

TAMIL NADU



Careless approach: Irresponsible feeding is the main reason for proliferation of dogs, say experts. Responsible feeding will not allow a large number of dogs to gather at one spot. Feeding should be sporadic rather than systematic. A scene at Virugambakkam. B. VELANKANNI RAJ

Man vs Dog: twisted tales of an abiding companionship

In recent times, the country has crudely been pushed to an artificial binary, and people have been forced to pick a side — those who love dogs and those who do not. Naturally, as with any other hasty binary, the issue is not merely black and white; there are, in truth, multiple dimensions.

Geetha Srimathi attempts to find multi-sectoral solutions to this vast grey zone problem that has confounded civil society and administrators alike

A favourite among pets, dogs have been an integral part of our landscape. Although the co-existence of humans and dogs span millennia, sporadic incidents of conflict — such as the more recent attack by two Rottweilers on a five-year-old kid in a public park and according to multiple accounts, a rabid street dog biting nearly 29 people in a gated community in Chennai — have strained the tolerance, prompting a holistic look at risks and negative interactions with dogs in public space.

There are multiple problems — a family with a pet dog was turned down half-a-dozen times before it could find a rental house, a jogger is always on alert and looking over his shoulder during an early morning jog, an IT employee takes a longer route to avoid dogs while walking home from the bus stop. Srinivasan, a resident of T. Nagar, Chennai, says dogs on his street keep barking through the night, which makes sleeping very difficult. V.S. Jayaraman, a member of the T. Nagar Residents' Welfare Association, complains that walking in parks has become a challenge because people feel threatened by stray dogs. This has impacted senior citizens who come for morning and evening walks, he adds.

Residents regularly move the civic bodies for removing the dogs. However, this is not something local bodies are legally allowed to do. While problems around dogs have been long-standing, what exactly has queried the pitch? Krithika Srinivasan, animal studies researcher and senior lecturer in the School of Geosciences at the University of Edinburgh, says it is crucial to differentiate between perceived risks and actual material risks. "You can have situations where the material risk remains the same, and the apprehension goes up or comes down, or vice versa," she says.

Is news to blame?

Ms. Krithika, who is also the head of Remaking One Health-Indies, a project exploring everyday people-dog relations and why rabies continues to be a public health concern, suggests that one of the reasons for increased apprehension could be the way information flows, especially on social media, in which 'newsworthy' events and the ones that get circulated more tend to be negative, as opposed to positive news. "There is also a normative shift in what is 'acceptable' behaviour. A while ago, dogs barking would have been similar to a car pulling by or a bunch of people shouting — something that happens and then stops. How it becomes an annoyance, something that needs to be complained about, is interesting," she says.

As part of a three-month study done for the Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC) on complaints related to dogs in 2023, Ms. Krithika says the average number of complaints received was not significant when seen in relation to the number of people, dogs, and the geographical scale of the city. One of the most common complaints being loud barking at night, and it is often the result of territorial confrontation among dogs. "Dogs being territorial is a good thing from a health point of view, if they are vaccinated. If the population is stable and the dogs are neutered, it keeps other dogs away," she says.

Here's where the trouble, as far as Tamil Nadu is concerned, kicks in. The approach adopted for vaccination and sterilisation of street or com-



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KRITHIKA SRINIVASAN,
animal studies
researcher

munity dogs has been haphazard so far in Chennai. In November 2023, the long-pending sterilisation drive that began was cut short by the rain and cyclone the following month. It is yet to begin in a full-fledged manner. Since 2021, 15,000 dogs are said to have been vaccinated and sterilised.

According to Abi T. Vanak, an authority on the ecology of dogs and Director of the Centre for Policy Design, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment, the current method is unscientific. Instead, the local body has to count the dogs, set a realistic target for population reduction, and calculate how many in a particular area have to be sterilised to get to the target.

"The GCC has to overtake the birth cycle. Dogs give birth twice a year. One [dog] can give birth to about 10 pups in a year. These pups will get ready to mate in one year. They multiply very fast. The only way to go about it is aggressive ABC [animal birth control] and the current approach is flawed," says Antony Rubin, an animal welfare activist. He says the GCC works on the basis of complaints. "If someone complains about a dog issue, they go to the location to catch the dogs, sterilise them, and release them back there. This is like sticking on a band-aid. To fix the entire issue, you have to sterilise 70% to 80% of the dogs in a zone or ward," he explains.

A 2022 survey, done by the NGO Dogs of Coimbatore for the Coimbatore City Municipal Corporation (CCMC), found 1,11,074 stray dogs in the city. However, councillors say the population has since surged without an updated survey. Additionally, NGOs have alleged that insufficient fund-



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ing from the CCMC and inadequate manpower for capturing dogs are the issues left unaddressed. An issue that persists across the State is that the civic bodies are supposed to pay ₹1,650 per captured and neutered dog, but they provide only ₹750 in some cases. "This results in a shortage of dog catchers as low wages discourage them," says a spokesperson for Asra, one of the NGOs.

Amid concerns over the limited capacity of the three ABC centres manned by the CCMC, Corporation Commissioner M. Sivaguru Prabhakaran says a new centre is being built at Vellalore.

In places like Tiruchi and Erode, sterilisation seems to be gathering pace. A study carried out by the Erode Corporation in 2023 put the number of stray dogs at 27,000 in all the 60 wards. The ABC programme, which was suspended for many years, resumed in January this year, and 1,200 dogs are sterilised on an average a month. According to the Animal Husbandry Department, Tiruchi district has about 24,500 pet dogs and 21,000 stray dogs. At present, there are four ABC centres in Tiruchi, and the civic body will set up six more to take the number to 10, so that each zone has two centres. "Since 2022, we have increased the number of centres from one to four for the operations and to deal with the backlog during the pandemic," says an official.

Feeding becomes an issue

While an uncontrolled population poses a risk to residents and the local body, a major reason for the proliferation of dogs is irresponsible feeding, say residents and experts. GCC Veterinary Officer J. Kamal Hussain says irregular feeding is an issue in Chennai. "The Corporation has held periodic meetings with volunteers of each zone. If the Animal Husbandry Department and the State government give the approval and after taking legal opinion, Corporation dog catchers of each zone can keep a watch on such activities and inform the department of disagreeable practices."

Making a distinction between responsible and irresponsible feeding, Ms. Krithika says the former is "invisible" feeding done by people living on the same street or close by — a resident leaving a portion of their lunch once in a while. Taking cooked food in large quantities to another locality and feeding is not advisable, she adds.

"Responsible feeding is when a large number of dogs do not gather at one spot, making the pack visible for people who otherwise would not have noticed them, and when feeders don't leave any leftover food or plastic on the spot. Feeding should be sporadic rather than systematic," she

says. The practice of feeding has increased since the COVID-19 lockdown. "Feeders are doing it with a good intention, but they should also take up some responsibility for vaccinating and sterilising the dogs," Mr. Rubin says, acknowledging that financial constraints could come in the way. It costs up to ₹3,000 to get a dog sterilised at trusted animal welfare centres.

Rajeshwari, who feeds 70 dogs at Kilpauk in Chennai, says, "There is no hard-and-fast rule for registration of feeders. Designated feeding zones and timings, sterilisation vans, and appointment of zonal animal officers can help to control the problem."

While the Animal Welfare Board of India introduced registration and passes for feeders, the initiative did not go far. Similarly, pet licensing in the local bodies such as Chennai has not caught on, until recently. After the Rottweiler attack on May 5, pet registration surged in the city from 105 to 2,080 in three weeks.

Regulating pet ownership

According to Prasanna Gopinath, an animal trainer for 12 years, a pet licence is the first step towards being a responsible pet owner. However, questions remain as to how a local body will enforce registration and penalise those who fail to get licence. Tiruchi officials say pet licensing would help the local body collect data on the number of pet dogs and breeds reared and help differentiate between pet dogs and stray dogs.

Over the past two years, the Coimbatore Medical College Hospital has been recording an average of one to two cases of rabies, out of five to six dog bite incidents a month. According to the head of the Department of General Medicine, most incidents involve house dogs biting their owners or others. Health officials in Salem district say 15 people died of rabies between 2018 and 2023 in the district. Most of the dog bites were by pet dogs, they say.

A doctor at the Government Rajaji Hospital, Madurai, says the hospital receives about 100 dog-bite cases every day. While most of them involve stray dogs, a considerable number of bites are by pet dogs.

Mr. Prasanna says the lethargy, or ignorance, extends to training the dogs too. What happens when a beloved pet dog pounces on a passer-by? He says the chances of this are low and a lot depends on the relationship between the pet and the owner and the body language of people in the surrounding area. Experts say the implementation of mandatory pet licences can provide the authorities with data on the breeds involved in bite cases. This will show that bite cases involve a diverse array of dogs and will negate the necessity of labelling specific breeds as "ferocious". So far, rules brought in by government bodies have largely remained on paper. They say a combination of measures, such as sterilising and vaccinating street dogs scientifically and strict ownership rules, will greatly reduce negative interactions between dogs and humans.

(With inputs from R. Aishwarya and Sangeetha Kandavel in Chennai; Avantika Krishna in Coimbatore; S.P. Saravanan in Erode; M. Sabari in Salem; Anjy Donal Madama in Tiruchi; and C. Palanivel Rajan in Madurai.)



Holistic method needed: The approach towards vaccination and sterilisation of community dogs has been haphazard in Chennai and many other parts of Tamil Nadu. B. JOTHIRAMALINGAM