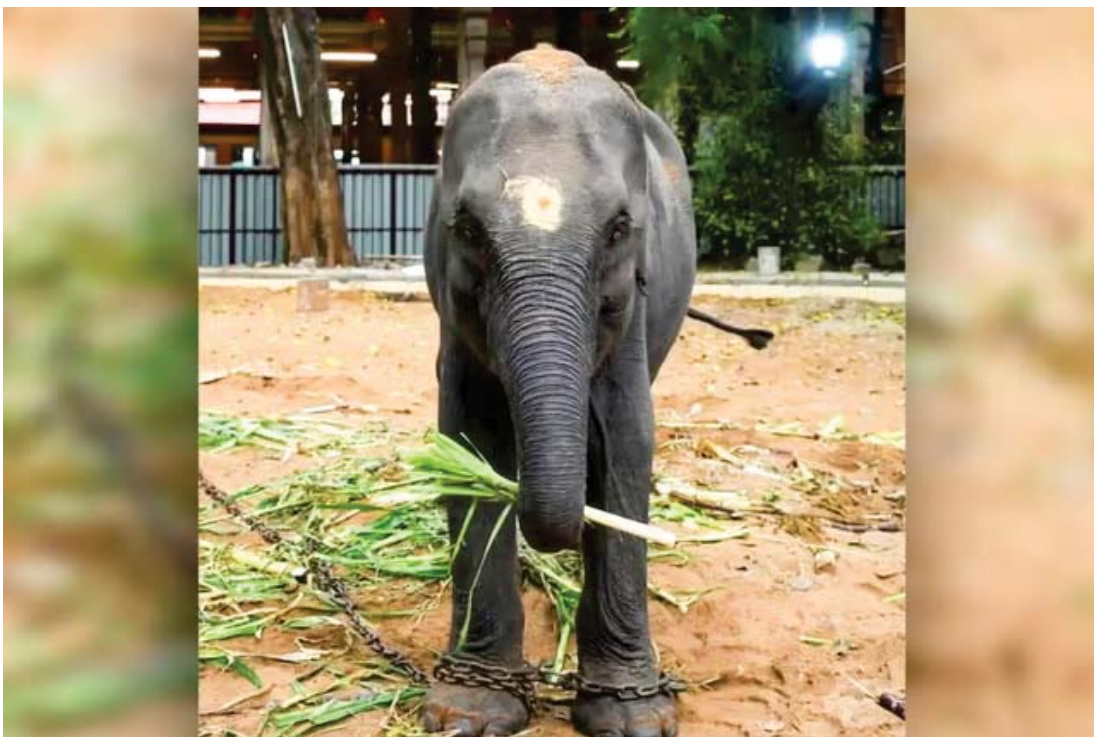


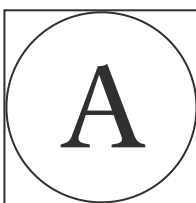


Protesters fight to save elephants from becoming ‘gifts’ for temples

Five-year-old Durga travelled 3,000km in six days from Assam to a temple in Tamil Nadu. ‘Horried’ activists tell **Shweta Sharma** they are trying to stop the transfer of other elephants



Durga is among five elephants set to be moved from Assam to Tamil Nadu (*Supplied*)



animal rights activists are trying to stop the proposed relocation of four young elephants from India’s northeast to be given as “gifts” to Hindu temples in the south, a process that will involve an arduous journey of thousands of kilometres by road.

The elephants due to be transferred have been identified as Rupsing, 13; Shiva, 6; Hiralal, 8; and Bijuli, 5, according to the non-profit People for Cattle in India (PFCI), which has raised serious questions over the circumstances surrounding the relocations.

PFCI said the elephants face a journey of nearly 3,000km (1800 miles) by road from Assam to Tamil Nadu, raising concerns over the welfare implications of subjecting young animals to such a lengthy travel.

One elephant, five-year-old Durga, has already been moved from Assam's Manas National Park area to the Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple in Tamil Nadu. Durga arrived at the temple on Sunday, six days after leaving Assam on 7 September.

A video released by the Meenakshi Temple Management appears to show the young elephant swaying from side to side, with her front two legs chained.

The Independent has reached out to the Madurai Meenakshi Amman Temple for comment.

Arun Prasanna G, founder of the Chennai-based PFCI, tells *The Independent* the transfer of elephants should be investigated, including questions surrounding their ownership, the basis for their transfer, and the parties involved in their acquisition.

“We are already horrified with the transfer of Durga, who is appearing distressed in the video after she arrived at her destination following a journey of six days,” he says.

“She’s already chained on her legs. She’s so anxious. When she was loaded onto the vehicle, the mother was heard screaming,” he says, citing locals and reports.



Durga left Assam on the night of 7 September and reached Madurai on the night of 13 September, covering approximately 3,000km in around six days (*Supplied*)

“What kind of welfare is this?” he asks.

He says Durga, who was allegedly transferred discreetly without adequate public disclosure, travelled an average of nearly 500km per day.

“This raises an extremely serious welfare and legal question in light of the Kerala High Court’s 13 November 2024 directions prescribing a maximum of 125km of elephant transportation per

day, along with limits on vehicle travel time and speed,” Prasanna says.

“The authorities must disclose Durga’s complete journey log, including the vehicle’s movement, kilometres travelled each day, driving hours, speed, rest periods and halts, and explain how a journey averaging around 500km per day complied with the applicable safeguard,” he adds.

Animal welfare groups and conservationists have long raised concerns over the treatment and commercialisation of elephants in India, where the animals are widely used in tourism, temple rituals, festivals, safaris and entertainment, despite being protected under wildlife laws.

Both Hindu and Buddhist traditions give elephants an elevated status. They are used to give blessings and perform sacred duties. In Hinduism, elephants are closely linked to the elephant-headed deity Ganesh.

Indian laws make it illegal to capture, hunt, trade, or harm elephants, but those that were born in captivity or captive before the laws came into place continue to be used for a range of purposes which rights activists say amount to abuse. They exist in a kind of legal grey zone – they cannot be sold, but non-commercial “transfers” of ownership are permitted.

The transfer of Durga was cleared by the Tamil Nadu Forest Department last week. Clearance for the other four is awaited, according to *The Hindu* newspaper.

Tamil Nadu chief wildlife warden, Rakesh Kumar Dogra, says the “No Objection Certificate” (NOC) for the transfer was issued last week.

“Before the NOC, the District Captive Elephant Management Committee (a local regulatory body) inspected the premises and

checked the availability of facilities such as mud bath, water bath and walking space,” he says.

The proposed transfer of the five elephants was challenged in court by another Chennai-based organisation, Seva Trust.

The court was informed that Durga’s transfer to the Meenakshi temple had received clearance, while applications concerning the other four elephants were still pending. The court directed the state to take a decision on the pending applications within a week and posted the matter for 16 September.



Mahouts wait with decorated elephants during Jal Yatra, a Hindu religious procession from Lord Jagannath temple to Sabarmati riverfront in Ahmedabad on June 29, 2026 (AFP/Getty)

State authorities have said the privately held elephants are being donated to the temples.

PFCI and other welfare organisations have questioned the ownership claims and alleged that the animals are being moved from national parks and reserves rather than being given up by previous owners.

“If you want to give up your animals, normally what people do when they can’t keep their pets is give their animals up for adoption, or to boarding facilities, shelters and sanctuaries. Why would somebody transfer these elephants 3,000km away?” Prasanna says.

The Independent has reached out to the Tamil Nadu forest department for comment.

“The elephants are being ripped [away] from their mothers at such a young age. If the owner is donating them, did the mother also abandon them? What happens to the well-being of the mother, who would be distressed?” he asks.

He also questions the speed with which the transfer paperwork was processed, alleging that the required documentation had been completed within hours.

“The striking part is, the entire paperwork was done in 7.5 hours. The forest department never does any paperwork in less than 15 days. How did they process the paperwork in seven and a half hours?” he says.

Prasanna alleges that the circumstances surrounding the transfers pointed to a wider network involved in the movement and possible trade of elephants.

“So there is a big nexus involved. There are middlemen. There are brokers. Elephant trading is happening big time. Both governments are turning a blind eye, or are part of it. This is a big scam,” he says.

He argues that the animals could face decades of confinement at temples. “An elephant can live for 70 or 80 years. From five or six years old now until she dies, she’s going to be in the temple in confinement,” he said.



Hindu devotees gather around an adorned robotic elephant in India's Kerala state
(AFP/Getty)

The campaigner challenged the claim that the transfers were intended to provide the elephants with better care.

“You are saying the elephant is sent to some other place for better upkeep. What is better upkeep in a temple?” he says.

According to a letter dated 7 September, seen by *The Independent*, the Assam Forest Department assigned four officials to conduct the transportation of Durga from Manas National Park to the Madhurai temple.

Assam-based conservationist Rohit Choudhury has urged a Supreme Court-appointed committee to immediately halt the transfer, raising questions over the legality, purpose and welfare implications of moving the elephants out of Assam.

Shurthi Vinodraj, former member of Tamil Nadu Animal Welfare Board (TNAWB), has also raised objections to moving the elephants. “This is a clear violation of standing Supreme Court guidelines and rules. We don’t know who is giving instructions to flout rules. This has to be stopped immediately,” she said.

P Chokkalingam, chief executive officer, TNAWB, also said that they had not given any assent to bringing in these elephants.

“We came to know about the incident only through some Whatsapp complaints. Since these elephants are being transported crossing various state borders, they must have to get approval from the Animal Welfare Board of India. We will inquire into the incident and report to the government about the incident," he says.