

UNDERSTANDING THE STREET DOGS-HUMAN CONFLICT

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A scene from Gachibowli in Hyderabad. | Photo Credit: NAGARA GOPAL

For about 25,000 years, we have coexisted with dogs. Dogs protect us, and give us emotional support and companionship. They are loyal, friendly and intelligent. We are now witnessing a disintegration of this beautiful bond. Intolerance is growing not only towards dogs, but also cats, cows, birds and other creatures. We then extend the same intolerance towards friends, family, neighbours, co-workers, co-passengers and strangers. It has been proven that when a person is mean to animals, he is also mean to his own species.

Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) are often the instigators of violence. The person who stands for election in these societies knows that he has no real power: no control over maintenance, electricity, building, sale, rent, or water. What he can control is the choice of guard at the gate, and whether dogs should be allowed inside. Power demands that an enemy be identified, so dogs living there peacefully become the target. And by constantly heckling them, we make dogs nervous. Residents have told the police that the child who was bitten to death in Hyderabad would constantly beat and tease three animals. The residents repeatedly warned the child's father. On top of that, the father, the watchman, had refused to let anyone feed the dogs for three days. Then, the society chairman/secretary targeted the humans who fed the dogs and made the community safe. Then came the mobs, instigated by statements of violence on group chats. When the RWAs go for election, both groups vie with each other on the level of violence they will inflict on animals — whether dogs, cats or pigeons.

Conflicts between humans and dogs are only symptoms of the real problem. Dogs get aggressive when they perceive a threat. They want to protect themselves or their litter from attacks if they are unwell or hungry, have been forcibly relocated, or have witnessed abuse and neglect. This can be remedied if we are kind to them and follow management rules which have been clearly set out by national and State governments and various courts.

During colonial times, dogs and Indians were disallowed from entering areas of privilege. Both were treated with violence and contempt. Street dogs were routinely killed so that their numbers would reduce. That did not work then, and it will not work now. Nature allows animals to have as many offspring and as frequently as there is space in the environment. If there is a vacuum, it will be occupied by a more inconvenient species, such as rats, mice, mongoose and cockroaches. The London Plague of 1665 was a result of the killing of 2,50,000 dogs and cats.

The mice population grew, and 70% of the human population was wiped out by the Black Death pandemic. A similar incident happened in Surat not long ago and we had a plague scare as a result of removing dogs.

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Indeed the multiplication of dogs on the streets must be curtailed. The Animal Birth Control (Dogs) Rules (ABC Rules) of 2001 have been recommended by the World Health Organization and the World Organisation for Animal Health as the only way to bring about a sustained decline in the dog population, incidence of rabies, and aggression in dogs. However, necessary measures have not been implemented by local authorities to adequately and scientifically manage the street dog population. The lack of budget and infrastructure, the prevalence of corrupt and inefficient practices, and the absence of transparency and monitoring were the challenges for two decades. Recently, the Central government issued a new set of ABC Rules that bridge these gaps. Rather than seeking the removal of dogs, the responsible and effective strategy would be for citizens to demand from the municipal bodies an ABC Programme in accordance with the new ABC Rules of 2023.

A proactive approach would be to encourage the adoption of Indian dogs. If one person out of every 100 people adopts a dog from the street, there would be no dogs on the roads. The fascination for foreign breeds keeps alive the brisk business of cruel puppy mills and dingy pet shops. Most dogs of foreign breeds in pet shops have parvo or distemper and die within weeks. In 2016, the Central government prohibited the import of pedigree dogs into India. In 2017, it notified Rules for strictly regulating dog breeders. In 2018, following a recommendation by the Law Commission, the Pet Shop Rules were notified to prevent the trade of pedigree dogs. Why has Tamil Nadu allowed over 3,000 illegal pet shops and breeders to exist? No attempt has been made to follow the rules. If pet shops are stopped, most dog-related problems will disappear.

Native dogs have better immune systems and make great pets. If a family adopts a native dog or if caregivers feed and socialise with community dogs and help get them neutered, it would be of service to the community. The importance of people who look after native dogs on the streets has been recognised by our courts, such as by the Delhi High Court in *Dr. Maya D. Chablani v. Radha Mittal*. Also, in the new ABC Rules, community dog caregivers have been granted protection from harassment.

Reports of dog attacks must be tested on the benchmark of proof. Recently, it was reported that two children had been killed by dogs in Vasant Kunj in New Delhi. The Mayor clarified that the autopsy report had not been obtained and that the chances of the children being killed by dogs was slim. But by then, outrageous speculation had already been circulated widely as fact. If we claim to be the superior species, we must act responsibly, scientifically and humanely. Anything else will lead to chaos and misery for all species.

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