
'Stray' Dogs and the Politics of Space in Contemporary India: A Sociological Analysis ¹

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The lives of free-ranging—or 'stray'—dogs are increasingly problematised in 21st century India. Apart from being considered a public health risk, people's general apathy towards their many misfortunes is frequently judged as unbecoming of a modern nation. The Supreme Court of India has in recent months leaned into the idea of their banishment from specific locations, fuelling debate about spatial politics. Narratives of control and/or care which accompany discussions of these dogs tend to downplay two crucial points: agency of the nonhuman, and heterogeneity of the anthropos. Drawing from field observations and secondary data from the internet, the present paper argues that rather than looking upon free-ranging dogs as merely a problem to solve, it might be more fruitful to regard the existing situation in terms of co-production. Dog-human conviviality and conflict are spun through multispecies encounters in agential space; they are not simply matters of human manipulation. Moreover, in analysing the issue as politics of space, the paper highlights how anthropocentric attempts at imposing order may worsen unequal vulnerabilities among dogs and humans alike through widening chasms between precarity and privilege, nonhuman and human, public and private, rural and urban, East and West.

Keywords: stray dogs, free-ranging dogs, politics of space, spatial agency, human-nonhuman relations, anthropocene

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The population of 'stray' dogs in India is generally estimated to be over 60 million, and they make up an amorphous category. While 'stray' refers most frequently to unowned dogs, it can enfold any that are deemed out of place, such as beloved community dogs who live on the streets, and even pets who are allowed to roam free (Animal Welfare Board of India, 2025; Karlekar, 2008). Due to this negative connotation of the term 'stray'—the denial of belonging and freedom of movement—the present paper will hereafter refer to such dogs as 'free-ranging' instead. Across India, free-ranging dogs are a common presence in and near human settlements, making the most of proximity by foraging in garbage dumps, seeking shelter in built spaces, receiving food and medical care from friendly humans, and not infrequently preying on livestock. People are generally tolerant of their existence and acknowledge the many benefits offered by free-ranging dogs: waste removal, rat control, security from human intruders, and keeping away dangerous wildlife. However, dogs are also recognised as a potential hazard as they are known to attack humans and pets, eat livestock, spread disease, cause traffic accidents, etc. Concerns regarding rabies transmission and mauling of vulnerable humans (children and elderly) loom especially large in discussions regarding India's overabundance of street dogs.

The presence of so many unowned and unaccompanied dogs in public spaces is against the ideals of modernity promoted by the West. Western ideas regarding modernisation and progress are rooted in nature-culture divide. They do not accept the intrusion of uncontrolled animals in zones marked off for the civilised. Accordingly, in Western countries, it is common practice to move 'stray' animals into designated shelters and to use euthanasia as a means of controlling their population. However, incarceration and culling are not only aimed at human convenience. These practices are also regarded as merciful as free-ranging dogs face countless dangers like starvation, exposure to the elements, traffic accidents, toxins, and harm by humans and other animals. For example, a study conducted in urban India found that 82% of pups born to the streets die before reaching the age of one year (Pal, 2001). It is believed that after economic liberalisation there has been a big change in the aspirations of Indian people. In particular, urban middle classes are now more demanding of modern comforts and aesthetics on par with

affluent Western countries (Singh, 2020). On the global stage, India is no longer content with survival and modest development but instead seeks to project the image of a rising world power. The existence of free-ranging dogs creates some hurdles when it comes to presenting a polished face in the global arena. Firstly, according to the 'developed' world's standards, the existence of free-ranging dogs signals an inability to maintain order. Secondly, Indians are judged as apathetic to the problems faced by free-ranging dogs. In July of 2025, the Supreme Court of India *suo moto* took up the matter of 'stray' dogs. The deliberations were sparked by a Times of India article (Saha, 2025) which reported the death of a child in Delhi after she was bitten by a rabid free-ranging dog. During the court hearings that followed, it was made clear that the Indian Supreme Court regarded control of free-ranging dogs as urgently required for ensuring public safety. On August 11, 2025, the Supreme Court ordered removal of free-ranging dogs from Delhi and National Capital Region. It ordered that the dogs must be relocated from public spaces to dog shelters (Supreme Court, 2025a). This decision by the court led to protests and many pointed out the impracticality of the order. The ruling was then modified on August 22nd allowing dogs to be released after sterilisation, vaccination and deworming, unless they displayed aggressive behaviour or were suspected to carry rabies (Supreme Court, 2025a). On November 7, 2025, the Court provided new rules to be implemented all over the country (Supreme Court, 2025b). The new rules call for permanent removal of free-ranging dogs from some designated 'institutional areas': educational institutions, healthcare centres, sports complexes, bus depots and train stations. At the time of writing of this paper, the final verdict on the matter is yet 'reserved', but the given Supreme Court orders have created uncertainty for dog-human relations. Thus, the fate of millions of Indian dogs hinges on the questions that muddle the lives of so many others in today's world: 'who can be where, and what can they do there?' (Clewer et al., 2012, p. 1).

The present paper undertakes an analysis of dog-human conviviality and conflict from the perspective of spatial politics. In contemporary India, dogs are one of many victims of 'the operation of power through space and place, and the spatial structuring of inequality' (Clewer et al., 2012, p. 6). Other sacrifices made upon the altar of 'development'

include factory farms, environmental devastation, displacement of villagers for public works projects, the erosion of common property resources, and dispossession of slum dwellers. The recent Supreme Court deliberations regarding dogs have fuelled debate regarding the politics of space. The court rulings support an exclusionary vision of modern India. Although the Supreme Court looks at free-ranging dogs through the lens of human-dog binary, the present paper is in agreement with those who frame the matter in terms of heterogeneity and more-than-human co-production. Thus, the present paper will analyse the spatial politics around free-ranging Indian dogs keeping in mind that: i. dogs and humans are not opposed, homogeneous categories, and ii. dog-human relations cannot simply be dictated by some humans ignoring the reality that relations are shaped also by dogs themselves and the spaces where interactions occur. The paper uses both primary and secondary data in order to examine the following points:

- i. How spatial changes introduced by humans (built environments and governance of space) affect the lives of free-ranging dogs and their relationship with humans.
- ii. The ways in which nonhuman agency can challenge human attempts to control space and dog lives.
- iii. Divisions among humans that intertwine into dog-related spatial politics.

Review of literature

Some academics argue that free-ranging dogs should not be called 'stray'. Because, as discussed previously, the term 'stray' implies out-of-placeness and it criminalises the existence of dogs who are not owned or supervised by humans (Srinivasan, 2013). So, terms like 'street dogs' and 'free-living dogs' are encouraged (Srinivasan et al., 2019). The present paper uses 'free-ranging' which is inclusive of varying degrees of human claim upon dogs. Most free-ranging dogs in India belong to an ancient indigenous breed called Pye, Indian Pariah, Indie, or simply *Desi*. Recently, in urban areas especially, there is an influx of commercial breeds either because of pet abandonment or due to interbreeding (Rai, 2025). Elimination of free-ranging dogs has been part of

modernisation efforts in many countries (Gundogdu, 2018). The elimination of dogs is tied to genuine public health concerns, but it may also be a way for the state to lay claim upon spaces and showcase smooth functioning in different facets of governance, such as sanitation and providing security to citizens (Gundogdu, 2018). Dogs are generally thought of as loving, loyal, and friendly creatures. Positive assumptions are also made regarding their owners. For example, dog owners are often thought to be more social than cat owners (Cudworth, 2017). Herzog (2011) notes that media tends to overreport the positive effects—physical and psychological health benefits—of pet ownership. Thus, ownership of docile dogs as pets has a pleasant halo. But when it comes to ‘stray’ dogs, the situation is different. Stray dogs are often thought of as dangerous and the media has been accused of excessive negative reporting regarding them (Karlekar, 2008; Ramanujan, 2015). In the Indian context, human relations with free-ranging dogs are complex and have many different and interesting aspects. Often, dogs are considered a part of the community and appreciated for the services they provide (protection, pest control, etc.), especially among low-income sections (Bhalla et al., 2021; Srinivasan et al., 2019). Unlike gated communities, low-income neighbourhoods are generally more accessible to free-ranging dogs, and the proximity can inspire sympathy and acts of kindness. Nonetheless, proximity also translates to greater risk, which human inhabitants of such localities seem aware of (Herbert et al., 2012). Srinivasan et al. (2019), for instance, show that dogs may simultaneously be thought of as vulnerable creatures who have a right to live on the streets as well as a nuisance. Also, the literature amply demonstrates that, among humans, the poor are at greatest risk of contracting and dying from rabies (Srinivasan et al., 2019). It would seem that dog ownership in India is more common among higher socio-economic sections (Brill et al., 2024); and prevalence of pet dogs is expected to increase alongside demographic changes associated with modernisation, such as gender parity in education and employment, and smaller family size (Volsche et al., 2019). But while discussing possible trends, two important points need to be remembered. First, dogs cannot be simply categorised as either owned or unowned. Across India, there are millions of free-ranging dogs who are looked after as community animals (Srinivasan et al., 2019). Second, pet ownership among poor and

‘under-developed’ people is often overlooked (Serpell, 1987). For example, poor people who own pet dogs may not have big enough homes to keep dogs indoors, they may not put collars on their dogs, and their dogs are often of the ‘street dog’ breeds. So, the pet dogs of the poor may be indistinguishable from ownerless free-ranging dogs (Ghosh, 2024; see also Karlekar, 2008). This may strengthen the impression that pet keeping increases with socio-economic and demographic changes.

Thus, there is a difference in attitude towards supervised pets and ‘stray’ dogs, and the type of pet one owns can lead to assumptions about the owner. It is also clear that ‘human’ and ‘dog’ are not uniform categories, and that individuals within them are judged according to different ideologies as being appropriate or savage. So, in this context, it seems important to critically examine how dogs come to be designated as ‘stray’ and the consequences it has for dogs and humans.

Methods

The study is based on field observations and analysis of Reddit social media posts. Primary data for this paper is derived from observation of dog-human relations in different parts of West Bengal. For the most part, these observations were not undertaken with specific research goals in mind but were instead accumulated over three decades of residing in, travelling to, and speaking with people from various parts of West Bengal. Observation was facilitated by the ubiquity of free-ranging dogs and a personal desire to understand their habits and their relationship with humans. The researcher was able to collect data by spending time in the company of dogs and by talking to people who expressed fondness or dislike towards them. People from various walks of life—NGO volunteers, train hawkers, university professors, livestock rearers, homemakers, security guards, etc.—shared their thoughts and enriched the study. Analysis of Reddit posts focused mainly on (but was not restricted to) people’s reactions to the recent Supreme Court rulings. Content from four high-traffic Indian subreddits (forums) and two subreddits related to Indian dogs and pets were analysed. The chosen subreddits are as follows: r/India (872,000), r/indiasocial (663,000), r/indiameme (445,000), r/AskIndia (384,000), r/IndianPets (39,000), and r/Indiedogs (33,000) (weekly visitors) —at the time of writing this paper in March, 2026—are given in brackets). Search

terms like ‘dogs’, ‘stray dogs’, ‘street dogs’ and ‘Supreme Court’ were employed and it was decided that a minimum of ten threads from each forum would be studied, contingent on availability. Posts dated from August 22nd, 2025 to March 22nd, 2026, were considered for analysis, with a preference for posts with higher engagement (greater number of comments and upvotes). Although other social media platforms, like Facebook, are more popular in India, Reddit was chosen because it is anonymous. The researcher hoped that anonymity might encourage greater frankness.

Examination of secondary data focused primarily on the following themes: consequences of proximity, rights of human and nonhuman animals, desire for progress, references to wealth disparity, opinion of government, and thoughts regarding religion. Data analysis tried to highlight the more-than-human nature of society. It also tried to make room for the interrogation of various inequalities. Thus, the focus is on living with dogs, not thinking through them as symbols (Haraway, 2016). The present exercise does not run under the steam of any utopian dreams; it merely seeks to loosen the hold of certain dominant ideas so that the search for gentler alternatives can breathe more freely. The methodology of this paper has both strengths and weaknesses. Primary data is largely derived from ordinary life experiences, unaffected by the artificiality associated with methods like survey and interview. On the other hand, employing a more systematic approach would have doubtless enhanced the paper’s credibility, and made it more generalisable. To make up for this deficiency, field observations have been contextualised with the help of available academic literature, news articles, etc.

An Anthropocene conundrum

The domestication of *Canis lupus familiaris* dates back at least 15,000 years (Haraway, 2016). Dogs have been a part of human society for millennia, as protectors, hunting partners, and companions. They have been comrades to kings and beggars alike, and have at times been interred alongside humans indicating emotional trans-species bonds as well as dogs’ status as ‘spiritually significant beings’ (Morey & Jeger, 2022). Yet, even as pets, they remain to this day with one paw in nature, granted only ambiguous citizenship of the human world that has transcended conditions of animality and

wilderness (Redmalm, 2013; see also Shir-Vertesh, 2012). Dogs labelled as 'stray' are generally denied even that. 'Stray' dogs are aberrant to both nature and culture; they are too intertwined with human society to be honoured as nature, yet they are still regarded as an animal *other*. Lately, in India, dogs' *other* status has been enhanced due to increasing news reporting of horrific dog attacks on humans (e.g. Saha, 2025) and growing concerns over their population increase amidst the country's poor waste management. The increasing number of free-ranging dogs not only raises concerns about human safety but because they face so many risks, their lives are considered an animal welfare crisis. The present era is sometimes called the Anthropocene, and in it these creatures present us with a conundrum. A compassionate but resource-intensive approach to dog control would be measures like Animal Birth Control (ABC) programme and putting dogs in shelters. Another option is culling. The former is a kind of favouritism that is problematic given that humans have already caused a lot of damage to the planet. After all, kind treatment of dogs generally comes at an environmental cost (Clayton & Myers, 2015) and free-ranging dogs are a threat to wildlife (Ladon & Dolma, 2025). Killing them, on the other hand, is a different, much more straightforward, sort of Anthropocene violence. The term Anthropocene has many criticisms. Among them: i. the term perhaps heightens notions of human exceptionalism and mastery, undermining the entangled nature of life (Haraway, 2008); and ii. in blaming humankind as a whole, the term is accused of neglecting human heterogeneity and the specific drivers of ecological ruination (Mitman, 2019). The spatial politics of dog-human relations reflect these criticisms and are worth pondering over. The proliferation of free-ranging dogs has anthropogenic roots but the issue is a runaway one. In India, socio-spatial changes like growing consumption and urbanisation often couple with poor governance in making spaces conducive to canine population growth. Spaces built for humans become home to a host of other species, including dogs. Dogs' friendly nature and functional roles also factor into the situation as they are appreciated and rewarded by humans. Thus, dog-human relations are co-produced. They are not simply decided by humans.

The researcher was talking to a toto driver who feeds neighbourhood dogs. He said:

Every morning when I open my doors, the dogs are there. They look at me. This morning I gave them tea and muri (puffed rice).

His home does not have a gate separating the house and yard from the street. Therefore, it is easily accessible to the village dogs. They often shelter on his property. Thus, the space itself enables dogs to seek resources. However, as society 'progresses', homes are becoming more exclusive, with walls and gates keeping out community dogs and many other creatures. Other species also play a role in dog-human relations. Apart from the fear of rabies, the hunting of livestock and poultry are a common problem in rural areas. The same man told the researcher on another occasion:

Sometimes people get angry and hit the dogs because they eat so many animals. I also lost four hens and one goat in the last few months. I give the dogs leftover food and even buy food for their puppies, but still they hunt the animals. I wish there were only a few dogs, one or two. But there are too many.

The problem of dog overpopulation is often discussed on Reddit both by people who like and dislike free-ranging dogs. Frequently, people report being overwhelmed by their numbers. On the r/Indiedogs forum, there are countless requests made to posters to get dogs under their care sterilised. Users are often reminded that feeding is only the first step towards responsible engagement. Apart from dissuading notions of human mastery over the world, the question of free-ranging dogs highlights that the so-called Anthropocene is dominated by some sections of humans. Not all humans get equal say, nor all suffer the consequences equally. As with environmentalism, dog-human relations in India are embedded into material struggles (Guha, 1989); and while poor folks are generally more in danger of disease and mauling, eradication of free-ranging dogs may be a cosmetic measure that merely heightens other problems suffered by them. Academic literature and field observations suggest that economically disadvantaged people rely on free-ranging dogs for safety more than wealthier humans. Ramanujan (2015) suggests that since slum dwellers are underserved by the government, they rely

disproportionately on dogs to alert them to the presence of helpful and unhelpful visitors: NGO and municipal workers, gangsters, police, burglars, etc. Dogs are also known to drive away other species whose presence is generally unwanted by humans, such as rodents, snakes, crocodiles, etc. (Ghosh, 2024; Karlekar, 2008).

Some years ago, a woman residing in a low-income rural neighbourhood told the researcher that the woman's neighbour's house had nearly been broken into by jackals. Her village was experiencing a sudden increase in jackal activity and those with flimsy homes (like the woman's neighbour) were more at risk. Then one night the local free-ranging dogs were heard making concerted efforts to drive away the jackals, and for some time afterwards the jackals stayed away from the village. Although dogs can also be a problem, many people recognise that they keep away worse dangers. The Supreme Court's order to keep dogs out of educational institutions may have a negative impact in rural areas where snakes and other wildlife are a threat. In urban areas also, dogs are now a part of ecosystems (Ghosh & Narlikar, 2026). In India, government services are often not adequate, so people have to rely on informal networks for support. So, dogs and humans have co-evolved lifeways. For example, advocate Poulomi Shukla pointed out during the court hearings that street dogs protect homeless children and act as their 'last line of defence' (Mondal, 2026). Also, floods of comments on Reddit cry out that most serious problems faced by the nation—poverty, environmental problems, increase in hate crimes, corruption, etc.—will not be solved by harassing dogs. These ground realities cannot be ignored. Dog-human relations here should not be based on West-centric ideas ignoring the local situation. Tsing and Haraway (Mitman, 2019) say that the term 'Anthropocene' should be used in a narrower sense to reflect the disproportionate impact that some humans and ideas have over the planet. If we apply that reframing to the analysis of free-ranging dogs, it becomes easier to appreciate that free-ranging dogs are not simply a 'problem' for humans. It becomes easier to see that dogs and humans are heterogeneous and their relations are complex.

The varied textures of othering

The politics of space is not only about law and state machinery. It manifests in everyday interactions among ordinary members of a diverse society. As the status of dogs fluctuates between acceptance and intolerance, there are also conditions that make some humans unacceptable and 'other'. An interesting feature of dog ownership in India is that even owned dogs are often allowed to roam freely. So, it may be hard to distinguish between owned dogs and unowned ones. This practice seems to be losing favour, however, and the reasons range from cultural influences which infantilise dogs, growing popularity of frail commercial-breed pets, and spatial changes that favour indoor accommodation—larger homes, increasing vehicular traffic, etc. Once near-universal, free-ranging dog ownership today is perhaps more common among the lower socio-economic sections whose conviviality with canines tends to be neglected (Ghosh, 2024; Karlekar, 2008). Nowadays, there may be a growing tendency to look down upon the practice of letting pets roam freely. Instead, the idea that dogs are like children who need to be controlled and showered with commodified care seems to be gaining hold (Yadav, 2025). In this context, the spatiality of dogs—proximity to human supervision, whether allowed on laps and furniture, being taken along on holidays, etc.—has consequences for their humans and risks entrenching the misconception that love for pets/dogs is a full-belly phenomenon. Since pet ownership is associated with a number of positive traits (e.g. altruism and modern sensibilities), the misconception can be quite damning (Berglund, 2014; Nast, 2006; Serpell & Paul, 2011). Free-ranging dogs are considered a threat to supervised pets. Many pet dog owners complain that presence of free-ranging dogs makes it difficult to take pets out for walks. Thus, delicate and docile pets are contrasted against uncontrolled dogs. In this way, dogs who live in the streets are labelled as being unworthy of being on the streets compared to the pets who only pass through. By contrast, for humans, it is said that people who spend time in the streets need to be protected. Dog welfare activists are frequently dismissed as rich people who ride around in cars. It is said that they don't face problems faced by free-ranging dogs. However, in one affluent gated community in Kolkata, its twenty-two well-

fed resident dogs are a problem for both wealthy residents and poorer visitors. Because of them, human residents can't enjoy morning or evening walks. Also, the dogs often attack delivery persons, resulting in bites, falls, and broken bones. Many wealthy human residents feel that the dogs are an extension of upper-class hubris inflicted on less fortunate humans. A commonly recommended way of controlling the free-ranging dog population is better waste management and cessation of dog feeding. In contrast, saying that human overpopulation should be controlled by starving people is likely to draw serious condemnation. Revered British broadcaster David Attenborough has been criticised for saying that it is 'barmy' to send aid to starving people in 3rd world countries (Furness, 2013). Famines, according to him, indicate a simple imbalance in the population-to-land ratio, which Asians and Africans have upset through mindless overbreeding (Furness, 2013). On a similar note, Winston Churchill made light of the Bengal famine by saying that Indians breed like rabbits (Safi, 2019). Parallels are often drawn between violence against other animals and the oppression inflicted by some humans upon others in the form of racism, colonialism, patriarchy, ableism, etc. And, it is noted that language plays a crucial role in the othering—of humans and nonhumans—that accompanies oppression. With regard to dogs in India, the media, courts, and general public are often united in evoking the 'chaos', 'danger', and 'divide' posed by 'strays'. A Supreme Court bench commented that no one can read a dog's mind, nor predict when they may bite (Dogra, 2026), as though the same is not true of humans. Othering makes violence more palatable.

However, it is not enough to draw parallels between the two kinds of othering and violence: as many have discussed, the nonhuman is doubly vulnerable under the weight of animality and third-world citizenship. In a poverty-stricken country like India, welfare of dogs is not high priority—a fact made painfully clear through a number of comments made by Supreme Court judges (e.g. Mondal, 2026). As canine suffering and death are less likely to move law enforcement, dogs can easily become surrogates for violence. One dog feeder near Burdwan, West Bengal, expressed fear that the dogs might someday be poisoned by a person whose family

is embroiled in property dispute with hers. Religion ought to also be discussed as it is a great force in India, and animal welfare discussions are frequently engulfed by the construction of Hindu Rashtra—e.g. bovine protection and politicised vegetarianism. The atmosphere of general tolerance towards free-ranging dogs tends to be attributed to Hinduism, which is followed by almost eighty percent of Indians (e.g. Wallen, 2023). But this perspective perhaps relies too heavily on the book view, and it risks further marginalising religious minorities. The toto driver quoted in the previous section is Muslim; he and a number of his Muslim neighbours are friendly with the local dogs. Instead of forcing people like him into assumed contrasts between indigenous holism and 'alien' Abrahamic human exceptionalism, it might be wiser to heed their own interpretations of their faith (Berglund, 2014). Simplistic terminology like 'dog lover' and 'dog hater' are abundant in rageful Reddit comments. They obfuscate common ground that exists among different sections of people on the matter of free-ranging dogs. For instance, there is general desire for canine population reduction (if not elimination), and to supplant reliance on them with appropriate alternatives. Meanwhile, we must make do with thin alliances.

Tendrils of formalisation

Formalisation here means increasing emphasis on systematic, rule-bound administration by the state machinery. In this section, government's rules regarding dogs are contrasted against some prevalent informal ways of getting by. In India, unowned/abandoned and community dogs are governed by the Animal Birth Control (ABC) Rules of 2023 (Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying, 2023). The ABC programme tries to ensure dog-human coexistence through sterilisation, vaccination, deworming, and responsible feeding. ABC rules prohibit relocation or incarceration of dogs (unless they are rabid or aggressive). And killing dogs is only allowed if a dog is mortally ill or injured. The programme has been successful where it has been taken up seriously (Karlekar, 2008). But efforts to implement it have been inadequate (Karlekar, 2008). The Supreme

Court's order of November 7, 2025, is said to contradict the ABC rules. Also, the order has been criticised as 'an act of administrative violence' because 'it comes with knowledge' (Gandhi, 2025). In August the court had reversed an order of mass dog incarceration because it realised infrastructure does not exist to make it possible (Gandhi, 2025). The World Health Organisation (2012) says mass vaccination and sterilisation are good ways of controlling dog population and reducing rabies deaths. Sporadic removal is known to cause more problems than it solves. The vacuum is simply filled by dogs from other territories, and newcomer dogs struggling to establish themselves are more likely to be aggressive (Karlekar, 2008, p. 80). Thus, the Supreme Court directives, it may be said, fail to take into account the worldview of dogs and their relationship with space. The ABC rules and Indian Supreme Court call for establishment of convenient feeding zones. Feeding zones are meant to reduce conflict by allowing dog feeders to administer care without causing harassment to other humans. The Standard Operating Procedure for dog feeding in urban West Bengal goes so far as to suggest healthy food options for canines and convenient feeding times: before 7 a.m. and after 7 p.m. (Department of Urban Development and Municipal Affairs, 2024). But it is interesting to note how establishment of feeding zones may go against the grain of existing relations which are shaped by humans and dogs through their specific relations with spaces. Feeding zone may work in a quiet residential area but it may work less well at a busy travel hub. Places like bus depots and train stations have certain features that contradict this sort of ordering. Such places are generally experienced by people only fleetingly. Which means people will likely share food with dogs where they meet instead of looking for feeding zones and waiting for the allotted hours. A lot of food waste is generated at such places because of the presence of food shops and sanitation is generally not good. The waste may sustain dogs without intentional feeding by humans. Also, such places tend to inflict disabilities on dogs which makes it more unlikely for people to follow rules regarding only feeding in designated areas. Of course, the Supreme Court says dogs should be removed from train and bus stations but that is not feasible (Gandhi,

2025). It is worth noting that these contrary conditions are also true of busy urban streets from where dogs are not directed to be removed (Economic Times, 2026). Informal handling of dog-human relations also comes with problems. Dogs are illegally killed for many reasons like revenge, making noise at night, looking sick and unclean, and simple human amusement. The ABC rules allow people to protest such acts of violence. The Supreme Court's anti-dog stance makes many fearful that dogs and dog caretakers will now face more harassment in spite of existing rules that protect them. ABC rules allow capture of aggressive and diseased dogs. Given the Supreme Court's stance, some fear that the rule may be misused because there is not much clarity about what counts as aggression. In general, people excuse behaviour like snarling and chasing when a dog is protecting babies. When fights break out among dogs, people often take sides based on things like which dog is known to be more docile and whose territory was invaded by whom. But misjudged violence by humans is also very common. In the researcher's village some years ago a female dog was poisoned by someone for killing livestock. The dog had recently given birth to some puppies. No one expressed sorrow for the dead mother. But some of the villagers then took pity on the orphaned litter and gave them food. The puppies did not survive for long. In different forms, violence is present in the relationships among dogs, humans and spaces. For example, at a small train station in rural West Bengal, the canine population is kept in check by trains, traffic accidents, and predation by jackals, despite efforts made by people to keep the dogs, especially puppies, safe. The manageable number enhances dog-human conviviality to an extent not observable in nearby localities (there is no ABC programme). The nature of the place makes for smooth relations in other ways also. People who care for the dogs—train hawkers, shop owners, the station master, toto drivers, travellers, etc.—do not live there and so are not much troubled by barking at odd hours; nor can there be much confusion about whether they own the dogs and therefore all the mischief caused by them. The rural nature of the place also enhances coexistence through relaxation of rules. There are no ticket checkers, no one to enforce rules about smoking, playing cards, relaxing on the

overbridge, or feeding dogs. In the evenings especially, the station is used to socialise. Food is shared with dogs at the tea shops.

Over time the station has gone through many changes, much of which benefits its resident dogs but has made the place inhospitable to other creatures. About fifteen years ago one could from time to time find goats, cows, crabs, caterpillars, etc. on or near the platforms. Nowadays the station is largely devoid of plants and other critters. But there are more places where dogs can shelter. Human ideas have without a doubt shaped the world and altered more-than-human relations. But it is interesting to see that there are limits to our mastery over the world, even in places shaped by humans. In future, free-ranging dogs may not be present in public places. But for now, life continues as usual despite faraway court discussions.

The thorny question of sacrifice

The debates over free-ranging dogs foreground some important considerations, such as: Who has the right to exist in 'our' world? And, what measures are acceptable to bring about 'our' vision of society? One person shared a story of argument breaking out between the owners of a *roti* shop and a couple of customers over the feeding of dogs. The customers used to share food bought from the shop with some street dogs in front of the shop. The story was told to the researcher as an example of clashing human worldviews in urban areas where space is scarce. But we should not lose sight of the fact that our worldviews have serious impact on dog lives. Feeding can have unintended consequences. Dog fights can increase if feeders force them to encroach on each other's territories (Narayanan, 2016). Some people say that fights increase during and after unintended dog feasts—such as food waste dumped near wedding pandals or other big gatherings—as dogs from different areas converge. Critics of (nonhuman) animal welfare often dismiss dogs as vermin who consume waste generated by humans, as do cockroaches and rats. However, limiting our circle of sympathy to the 'human' is not an easy solution because even among humans some lives are valued more than others.

In India, mass killing of dogs has been done from time to time through brutal methods like poisoning, electrocution, and negligence (Karlekar, 2008). People justifying such actions often cite the prevalence of euthanasia in the West. But in India the sudden removal of free-ranging dogs may cause more problems for humans than it solves. It is known that sporadic killing has little long-term effect on dog population. In fact, the creation of vacuums increases conflict (Karlekar, 2008). So, to eradicate free-ranging dogs, systematic culling needs to be done all over the country and within a relatively short period of time. But there are over 60 million free-ranging dogs in India. And since the nation's waste management is already very poor, dealing with a dog massacre is likely to prove disastrous even from a human health perspective. It should also be remembered that dogs protect people in various ways. And their removal will negatively impact some sections of humans more than others. As with environmentalism, ideas and policies cannot simply be transplanted from the West (Guha, 1989); they need to be adapted to local conditions. The ABC programme is generally regarded as a conscionable approach to dog population control, and it would allow precious time to humans and dogs. Advocating on behalf of ABC, one Redditor posted:

Why should they guard ungrateful humans for generations who themselves don't like community dogs at all?

On the same thread, other comments stated that sterilisation protects dogs, and that if any problems are exacerbated by extinction of free-ranging dogs, the ill-effects are for humans to deal with. Scholars like Srinivasan (2013) and Narayanan (2016) warn against over-enthusiasm when promoting ABC. They point out that sterilisation is risky for dogs. The ABC programme is also risky for humans and wildlife since it means continued presence of free-ranging dogs, at least for a while. No matter how we weigh the pros and cons, the consequences of any decision will be distributed unequally among heterogeneous humans, dogs, and other lives. People sometimes make sarcastic comments about rural-urban difference when it comes to living alongside nonhuman animals. They joke that city people cannot tolerate dogs but they lecture rural people about the need to learn

coexistence with dangerous wildlife. The rural is often thought of as more inclusive of the nonhuman, so the problems of rural people are often neglected when it comes to free-ranging dogs. ABC units are generally in urban areas, but the rural stands to lose more due to unchecked dog population growth (Adhya, 2026). Rural communities have less easy access to healthcare and they harbour more biodiversity that may be threatened by dogs. Thus, there is an urban bias in dog governance efforts. Sadly, many Reddit users believe that relocation of dogs to jungles or villages is a good way of solving dog overpopulation in cities. Meanwhile, rural communities have already suffered due to nonhuman animal relocations from urban areas (Govindrajan, 2018; see also Bhan & Bose, 2020). When Turkey was trying to eradicate free-ranging dogs as a modernising nation, thousands of dogs were relocated to a hostile island. There they died from hunger, thirst, heat, and fighting. Later, many Turks believed that there were calamities suffered by the nation because of those dogs' curses (Alkan, 2016). '*Bhogoban achen*' (god exists), said a veterinarian's assistant, while injecting the researcher's pet with a vaccine, some years ago when Kerala was hit by some natural calamity after stories of horrific violence towards dogs had been making the rounds in the news. Such cries from the heart are far from rare. Yet, we must remember that dogs are one of many victims of the Anthropocene, and regardless of which road we favour, it is likely to draw the contempt of one god or another.

Concluding remarks

Since social media posts were analysed as part of this exercise, it seems prudent to mention that the nature of online spaces, too, can enhance divisions by creating echo chambers that keep out opposing viewpoints and make it difficult to empathise with the disagreeing other. Against the grain of polarisation, it is hoped that the present paper has been able to highlight diverse nuances of dog-human relations in present-day India without losing sight of the special vulnerability of dogs vis-à-vis human caprice. The study did not set out to make prescriptions about human-nonhuman relations, nor to accomplish the oft-touted goal of filling a gap in existing academic literature. It has been an attempt to contribute to a

complex and dynamic conversation regarding a problem with no easy solution. As so frequently happens in our quests to improve the world, one set of risks may simply be replaced by another. The researcher hopes to have done a somewhat adequate job of representing dogs, humans, and spaces as agential, non-monolithic entities in the politics of space.

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