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A Stray Problem

Managing human conflicts with dogs

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Misguided compassion towards street dogs often leads to major human-dog conflict and worsens the problem. Every action of individuals or animal welfare organisations must be carefully thought through, ensuring the welfare of both people and animals.

Two recent cases in the Kerala and Delhi high courts highlight the complicated nature of our relationship with domestic dogs. In Kerala, the brutal and senseless killing of a pet dog, Bruno, highlighted the needless and sometimes wanton cruelty that we can inflict upon animals. In Delhi, on the other hand, the high court passed a judgement granting stray dogs the right to food, and the right to be fed.

The two sides of this spectrum, and all shades in between, are commonplace, with arguments, fights, police and court cases over the ‘rights’ of street dogs and indirect or direct cruelty meted out to them. The most common problems that arise in relation to these dogs revolve around overpopulation and incidents involving barking or chasing behaviours by packs of dogs, dog bites and inhabiting or damage to private property.

There is a thin line that exists between compassion and misguided compassion that needs to be kept in sight by community animal feeders and animal welfare organisations.

Lawfully, the local authority of an area is responsible for the management of all unrestricted dogs roaming on public streets or in public spaces. But because local authorities might be falling short in their ability to do so, individuals and organisations often assume responsibility for the management of these dogs. This is largely driven by compassion and provides help to thousands of street dogs.

But there is a thin line that exists between compassion and misguided compassion that needs to be kept in sight by community animal feeders and animal welfare organisations. When overlooked, misguided compassion often leads to major human-dog conflict situations and worsens the problem for the subject that these individuals or organisations have set out to help — the dog.

Domesticating dogs

Scientists estimate that dogs were domesticated from the grey wolf over 23,000 years before the present. A debate still continues over how this process might have happened. Did humans bring wolf pups into their villages, either as food or even potentially as playmates, and eventually, the more docile, tamer individuals were increasingly selected for? Or, as another version goes, did wolves domesticate themselves? Did they increasingly come to rely on scavenging from early garbage dumps outside human settlements, and eventually lose their fear of humans? Did early humans realise the value of having these clever canids as aids to hunting, as affectionate playmates, or even as potential food sources?

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Whatever the route to domestication, dogs we know today are globally perceived as companion animals, barring a smaller section of working dogs. By virtue of the definition of a ‘domesticated animal’ — belong and live alongside humans to serve a purpose — every dog must have an owner or a family. But as you walk down any street in India, you wonder: how did we reach a point where there are so many unowned street dogs in our country? Where did they come from and who do they belong to?

Managing dog populations

India’s dog population management (DPM) program plan is flawed as it places all its bets on controlling the population through animal birth control. Animal birth control, through sterilisations — colloquially referred to as the ABC programme — is just one component of

a larger DPM programme. The regulation of pet ownership and trade, restricting food availability, and garbage management are just as essential for controlling the population of stray dogs.

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Unfortunately, ABC is seen as a silver bullet, even though scientific studies have shown that it takes enormous amounts of time, effort, and money to achieve long-lasting and meaningful (greater than 70%) population reduction. Most cities simply do not have the infrastructure, funds, or political will to continually implement the required measures. Short-term ABC campaigns achieve next to nothing and can even be counterproductive since a pause in sterilisation programmes allows the dog population to bounce back higher than before.

A comprehensive DPM plan is imperative for ensuring both, dog and human welfare, health and safety and managing dog populations. Alongside, it is imperative to understand who the stakeholders are and why stray dogs develop behaviours that cause problems to humans, before forming an opinion on the way forward.

The making of the ‘stray’

The popular term for dogs routinely seen on the streets is ‘stray’. Scientists prefer using the less value-loaded term ‘free-ranging’ for such dogs that are not under the direct control of a person or are not prevented from roaming. (For this article, we will use the popular terminology.)

The daily life and strife of stray dogs in India depends on their origin and upbringing.

Stray dogs could be family dogs, wholly dependent on humans for food and shelter, but whose movements are only partially restricted by irresponsible pet owners. They could be neighbourhood or community dogs partially dependent on humans but whose movements are entirely unrestricted. Then there are the truly free-ranging dogs that are fully independent (or dependent only on human waste and garbage) and whose movements are entirely unrestricted. The dogs we see roaming the streets of our country are a mix of these categories.

In rural areas too we see free-ranging dogs from all the above categories, in addition to farm dogs and shepherd dogs that use fairly large areas. There are also a few populations of feral dogs, who are no longer associated with humans, but these are rare and seen only in some remote parts of the Thar desert and in the Himalayan region.

The daily life and strife of stray dogs in India depends on their origin and upbringing. Some stray dogs are ‘originals’, born on the street. Protected by their mother, they learn to eat garbage from dumps or bins or accept scraps of food handed out or thrown out by people. Once they reach adulthood and have settled in areas with adequate food and shelter, they generally become territorial. They learn to drink water from puddles and drains, cut across roads in traffic, take shade and shelter under cars or isolated spaces. They learn about human behaviour, and most importantly, about the human hand. Sometimes the human hand feeds them, but very often it also hurls stones and shoos them away.

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Other strays could be dogs abandoned by pet owners for a host of reasons. If these abandoned dogs are older, they tend to struggle more, not having learnt how to navigate the mean streets without their human caretakers. They get wounded in fights with other street dogs, meet with road accidents, develop skin conditions, and fall sick because they are not accustomed to the poor quality of food and water available on the street. If the abandoned dog is a pedigreed one, it might get noticed due to their breed-specific visual appearance and is sometimes admitted in shelters or foster homes. The rest, especially the non-pedigree ones, never get identified; they rarely cope on the streets and very often die after battling with injury or illness.

The third type of stray dog is the nomad, pets whose movement their owners neglect. Some of them spend most of their day out and return home only to eat food and for safe shelter. Some belong to lazy pet owners who let the dogs out to ‘walk themselves’. Such nomads might cause considerable damage during their daily unsupervised strolls. If unsterilised, these nomads move around

impregnating females or getting impregnated themselves, directly contributing to the street dog population in the former case.

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There are no large-scale efforts made to educate pet owners about responsible pet ownership, the need to either sterilise their pets or restrict their movement. This not only affects the animals' welfare but also poses a threat to public health and safety. Irrespective of statistics, the maximum resistance is faced by organisations and corporations while picking up the nomads when large-scale sterilisation efforts are ongoing in a city. This is due to the social stigma against sterilization, and owners disallowing pick up and sterilization, which results in the dogs remaining unneutered, free-roaming and continuing to contribute to a growing stray dog population.

Uncovering stray dog behaviour

Dogs quickly learn important lessons about approaching humans, wagging their tails and meeting the friendly ones joyously, and maintaining a distance from the ones they are wary about. Early negative interactions — where a pup may have been hit by a human or learnt avoidance behaviour from their mothers — may result in wary, unapproachable dogs living on the periphery of human settlements, dependent on scraps of garbage, not unlike their early wolf ancestors.

|| The dogs' territorial and hunting behaviours start manifesting especially at night when the streets are theirs again.

Their wolf lineage comes bursting forth again when they find strength in numbers and form a pack. The dogs' territorial and hunting behaviours start manifesting especially at night when the streets are theirs again. Any intruder into their nocturnal domain is now fair game; the late-night worker returning home, a two-wheeler rider turning an unwary corner, the well-prepared early morning jogger, now armed with a stick, or most curiously, the pampered-pet owner taking their dogs out for their morning constitutional. Such encounters may be an occasional nuisance for some, lifelong scarring for others, or tragically, may even lead to loss of life or limb due to these accidental encounters.

A stray dog has two basic needs for survival: shelter from the elements and food. Most stray dogs survive either through food fed to them or by scavenging on garbage. They take shelter under vehicles or in establishments where there is reduced human footfall. Male dogs might temporarily move long distances for mating but will generally return to their home-turf that they are familiar with and where they can find safe shelter and sufficient food. When stray dogs are fed regularly, either through an animal feeder or constant garbage or food source, they begin to get dependent on that resource. This is also where dogs tend to get territorial. They will instinctively try to drive out any new dog that enters into their territory, in order to reduce competition for resources. Often this results in dog fights and bites. Sometimes, humans get bitten as collateral damage.



Unneutered & free-roaming dogs contribute to a growing stray population | Pranjal Nath (Wikimedia)

This is especially the case when community animal feeders feed dogs inside private housing complexes or at the entrance gate, dogs generally get territorial of this space. A dog that is fed by a human directly may be more confident to approach a human in general in anticipation of food. A fear-driven reaction or an agitated response by humans to a dog coming close may result in harm to the dog or the individual involved.

Children tend to get bitten more than adults as dogs are more confident to take on something their own size. Dogs will also chase unfamiliar individuals or rapidly moving objects, whether it be a morning walker, jogger, a two-wheeler, or even a four-wheeler. Aggression towards ‘unfamiliar’ individuals is a valued trait in a dog defending private property but can infringe on people’s right to free movement and safety in public spaces.

Even if people are familiar with dogs in their neighbourhood, an unvaccinated dog can develop rabies, a deadly disease with no cure, and may bite unprovoked.

Rabies can manifest in several ways, and even trained professionals may sometimes fail to recognise these symptoms. The threat of rabies is a powerful factor that creates fear amongst the general public, and therefore not everyone is comfortable with the idea of having dogs in their vicinity. It is imperative that all dogs receive annual anti-rabies vaccinations to reduce the risk of rabies spread, both to humans, as well as other animals.

Responsible compassion

When a dog has access to food, it increases the dogs' fecundity (ability to reproduce successfully). Thus, when a street dog is being fed by a community animal feeder regularly, it is imperative that the dog is caught and sterilised. Generally, dogs that are wary of individuals may accept food being left out for them but never come close to the feeder.

Feeding such dogs regularly over a period of time may help in befriending them, making it easier to catch for sterilisation. However, if a dog remains skittish and uncatchable for an extended period, feeding such an animal may end up exacerbating the street dog population problem because they will continue to reproduce successfully and not be caught.

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It is critical that communities put a check on the food resources available to stray dogs, either as food scraps or open garbage access, so as to not attract a larger number of dogs. Community animal feeders must determine and fix the number of dogs they look after to ensure that their actions eventually result in a decline in the population of the area. It is important for them to not feed new dogs that may arrive suddenly (potentially migrating). The new and old dogs could form packs and start exhibiting problem behaviours, causing problems even for the older resident dogs who the local community may have previously accepted peacefully.

The act of compassion does not end at merely feeding a dog and keeping it alive. It extends into putting double the effort in educating the local community and making them aware of actions being taken to ensure both human, and dog health, safety, and welfare, due to the inability of the local authority in fulfilling their legally mandated role.

The bigger problem

Most of what has been highlighted above pertain mainly to urban centres. It is in rural areas, however, that the problem of dog bites, attacks on humans and other animals, and rabies is most prevalent.

Over 90% of India’s reported human rabies cases are from rural areas, where people often do not have quick access to vaccines or may depend on traditional and faith healers that are completely ineffective against this deadly virus.

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Dogs in rural areas have little economic value attached to them and often serve a more utilitarian purpose of guarding the farm or homestead. Hence, there is little in the way of healthcare provided to them. Annual anti-rabies vaccinations or sterilisation campaigns are unheard of. In many areas, dogs also roam into wilderness zones, where they have become an important concern for wildlife

conservation, either through the direct harassment and killing of wildlife, or through the spread of deadly diseases such as canine distemper virus.

Packs of free-ranging dogs are also known to kill sheep, goats and other livestock, causing lakhs of rupees in economic losses every year. The solutions that are mooted for stray dogs in cities are unlikely to work in rural areas, and new strategies need to be devised.

Conclusions

Every action of individuals or animal welfare organisations intervening with stray dogs must be carefully thought out, ensuring the welfare of people *and* animals is best served. Ideally, the end result of these actions should be having a world where no animal suffers on the streets. Dogs are human's best friends and provide humans with unconditional love and loyalty. Ultimately, the responsibility of ensuring that dogs do not suffer on the streets is with us. They deserve the safety, shelter and love that a home or protected environment can offer.