

# CHALLENGING DOGMA: ON THE THREAT FROM STRAY DOGS

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The newspaper rule of thumb is that ‘dog-bites-man’ stories are not newsworthy. However, with a nearly 1.5 crore stray dog population (2019 livestock census), and a dubious distinction of being the world’s dog-bite-and-rabies-capital, India’s ‘stray dog menace’ has a steady presence in the media ecosystem, to the point of being anaesthetising. Occasionally, this stupor is broken by the macabre. An infant in a Rajasthan hospital was reportedly taken away by stray dogs, while strays attacked a four-year-old, with fatal results, which was captured by CCTV cameras, in Telangana. Both incidents constitute only a fraction of the many dog attacks. Despite the acknowledgement of the crisis by States, the Centre, the judiciary, municipalities, and non-governmental organisations, the problem festers.

Dogs have a unique relationship with man’s evolutionary history — one of companionship. This poses a moral dilemma of being responsible for their welfare but also confronting the vagaries of their evolution from wolves and their territorial instincts. While by no means a conundrum unique to India, much of the world has drawn the line by de-recognising the rights of stray animals: if leashed and registered, human custodians are obliged to take care of them. If not, the state — as a last resort — is encumbered to euthanise them, in the interest of public health. The Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PCA) Act and the Animal Birth Control (Dogs) Rules, 2001 (being updated), while aimed at limiting the stray population, do nothing to improve public safety. The proposed draft rules, or the Animal Birth Control Rules, 2022, only put forth procedural changes in sterilisation and vaccination, permit only “incurably ill and mortally wounded” dogs to be euthanised, which is what existing rules permit, and make leaders of resident welfare associations responsible for feeding strays in pockets. The PCA and ABC rules acknowledge that unchecked strays must be restrained. However, they do not factor in the magnitude of the problem: that there is nearly one stray for every 100 Indians; that India lacks the infrastructure and mechanism to ensure that the most vulnerable (the poor and their children) are able to access treatment, and that expecting dog numbers to reduce on their own with sterilisation and vaccination is a pipe dream. India has committed to eliminate rabies by 2030, but without first framing the threat from stray dogs as a public health crisis, India’s poorest will continue to see their right to safe public spaces culled at the altar of callous activism.

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