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India's dog crisis warrants governance reimagination, less animal management

Nishant Kumar [1,2,3], Tim Coulson [3]

[1] DBT/Wellcome Trust India Alliance Fellow, National Centre for Biological Sciences, Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Bangalore. India
[2] THINKPAWS Sustainability Research Foundation, Delhi. www.thinkpaws.org
[3] Department of Biology. Life and Mind Building. South Parks Road, University of Oxford. United Kingdom. OX1 3E

Corresponding author emails: nishantk@ncbs.res.in | nishant.kumar@biology.ox.ac.uk | nishant.kumar@thinkpaws.org

Standfirst

The Indian Supreme Court's 2025 mandate to relocate millions of dogs exposed policy instability in cities where ecological realities, cultural practices, and institutional fragmentation collide. The crisis is less about animals and more about how urban governance fails to reconcile competing priorities, underscoring the collapse of the Indian coexistence model.

On August 11, 2025, the Indian Supreme Court (SC) directed authorities in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR)—an area encompassing approximately 4,500 km²—to capture and relocate up to 2.5 million free-ranging dogs from public spaces to (nonexistent) shelters within eight weeks[1,2]. The order sought to address rising dog-bite incidents—estimated at tens of millions annually—and India's disproportionately high rabies burden[3]. Within 11 days, however, the court revised its directive following public protests, petitions, and logistical objection[1]. By November 2025, SC again shifted position, mandating the removal of dogs from ~1.5 million schools, hospitals, and transport hubs while proposing campus-fencing and feeding restrictions[2]. Subsequent hearings in January 2026 exposed deep disagreements among stakeholders and the state's limited capacity to implement any version of the policy. This judicial volatility highlights a deeper malaise: a governance system attempting to solve an ecological problem[4] through administrative decrees rather than infrastructural reform.

Why did a policy ostensibly designed to protect public health trigger fierce opposition and rapid reversals? The answer lies not in the number and behaviour of dogs alone, but in a governance-system struggling to reconcile ecological realities, cultural practices, and institutional constraints.

1. Relocation mandate failure

The SC's relocation directive, motivated by the unfortunate mauling of kids by dog[1], faced immediate scrutiny. First, India lacks the infrastructure to house millions of dogs; shelter-based approaches are widely recognised as unscalable in such contexts[5]. Second, the directive effectively overrode existing Animal Birth Control (ABC) Rules, creating legal and operational confusion. Third, ecological processes undermine removal strategies: vacated areas are rapidly recolonised by other dogs (vacuum effect)[6], limiting long-term effectiveness[2,7]. Finally, mass sheltering poses severe risks to animal welfare and public health: such facilities could become hotspots for rabies, canine distemper, parvovirus, and respiratory infections (Fig. 1). More fundamentally, the mandate conflicted with deeply embedded cultural norms of coexistence and compassion[4], rooted in practices such as feeding and tolerance of free-ranging animals. These values coexist uneasily with rising public safety concerns, producing a policy landscape marked by contradiction and contestation[2]. The result is a familiar pattern: reactive interventions introduced under public pressure, followed by rapid policy reversals when they prove impractical.

1.1. The scale and geographic context

India hosts the world's largest population of free-ranging dogs, with tens of millions living alongside dense human populations. This coexistence produces significant public health risks, including rabies, while also reflecting broader urban dynamics such as waste generation, infrastructure deficits, and informal practices of animal care[3]. Delhi exemplifies the scale of the challenge: entangled urbanism of dense human populations coexisting with large free-ranging dog populations sustained by abundant urban waste and feeding practices, which intensifies everyday interactions and conflicts/diseases[2,8,9].

Recent research consistently highlights the role of waste management, vaccination, and sterilisation as the foundation of effective control strategies, while emphasising that fragmented implementation undermines their succes[6,10]. The persistence of the crisis, therefore, reflects not a lack of available solutions but a failure to implement them coherently across social and federal institutions. Tropical urbanity shares these challenges[3,10]. Recognising this broader context, the SC subsequently extended the purview of its August 11, 2025, directive, nationwide[1]. The pressing nature of dog-mediated zoonotic disease has prompted the World Health Organisation to establish a goal of eradicating dog-transmitted rabies by 2030[3].

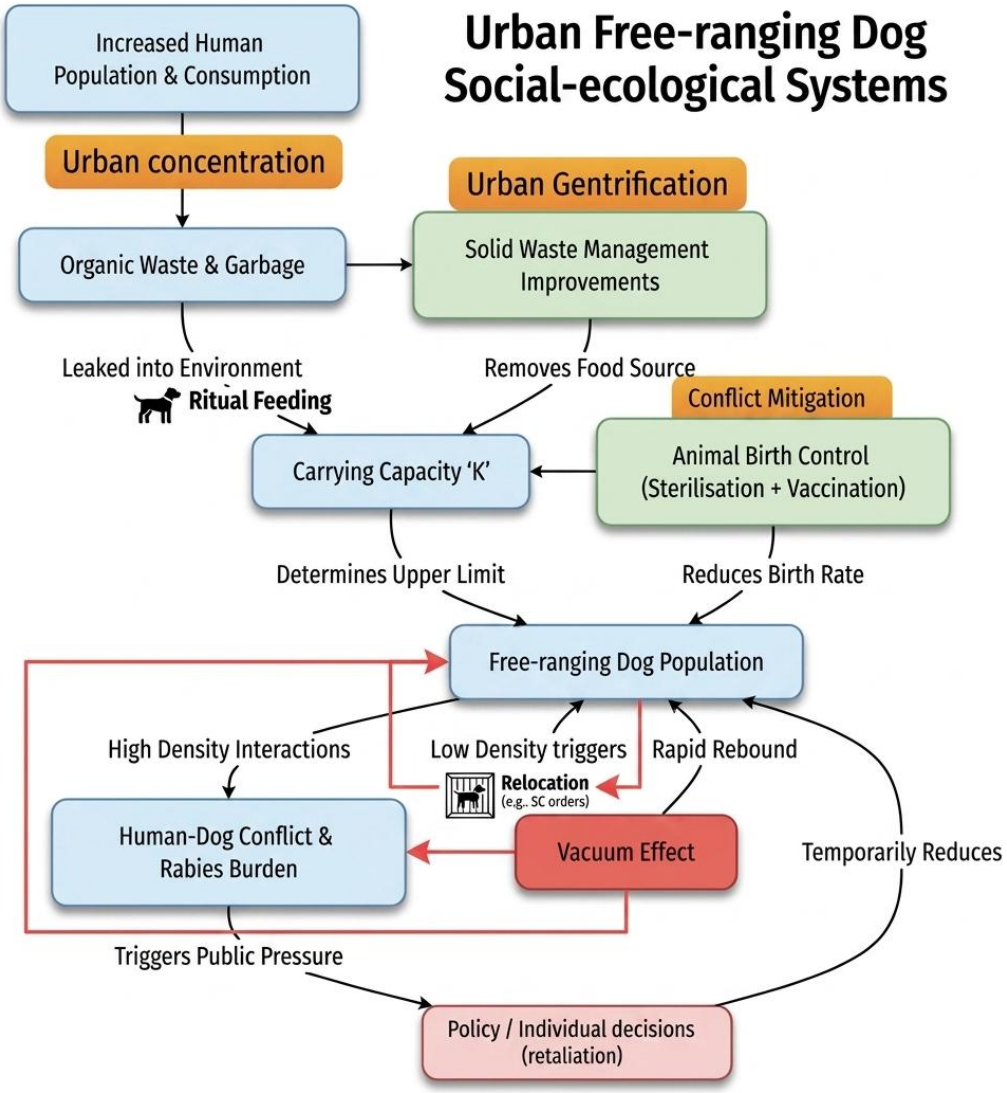

Fig. 1. The proliferation of free-ranging dog populations in the Global South represents a complex intersection of socio-economic development, urban waste metabolism inefficiency, and population ecology. Human-animal coexistence conundrums are often erroneously treated as a discrete animal control issue. The phenomenon is more accurately understood as a systemic symptom of rapid urbanisation where the management of organic solid waste has failed to keep pace with economic growth. ***This schematic*** illustrates the structural drivers behind urban dog populations. The central spine (in blue) depicts the resource flow: rapid urban concentration and increased consumption leak openly accessible waste in streets that elevate the regional dog carrying capacity (K). We contrast reactive interventions with structural solutions (Green Boxes). Retaliatory policies (relocation) trigger a biological feedback loop where the sudden drop in population (Vacuum effect[6] is rapidly negated by immigration and compensatory breeding, as the underlying food resources remain unchanged. **High-Leverage Interventions (Green Boxes):** Sustainable population control is achieved by targeting the system's inputs. **Solid Waste Management** reduces the Carrying Capacity (limiting the intrinsic growth rate), while **Animal Birth Control** reduces the recruitment rate.

1.2. Resource subsidies trap people and dogs

Dog ecology in Indian cities is inextricably tied to >150,000 metric tonnes of solid waste generated every day, with food waste averaging 50 kilograms per person annually[11]. Human handouts, alongside waste, are subsidies supporting elevated survival and reproduction of dogs in crowded spaces. Yet policy continues to mostly target animals rather than these drivers[12]. The SC ordered perturbations override religious convictions shared across communities[2,4], but also affect canine social hierarchies, potentially exacerbating aggression and conflicts (Fig. 1). Consequently, Indians with polarised opinions are discordant. We lack a mechanistic understanding of how day-to-day actions shape traits within regionally adapted FRD populations. Economic prosperity could ease urban crises, but patchy development in tropical cities and high cross-sector mobility frequently create unfamiliar human-dog interactions—especially where affluent areas border low-income communities—underlaying tension within shared spaces. The latter traps both people and dogs into vicious interaction loops, impacting public health[2,4,6,8,13].

While the urgency of conflict mitigation is undeniable, governance approaches ignore the demographic engine[2]. A common misconception suggests that adequately nourished and cherished dogs present minimal risk of biting. On the contrary, aggression frequently emerges as a significant issue in well-provisioned pet dogs. Research has linked aggressive offspring defence in commensal species with fitness benefits, the adaptive value that addresses the underlying behavioural bottleneck of choosing human proximity despite inherent risks[14].

2. Integrated solutioning

The parable of blind stakeholders examining an elephant

The dog crisis persists because different stakeholders address isolated aspects of the problem. Animal welfare advocates emphasise compassion, residents prioritise safety, and municipal agencies focus on operational constraints. Each perspective is valid, yet partial—perceiving fragmented aspects of reality that miss systemic complexity[4]. Without coordination, these fragmented approaches produce policy paralysis rather than resolution. Siloed advocacy yields polarised debates. Meanwhile, empirical evidence of successful implementation at a tropical megacity scale is nonexistent. Small-region successes—Goa, India[15] and Bhutan[16]—demonstrate feasibility but require adaptation to Delhi's extreme density and resource abundance. Below, we identify key stakeholder groups and their complementary contributions:

2.1. Most of us are dog lovers

Dog welfare advocates/agencies, tolerant residents, and casual-feeder people constitute the numerically dominant stakeholder group. This is evidenced by the fact that, if public sentiment favoured complete removal, political pressure would have mandated such interventions decades ago[4]. What dogs require are refuge areas offering shelter, water access, and opportunities to avoid human contact when desired—precisely what megacities' built-environment increasingly denies through infrastructure compression[2]. If feeding practices continue, caregivers must accept corresponding responsibilities: systematic Capture-Sterilise-Vaccinate-Return (CSVR) program[6,10], territorial monitoring to identify aggressive individuals requiring intervention, and, crucially, awareness that any form of resource provisioning influences behavioural repertoires, including territorial defence. The goal should be to prevent dependent populations of semi-owned street dogs concentrated around feeding stations[2].

2.2. Public safety constituencies have legitimate concerns

Individuals and families who have experienced dog attacks, parents concerned for children's safety (58% of all bite victims are under 15), elderly residents with reduced mobility, and anyone navigating unfamiliar neighbourhoods where territorial dog packs concentrate (e.g. blue-collar workers) have valid concern[3,10]. Poverty limits access to post-exposure prophylaxis, or political leverage[2]. To address socially divisive concerns, concerned citizens can contribute meaningfully by reporting genuinely dangerous or rabid individual dogs for targeted intervention. Additionally, animal safety advocates could demand infrastructure modifications, reducing unfamiliar, direct human-dog encounters; pedestrian pathways separated from dog congregation areas; and street lighting in high-risk zones that are multi-use urban streets[2,4].

2.3. Collaborative waste management and ecological/health surveillance

SC warranted "evidence-based Standard Operating Procedures", overlooking systematic neglect towards foundational science. Longitudinal studies identify how infrastructure impacts demography, and its subsequent effect on zoonotic disease persistence and spread[1]. Waste management engineers must collaborate with ecologists to quantify how infrastructure modifications affect dog demographics, movement patterns, and resource access, taking advantage of SC-directed removals/fencing as controlled experiments. This could identify causative links in population density, FRDs' access to waste, and spatially explicit aggression thresholds, especially in response to interventions. Finally, such analytical pipelines would forge surveillance networks, linking stakeholders in tracking zoonotic diseases. It will aid in zonal mapping and prioritisation of interventions that could most effectively disrupt disease persistence and transmission[4,10]. Multiple iterations shall translate into policy briefs accessible to stakeholders.

2.4. Religious leaders and mass feeding

Cultural and religious feeding practices represent deeply embedded customs that cannot be dismissed by regulatory fiat[4]. However, spiritual intentions do not exempt actions from ecological consequences. FRDs evolved as opportunistic scavengers, not as recipients of provisioned meals[2]. If feeding must continue as a spiritual/philanthropic imperative, it should be incorporated into broader management strategies, focusing away from high-traffic areas, in coordination with municipal CSVR. Religious leaders could transform public attitudes, by promoting genuine compassion that sometimes requires limiting provisioning[4,14].

3. Coexistence futures

Policy failure arises from ignoring urban pluralism and targeting dogs instead of systems. Cities like Delhi embrace Western infrastructure while maintaining cultural tolerance for commensal animals. This amalgamation has been creating novel social-ecological configurations that lack established management frameworks[4]. However, the same prosperity that generates waste can utilise and link cultural compassion for animals with technology that aids management, spatial planning, and epidemiological surveillance in a feedback loop. Such measures shall evidently yield and guide systems-level solutions at scale.

The "human-dog coexistence problem" serves as a proxy for deeper questions about who occupies urban space, whose needs receive priority, and how development mediates (unequal) distribution of benefits and ecological burdens of multispecies coexistence across social strata[2,4]. Inadequate settlement of these competing priorities permeates environmental injustice. Sustainable coexistence requires uncomfortable honesty: compassion divorced from ecological realism viciously perpetuates human and animal suffering. Resolution warrants integrated frameworks like One Health that are adequately funded, professionally implemented, and sustained across electoral cycles. Indians can transform this crisis into a model, wherein animal well-being, public safety, and environmental justice converge.

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Ethical Statement

The ethical approval for dog study was via permit number 2023/ER/Canine Conundrums/01, from Thinkpaws, with validity: 29.04.2023 to 31.12.2027 and the M.Sc. dissertation committee of Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh. Since this counting was non-invasive and free-ranging dogs are not under the Wildlife Protection Act, no specific permission from the Department of Forest and Wildlife, Government of NCT of Delhi was required.

Declaration of AI use

This article's sections were revised for grammatical mistakes and were provided rewording suggestions. The software tool 'Grammarly' (App version 1.2.155.1657, embedded in the Google Doc.) was used between 07.11.2025 and 02.05.2026.

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