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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

World Elephant Day: From Ritual Reverence to Rethinking Development, Amal Chandra's Case

 **DOWN TO EARTH**

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ENVIRONMENT**GS3**

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GS3


INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Chandra argues the term "human-elephant conflict" is descriptively convenient but conceals an asymmetry, in many landscapes it is the village, road or plantation that has entered the elephant's traditional range, not the reverse. Does using more accurate language change how a district forest officer should actually respond to a crop-damage complaint, or is this mainly a framing point with limited operational consequence?"

Source: [Original editorial](#)

Down to Earth

 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A DNA-based count of 22,446 elephants is a baseline, not a verdict. Amal Chandra's real question is whether they have anywhere connected left to walk.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

This is a signed piece by **Amal Chandra**, author, policy analyst and columnist, not an unsigned Down To Earth editorial. Its sharpest contribution is methodological caution, explicitly warning readers not to misread the new DNA-based count as a population crash relative to the older estimate, alongside a specific, less-obvious data point that most elephant-conservation answers miss entirely: the 2025 Chhattisgarh study showing central India, not just the familiar southern and northeastern elephant landscapes, is now a major human-elephant conflict zone.

GS Paper 3: Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, [environmental impact assessment](#); biodiversity and its conservation.

CONCEPT	MEANING	SOURCE
DNA-based SAIEE count, 22,446	India's new elephant population baseline; not comparable to the older method's 29,964 figure	From the op-ed
"Human-elephant conflict" language critique	The term conceals which party's territory was actually entered first	From the op-ed
Chhattisgarh 2025 WII study (828 incidents, 218 deaths)	Evidence conflict is not only a southern-India phenomenon	From the op-ed
Railways-WII 77 stretches, 705 structures (March 2026)	The infrastructure-design-not-halt approach in progress	From the op-ed
Elephant Reserves' lack of statutory status vs Tiger Reserves	The legal architecture gap behind corridor fragmentation	Ujjiyari's addition
Saranda Forest litigation (Jharkhand)	A specific, separate corridor case not raised in this piece	Ujjiyari's addition

WHAT THE OP-ED ARGUES

(This section reports Amal Chandra's own argument, as a named author writing in Down To Earth, not an unsigned institutional editorial.)

Who is arguing this. Amal Chandra is an author, policy analyst and columnist. This is his own signed analysis, timed to World Elephant Day (12 August), not a Down To Earth institutional editorial.

The paradox he opens with. Every August 12, World Elephant Day invites India "to celebrate an animal that occupies an unusual place in the national imagination," revered in mythology and festivals "yet increasingly displaced by the geography of our own development." India holds "more than 60 per cent of the world's wild Asian elephants," but the latest national assessment, released by the **Wildlife Institute of India (WII) in October 2025**, estimated **22,446 elephants** using a new **DNA-based mark-recapture method**. Chandra is explicit that this "should not be read as a simple 25 per cent fall" from the earlier **29,964** estimate, "because the methodologies differ and the new exercise establishes a fresh baseline." The warning, he writes, "is unmistakable: accurate counting cannot substitute for giving elephants somewhere safe to live."

Why corridors matter more than counts. Elephants "need large, connected landscapes" for seasonal movement in search of food, water, salt and shelter, but roads, railways, mines, power infrastructure, plantations and expanding settlements "increasingly cut these routes into fragments." India has identified **150 elephant corridors across 15 range states** and established **33 Elephant Reserves**, but "recognition on paper is only the beginning." A corridor "narrowed by construction, blocked by fencing or rendered unusable by human activity is not a corridor in any meaningful ecological sense."

Rethinking the language of conflict. The phrase “human-elephant conflict” is “descriptively convenient but can conceal an uncomfortable [asymmetry](#).” An elephant does not enter a village “because it has decided to invade human territory”; in many landscapes, “the village, road or plantation has entered an elephant’s traditional range.” Chandra is careful to add: “that does not make the loss of a crop, house or human life any less real.” Conservation that “asks vulnerable communities to bear the cost of protecting wildlife without sharing the benefits will eventually lose its social legitimacy.”

Prevention over compensation. The “most durable response... begins with prevention rather than compensation.” Compensation “remains indispensable,” and India has “strengthened ex-gratia support for human fatalities,” but “a cheque after a death... is not a best strategy.” States need “reliable, rapid and transparent systems” for reporting crop damage and paying compensation, alongside insurance mechanisms, hotspot identification “season by season,” and “community watchers, mobile alerts, thermal cameras, radio-collared animals where scientifically justified, and coordinated forest-department response teams.” Technology “should serve local knowledge, not replace it.”

Corridors as infrastructure, and how they get secured. Corridors must be treated “as infrastructure of a different kind,” not vacant land awaiting conversion. The **Wildlife Trust of India’s Right of Passage programme** has used “private land purchase, community arrangements and government acquisition” to secure strategic corridor areas, showing conservation “does not always require the state to acquire every acre.” Voluntary agreements, easements, relocation packages and negotiated land-use changes “can sometimes reconnect landscapes while respecting legitimate local property rights.”

Kerala as a case of both promise and difficulty. Kerala’s forest statistics identify **four major elephant corridors**, including the **Thirunelli-Kudrakote corridor in Wayanad**, which “has been secured and notified.” Yet Wayanad also shows why corridor protection “cannot be reduced to a line drawn on a map”: dense settlement, agriculture, tourism, roads and fragmented forest edges bring people and elephants into close proximity, so the policy challenge is protecting movement routes “while making settlements safer” and ensuring costs “do not fall disproportionately on a handful of villages.”

Karnataka’s barrier experiment. Railway barricades, trenches and solar fencing “have been deployed around parts of the Bandipur landscape,” alongside elephant task forces and better monitoring. Chandra cautions these “are not universal solutions”: poorly designed fencing “can simply redirect elephants towards another village, fragment habitats or become dangerous to wildlife,” and should be “targeted, maintained and evaluated for their landscape-level consequences,” not just measured in kilometres built.

Railways as a clear test case. In **March 2026**, the Environment Ministry and WII “reported that 77 critical railway stretches had been prioritised” and “705 [mitigation](#) structures had been recommended” following joint field surveys, up from **110 sensitive stretches** identified in earlier national assessments. This, Chandra argues, “is precisely the direction policy should take: not stopping infrastructure development, but making wildlife movement part of infrastructure design from the beginning.”

Climate change as an added layer. Shifting rainfall, longer dry spells, rising temperatures and changing vegetation and water availability “can alter their traditional movement and feeding patterns, bringing them more often into farms and settlements.” Climate adaptation policies “must account for wildlife movement and habitat connectivity.”

The central-India warning. A **2025 WII study of Chhattisgarh** documented **828 human-elephant conflict incidents and 218 elephant mortalities between 2000 and 2023**, linking the pattern to “forest fragmentation, agricultural expansion, mining and infrastructure development.” This “challenges the comfortable assumption that conflict is primarily a problem of wildlife-rich southern India.”

The closing argument. India “should not measure conservation success by elephant numbers alone.” A population “may remain stable on paper while becoming increasingly isolated, genetically vulnerable and confined to shrinking habitats.” World Elephant Day “should be less a ritual of admiration than a reckoning with the choices we make about development.” Since **Project Elephant, launched in 1992**, India has built institutional capacity, but the next phase “must go further,” with forest departments joined by railways, highways, mining, power agencies, local bodies, farmers and researchers. “If India can build roads, railways, farms and towns with ecological realities in mind, the elephant need not become a casualty... of development. It can instead become a measure of whether our idea of development has finally learnt to coexist with nature.”

Ujjayari's addition begins below. Nothing past this point should be read as Chandra's argument.

BACKGROUND THE OP-ED ASSUMES

The following is Ujjayari's addition, not part of Chandra's argument. He does not discuss the Saranda Forest litigation or the statutory status gap between Elephant and Tiger Reserves directly; this background gives his corridor-fragmentation argument a specific legal mechanism.

Elephant Reserves, unlike **Tiger Reserves** (statutorily backed under **Section 38V of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972**), carry **no equivalent statutory status**; they are administrative planning designations under the 1992 Project Elephant scheme, meaning a mining lease or linear-infrastructure project proposed inside one is assessed under ordinary Forest (Conservation) Act and Environmental Impact Assessment procedures, with no corridor-specific statutory bar. A separate, concrete instance of this gap is Jharkhand's **Saranda Forest**, where the Supreme Court has repeatedly directed the state, since **November 2024**, to notify a critical elephant corridor as a wildlife sanctuary against mining-linked delays, with the state cabinet approving roughly **314.65 sq km** for notification in **September 2025**, final notification still pending. Elephants carry **Schedule I** protection under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, the highest legal category available.

THE ANALYSIS

- 1. Chandra's methodological caution about the DNA-based count is the piece's most exam-useful, and most frequently skipped, point.** A candidate who cites "22,446 elephants, down from 29,964" as evidence of population decline is making exactly the error Chandra warns against; the two figures use different methodologies and are not a valid trend comparison. Precision on this point separates a careful answer from a superficially data-driven but methodologically wrong one.
- 2. The "human-elephant conflict" language critique is a genuine reframing, not merely rhetorical.** By noting that human infrastructure has often entered the elephant's range rather than the reverse, while explicitly preserving the legitimacy of a farmer's losses, Chandra threads a difficult needle: reframing the causal direction without minimising the human cost, a distinction worth preserving carefully in an answer rather than collapsing into either "elephants are the real victims" or "farmers' losses don't matter."
- 3. The Chhattisgarh evidence is the piece's sharpest empirical contribution, and it corrects a common geographic assumption.** Most conservation answers default to Karnataka, Kerala, Assam or Odisha as the conflict hotspots; Chandra's central-India data (828 incidents, 218 deaths, 2000-2023) demonstrates that fragmentation-driven conflict is now a live central-India policy problem, not a southern or northeastern one exclusively.
- 4. The Railways-WII figures show a specific, measurable policy shift already under way, distinct from a general call for "more mitigation."** Going from 110 identified sensitive stretches to 77 prioritised stretches with 705 recommended structures is a concrete, countable data point that demonstrates institutional movement, useful evidence against a purely pessimistic reading of India's conservation record.
- 5. Chandra's corridor-securing toolkit, WTI's Right of Passage model, is broader than "government acquisition," and that breadth is the point.** Private land purchase, community arrangements, easements and negotiated land-use change are presented as complementary tools, not a full substitute for statutory protection, useful for a Mains answer that needs concrete institutional mechanisms beyond simply "declare more protected areas."
- 6. Kerala and Karnataka are offered as partial, not solved, cases, and treating them as success stories would misread the piece.** Chandra explicitly frames Wayanad as illustrating both "promise and difficulty," and Karnataka's fencing as producing real but non-universal, sometimes counterproductive, results. A complete answer should cite both states' genuine progress and their acknowledged limitations.

BEYOND THE OP-ED

This section is Ujiyari's addition: the statutory-status gap and a separate, specific litigation case that give Chandra's corridor-fragmentation argument its legal mechanism.

The Tiger Reserve/Elephant Reserve statutory asymmetry. Chandra’s argument that “recognition on paper is only the beginning” has a precise legal explanation Ujiyari supplies: Elephant Reserves lack the Section 38V statutory backing Tiger Reserves have, leaving corridor protection dependent on ordinary clearance procedures rather than a binding legal bar.

The Saranda case. Jharkhand’s Saranda Forest corridor is a specific, ongoing instance of exactly the fragmentation risk Chandra describes in the abstract, now under repeated Supreme Court direction since November 2024, useful as a named, current example alongside his own Kerala and Karnataka cases.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS, FROM THE OP-ED:

SAIEE (Synchronous All India Elephant Estimation): 22,446 elephants, DNA-based mark-recapture, released by WII, October 2025; not directly comparable to the earlier 29,964 estimate

India holds 60%+ of the world’s wild Asian elephant population

150 elephant corridors across 15 range states; 33 Elephant Reserves

2025 WII Chhattisgarh study: 828 conflict incidents, 218 elephant mortalities, 2000-2023

Railways-WII, March 2026: 77 critical stretches prioritised, 705 mitigation structures recommended, up from 110 earlier sensitive stretches

Wildlife Trust of India’s Right of Passage programme: secures corridors via private land purchase, community arrangements, government acquisition

Kerala: 4 major corridors identified; Thirunelli-Kudrakote corridor, Wayanad, secured and notified

Karnataka: railway barricades, trenches, solar fencing around Bandipur

Project Elephant: launched 1992

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS, UJIYARI’S ADDITION:

Schedule I, Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972: elephants’ protection status

Tiger Reserves: statutory backing under Section 38V, WPA; Elephant Reserves have no equivalent statutory status

Saranda Forest, Jharkhand: Supreme Court direction since November 2024; ~314.65 sq km cabinet-approved for sanctuary notification, September 2025, final notification pending

WATCH THE TRAP: DO NOT CITE “22,446 ELEPHANTS, A 25% FALL FROM 29,964” AS EVIDENCE OF POPULATION DECLINE. CHANDRA EXPLICITLY WARNS AGAINST THIS COMPARISON, THE TWO COUNTS USE DIFFERENT METHODOLOGIES AND THE NEW FIGURE IS A FRESH BASELINE, NOT A CONTINUATION OF THE SAME TREND LINE.

THE DEBATE

Argument FOR treating corridor connectivity as the real metric of success. Chandra's evidence, that a population can look stable on paper while becoming genetically isolated in fragmented habitat, and that central India (Chhattisgarh) is now a major conflict zone despite not being a traditional "elephant state," supports his case that headline population counts obscure the more important connectivity question.

Argument AGAINST an uncritical corridor-first framing. Corridor securing through private land purchase and negotiated arrangements, while real, remains limited in scale relative to India's total corridor length, and Chandra's own Kerala and Karnataka examples show that even secured or partially-mitigated corridors continue to produce friction where settlement density is high, suggesting connectivity alone will not eliminate conflict without parallel investment in prevention infrastructure.

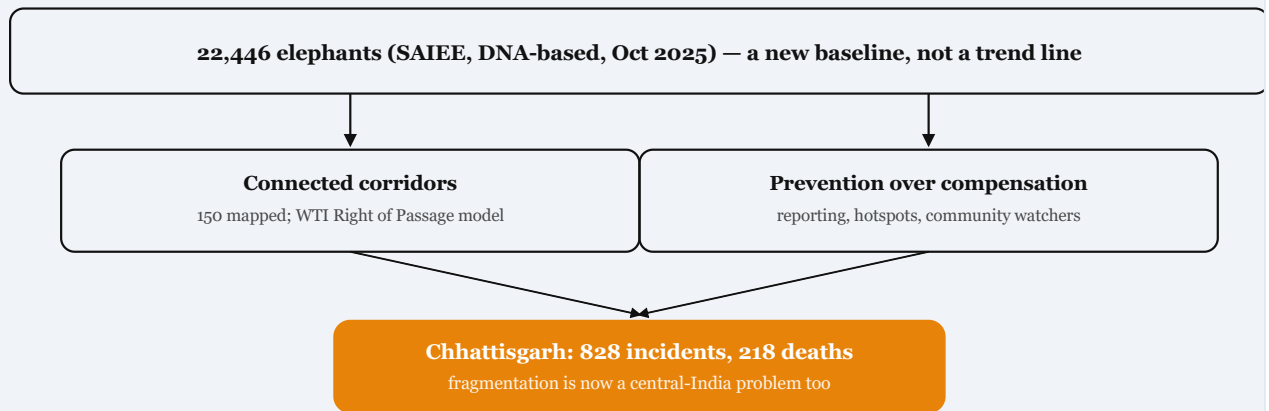
Balanced verdict. Chandra's own position already holds both: connectivity is the right long-term metric, but he explicitly rejects treating corridor designation as sufficient by itself, pairing it with prevention-focused, community-involving conflict mitigation. A complete answer should credit both halves of his argument rather than reducing it to "corridors are the answer."

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable pattern: when a conservation statistic looks reassuring (a large population count, a rising number of designated reserves), check whether the underlying connectivity and genetic viability data support the headline, or whether the number conceals fragmentation, isolation or a methodological break with prior estimates. Chandra's specific caution about the DNA-based count not being comparable to the older 29,964 figure is a specific instance of a general discipline: always ask what methodology produced a conservation number before using it as evidence of a trend.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

A count is a baseline, not a verdict



Chandra's argument moves from a cautious reading of the new population count, through connected corridors and prevention-focused mitigation, to the Chhattisgarh evidence that fragmentation-driven conflict now extends well beyond India's traditional elephant states.

TAKEAWAY BOX

A DNA-based count of 22,446 elephants is a baseline, not a verdict. The real question is whether they have anywhere connected left to walk.

Author Amal Chandra; SAIEE, 22,446 elephants (WII, October 2025, DNA-based); 150 corridors, 15 states; 33 Elephant Reserves; 2025 WII Chhattisgarh study, 828 incidents, 218 deaths (2000-2023); Railways-WII, March 2026, 77 stretches, 705 structures; Kerala's Thirunelli-Kudrakote corridor, Wayanad; Karnataka's Bandipur barricades; Project Elephant, 1992.

Schedule I, WPA 1972; Tiger Reserves' Section 38V statutory backing, absent for Elephant Reserves; **Saranda Forest, Jharkhand, SC direction since November 2024.**

Chandra argues conservation that asks vulnerable communities to bear costs without sharing benefits “will eventually lose its social legitimacy.” As a district forest officer balancing a mining company's clearance application against a mapped elephant corridor, how would you weigh the state's revenue interest against a legitimacy argument that is about long-term public trust, not an immediate legal requirement?

UPSC has tested Project Elephant and Project Tiger as centrally sponsored schemes, and environmental clearance versus development trade-offs recur in GS3 Mains; Chandra's Chhattisgarh evidence and his DNA-count methodological caution are both fresh, precise anchors for either theme.

“India's elephant conservation success should be measured by connected habitat, not population count alone.” Examine this claim with reference to the evidence from Chhattisgarh and India's corridor-securing mechanisms.

Sources: *Down To Earth*, “World Elephant Day in India: From Ritual Reverence to Rethinking Development and Habitat Connectivity” by Amal Chandra, Wildlife Institute of India, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change

Source: World Elephant Day: From Ritual Reverence to Rethinking Development, Amal Chandra's Case —
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• KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Writing in *Down To Earth*, author and policy analyst Amal Chandra argues World Elephant Day should be less a ritual of admiration than a reckoning with India's development choices, since India's new DNA-based elephant count is a valuable baseline but numbers alone are meaningless without safe, connected corridors, climate-resilient landscapes, and institutions that share conservation costs fairly with the local communities who actually bear them.



SUPPORTING

- India's new Synchronous All India Elephant Estimation places the population at 22,446 (2021-2025, DNA-based mark-recapture), but Chandra warns this should not be read as a straightforward 25 per cent fall from the earlier 29,964 estimate, since the methodologies differ and the new count establishes a fresh baseline rather than a comparable trend line.
- The term "human-elephant conflict" is descriptively convenient but conceals an asymmetry: in many landscapes it is the village, road or plantation that has entered the elephant's traditional range, not the reverse, though Chandra is careful to add this does not make a farmer's crop loss, damaged house, or loss of life any less real.
- A 2025 WII study of Chhattisgarh documented 828 human-elephant conflict incidents and 218 elephant mortalities between 2000 and 2023, linked to forest fragmentation, agricultural expansion, mining and infrastructure development, evidence Chandra uses to challenge the assumption that conflict is primarily a southern-India, wildlife-rich-zone problem.
- India's Railways and the Wildlife Institute of India reported in March 2026 that 77 critical railway stretches had been prioritised and 705 mitigation structures recommended following joint field surveys, up from 110 sensitive stretches identified in earlier national assessments, evidence Chandra reads as the right direction, not stopping infrastructure but building wildlife movement into its design from the start.



COUNTER

Chandra does not argue India should simply halt development in elephant-range states; he explicitly favours mitigation design, underpasses, targeted and maintained fencing, seasonal restrictions, negotiated land-use change, over a binary choice between mining or infrastructure and elephants, and he cites both Kerala's Thirunelli-Kudrakote corridor and

Karnataka's Bandipur barricades as partial, real-world examples of that design approach rather than treating either state as a solved case.



WAY FORWARD

Chandra's own prescription is prevention over compensation: reliable, rapid and transparent crop-damage reporting and insurance mechanisms, season-by-season hotspot identification by local administrations, community watchers and coordinated forest-department response teams that use technology to serve local knowledge rather than replace it, and treating corridors as infrastructure in their own right, securable through private land purchase, community arrangements, easements and negotiated land-use change, as the Wildlife Trust of India's Right of Passage programme has already shown is possible, rather than through government acquisition alone.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Amal Chandra argues India's elephant conservation success should be measured by connected habitat, not population count alone. Examine this claim with reference to India's corridor-securing mechanisms and the specific evidence from Chhattisgarh and the railway mitigation programme. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Writing in Down To Earth on World Elephant Day, author and policy analyst Amal Chandra argues that India, home to over 60 per cent of the world's wild Asian elephants, must move beyond symbolic reverence to confront how rapid development fragments elephant habitats, since India's new DNA-based elephant count offers only a baseline, meaningless without safe, connected corridors, climate-resilient landscapes and institutions that share conservation costs fairly with local communities.

BODY

Chandra grounds his argument in the Wildlife Institute of India's Synchronous All India Elephant Estimation (2021-2025), a DNA-based mark-recapture exercise placing India's wild elephant population at 22,446, while explicitly cautioning against reading this as a 25 per cent fall from the earlier 29,964 estimate, since the two counts use different methodologies and the new figure is a fresh baseline. His central structural critique concerns corridors: India has identified 150 elephant corridors across 15 range states and established 33 Elephant Reserves, but a corridor that exists administratively while being narrowed by construction or blocked by fencing, he argues, is not a corridor in any meaningful ecological sense. Chandra also challenges the language of "human-elephant conflict" itself as concealing an asymmetry, since in many landscapes it is human infrastructure that has entered the elephant's traditional range, while stressing this framing point does not diminish the reality of a farmer's losses. His strongest evidentiary move is geographic: a 2025 WII study documenting 828 conflict incidents and 218 elephant deaths in Chhattisgarh between 2000 and 2023 challenges the assumption that conflict is mainly a southern, wildlife-rich-zone problem, tying it instead to forest fragmentation, mining and infrastructure expansion in central India specifically.

On solutions, Chandra favours prevention over compensation, reliable crop-damage reporting, season-by-season hotspot identification, community watchers, technology that serves rather than replaces local knowledge, and points to concrete, if partial, models: the Wildlife Trust of India's Right of Passage programme securing corridors through private land purchase and negotiated arrangements rather than acquisition alone, Kerala's notified Thirunelli-Kudrakote corridor in Wayanad, Karnataka's railway barricades and solar fencing around the Bandipur landscape, and the Railways-WII joint effort that had prioritised 77 critical stretches and recommended 705 mitigation structures by March 2026, up from 110 stretches identified earlier.

CONCLUSION

Chandra's closing argument is that India should not measure conservation success by elephant numbers alone, since a population can remain stable on paper while becoming increasingly isolated and genetically vulnerable in shrinking, disconnected habitat. His real test, echoed in his own closing line, is whether India can build roads, railways, farms and towns "with ecological realities in mind," so the elephant becomes a measure of whether development has learned to coexist with nature, not a casualty of it.

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