by diverting tourist and freight vehicles,” he added.

The Gudalur Consumer Protection Centre also called on the government to set up an engineering college as well as nursing college for students in the constituency.

The constituency is also home to a considerable number of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, including the Kurumbas, Kattunayakans and Paniyas. Sobha Madan, an activist working on implementing the Forest Rights Act, 2006 in Tamil Nadu, said that the claims for land titles for many residents are still pending, which in turn leads to displacement and lack of livelihood opportunities. She called on the government to immediately issue land titles for communities in the region.

Gudalur constituency promises to be another closely-fought race, with the incumbent AIADMK MLA, Pon Jayaseelan set to face a stern test from the DMK's M. Thiravidamani, a two-time victor from the constituency in 2011 and 2016. However, the rising popularity of the Naam Tamilar Katchi, particularly among Sri Lankan repatriates, who make up the single-largest voting block in Gudalur could potentially eat into the vote-banks of the two parties.

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