

Metro

CITY CANINE: STERILISING STRAYS IS THE WAY TO DEAL WITH THE 'MENACE' ON STREETS

A dog's life for man's best friend

By Sugandha Pathak

The handful of animal welfare NGOs working with civic bodies are always in a state of resource and manpower crunch, and trifurcation of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi hasn't helped. A majority of these voluntary organisations came under the South Delhi Municipal Corporation—and splitting the MCD has slowed down the process of sterilisation and vaccination of street dogs in other areas.

"Recently, Frendicoes set up its branch in east Delhi, which did not have any NGO working for the strays after the trifurcation. North also has no NGO. As the NGOs facilitate the catching and sterilising of dogs, the lack of them is a challenge," says MCD public relations officer Yogendra Mann.

According to Mann, about 2.5 lakh dogs were sterilised and immunised in the city since 2003 till July this year. "The sterilisation and immunisation drive usually takes place once every three months. In 2004, an NGO did a survey where the total dog population was around 2.5 to three lakh," says Mann. "There is a court order that we can't kill dogs. We can vaccinate and sterilise them and then put them back in their territory." He says if their territory is changed, the strays attack due to fear.

To control the population of street dogs, the Society for Stray Canine Birth Control was formed in 2003, comprising NGOs, animal experts and veterinarians. Under this, NGOs are given Rs 445 for each stray they immunise, sterilise and release back to the animal's original territory.

The Animal Birth Control (Dog) Rules, notified in December 2001 under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960 prohibit the killing of strays except in special cases — when they become rabid or terminally ill. Even in such cases, procedures have to be followed. Besides, the law provides that strays can only be removed from their habitats for neutering and immunisation against rabies. Then they must be returned to areas from where they were picked up.

Anupama Sen, who heads Sonadi Charitable Hospital for Animals in Najafgarh, says ABC (animal birth control) rules must be followed without any compromise. "I make sure that I don't compromise on the medicines given to dogs for treatment. I might compromise a little bit on the food I give them, such as instead of rice I would give a cheaper option on some days," she says.

"But I have never compromised on their medicines. Financial crunch is always a problem. I have a debt of Rs 10 lakh. There is not much money coming in, though criticism that we are using charity money for other things comes in plenty," she says. The hospital on an average gets over 200 dogs for sterilisation and other treatment per day. Over 70 dogs abandoned by their owners have made the hospital their home. There are also sick and injured cats, as well as peacocks at the hospital.

NGO experts and MCD officials believe that the solution to what is termed as 'dog menace' is sterilisation. "Dogs usually mellow down after sterilisation even if they are on heat. But the mother will still be protective and may become aggressive around strangers, so people need to be

careful," says Mann.

Sonadi, which has been working in the field for over a decade, covers a decent area of the city. Situated in Najafgarh, its volunteers and dogcatchers make rounds of Dwarka, Utran Nagar, Nirmal and villages around Najafgarh. Sen, a resident of Chittaranjan Park, is also active in south Delhi.

"Our organisation and other NGOs working in tandem with the MCD don't charge anything unless someone wants to donate money, which doesn't happen too often. Apart from sterilising dogs, we also treat them of maggot infection, itching and cancer," says a volunteer with Sonadi.

Notice to animal NGO

The MCD is working with eight NGOs. Circle of Animal Lovers at Saket was black-listed from the MCD's list of NGOs and was served a show cause notice by the Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) and the MCD after complaints and inspection reports against its functioning. But Circle of Animal Lovers is still operating.

"Dogs usually mellow down after sterilisation even if they are on heat. But the mother will still be protective and may become aggressive"

Experts feel that in areas with open overflowing, garbage dumps or places where food is available readily, the number of stray dogs is high. In 2009, the High Court passed an order on feeding spots. The judge said that dogs must be fed "to keep them confined to a particular place, so as to subject them to sterilization/vaccination/ re-vaccination (as the effects of) vaccination does not last more than a year." The judge said that in the first instance, the sites where strays are to be fed should be identified by the AWBI. Delhi Police were directed to ensure that no harm is caused to volunteers who feed dogs.

"Feeding boards are being installed in some areas by the co-opted members of the AWBI working in tandem with resident welfare associations and police. Not all areas in Delhi have installed them yet, and it's only happening on priority in areas that went to court on this subject," says Mehta.

MCD workers find it difficult to trace sterilised and non-sterilised dogs, and NGOs complain of lack of vans to pick up the animals. Experts say although awareness about ABC is spreading, there is still a long way to go before the mindset of people changes towards stray animals. "If not with kindness then just treat all animals with respect, and they will respect you back," says Mehta.

"Every dog has its own personality. When they react aggressively, according to humans, it may just be a self-defence reaction or a response to a past experience," says Mehta, citing an example of a bitch in her area that used to run and bark



Approximately 2.5 lakh dogs were sterilised and immunised in the city since 2003 till July this year. DH PHOTOS/CHAMAN GAUTAM

at speeding cars. "Her pups were crushed under the wheels of a car. Even post-sterilisation she used to bark at cars. But when cars slowed down on seeing her and gave her that respect, she didn't bark. We often joked and named her 'traffic police'."

As far as the 'common reasoning' of non-vegetarian dogs being more aggressive goes, Mehta says that there is a distinction between dogs fed on raw meat (like slaughterhouse waste) and dogs fed on cooked meat and bones. "Dogs fed on raw meat may be a bit more aggressive because of their food habit. But such generalisation about dog behaviour or aggression being linked to their diet cannot be made, as dogs having descended from wolves are indeed scavenging animals. That's the way they are," adds Mehta.

Experts say that dog lovers can make things easy for NGOs and civic agencies by coming together and taking the responsibility of getting dogs in their colonies sterilised and vaccinated annually. "Then they should dispatch a letter to the RWA or past posters listing the benefits of such an activity, the laws and rights of street dogs, and do's and don'ts of behaving with dogs," she says.

Experts rubbished the story about city dogs being taken to other places during Commonwealth Games 2010. "Yes, NGOs and civic agencies did catch dogs and kept them in animal homes till the games were over. But we made sure that the dogs returned to their territories," says a Sonadi dogcatcher.

"There could have been some cases when the animals were placed at a shelter in Gurgaon. A few of them may have died there or run away from the shelter. Otherwise all of them were brought back."

Adopt them, give a bowl of food

Indian community dogs are healthier and more robust than their purebred cousins

By Ashpreet Sethi

Chamatkar is one of those lucky dogs who got saved from an accident and adopted as a pet.

"When I saw a puppy run over by a car near my house I immediately took her to hospital. When the doctor saved her, he said it is a chatmatkar (magic) that she is alive," says fashion designer Sanjana Jon, who adopted that dog some time ago.

Jon has four street dogs at her house and 20-25 dogs in her locality, who she takes care of. "They all came to me in different ways. Recently, I have shifted to a new place and I came across some 20 puppies outside my house. I saw one puppy getting bullied by others and when I observed for a while, I realised that she is deaf and dumb. So I took her in," she says.

One of her dogs was poisoned while another was wounded when she found them. "It hurts to see people ill-treating dogs. Even if you do not bring them inside, you can always give them one bowl of food every day. And if it does not hurt your pocket too much, get them vaccinated as they cannot take for themselves but need love."

Another Delhi resident, who does not wish to be named, has lived near Jawaharlal Nehru University for years. She wakes up at 5.30 am to feed 50-odd dogs on JNU campus every day.



Dog lovers agree that if one respects dogs, they will return the favour.

"It is not easy to do this as people do not like me, and consider me an outsider when I go there every day. But I feed them irrespective of all the opposition. We need to change mindsets and spread awareness about how citizens can take a step forward to help these dogs lead better lives," she says.

People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) has done several public education events with innovative visuals to raise awareness in Delhi about the importance of adopting Indian dogs.

"These kinds of activities draw people's attention to the issue in a fun way. We have also released many print public service announcements starring notable people like Imran Khan, Kalki Koechlin, Trisha Krishna, Gulshan Grover, Dino Morea, just to name a few, to promote the adoption of Indian dogs," says PETA India's Sachin Bangera.

He explains that pedigree dogs sold in pet shops are deprived of proper veterinary care, adequate food, exercise, love and socialisation. "Common health ailments in purebred dogs include breathing problems, cancer, heart disease, bleeding disorders, skeletal malformation and eye problems. In contrast, Indian community dogs are healthier and more robust than their purebred cousins," he adds.

Others point out that millions of dogs and cats suffer on the streets every year or languish in severely crowded animal shelters because there are not enough homes for them.

"We urge everyone to sterilise animals on the streets, and never buy but adopt a homeless animal. If ten people in a society adopt just one dog on the street he will not be a 'menace'," says Saurabh Gupta of People For Animals (PFA).

He says PFA gets several complaints from dog lovers who are being threatened for feeding and keeping dogs in their localities. "We should not kill dogs, and to control the overpopulation of dogs we need to promote sterilisation. People just need to call animal shelters, which will sterilise and bring the dogs back. Demanding more animals shelters is not the answer."

They also get scared like human beings, say vets

Due to fear on lonely stretches at night, dogs become more aggressive

By Jyotsna Singh

There are many dog lovers in Delhi, and they bring strays to the vets if they are hit or hurt. Veterinary doctors also get requests to treat dogs when they start creating problems for residents after dark.

"It's common to see a dog or a group of them bark at people after dark. This happens more in residential areas. Even local people who the dogs know and do not harm in the daytime are being barked at," says Dr Smita Panda, who runs a dog clinic in Kalkaji, south Delhi.

She says that like human beings, dogs feel unsafe and lonely when it starts to get dark.

"Till 9 pm one can see people moving around, and the lights outside houses are on. Thus, for a few hours after sunset Delhi is quite bright and lit. It's only after 9.30 or so that the lights start to go off. This induces a sense of insecurity among dogs," she says.

Dr Panda adds that deserted lanes also make dogs feel unsafe.

"Their barking on a lonely stretch at strangers and locals alike is an indication that they are feeling unsafe and going on the offensive to protect themselves," says Dr Panda.

She says she has been asked by people several times to try to treat dogs in the locality as late-night barking troubles residents, especially women and children.

Dr R V Sharma, veterinary doctor with Apollo Dog Clinic in Kirti Nagar, east Del-



Dogs barking on a lonely stretch at strangers and locals alike is an indication that they are feeling unsafe and going on the offensive to protect themselves.

hi, says dogs usually don't bite and are satisfied with barking and seeing the person leave.

"But it's true that more dog bite cases happen after 10 pm," says Dr Sharma, who treats eight to 10 dogs a month for accidents and other problems.

"We don't go out to treat them. There are enough dog lovers in Delhi who bring stray dogs if they see them suffering. We treat them for free, but the material for treatment has to be bought by the people who bring them," he says.

Dr Sharma adds that the treatment material is not very costly. Antibiotics for a

week cost Rs 50, while plaster can be done for Rs 100.

"What is important is that the dog is taken care of after leaving our clinic. They have to be provided food according to taste and the disease," he says. "If the person who has brought the dog is not familiar with handling dogs and has brought it out of love and care, then the person won't know the diet pattern of that particular dog. This creates problems when the dog is already unwell."

"One has to be patient for a day or two to understand the dog and care accordingly," says Dr Sharma.



Caring hands

I have never compromised on their medicines, though financial crunch is always a problem
Anupama Sen

It hurts to see people ill-treating dogs. Even if you do not bring them inside, you can always give them some food every day
Sanjana Jon

Strays can be included in society if people start considering them as a part of it
Maneka Gandhi

'No work takes place at govt animal homes'



Maneka Gandhi, MP, has built herself a formidable reputation as a no-holds-barred animal welfare activist. She agrees that the best way to deal with their natural lives healthily and harmlessly.

We all know that the condition of stray animals in most parts of the capital is bad. Stray dogs are perhaps more visible because of their high numbers. How do you think strays can be included in the structure of society?

In a city of two crore people, it is natural that stray dogs will be there on the streets. The stray dogs can be included in society's structure when people start considering them as a part of it. Their population has declined a lot in the city, and we are trying to ensure proper care and attention is given to stray dogs in distress. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi is also trying to ensure proper sterilisation of stray dogs and they are looking at it systematically — colonies after colonies.

How is your organisation People for Animals, which is India's leading animal advocacy group, keep a check on strays?

We house around 4,000 animals, including dogs, in our shelter. The Municipal Corporation of Delhi or Delhi Police or any other organisation — whenever they find animals in distress they immediately bring them to our organisation, where we provide proper treatment and care. On a

daily basis, we get around 100 animals in distress. For stray dogs, we ensure an effective sterilisation programme all across India. Street dogs are caught, operated upon, tagged and inoculated before being returned to their original areas to live out their natural lives healthily and harmlessly.

Is government help coming to your NGO?

We run the organisation on our own and do not get any aid from the government.

Do you think vaccination and sterilisation are the answer to what is called the stray dog problem?

Yes absolutely. When they are sterilised, they become less aggressive and don't bite. Stray dogs which are not sterilised give birth to pups on streets that die due to various reasons. Either they are crushed by vehicles or they die of starvation. Due to sterilisation, dog bites, from 36,000 annually, have come down to 8,000. And of these, 90 per cent are by pet dogs.

What about animal shelters? Are there enough in the capital?

There are seven non governmental organisations working in this field. However, there is only one animal shelter in the national capital. All the government animal shelters are technically open on paper but virtually no work takes place there. All animal shelters run by the animal husbandry department under Delhi government are almost empty, except the Moti Bagh centre.