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The Community Dog and Competing Visions of the Indian City

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As Indian cities modernise, street dogs have become symbols of competing ideas about urban space. From calls for removal to practices of care and coexistence, the debate over community dogs reveals deeper questions about who belongs in the Indian city and whose lives count.

Walk through almost any neighbourhood in Delhi at dawn and you are likely to witness a familiar ritual. Someone, more likely a woman, carrying a bag of cooked rice stops beneath a tree where several street dogs are already waiting. She knows each dog by name. She knows which one is recovering from sterilisation, which one limps from an old injury, and which one needs the medication she has carefully hidden inside a piece of bread. A neighbourhood security guard pauses to tell her that one of the dogs disappeared the previous evening but has since returned. Soon another resident arrives and angrily asks, "Why are you feeding them? You're encouraging them to stay here". Within minutes, tempers flare, and the exchange escalates into a bitter argument.

Like much of India's informal urbanism, the place of community animals in neighbourhood life is negotiated through everyday practices of tolerance, care, and conflict rather than formal rules.

The woman is one of thousands of people across India's cities who devote extraordinary amounts of time, money, and emotional energy to animals they do not legally own. The person who confronts her is equally familiar. Similar scenes unfold every day across India: on college campuses, Resident Welfare Association (RWA) meetings, WhatsApp groups, and increasingly in courtrooms. If disputes over street dogs were simply questions of animal management, one might expect relatively calm debates about vaccination, municipal capacity, or the implementation of existing laws. Instead, they become quickly polarised. Friends stop speaking to one another. Neighbours and classmates divide into opposing camps. Municipal officials, judges, and politicians are drawn into the conflict. The intensity of these disputes suggests that something more fundamental is at stake than questions of law or policy alone.

Debates over street dogs are, at their core, conflicts about the kind of city Indians imagine and seek to create-an argument concerned with urban India in particular, though the line separating city from countryside is never entirely clean, and much of what follows may extend, with modification, to India's small towns and peri-urban edges. These debates reflect competing ideas about how urban space should be ordered: whether cities should be defined primarily by order and control, or by their capacity to make room for diverse forms of life within a shared urban world.

Coexistence and Urban Order

For many, particularly among India's aspiring middle classes, the ideal city is orderly and predictable: a modern metropolis in which free-ranging animals appear as signs of disorder, squalor, and administrative failure. Opposed to this is a different vision rooted in the lived city, where humans and community animals (a term I define below) have long shared urban space, coexistence woven into the ordinary business of how the city functions rather than standing as an obstacle to it.

The aspiration to create "world-class cities" has become one of the defining paradigms of urban governance in contemporary India (Baviskar 2011; Bhan 2016). Urban problems become challenges of administrative control: congestion to be reduced, public space to be regulated, aesthetics to be improved through "beautification," disorder to be eliminated. Phenomena that resist easy regulation or evoke "backwardness"-informal settlements, street vending, open waste, and unrestricted access to residential colonies-appear as evidence that the city remains unfinished.

Street dogs, and the citizens who care for them, become focal points for conflict and backlash precisely because they disrupt that image. Rather than being seen as longstanding inhabitants of urban neighbourhoods, dogs are recast as signs of disorder and obstacles to the realization of the modern, well-governed city. It is not incidental, therefore, that preparations for Delhi's G20 summit - an effort to present Delhi as a globally legible, 'world-class' capital - saw street dogs picked up even after the MCD had officially withdrawn its removal notification, activists calling the pickups unlawful and the dogs held in overcrowded, ill-equipped shelters (Ghosh 2025).

This vision of the 'world class' city shapes middle-class neighbourhood politics too, where RWAs increasingly police security, appearance, and access, tying responsible citizenship to orderly, gated neighbourhoods (see Ghertner 2015). Yet, the policed 'world class city' is only one way of imagining the urban. For millions of residents, particularly those whose lives unfold across the overlapping worlds of formal and informal labour, the city is navigated through relationships as much as rules, sustained through negotiation, accommodation, and everyday improvisation rather than comprehensive planning. As Ananya Roy (2005) has argued, this informality is often mistaken for a residual condition awaiting elimination, a set of failures the modern city has yet to correct. In fact, it is actively produced through the very processes of urbanisation and governance said to be modernising the city and remains central to how Indian cities actually function.

|| The community dog's survival is not an accident of incomplete modernisation, but a consequence of the forms of coexistence through which Indian cities have long been made.

These practices of everyday negotiation invite us to consider a category of urban inhabitants that occupies a distinctive position within the Indian city: community animals. By this I mean free-ranging dogs, monkeys, cows, birds, and other animals that are neither fully excluded from urban life nor incorporated into formal systems of ownership and control. They belong to no individual household, yet they are often unmistakably associated with specific streets, parks, temples, or markets.

Like much of India's informal urbanism, the place of community animals in neighbourhood life is negotiated through everyday practices of tolerance, care, and conflict rather than formal rules. Residents know them, feed them, and often fear them; protecting them one week, complaining about them the next. They are active participants in the social worlds through which neighbourhood life is constituted, not merely animals that happen to live alongside it. Recognising the place of community animals requires us to rethink the city less as a machine to be optimised than as a lived social ecology sustained through negotiation as much as harmony.

Rather than treating "stray" animals as biological populations to be controlled or removed, the concept of community animals recognises them as products of the social and material processes through which cities are made, their lives intertwined with human food systems, waste practices, and neighbourhood routines built over long histories of shared, often uneasy, urban life.

Dogs are the most visible expression of this dynamic. A dog sleeping outside a temple or in a neighbourhood park may be fed by nearby residents, watched over by security guards, sterilised by an animal welfare organization, vaccinated through municipal programmes, and known by name to the people who encounter it each day. Through these everyday relationships and practices, they are co-produced by the city and become part of the moral and social landscape of particular places. Living immediately outside people's homes, they mediate the boundary between private and public space and are experienced simultaneously as companions and threats, protectors and nuisances. Their constant presence in everyday neighbourhood life makes dogs unique sites through which broader conflicts over urban order and coexistence are played out.

This same logic, that community animals are co-produced by the city and are not aberrations, is what Roy (2005) identifies in her account of urban informality more broadly. Narayanan (2017) extends the insight by recognizing Indian cities as multispecies spaces, in which human and non-human lives have long been co-constituted, not merely co-located.

Viewing Indian cities as multispecies social ecologies does not require romanticising coexistence or denying the real risks of dog bites and rabies. Nor does it imply that every species belongs in every place or that conflicts between humans and animals can simply be wished away.

Human-dog conflicts are certainly not new.

From the early 19th century onwards, British authorities increasingly viewed ownerless dogs as threats to public order and sanitation. Colonial regulations authorised their destruction, and campaigns to reduce their numbers became a recurring feature of urban administration. These efforts, however, repeatedly encountered resistance. In Bombay, an aggressive campaign to destroy ownerless dogs, including the introduction of cash rewards for each dog killed, provoked the Dog Riots of 1832. Members of the city's Parsi community, for whom dogs held an important religious and ritual place, led widespread protests that disrupted commerce and forced the colonial authorities to retreat from the campaign. Although the protests were centred on the Parsi community (Palsetia 2001), they also revealed how colonial efforts to impose new standards of urban order could collide with wider local moral sensibilities and longstanding practices of human-animal coexistence.

Narratives of care and belonging cut across social class, undercutting the assumption that concern for street dogs is either an elite post-materialist indulgence or a mark of the poor's resignation to circumstance.

Many colonial assumptions about ownerless dogs survived independence. Municipal authorities across India continued to rely on periodic culling in response to concerns about rabies, sanitation, and public safety, reinforcing the view that free-ranging dogs were fundamentally incompatible with the modern city. In Madras, for example, the municipal corporation continued systematic dog-catching and killing for decades after independence, only beginning to move away from the practice in the 1990s. Although sterilization and vaccination programmes had begun to emerge in some Indian cities during the 1990s, it was only with the introduction of the Animal Birth Control (Dogs) Rules, 2001, and their replacement by a more detailed regulatory framework in 2023, that national policy formally shifted away from large-scale culling towards a regime of sterilization and vaccination that recognized the continued presence of community dogs in urban neighbourhoods.

The underlying conflict between these two visions of urban order, one favouring removal, the other accommodation, did not disappear with the ABC regime. It resurfaced with force in 2025 and 2026, when the Supreme Court revisited the legal architecture of the ABC regime. In August 2025, the court ordered that street dogs captured in Delhi and the National Capital Region be permanently removed from public spaces rather than returned to their localities, a sharp break from the ABC framework's governing principle. The order provoked immediate and widespread protest, and within weeks, a differently constituted bench narrowed it, restoring the presumption that healthy, non-aggressive dogs be returned to their neighbourhoods. In November that year the Court carved out a further exception for schools, hospitals, and other institutional premises, from which dogs were no longer to be returned. In May 2026 it upheld that exception but also reaffirmed the broader ABC regime.

The Supreme Court's successive judgments captured both halves of the argument advanced here. The initial order gave legal expression to precisely the anxieties this essay has traced to the "world-class city" ideal: that street dogs represent a disorder to be administratively cleared rather than community members to be accommodated. The backlash it provoked, drawing together ordinary residents alongside established welfare organizations, was equally revealing. It suggested that the informal relationships this essay describes remain robust enough to prompt a reconsideration of national policy within days.

Concluding Thoughts

Taken together, this history points to something quite remarkable: the community dog has survived more than two centuries of efforts by colonial administrators, postcolonial municipalities, and now the courts- to eliminate or restrict it. This endurance suggests that the community dog's survival is not an accident of incomplete modernisation, but a consequence of the forms of coexistence through which Indian cities have long been made.

This coexistence is often uneven shared and, contrary to common assumption, not the work of any single class. Survey and interview research in Chennai bears this out: attitudes toward street dogs did not track socioeconomic status in any straightforward way, but the deepest individual attachments documented were often among the city's poorest residents, pavement dwellers and waste-workers who named, fed, and relied on particular dogs for companionship and security, sometimes sharing food they could ill afford to spare (Srinivasan et al. 2019). As the researchers note, narratives of care and belonging cut across social class, undercutting the assumption that concern for street dogs is either an elite post-materialist indulgence or a mark of the poor's resignation to circumstance.

The community dog is a reminder that cities are not built by planning alone, but that they are also made through the ordinary relationships that develop between people, places, and the other living beings.

None of this makes the community dog secure. Each of the periods traced here ended not in settlement but in a new configuration of the same conflict, and the 2025-26 litigation shows that courts can still be moved to order removal at real scale. The dog's endurance is a record of what has been survived, not a guarantee of what will be.

India's cities will undoubtedly grow wealthier and more heavily built up in the decades ahead. This growth need not require the erasure of every form of life that sits uneasily within ideals of order and administrative control. The future of the city will depend not only on infrastructure and investment, but also on whether it leaves room for the complex relationships that sustain neighbourhood life, including longstanding forms of human-animal coexistence. The community dog is a reminder that cities are not built by planning alone, but that they are also made through the ordinary relationships that develop between people, places, and the other living beings.

Return, for a moment, to the woman beneath the tree, the security guard, the neighbour who angrily asks her to stop. They will not settle their disagreement today, and the Supreme Court's rulings will not settle it for them. But tomorrow morning, in all likelihood, the woman will be back beneath the same tree, with the same bag of rice, and the dogs will be waiting.

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