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Do Dogs Threaten People's Right to Safety in Public Spaces?

BY JANAKI LENIN, MEGHNA UNIYAL AND ABI TAMIM VANAK ON 22/09/2016

• 13 COMMENTS

People can't avoid being attacked if authorities mandate that dogs will live on the streets. And this is neither compassionate towards dogs nor people.



Dogs on the street. Credit: jonnyscholes/Flickr, CC BY 2.0

Many people are terrified of dogs. When a dog approaches them, they fly into panic and hysteria. They don't know a dog's body language and can't tell the difference between a friendly canine from an agitated one. To them, all dogs are scary at all times. Their extreme reaction may be amusing to people who know canines. But this raises the question: Don't people who fear dogs have a right to safety in public spaces?

Their fear may be a reaction to a past traumatic experience or just unfamiliarity. The fear is so deep-seated, no matter how many times you admonish them saying 'Don't run', they run from dogs. Few dogs can resist the temptation to chase. After all, they are hardwired to run after prey. If the frightened human is a child, the consequences can be severe.

Dogs are territorial of places and people. People who feed dogs imagine the animals are just as friendly to everyone. A child walks down the street with a packet of biscuits in her hand. Hand-fed mutts smell the goodies and salivate. The child gets defensive and holds the packet higher. One dog jumps and knocks it down. Maybe the kid cries and runs away or tries to retrieve the packet. Who's to blame for what follows?

In any other country, a dog that attacks people is put down. In India, we blame others. After almost every incident of dogs attacking children, you can count on the animal welfare activists to say that a nearby butcher shop didn't dispose off offal responsibly. The elderly woman who was killed in Kerala while relieving herself was accused of carrying meat (<http://www.theweek.in/news/india/what-has-kerala-achieved-by-killing-stray-dogs-asks-maneka-gandhi.html>). Activists reason that eating meat makes dogs aggressive. But this is just a myth with no scientific backing. Try taking even a bowl of curd rice away from a hungry stray dog. If you don't back off when it growls, it will snap.

Often, dogs don't need the smell of food to attack. Take the case of a toddler playing in her house

([http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/One-year-old-girl-grievously-injured-in-stray-dog-attack-at-her-residence-in-](http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/One-year-old-girl-grievously-injured-in-stray-dog-attack-at-her-residence-in-Malappuram/2016/09/03/article3610788.ece)

[Malappuram/2016/09/03/article3610788.ece](http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/One-year-old-girl-grievously-injured-in-stray-dog-attack-at-her-residence-in-Malappuram/2016/09/03/article3610788.ece)) who was savagely attacked by a dog. Or dogs chasing motorbikes. They are driven by their fear of humans and territoriality, with sometimes tragic consequences for humans.

An estimated 20 million people are bitten by dogs each year according to a 2006 study, causing a loss of 38 million human-days and costing Rs 20 crores in treatment. Today's figures are likely to be several times higher.

Managing stray dog populations is an animal welfare issue, too. Take the life of a stray dog. In searing heat or pouring rain, they often curl up under parked cars. If they are fast asleep, when the car engine starts, they get run over. They run headlong into oncoming traffic to escape from a snarling rival. Car drivers brake suddenly, and a motorcyclist swerves and loses his balance. Animals get hurt and so do people.

If cows and buffaloes are confiscated for being a menace to public safety, how justified are stray dogs on the roads? You can throw the same arguments to justify bovine presence – they eat garbage and keep the city clean. But tempers and emotions skyrocket when the subject is stray dogs.

The problem of stray dogs is not unique to India. It's a problem in most countries. But nowhere in the world is the problem so intense and acute as it is in India, where an estimated 50 million stray dogs

(<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/free-ranging-dogs-and-wildlife-conservation-9780199663217?cc=in&lang=en&>) live. And the culprit is our poor management.

The only way of dealing with free-ranging dogs by law is to pick up them from the streets, perform birth control operation and release them back in the same area. The Ministry of Culture, which has nothing to do with animals or public health, enacted this legislation. Although activists claim this is the most successful policy, there is little evidence. They hold Jaipur up as the role model, but just last week, a report called their bluff (<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/jaipur/Jaipur-Municipal-Corporations-tall-claim-on-curbing-stray-dog-menace-falls-flat/articleshow/54339456.cms>).

All this talk of dog management ends at the city limits. No government agency or animal welfare NGO works to curb numbers in the vast countryside.

Instead of addressing responsible pet ownership, providing subsidised neutering facilities for pets and addressing the garbage problem, the focus is entirely on neutering stray dogs. This is a task even Hercules can't achieve because at least 70% of the breeding population – including owned dogs, community dogs and feral dogs – has to be fixed every six months year after year. An effective reduction in population takes at least a decade.

However, in India, the overwhelming investment of infrastructure and budget is trained on stray dogs that are not fecund, don't receive their annual rabies booster shots and live terrible lives. Owned dogs and partly owned dogs are not a part of the official animal control policy. These merrily continue to reproduce and are abandoned on the streets.

Population ecologists say the size of a population depends on a complex relationship between the amount of available food, social systems and

control mechanisms. Few stray dogs live as long as 10-12 years but most die young, when they are no more than three or four years old.

Aniruddha Belsare of the University of Missouri, who studies dogs in rural Maharashtra, says the turnover rate was 40% every year and a majority of the dogs are young animals. The current method of population and rabies control is sterilisation and annual vaccination. Most of the vaccinated, sterilised animals die, and other unvaccinated, intact animals replace them. Keeping a population sterilised and immune to rabies are logistical nightmares. Unfortunately in India, neither activists nor government agencies have an ecological understanding of population dynamics.

In addition to attacking children and the elderly, dogs are a huge health liability. They are the main reservoir of rabies. The 2012 Million Death Study (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3464588/>) estimates that 20,000 people die of rabies every year in India. That's 80% of the world's rabies mortality.

For an effective anti-rabies vaccination drive, at least 70% of the total dog population has to be vaccinated every year. The Animal Welfare Board of India, the nodal authority for the management of street dogs, focuses on sterilising and vaccinating stray dogs. It doesn't indicate how it intends to catch dogs again to administer their booster shots. The Ministry of Health's National Rabies Control Programme (<http://www.bloodbank.nhp.gov.in/national-rabies-control-programme>) toes the welfare board's policy. So the country that tops the world in rabies deaths has no official rabies prevention policy.

All this comes with a caveat: neutered and vaccinated dogs can still attack and bite. They are territorial as well and will attack to protect their territories despite activists' claim that sterilised dogs don't bite. This is the premise of animal birth control: When dogs are killed, other dogs move into the vacant territory. But sterilised dogs will preclude rivals from moving in.

If the governing dispensation mandates that dogs will live on the streets, then there's no way people can avoid being attacked. This is

neither compassionate towards dogs nor people.

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Note: This article earlier stated that there are around 30 million stray dogs in India. The figure has been corrected to 50 million.

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