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Deadly Predators and Virtuous Buddhists: Dog Population Control and the Politics of Ethics in Ladakh

Karine Gagné

The region of Ladakh in the Indian Himalayas has recently seen a rise in attacks by stray dogs, some of which have been fatal. The dogs' claims on territory have not gone uncontested in an emotional landscape fraught with anxieties over religious identities as tensions prevail between a Buddhist and a Muslim population. Consideration for the political effects of ethical discourses about dogs in Ladakh reveals how dog population control, and the intricately linked question of dog care have implications for the shaping of an animal ethics as a contentious political question. In the public sphere, some interpret matters related to dogs as a problem of human territoriality, while others foreground animal care as a virtue of Tibetan Buddhists. While these ideas about dogs and their treatment are shaped by a network of local and translocal ideas and practices about animal welfare and about religious identity, the politics of dog ethics in Ladakh is not an exclusively human

product. Dogs are also agents of this politics, both in their physical capacity, to define dog-human interactions, as they are capable of being both affectionate and extremely violent, and because they have the potential to act on human's production of meaning and exceed human expectations.

Keywords: Ladakh, human-animal relations, ethics, religion, identity.

In the early morning of December 2014, in the village of Saspol in Ladakh in North India, a woman in her thirties was killed by a pack of dogs. Her body was so badly mutilated that she could only be identified through the cellphone she was carrying. Shortly after the incident, in an effort to reassure the villagers, high Ladakhi officials met in Saspol, including the Vice President of the Ladakh Buddhist Association, the Chief Officer from the Animal Husbandry Office, and the Sub-Divisional Magistrate of Khalatse. The superintendent police of Leh sent a police team to keep watch in Saspol. Rumors spread that immediately after the attack, villagers had mobilized soldiers from a nearby army base to shoot dogs.¹ These rumors were not entirely unfounded. After the incident, Hassan Khan, the District Commissioner of Leh, ordered that twenty stray village dogs be killed under Section 133 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, but he had to suspend the order due to complaints from local animal activists.

This incident epitomizes the contentions that surround dogs in Ladakh today. Deadly attacks by dogs have happened before—about a year prior, a pack of dogs mauled a colonel to death while he was out on his morning run, and violent encounters have increased over the past decade. The presence of stray dogs in Ladakh is certainly significant, more so in Leh, where they can be seen on every corner, scavenging for trash and or simply basking in the sun (Figure 1). According to the Animal Husbandry Department of Leh, in the town of Leh itself, which has a human population of 27,000, the population of stray dogs is said to be about 5,000 (Singh 2016). In a recent interview for the *Times of India*, the Wildlife Department in Leh estimated the population of stray dogs to be 3,500 to 4,000 (Dutta 2018). Although these dogs are generally gentle, some can become aggressive, particularly in winter, when food becomes scarce. As one woman put it “this is the time of the year when the dogs become

wolves” (Figure 2). The Sonam Norbu Memorial Hospital of Leh treated 585 dog bite cases in 2013 (Reach Ladakh Correspondent 2014).²

In Leh, dealing with dogs is practically an everyday matter. More vigilance is required in autumn and winter; with the end of the tourist season, as the cold sets in, restaurateurs leave the town, making it more difficult for dogs to scavenge for food. Pedestrians make detours to avoid packs of dogs. It is quite common to see groups of kids panic on their way to or from school when meeting dogs on the street. Reflecting on the magnitude of the problem, a father of three confided: “I am now afraid to let my kids play outside.” The situation has become so problematic that staff from the State Disaster Response Force of Leh and the National School Safety Program are touring schools to train children on how to avoid dog attacks and how to confront an aggressive pack of dogs. The authorities are also distributing leaflets on how to keep from being bitten by a dog and what to do if bitten. There is a huge discontent regarding the situation among the inhabitants of Leh and surrounding rural areas. But, there is also a lack of consensus over how best to address this problem, and opinions range from the drastic measure of culling to following the status quo. How has the question of dog population control in Ladakh become such a contentious issue? Is it only, as suggested in a recent BBC reportage, because of the Indian law that prevents the killing of stray dogs? (BBC News 2018).

This article examines the politics of dog ethics in Ladakh as an assemblage of ideas, practices, and actors—both humans and nonhumans. Within this assemblage, dogs have become a “more than human public” (Smart 2014: 3), both in their capacity as actants through their very materiality, and because questions over their treatment make them emblematic of Buddhist animal ethics. This latter



Figure 1. Dogs scavenging trash in search for food.

(Lhundup, 2015)



Figure 2. A pack of dogs in winter.
(Lhundup, 2016)

aspect manifests as controversies over the control of the population of dogs are taking place in an affective landscape fraught with anxieties over religious identity. The region of Ladakh is located in the Muslim majority state of Jammu and Kashmir in North India, and it is comprised of two districts, Leh and Kargil, both having respectively a Buddhist and a Muslim majority.³ The question of political representation in the region has been contentious since the independence of India. Feeling that political interventions are in favor of the Muslim majority of the state, many Buddhist Ladakhis have long sought autonomy from Jammu and Kashmir state by asking for Union Territory status.⁴ This request is, as yet, unanswered. Communalism and the politics of religious identity in the region have taken various forms over the years, among them the orthodoxization of Buddhist practices. It is in this context that discourses over the treatment of dogs are being articulated by many in light of a Buddhist ethics for animals. The situation, reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss' (1962) famous argument that animals are powerful means for groups to distinguish themselves and to assert their identity, has gathered strength as translocal and local actors call for a coherency between dog care in Ladakh and the image of virtuous Buddhists.

But, dogs have also become controversial because of the ways their very materiality defines dog-human encounters. Questioning the human exceptionalism that has long characterized the discipline, multispecies anthropologists are calling for the rethinking of the relations between humans and nonhumans. Thinking of animals, microbes, plants, and others as acting agents opens our

analytical perspective onto a world in which nonhumans are more than receptacles for human action (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). While the looming question of intentionality may haunt those sceptical to this proposition, such concerns are generally dispensed with by thinking through notions of 'networks,' 'hybrid collectif' or 'assemblage.' These composites of heterogeneous elements have notably become prisms through which to understand the influence exerted by these various "actants," as Bruno Latour (2005) would put it, whether human or nonhuman, on one another. In other words, agency, in this view, emerges from the relations between these actants. As Jane Bennett describes: "an actant never really acts alone," but rather, derives its agency from "the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces" (2010: 21).

But, reducing dogs to actants would fail to recognize their potentiality and their intentionality. Here, the agency of dogs does not solely derive from their imbrication in the assemblage that constitutes the politics of dog ethics. If dogs have become actants—or perhaps, more appropriately, agents⁵—in this politics, it is also because they exert their agency when they make territorial claims in a region that over the past three decades has seen an increasing competition over space between villagers, the Indian army, and people catering to the tourist industry, along with their clients. In this way, dogs are more than mechanistic actants due to their imbrication in an assemblage, but are also agents in their affective and semiotic capacity. The claims made by dogs in Ladakh take a myriad of forms, ranging from their

search for food to attempts at establishing and protecting territorial boundaries. Through their very corporality, the assertiveness of dogs can lead to violent encounters. The agency of dogs, however, does not rest merely on their territorial behavior. Dogs also enter into meaningful embodied interactions with humans, such as when they befriend people, who take much pleasure in petting, feeding, or playing with them. That humans may engage in intimate and personalized relations with predatory animals, even when sporadic fatal attacks occur, has been observed in other contexts (Baynes-Rock 2015). These intimate relations are the result of a process of attunement through specific histories and geographies, so that humans and animals can both contribute towards and transform each other (Parreñas 2012). In this way, stray dogs in Ladakh complicate the categorization of predator and “companion species” (Haraway 2008). In fact, the same dog can be both gentle and violent. I came to know this on a cold day in January. Next to the house where I was living in Leh, there was an empty lot where children would play, often accompanied by a stray dog they had named Toby. I would also play with Toby when he was near the house. Our friend grew quite shabby during the winter and at some point, stopped hanging around. One day, as I was coming back from the market, I got attacked from behind. To my surprise, my aggressor was Toby, and he was not in the mood to play. He started to forage through the shopping bags I had dropped under the impact, giving me the chance to run away. Over the years, I heard several stories of people being attacked by dogs in Ladakh, and my experience remains a minor event compared to what these dogs in Ladakh are capable of, as several fatal incidents have shown. But, this incident serves as an example of how, in their very liminal quality, stray dogs contribute to controversies over the control of their population; at times people bestow them with affection, and at times they are seen as enemies whose population needs to be controlled.

To explore the assemblage of the politics of dog ethics, I first trace the history of human-dog relations in Ladakh and locate the growing bodily entanglement of dogs and humans in a changing political and economic context. Next, I explore how the treatment of dogs feeds into the politics of religious identity in Leh District: first, I consider how enduring communal tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in Ladakh have produced an affective landscape where lurking territorial anxieties have translated into practices that aim to crystalize religious identity; second, I analyze how dog’s fierce behavior leads to debates over the control of their population in the media. Lastly, I examine how the initiatives of lay and religious dog care-oriented NGOs are at times underpinned by local and translocal

ideas about animal ethics in Tibetan Buddhism, and are largely informed by the capacity dogs have to engage in meaningful relations.

This ethnographic analysis has two implications. The first concerns the decentering of human exceptionalism in projects that attend to the nonhuman world, in particular when it comes to the management of animal populations, a profoundly anthropocentric intervention. In Ladakh, dogs are not only acted upon by humans, who are, as I examine below, trying to control their population or care for them. Rather, dogs thrust their agency in debates over the control of their population by eluding human’s expectations. In this way, I show how the ontology of participants in assemblages has implications for the shaping of the course of actions. Second, this case sheds some light on the political effects of ethical discourses when they are taking place in an emotional horizon fraught with anxieties over religious identities. I want to be clear: I am not denying the existence of empathy in the act of caring for dogs, whether it takes the form of activism or individual actions. Rather, I am arguing that the question of dog population control, and the intricately linked question of dog care have implications for the shaping of an animal ethics linked to stray dogs as a contentious political question. This is the case whether matters related to dog population control are inflected by translocal ideas about Tibetan Buddhism and animal ethics, whether they are interpreted as an issue of religious identity or whether they feed into local geopolitical anxieties. While these outcomes may not necessarily attune with people’s or organization’s intentions when they care for dogs, what they reveal is that dogs are not a mere receptacle for human’s interventions but rather, are actors in how humans interpret situations.

Virtuous Buddhists: A Situated History

The politicization of religious identity in Ladakh has a long genealogy which the post-Partition context has exacerbated. In the 1930s, the authorization of separate electorates for the different communities in the then Ladakh *wazarat* (province) institutionalized political representation on the basis of religious identity (van Beek 2000: 532). This measure meant that from this point forward, the bloc of voters would follow religious lines in the state. Through the voice of the Young Men’s Buddhist Association, Buddhist Ladakhis raised the specter of Buddhists being outnumbered by Muslims in the region and warned against the potential consequences for political representation (ibid: 532-533). In parallel, several Buddhist organizations, dominated by local elites, sought to reform what they considered the ‘social evils’ of Buddhist Ladakhis, which included a ban on the

consumption of local beer and the abolishing of animal sacrifice. This reform also included a demographic strategy for competitive growth with a ban on polyandry, seen as a key factor in the low birth rate among Buddhists, and in the conversion of “surplus” women to Islam through marriage (Smith 2013a; van Beek 2001: 380).

In tying together religious identity, majority status, and territory, the unresolved post-Partition India-Pakistan border conflict has also charged the landscape “with territorial meanings tied to religion and power” (Smith 2013b: 49). When India became an independent nation, Jammu and Kashmir was a princely state, formed by a conglomeration of independent kingdoms, among them Ladakh. The state had a Muslim majority population, and a Buddhist minority largely confined to the region of Ladakh. During the Partition in 1947, the Indian state formed along religious lines and the regions comprising a Muslim majority became Pakistan, whereas the regions comprising a Hindu majority became India. The Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir eventually pledged allegiance to India, after which the first Indo-Pakistani war erupted. The state of Jammu and Kashmir has since become a contested territory.

After the independence of India, what van Beek (1996) describes as “identity fetishism” among Buddhists started to intensify, with the use of communal language as a political practice. The reformation of practices to polish the image of virtuous Buddhists has persisted, with a ban on ancestor worship and a revival of orthodox practices (Dollfus 1995: 52; Gutschow 2004: 34). Conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims in Ladakh have since taken many forms, notably the control of intermarriage, reinforcing pronatalism, or the idea that each birth in one community is a loss for the other (Aengst 2013; Gutschow 2006; Smith 2013b). Buddhist Ladakhi leaders continued to decry discrimination regarding the allotment of development funds and the tensions culminated into the ‘social boycott’ of Ladakhi Muslims by the influential Ladakh Buddhist Association,⁶ from 1989 to 1992, which led to episodes of violence and ruptured relations between the two communities.⁷ At the heart of the boycott, which was framed in terms of religious identity, was the demand for political independence in Ladakh through Union Territory status by the Ladakh People’s Movement.

As van Beek (2001) argues, communalism in Ladakh has effectively been instrumentalized by political leaders in order to mobilize the masses, hide social divisions within religious groups, and conceal lines of cooperation between communities. One of the consequences of the various related rhetorical strategies is not only to crystalize the

cultural differences between Buddhists and Muslims, but also to moralize cultural practices. Overall, these tensions are inscribed in the local politics of ‘ethnic groups boundaries,’ or, following Fredrik Barth (1969), the deployment of cultural elements, practices, and values as ethnic identifiers. The role played by Buddhist leaders in the public sphere in sanctioning what counts as a good behavior within their community is a crucial element of religious identity in Ladakh. Because Buddhist leaders are giving their directions amidst fraught communal relationships, these instructions work at creating further opposition between Buddhists and Muslims.⁸

The tensions between Buddhists and Muslims in Ladakh are also inflected by the general dislike that has developed for Muslims in India since the Partition of 1947, and with the country’s extensive military presence in Jammu and Kashmir. If this heavy militarization is foregrounded as a question of national integrity, for some, this very presence is seen as an occupying force. The unresolved post-Partition tensions have led to practices of violent repression and to the marginalization of the Muslim population in the Kashmir Valley where civilian-military relationships differ markedly from those in the Leh District of Ladakh.⁹ The Kargil War of 1999 further contributed towards nourishing communal tensions, as relations of mistrust have since become the basis for the many military interventions in the region. As Mona Bhan (2014) notes, wars between India and Pakistan ask that citizens conform to a national identity. This is all the more crucial for Ladakhis, as these wars are taking place on their land and they actively engage in military labor in the region.¹⁰ The one-sided version of the Kashmir conflict and generalisations about Muslim populations aired on Indian television channels no doubt contribute to the idea that “Muslims in the state are causing so much trouble to this country,” as one Buddhist Ladakhi man put it once for me while watching news about civil-military conflicts in Kashmir.

It is against this political and communal backdrop that the practices that are considered ethical for Buddhists with respect to the treatment of dogs in Ladakh have become increasingly political over the years. While moralizing political discourses are unexceptional, the cases evoked above show how in Ladakh, Buddhist moral discourses, when they revolve around the ‘Muslim Other,’ are often instrumental. To grasp the impacts of the prevailing politics of religious identity in Ladakh on feelings about dog population control, we need to remember that an animal ethics, as any ethics, may take on a life of its own once propelled into the public sphere. The shift from a collective to an individual focus on ethics in anthropology has inspired a wealth of writings on the experiential aspect of

ethics by emphasizing the subjectivities of moral subjects. Yet notions of virtue and self-directed ethical dispositions cannot be isolated from collective ethics, as they are linked to the material world and public life (Sivaramakrishnan 2015: 1265). What counts as ethical in a community is a political question and, when taken in its collective dimension, virtue ethics is often a normative enterprise.

In her recent study, Lavrentia Karamaniola (2017) demonstrates how in Bucharest, opposing perspectives on the control of the street dog population are based on generational lines and revolve around ideas about humanity and civilization, ideals of citizenship, and moral values. These ideas, Karamaniola demonstrates, are shaped in relation to what becomes the normative rule of conduct with regards to dog population control, here defined by practices adopted by Western European urban centers. In other words, an ethics of care for animals is not just an individual reflection, but is shaped in light of how one ought to act in relation to certain ideals that are intricately linked to regional histories and identities. These reflections on collective ethics are fruitful when probing the politics of ethics in Ladakh. While the question of care for dogs in Ladakh may not inevitably be instrumentalized to serve



Figure 3. Despite his small size, this dog is kept to prevent predators from roaming around the house of his carer.

(Tashi, 2017)

a political project, given the prevailing religious and territorial anxieties, the moral and affective value placed on the treatment of dogs has nonetheless political effects.

Human-Dog Relations in Ladakh: A History of Growing Entanglement

The population of dogs in Ladakh is of ill-defined origin (Osmaston et al. 1994: 229).¹¹ There are two varieties of dogs in the region: pet dogs—generally Lhasa Apsos and Tibetan Spaniels—and shepherd dogs, which are mostly used as watchdogs (Kaul 1998, 46; Osmaston et al. 1994: 229).¹² Dogs kept as pets are generally of the first variety, but are rather rare. These dogs are also not systematically kept inside the house, but are often left outside, as they are also sometimes kept to dissuade predators (see Figure 3).

In the past, many families and monastic communities would keep watchdogs tied at the entrance of their property to protect domesticated animals from wolves, snow leopards, and thieves. These dogs would also be brought to the summer grazing areas, where they would protect sheep, goats, and dzos. Depictions of watchdogs in Ladakh in colonial writings converge on the observation that these are extremely ferocious and generally unfriendly animals (Cunningham 2005[1854]: 218; Gompertz 1928: 135). The treatment of these dogs also raised concerns. Visiting Ladakh in the 1930s, mountaineer Marco Pallis laments that Ladakhis “have come to treat the presence of a chained dog as a piece of household furniture.” Pallis reports that these dogs are never let loose, and deplores that Ladakhis “are no-longer conscious of the cruelty involved” (Pallis 1942[1939]: 293). Pallis’ comparison of these dogs to mere commodity is an apt one since in local idioms, these dogs are referred to as *go khyi* (dog of the door). These observations find echo in remarks made by many elders in Ladakh. For instance, one interlocutor in his seventies noted: “big dogs in Ladakh were never kept inside the house like we see in movies on TV.” Another interlocutor emphasized that playing with dogs was never a common practice. What this suggests is that, by and large, dogs had a utilitarian purpose and were not treated as pets.

Pascale Dollfus’s observations in her recent study carried out in Changthang, the nomadic area of Ladakh, suggest the persistence of this attitude towards dogs in some areas. Dollfus notes that in Changthang, a dog is “an animal with no name that is addressed only when a stone is thrown at it” (2012: 129).¹³ She also lists a number of sayings that refer to dogs, all of which are negative.¹⁴ Except for Changthang, dogs treated as mere *go khyi* are generally no longer found in Ladakh. In villages and in Leh, only a minority of families keep dogs, which are not systematically tied up, but often allowed to roam freely within the walled compound of a house.

According to Ladakhi elders and other observers, stray dogs were once rare in Ladakh, a situation that started to

change in the 1980s (Kapur 1987: 5; Osmaston et al. 1994: 229-230). A number of elements have contributed to their growing presence. During the colonial era, dogs were occasionally bred by locals and sold in Kashmir, where they were popular with the families of British administrators (Pallis 1942[1939]: 227). Dogs from Ladakh were also imported to England through a breeding program, a business that ceased with the end of the colonial regime (Bates and Harman 2014: 4). When breeders went out of business after demand fell, many of the animals may have been left to roam freely. Another element in the growth of the stray dog population is the opening of Ladakh to international tourism in 1974 and the steady increase since in the development of tourist infrastructure, particularly restaurants. Together with the growing presence of the state's military apparatus in the region, which was effectively reconfigured into a sensitive border area after the independence of India, these developments have contributed to dog's easy access to food. But, perhaps most significantly, the growing presence of the state in the region since the past three decades provided employment outside the traditional agro-pastoralist economy, which has rendered dogs redundant, as Ladakh saw a steady decline in pastoralist activities.¹⁵

Amid a changing economic landscape that rendered them obsolete to the household economy, dogs were

progressively disentangled from their chains, and in being abandoned, became increasingly entangled with humans. Today, one can frequently see kids in Ladakh play with dogs and hug them, whether in monasteries, in school playgrounds, or in the streets (see Figure 4). Affective practices for dogs take various forms, and it is common for people to get attached to one specific stray dog, which will be regularly fed. In this manner, a dog will start to hang around the same house, monastery, or school, occupying a hybrid position, not entirely stray, not entirely domesticated. But, the questions over the treatment of dogs that arise from these new human-dog relations are contentious, precisely because dogs are physically capable of being both extremely affectionate and extremely violent.

Debating Dog Population Control: Righteous Buddhists and Territorial Anxieties

Until recently, the only organized initiative oriented towards controlling the population of stray dogs in Ladakh was the authorities' sporadic mass shooting and poisoning campaigns. These measures used to be executed by the Jammu and Kashmir police, but ceased in the early 1990s, following the enactment of the Jammu and Kashmir Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. In rendering punishable the mistreatment of animals,



Figure 4. Young monks playing with a dog.

(Lhundup, 2016)

these same measures are also preventing Ladakhis from taking matters into their own hands, as they once did. According to many elders, in the past, Ladakhis would not be very tolerant of dogs who would attack, an attitude well reflected in the Ladakhi saying: “The cure for a dog bite is the dog’s skin” (Khan 1998: 186). This challenges a prevailing discourse according to which human-dog relations have always been harmonious in Ladakh and general assumptions about Buddhists as animal lovers. However, while Ladakhis are well aware that Tibetan Buddhism maintains that injuring animals will bring karmic retribution, the pragmatism of everyday life in the Himalayas, as has been demonstrated, leaves many unresolved tensions with the Tibetan Buddhist ethics for animals (Childs 2004: 127; Gagné 2019; Kapstein 2006: 18).¹⁶

Since the enactment of the Jammu and Kashmir Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, the Jammu and Kashmir police and Sub-Divisional Magistrates have frequently petitioned the District Magistrate for permission to implement Section 133 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which would enable them to perform culling campaigns. Local animal activists have however been successful at dissuading such measures. The control of the dog population is now under the purview of the Animal Husbandry Department of Leh through sterilization campaigns, but their interventions have thus far been largely unsuccessful in the eyes of the population.

Amid this dissatisfaction, many dogs are mistreated. Stories of dogs being drowned in the Indus, buried alive, or killed and thrown in junkyards by people who decided to take matters into their own hands are not unusual in Ladakh. Extensive debates, often quite polarized, on how to resolve the problem of stray dogs have come to occupy a significant place in the public sphere. Proposed interventions have ranged from culling to following the status quo. The question is regularly brought up in informal meetings in restaurants and teashops, but has also been discussed in gatherings held by various local NGOs and in local media. Many use these tribunes to depict Buddhist Ladakhis as virtuous, by emphasizing how inflicting pain on animals is contrary to Buddhist values.

Significantly, in these discussions, the problem of stray dogs and their treatment is also often construed as a problem of human territoriality. The selection of excerpts below comes from the op-ed section of *Reach Ladakh*, a widely read, local newspaper. The journal also has an online version and a Facebook page. Readers are welcomed to post comments and share their opinions on any article published. Many participants in discussions in *Reach Ladakh* on the topic of stray dogs indicate the authorities’ lack of action, while others caution people against being

cruel to animals. Some are using the case of Ladakh to reflect on the need to live in harmony with animals and to rethink humans’ precedence over a territory.¹⁷

Discussions escalated following a fatal incident that took place in January 2014, when a nine-year old girl in the village of Spituk was mauled to death by a pack of dogs. The death of the young girl was extremely violent; her body was dismembered and almost completely consumed by the predators. Following the incident, fear gripped the population. Rumors also circulated that angry villagers launched a raid and killed many dogs. On March 20, 2014, *Reach Ladakh* published a letter in which the author complains about how the problem of stray dogs may negatively impact tourism in the region. The author suggests that all stray dogs should be either adopted or euthanized, noting that although the latter option may grate the sensitivity of some given the religious context of Ladakh, the problem nonetheless needs to be solved immediately (Wangtak 2014). This author’s comment generated immediate reactions, many of them criticizing his drastic approach. About two months later, the journal published a letter, acrimonious in tone. Upset with villagers who attacked dogs after the Spituk incident, the author argues for a better understanding of the dogs’ behavior: “The dogs didn’t attack the girl for food but for their territory. Every animal from a tiny sparrow to a giant lion have their own territory which they guard” (Zyanfan 2014). The author supports his point by tracing an analogy between the behavior of dogs and the geopolitical context of Ladakh. A border area, Ladakh knows frequent intrusions by both Chinese and Pakistani forces. Drawing an analogy between the attack on the little girl and the Depsang incident of 2013, when Chinese troops entered India and settled in a sector of Ladakh until they were rebuked by the Indian army, the author rhetorically asks why the girl was killed and the Chinese troops were repelled without injuries. This brings him to conclude: “because the girl was alone, and remember, all your strength lies in your union, all your danger is in your discord.” By considering the behavior of dogs in reference to geopolitical issues and the need for unity, this author is obviously engaging in a parallel discussion that indicates prevailing communal tensions and territorial anxiety. This becomes even more salient in the author’s plea against sterilization campaigns: “If we still encourage this kind of stuff [sterilization] the day is not too far when there would be no dogs left in the picturesque place called Ladakh.”

The argument against sterilization is reminiscent of a prevailing communal discourse. Amidst the fear of being demographically outnumbered, contraception has become a sensitive issue and Buddhist women are dissuaded

from undergoing tubal ligation. Local religious leaders and organized groups dissuade women from undergoing contraceptive measures (Smith 2013a: 10-11; van Beek 2004). This discourse is also evident in the recent tensions that erupted in 2017 following an intercommunal marriage between a Buddhist woman and a Muslim man in Ladakh. Members of the Ladakh Buddhist Association pitted Buddhists against Muslims through belligerent communal discourses and by encouraging young Buddhist men to chase taxi drivers and merchants from Kargil out of Leh.¹⁸ The fear of seeing the Buddhist population of Ladakh outnumbered by Muslims is well encapsulated in the reflections of a local head lama on the situation in an interview for the *New York Times*: “The Muslims are trying to finish us off.” He also added that it was fundamental for Buddhists to marry Buddhists, and that “Buddhist women should have a dozen children to match the Muslims or the Buddhists will face extinction” (Raj and Gettleman 2017).¹⁹ The same incident also revived discussions over the question of Union Territory Status for Ladakh.

Given how sensitive the demographic question has become in Ladakh today, reading between the lines of this text, there is little doubt that the author of the letter is implicitly alluding to a scenario where the presence of Buddhists has become marginal in Ladakh. The author traces an analogy between dogs and Buddhist Ladakhis to underscore that both are vulnerable beings struggling in a contested territory. But, an animal ethics is also instrumentalized as it is rhetorically used by the author to discuss communal tensions related to control over space.

The linking of animal care to control over a territory also transcends the metaphor of a geopolitical situation. For instance, during a group discussion with Buddhist Ladakhis in their late twenties, I asked why religious NGOs were, in their view, involved in dog care in Ladakh and why Buddhists would sometimes frame the question of dog population control in a way that opposes Buddhists to Muslims. I compared the issue to that of the endangered snow leopard in Ladakh, which has never been framed in the same way. For my interlocutors, it was clear that because the political authority in Jammu and Kashmir state was in the hands of the Muslim community, if the Buddhists were not to mobilize, all the dogs would be poisoned. Ladakhis frequently allude to the intent of state authorities to poison the dogs of Ladakh, as has been done elsewhere in Muslim majority parts of the state. To my interlocutors, this measure was simply outrageous. As one put it: “Buddhists care for dogs, so we cannot let this happen here.” While there is little doubt that empathy motivates this desire for dogs to not face a similar lot,

this reflection equally suggests a desire for coherence in Ladakh between animal care and a religious identity.

Communal tensions again resonated in the series of debates in *Reach Ladakh* that followed the incident of Saspol evoked in the opening of this article. Reacting to an article in which the author questions the safety of dogs in Ladakh today, a commentator expands upon the idea by denouncing Ladakhis for “going jingoistic over the safety issue” in suggesting the mass culling of stray dogs, a measure that “reeks of vengeance which is not a Ladakhi attribute” (Barcha 2015a). Here, the author aligns with the depictions, (explicit or implicit), made by other contributors to this tribune and which depict Ladakhis as a pacifistic community that lives in harmony with animals. Arguing for government support for large scale professional sterilization campaigns, the author deplores the poor handling of the situation by the administration: “Talk about efficiency in government departments ...it is deplorable. Forget one devoted to animals who obviously do not comprise the electorate.” This reflection echoes John Knight’s observation (2000) that conflicts between people and the state are often at the heart of human-animal conflicts. In framing the problem as the result of Buddhist Ladakhis’ limited political autonomy—a perspective shared by many—the author’s rhetoric works at absolving Buddhist Ladakhis of any responsibility in this problem and at limiting the tarnishing of the image of virtuous Buddhists. This comment also calls on the unfounded assumption of many Ladakhis, one frequently evoked in informal discussions, that Muslims treat dogs worse than Buddhists.²⁰ Such assertions must also be read in light of the changing political landscape of India which, since the 1990s, saw emerging forms of cultural nationalism and regionalism, with significant implications for people’s relation with animals and the environment (Rangarajan and Sivaramakrishnan 2014: 5). In this context, the discourse of animal-rights movements in India is increasingly framed into religious registers, largely oppositional to Muslims’ alleged poor treatment of animals.²¹

Regulating Ethical Practices: Dog Activism

One afternoon, my friend Tundup came to pick me up as we were going to meet friends for a picnic. On the backseat of his truck was an injured puppy in a cardboard box, blood staining its brown coat. The puppy was curled up and obviously terrified. For the past few days, Tundup had seen the puppy, visibly enfeebled, roaming around his travel agency. He quickly became attached to the little dog and started to bring him food. But, the puppy’s health continued to deteriorate, and that morning, he found

the puppy injured, apparently attacked by other dogs overnight. Concerned for the animal, Tundup thought he should do something. We took the bumpy road to the village of Sabu, a few kilometers from Leh. Reaching a rocky plain, we arrived at the Ladakh Animal Care Society, where a three-legged dog welcomed us. A man eventually came out to greet us, an Australian working for the Sydney-based NGO Vets Beyond Borders. He took the puppy, explained that it would receive care, and noted the location where it was found. Once his wound healed, the puppy would be returned to the area where he was found, to avoid being an intruder in another territory.

Up until a decade ago, facilities for dogs were not available in the region. Suffering dogs and puppies would have to fend for themselves or rely on the care of empathic people. In 2006, the Ladakh Animal Care Society was founded by a local philanthropist. The organization received the support of the Animal Welfare Board of India, then run by India's well-known animal activist, Maneka Gandhi, and soon operated with the help of international organizations. It is running in partnership with the World Animals Foundation, a Dutch organization, in addition to receiving the support of Vets Beyond Borders and La Fondation Brigitte Bardot, a French organization dedicated to the protection of animals, named after its founder, the former French actress and now world-renowned animal rights activist. The Ladakh Animal Care Society runs a rabies vaccination and dog management program and every year, and with the support of volunteers from Vets Beyond Borders, sterilizes around a thousand dogs. They also provide care for severely injured dogs found in and around Leh. Sometimes, the dogs are brought in by well-meaning people, sometimes by those who, like Tundup, have developed an affectionate relation with a stray dog.

Members of the Young Drukpa Association of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism also partake in dog activism. One of their major initiatives is the Stray Animal Care and Management Centre, which opened in 2014 in the village of Nang, about thirty-five km from Leh, as part of the 'Live to Rescue' initiative carried out by Live to Love, an international non-profit organization founded by the Gyalwang Drukpa, the well-respected head of the Drukpa Lineage.²² The dog sanctuary aims to sterilize and vaccinate dogs, treat injured dogs, and provide shelter to the most aggressive dogs. The inauguration of the sanctuary was attended by hundreds of Ladakhis and received extensive coverage in the local media. More recently, a canine veterinary clinic was opened in Leh for animal sterilization and rabies vaccinations. Its construction was partly sponsored by Thuksey Rinpoche, another esteemed figure of the Drukpa lineage and one of the main architects behind the dog sanctuary.

Testimonies from the main figures behind these initiatives reveal a shared desire to preserve the virtuous character associated with Tibetan Buddhism and an awareness that the global community has their eyes on Ladakhis' ethical conduct. During the inauguration of the canine veterinary clinic in Leh, Thuksey Rinpoche reminded the audience of the appreciation foreigners have for Buddhist Ladakhis' religion and the values of love and compassion with which it is often associated. Yet such values, he pointed out, fail to be put in practice when it comes to the treatment of dogs. He went on to explain how, while giving a talk at a university in Germany, some students handed him pictures of Ladakhis mistreating a dog, which made him realize that the situation required immediate attention (Barcha 2015b). Similarly, during the inauguration of the dog sanctuary, Gyalwang Drukpa spoke of "setting an example for the whole world" (Chumikchan 2015). Still, along similar lines, in an interview with *Reach Ladakh*, Kunzang Namgyal of the Ladakh Animal Care Society explained that the setting up of his NGO was partly motivated by a desire to preserve the image outsiders have of Buddhists Ladakhis as peaceful and kind, an image tarnished by the treatment they inflict on dogs (Reach Ladakh 2014).

As Timothy Pachirat (2011) demonstrates in his vivid ethnography of industrial slaughter in the USA, the control of what is visible to the public in terms of the treatment of animals when it comes to practices considered morally repellent is a crucial strategy, and is central to our understanding of societal development. This is evident in the founding of dog care-oriented NGOs in Ladakh: if dog activism in Ladakh seeks to transform how dogs are treated, it is also invested with a desire to prevent the detrimental impacts of these images on Buddhist identity, as the question transcends the local scene. In fact, many non-Ladakhis actively participate in the discussions on the online forums I have examined above. Many are also active on the local scene, either as volunteers for NGOs or as animal activists who lobby local lamas for their cause. Many, (although not all), adopt a discourse that transpires what scholars have described as an orientalist vision of Tibetan Buddhist communities (Lopez 1998). Dogs are also depicted as friendly creatures, and their aggressiveness is seen as resulting from the unkind treatment they are subject to.

Many Ladakhis had great hopes that the dog sanctuary in Nang would resolve the problem of stray dogs once and for all. Yet, with its maximum capacity of 300 dogs, it filled up as quickly as it opened. Moreover, the dog sanctuary has been a controversial measure right from the outset. Impoundment as a measure of population control runs contrary to the philosophy of animal activism, which is strictly against curtailing the movement of dogs. The

Chairman of the Animal Welfare Board of India quickly declared the pound illegal, unless it could be shown that the dogs being kept were strictly those not strong enough to survive on the street. Amidst the controversies, Thuksey Rinpoche had to give a public address to dispel the rumor that the sanctuary was intending to relocate all the stray dogs of Leh, and to inform the public that it was meant to be a refuge for injured, aggressive dogs in need of treatment.

Thuksey Rinpoche also stressed the need to treat dogs ethically and encouraged people to adopt dogs as pets. Adoption has been the object of a campaign led by Drupka animal activists, and the practice was framed as having traditionally been a custom of Buddhist Ladakhis. A pilot project was put in place in Thiksay, where villagers agreed to adopt 400 stray dogs. The project had very limited success, as the behavior of dogs contradicted human expectations; for example, the barking of dogs, which intensifies when many dogs are in immediate proximity, soon became a source of irritation. One of the unintended consequences of this initiative has been the further misreading of the problem as a communal one by some. I occasionally heard Buddhist Ladakhis suggesting that the program was unsuccessful because Muslims in Ladakh are not doing their share, since “adopting dogs is not in their custom.” But, this perspective is oblivious to the fact that many Muslims may not feel a responsibility to adopt dogs precisely because, traditionally, Muslim households in Leh District rarely kept dogs.²³ This was pointed out to me by a Muslim woman in Leh who was quite assertive in her diagnosis of the problem of stray dogs today, which she saw as one that Buddhists had created given that “they are the ones who used to keep dogs.”²⁴

Ethical discourses, when tied to strong affective experiences, may have political effects that are unsuspected by participants (Bialecki 2016; Watanabe 2014). While the question of dog welfare is never foregrounded in a way that pits Buddhists against Muslims by animal activist organizations, the very emotional horizon where these interventions take place is such that they sometimes contribute towards reinforcing moral ideas about Muslims’ alleged treatment of dogs. This situation resonates with perceptions about animal rights activism in the broader context of India. Anthropologist Naisargi Dave notes that animal activists in India are often conceived of as belonging to the elite and as having anti-Muslim sentiments, a consequence of “the faces of animal welfare groups, many of which do belong to high-caste or non-Muslim middle-class people” (Dave 2014, 436). In other words, animal activism in India is laden with meaning that has political implications even if these

interventions are not necessarily founded on sentiments that aim to exclude groups.

But, interventions by animal activists in Ladakh also highlight how dogs, like any other animals, are “unruly” (Govindrajan 2015a, 34) that is, they have the capacity to have a tangible impact on the course of life in a way that does not always conform to human expectations. Stray dogs in Ladakh, through their materiality, and their behavior, which can be physically violent, contradict the narrative some have created about them. The fact that some Ladakhis dub the sanctuary in Nang the “jail for bad dogs” illustrates this clearly. The reference highlights that the dog imagined by religious NGOs is an idealized companion, an idea emerging from the capacity of dogs to engage in meaningful relations with humans. In this situation, dogs contradict human’s presumptions about them and, accordingly, to keep the narrative about human-dog relations coherent, aggressive dogs have to be consigned to secluded spaces.

Despite all the efforts, dog population control measures have left Ladakhis deeply dissatisfied. Sterilization campaigns have been running for years without significant change. There is some evidence suggesting that not everything operates smoothly between the NGOs and the government organizations. In a press release, the Animal Husbandry Department expressed its dissatisfaction with the credit taken by some NGOs for their management of dog welfare and sterilization programs, claiming that they have in fact carried out all the hard work (Greater Jammu Report 2015). This has contributed to further irritating the population, who see this as yet more proof that the situation is being poorly handled by the administration. The most cynical are also calling attention to the Gyalwang Drukpa’s involvement in dog activism, questioning his instrumentalization of empathy. For instance, one man qualified the dog sanctuary as being a mere façade for the media that allows the lama to acquire political capital.

In its bitter assessment of animal activism interventions, this perspective echoes the one shared by a Muslim merchant from Leh. During the summer of 2018, the organization Live for Love installed a kiosk in the main market of Leh, and for several days, two young Ladakhis distributed information about the organisation’s activities related to dog care. During our conversation, the merchant, whose store was in sight of the kiosk observed, rather caustically: “It is not a matter of loving dogs or not. It is about being able to walk around this town at night and not fearing a dog attack.” He then asked: “Why aren’t they talking about this instead?” adding bitterly “The dogs are now taking control of the market!” In his pragmatic understanding of the

situation, the man's perspective aligned with that of some Buddhist Ladakhis, who see the question of dog population as one of control over space. However, for him, dogs, rather than humans, were controlling this space, a direct result of the interventions of Buddhist religious organizations.

Noting the anthropocentrism of measures oriented towards animal welfare when they are anchored in religious discourses, Yamini Narayanan (2015) points at the Maharashtra Animal Preservation (Amendment) Bill, 1995, which imposes a prohibition on the slaughter of cows and bulls. While it focuses on animals considered sacred in Hinduism, this measure nonetheless constitutes a partisan project in an increasingly polarized political landscape that divides religious groups. Ultimately, Narayan maintains, if this measure is a response to a moral imperative dictated by religious norms, it obscures the realities of animal conditions in other situations, such as the dairy industry, a serious and concrete problem. This reflection has resonance for the case of dog care and dog population control in Ladakh where the association between dog management and a religious identity is not without consequences. Above all, it works at maintaining a status quo on the control of the population of dogs. In the absence of properly tackling the problem, people's fear of dogs continues and dogs continue to suffer through those who decide to take matters in their own hands.

Conclusion

In the summer of 2016, Tashi, a Buddhist Ladakhi man in his fifties, escaped a large pack of aggressive dogs on the outskirts of Leh. Tashi remains convinced that he only survived the encounter because he managed to jump a small cliff to escape the dogs. Recollecting the incident, Tashi categorically stated that control over the population of stray dogs should strictly be handled secularly: "They should be controlled in non-Buddhist ways," he remarked, emphatically. This meant, in his view, drastic measures of sterilization and euthanasia for the most dangerous dogs, something which is not conceivable in the current context, as the control of the dog population has become enmeshed in religious identity.

When they become a nuisance, animals can exacerbate existing tensions between communities and become elements of prevailing political disputes (Govindrajan 2015b). That dog population control comes to be understood as being handled in a religious manner should not come as a surprise; in Ladakh, this question has become fraught as it gets entangled in the local politics of religious identity in a place where territorial anxieties prevail.

These local politics are also connected to notions of national identities in India, where the political discourse of recent years nurtures antagonism towards Muslims. As a result, caring for dogs has become a terrain of ethics where Buddhist Ladakhis must conform to the image of animal lovers, an image that is also shaped by translocal ideas about Buddhism. But, Tashi's position, shared by many, at least in its desire to isolate the problem from any religious discourse, should not be interpreted as antagonism towards dogs, but rather, as an attempt to find a concrete solution to a problem which to this day remains unresolved. And it is probably the absence of a solution to this problem that led to the death of a twenty-nine-year-old woman in Nyoma in early 2017 to another violent stray dog attack. For, as Ticktin (2006) reminds us, the meeting of ethics and politics may have unintended violent consequences.

The treatment and control of the population of dogs in Ladakh presents a platform for many Ladakhis to put their qualities of virtuous Buddhists on display, sometimes in reaction to the tarnishing of this image on the international scene. Amid an affective landscape loaded with territorial anxieties, some also interpret the question of dog population control as a communal one, thereby conflating ethics with politics. In particular, when religious leaders anchor dog care in a religious tradition, they may contribute towards amplifying these feelings and interpretations. In fact, in Ladakh, the image of the virtuous Buddhist is one that Buddhist leaders have long shaped in opposition to Muslims. Thus, although the motivations of Buddhist animal-rights activists are not necessarily based on anti-Muslim sentiments, the political effects of the very social context against which these activities are taking place leads some to such interpretation, as shown in debates and discussions taking place in the private and the public spheres.

The politics of ethics is, as I analyzed, a heterogeneous assemblage of ideas and practices that bring together humans and nonhumans. In this assemblage, agency is not exclusive to humans; rather, it emerges from the interaction between the various bodies that form this assemblage, albeit always unevenly. Consideration for the history of human-dog relations in Ladakh reveals how the eroding pastoralist economy during the last decades has been a process of becoming for dogs, who have emerged as both aggressors, friends, and as animals that ask for recognition. The dogs of Ladakh are protecting their territory, and they are searching for food, which is abundant in the summer months and scarce during the cold winter

months. They have also become attuned to humans, and humans have also added new dog-related practices to their everyday, whether by feeding them, caring for them, playing with them, or keeping them at a distance when they fear an attack.

The entanglement of humans and dogs leads to contrasted feelings and attitudes, ranging between attachment, fear, and rejection. This manifests in individual actions, in public debates, in religious discourses, and in organized initiatives for dog welfare. It is in their capacity as friendly creatures that dogs have been co-opted into a discourse about virtuous Buddhists. But, dogs have shown how they can elude human expectations about them. Through their very materiality, enacted through their territoriality and their need to fill their stomachs, they have the capacity to be violent. Reflecting on her experience of being attacked by a crocodile in Australia, an incident during which she nearly lost her life, philosopher Val Plumwood (2000) observes that becoming prey elicits the recognition that humans are not, as it is often assumed, the sole agent in their encounter with animals. Rather, in revealing in a forceful way the chimerical nature of the neat boundaries between humans and animals we have long imagined, violent encounters with animals are forms of extreme “animal intimacies” (Walker 2013, 55). The entanglement of humans and dogs in Ladakh is particularly tangible when considering how dogs shape debates over what constitutes an ethical control of their population. Moreover, as the politics of ethics in Ladakh demonstrates, dogs also have the capacity to act on human’s productions of meaning and exceed human’s control. Accordingly, violent encounters between humans and dogs cannot be read only as the meeting of two bodies, but also as the result of how dogs infuse social relationships with their agency.

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Endnotes

1. Because Ladakh is a border area, many Indian troops are stationed in the region.
2. Many dog bites also remain unreported.
3. This article focuses on Leh District and its predominantly Buddhist population. It builds on twenty months of fieldwork carried out in Ladakh between 2011 and 2018. The majority of my interlocutors were of Buddhist confession, and the insights provided by this article, (and its limitations), are bounded by this representation.
4. If granted Union Territory status, the district of Leh would have a direct relationship with the central government in Delhi.
5. Assemblage thinking as articulated by Bruno Latour in the actor-network theory has been amply criticized for putting all entities on the same ontological footing. This point is addressed by multispecies anthropology which shows how the entities that operate in assemblages are of various ontologies, and this in turn impacts their degree of agency.
6. The organization was formerly the Young Men’s Buddhist Association.
7. Another example of systematic community rejection in the greater region of Ladakh is the enduring social boycott of Muslims in Padum by Buddhist Zanskarpas following the conversion of some of their members to Islam in 2012. On the tensions between Buddhist and Muslims in Zaskar and Kargil District, see Deboos (2012).
8. Yet, as Martijn van Beek notes, being Ladakhi does not rest on a stable and homogenous “set of characteristics, forms, idioms, or practice” (van Beek 2003, 286). On the question of identity and the various forms of national consciousness in Ladakh, see also Aggarwal (2004), Bhan (2014), Bertelsen (1996), Gupta (2013), and Srinivas (1998).

9. On the violence perpetrated by the Indian state in Kashmir, see Bhan and Trisal (2017), Mathur (2016), Varma (2016). On the discrimination experienced by Kargilis in their interaction with the state administration, see Gupta (2013).

10. Bhan also notes the increasing presence and influence in the region of the RSS, a right-wing, Hindu nationalist organisation, which in foregrounding a narrative that links Buddhism and Hinduism, further contributes towards marginalizing the Muslim population (Qanungo 2017).

11. The breeding history of these dogs is likely the same as that of the dogs from Tibet and China (Osmaston, et. al. 1994: 229).

12. The shepherd dog is sometimes referred to as a mastiff, although they are in reality not of the mastiff breed. This dog has the blood of chow, spitz, and pariah. The dog as a pet also includes the Shih Tzu, the Tibetan Spaniel and the Pekingese (Osmaston, et. al. 1994: 229).

13. Translation by author.

14. In many ways, this attitude reflects how dogs have often been traditionally considered in the Tibetan Buddhist cosmology. Because they are seen by Buddhists as being subject “to a short lifespan, terror, pain, and stupidity,” animals are not a class sought for in the rounds of rebirth (Kapstein 2014: 1-11, 96). In particular, a human reincarnation as a dog is even deemed a form of punishment or an ill-fortune, as expressed by many Tibetan Buddhist lores and sayings (Kapstein 2014: 116; Khan 1998: 186). For instance, a Tibetan proverb reads: “Just when you think you are poised to be reborn as a human, you get a dog’s form instead. Just when you think you are poised to go to hell, you get a lord’s form instead” (Lhamo Pemba 1996).

15. Dogs have long been companions in humans’ economic activities in Ladakh. Many of the petroglyphs found in the region depict people hunting with bows and arrows, often accompanied by dogs (Thsangpa 2014: 23).

16. Hunting is another practice that contradicts the Tibetan Buddhist ethics towards animals, yet Tibetans and Buddhist Ladakhis have long partaken in this activity, to the point of endangering species (Fox et al. 1991; Kapstein 2006: 11).

17. The comments have been removed through the redesigning of the Reach Ladakh website in 2019.

18. The organization also appealed to the state government, mentioning that they have, in the past, reached out to Muslim leaders to call on their community to “stay away from such wicked and depraved acts which otherwise will lead to communal unrest” (Raj and Gettleman 2017).

19. See Smith (2012) on fears related to this alleged shifting ratio.

20. Foltz (2006) and Khan (2014) both point at a general repulsion and avoidance of dogs in the Muslim context and I have occasionally encountered similar feelings among Muslim Ladakhis. But, as Khan shows (2014), these feelings should in no way be equated with a systematic attempt to eradicate dogs from a place: on the contrary, these feelings can exist alongside practices of care for dogs, and the treatment of dogs can also become the subject of moral allegories.

21. This is well exemplified in recent, and at times extremely violent, debates over beef consumption and cow protection that are taking place in India.

22. The Drukpa Lineage is a branch of the Kagyu school, one of the six main schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Gyalwang Drukpa is renowned, locally and internationally, for his environmental and social activism and for the extensive publicizing of these activities.

23. This can be explained by the fact that pastoralism has never been at the center of the economy of a majority of Muslim households in the town of Leh and the surrounding area.

24. Taking into consideration the communal tensions prevailing in Ladakh today, such perceptions may also explain the limited participation of Muslim Ladakhis in dog care activism and dog-related debates.

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