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The Indian Street dog crisis and multispecies coexistence in tropical urban futures

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Preface

Cities in the Global South struggle with human-animal coexistence conundrums, e.g., in South Asia, old and new collide: people raise livestock informally and feed animals within heterogeneously developed, juxtaposed patches. Digital economies boom amidst threats from waste piles that cause zoonotic diseases and conflicts, as exemplified by the ongoing free-ranging dog crisis in India. Humanity's oldest companion now suffers from misguided compassion and rising conflicts. Indian Courts, attempting to address the problems, have overlooked the root cause—food subsidies. Reactive management must yield to ecological urban planning, acknowledging multispecies communities sharing complex, interconnected lives across space and time.

Main

Urban conflicts with free-ranging animals are reshaping human-nature relationships in the Global South[1]. Two dominant frameworks—Nature-based Solutions (*NbS*) and One Health—have the promise to address these challenges. The *NbS* advocates for protecting and restoring ecosystems to tackle climate change, food security, and disaster risks[2]. One Health emphasises the systemic interconnections between human, animal, and environmental well-being[3]. But available research discourse on both frameworks overlooks the functional multispecies relationships embedded in South Asian cities, where animals offer essential ecosystem services often invisible to modern urban planning[4,5].

Way before the rise of modern infrastructure, tropical urban ecology has been co-constructed by humans, domestic animals and opportunistic species[5,6]. Vultures, black kites, crows, dogs, monkeys, pigs, cattle, etc., have been operating at a dynamic interface shaped within behavioural regimes modulated by human cultural practices and beliefs. Commensals provided critical services—scavenging organic waste, reducing disease vectors, and managing refuse at no cost to communities[4]. This traditional multispecies coexistence was not accidental but emerged from centuries of mutual adaptation, recently termed co-cultures, in human-modified environments[7].

Rapid urbanisation has created an inflexion point for these cross-species ties[8]. For instance, urban expansion offers abundant foraging opportunities through waste and other subsidies, but simultaneously restructures inter and intraspecific interactions and creates novel selection pressures by altering how nonhumans read environmental cues for decision-making[5,9,10]. On the other hand, for humans, animals that were previously valued for ecological/cultural salience[5] are increasingly seen as nuisances or health threats[11]. Consequently, behavioural responses in traditional settings turn maladaptive in modern contexts[12]. With up to 65% of people living in urban areas occupying less than 4% of the Earth's terrestrial surface, this tension intensifies[8,13].

Free-ranging dogs—humanity's oldest nonhuman companion[14]—exemplify this crisis. In India, dogs exist in a volatile space between shortsighted kindness (feeding rituals without population management), escalating conflicts (bites and fear of rabies), and ecological oversight (their waste-scavenging roles and negative impacts on wildlife are often overlooked)[15–17]. Recent Indian Supreme Court (SC) directives, issued between August 2025 and January 2026, faced fierce backlash despite aiming to protect public health, revealing deep contradictions in how we value animals within and beyond human use landscapes[4,11,15]. This perspective advocates for incorporating multispecies coexistence concerns into urban planning for tropical landscapes[6], transitioning from reactive crisis management to anticipatory design that acknowledges complex ecological entanglements and prepares for potential conflicts and diseases[4,18,19].

The tropical urban chaos

A viral video from July 2025[20] showed a Delhi woman booking a motorbike taxi for 180 meters, done to avoid stray dogs on her street. The incident drew reactions online, but it reveals a deeper crisis in urban India[21–23]. This is not merely about fear or convenience. It exposes how FRDs, once integrated into urban ecosystems as waste scavengers, now trigger anxiety, aversion, and conflicts[4,6,23,24].

FRDs exemplify the growing contradictions about competing priorities in multispecies South Asian cities. It involves people exhibiting cultural tolerance, but they also negotiate aggressive encounters, based on taxa, space or season[4,22,25]. This paradox—affection mixed with aversion[20,26]—defines human relationships with multiple urban animals[1]. FRDs are erroneously perceived passive and fed. But dog populations respond to gradients in resource availability[15,17,27,28]. When food is abundant, but space, veterinary care, and waste management are not, dog numbers surge[17,26,29]. Inter and intraspecies interactions intensify, culminating in territorial instabilities that likely feed into aggression, disease spreads, and conflicts[30–32].

The chronology of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi's (MCD) trifurcation in 2012, followed by its subsequent unification in 2022[33], serves as an exemplar of broader shifts in urban governance and animal management. These periods have represented a crucial decade of infrastructural transformation, particularly concerning waste management. For instance, the SC directive[34] of 2000 mandated the MCD to identify alternatives to the three existing sanitary landfill sites, yet it remains unimplemented. Considering significant variability across areas previously under respective Eastern, Northern, and Southern units of MCD, departmental restructuring and fragmentation have generated jurisdictional ambiguity, accompanied by shifting priorities[33,34]. Consequently, public health, veterinary services, waste management, and urban planning frequently operate in isolation. Technical expertise in urban ecology is notably limited[4]. While policies are developed based on Western cities[35], a deficit in interdisciplinary rigour regarding human-animal dynamics constrains successful replications[15]. In addition, monitoring systems, when implemented, typically capture episodic snapshots rather than the longitudinal data essential for adaptive management[36,37].

Neither the *NbS* nor the One Health frameworks are adequately conceptualised to address the dynamic nature of human relationships with other biota in the Global South[4,5]. For instance, dogs' functional role in waste disposal, which was potentially the cornerstone for this unique cross-species relationship[14], is progressively becoming obsolete since food production entered a phase of surplus[16,26]. Wealthy urban centres can account for the full daily dietary demands of FRDs[15,38]. However, inequitable resource allocation contributes to food wastage within and between variably developed regions, modulated by changing access animals have for food-subsidies[4,39]. Problems stemming from inefficient supply chains, storage issues, political instability, and economic barriers thus create a highly variable geography of FRDs' dependence on human refuse[29,32,40]. These are profoundly related to the World Health Organisation's mandate of removing dog-mediated rabies[41] by 2030. Currently, suggestions about handling FRDs as disease vectors (rabies and other zoonoses) through capture-neutering-vaccination and, most crucially, returning (CNVR) them to their original territories remain silent about the demographic engine: waste, intentional feeding, and infrastructure failures in the developing world[15,42]. The consequences ripple beyond visible street encounters into free-ranging animal/wildlife social systems, affecting public health, municipal budgets, and ecological networks we barely comprehend[16,17,23,26,32,38].

Numbers exhibit a crisis in plain sight

The scale of India's human-dog coexistence crisis is staggering. Up to 20 million dog bite incidents occur annually[36], a figure that has expectedly risen in recent decades. Rabies kills approximately 20,000 people per year in India, accounting for 36% of global rabies deaths. These are indicators of systemic failure in managing multispecies coexistence[36].

India has the world's largest FRD population, estimated at 60 million in 2008[36]. The FRD crisis extends beyond human health: dogs prey on threatened wildlife like kiang *Equus kiang*, Himalayan serow *Capricornis sumatraensis thar*, including the critically endangered Great Indian Bustard[43], of which fewer than 150 individuals survive. They transmit canine distemper to wild carnivores, e.g., recently, it reduced the Gir lion population[44] by 30%. They compete with other scavengers and mesopredators, altering food web dynamics in both urban and peri-urban landscapes. Reportedly, pack hunting behaviour enables FRDs to take fairly large prey, expanding their ecological niche[5] beyond opportunistic scavenging[32,45]. Conservation initiatives, despite the presence of zoonotic risks at land-use ecotones spanning from urban centres to protected territories, tend to prioritise the preservation of wild habitats[46]. Consequently, they often overlook the management of subsidised facultative scavenger populations that typically inhabit the periphery of the several small protected areas found throughout South Asia[4,18,41,46].

An evolving experiment in coexistence

Dogs are the only vertebrate species that followed human migration out of Africa into every climate zone, since the human niche expansion 70,000 years ago[47]. Larson notes[14,48], while we do not know exactly when domestication happened, this taxon's genetic distinctness and stability despite continuous proximity to wild canids is noteworthy[49]. Prior research has designated dog-wolf hybrids an "evolutionary doomed valley" between two adaptive peaks–they are neither good dogs nor good wolves. This resistance to backsliding into wildness proves how thoroughly dogs and humans have shaped one another. In 300 years, humans created over 400 dog breeds, fine-tuning them for companionship, work, and aesthetics[14]. We accomplished this feat because dogs' ancestors adapted their behaviour in ways that matched inter- and intraspecific social changes[50], eventually cohabiting with people. This mutual shaping, where selection pressures operate not on one species but on what they do together, represents co-evolution at its most intimate[7].

We know dogs intimately—and barely at all. Breed genetics have been dissected to explain labradors, danes and pugs[14,48,51]. However, approximately 800 million FRDs[21] inhabiting tropical ecosystems from villages to cities remain poorly understood: *what does their abundance tell us about how tropical cities function*? These are not simply strays. They are the world's most abundant carnivores, occupying an overlapping niche between the wild and domesticated, dependent on human resources but autonomous, ecologically[45]. Such traits simultaneously make them ecological and social keystones, and public health hazards, considering threats posed by daily nuisance from barking, chasing, and the burden of bites that cause rabies. But FRDs also consume organic waste that would otherwise rot in streets, reducing disease vectors and management costs. This dual reality confounds how dogs are perceived in developing societies with deteriorating ecological systems[16,26,45].

Canine populations—dogs, jackals, and occasionally wolves and foxes[32,45]—are woven into daily South Asian life[31]. FRDs rest on pavements, move through markets, and investigate garbage heaps. To some, they are familiar elements of the urban landscape[4,32,38]. To others, including many dog enthusiasts who encounter unfamiliar FRDs, they represent a daily risk[26,38,52]. The human-dog dynamic in urbanising tropics is progressively becoming contradictory[4,38,39]. Others, like the woman in that viral video[20], might have to go to absurd lengths to avoid them, based on previous encounter histories. Progressive compaction of urban infrastructure, typical for cities like Delhi[25] forces dogs onto roads[38] (Fig. 1). Waste and ritual feeding anchor them to human spaces. Dogs respond by becoming territorial, by guarding feeding spots, apparently perceived as street sentinels. FRD vigilance, which traditionally shaped cross-species ties, now faces radically new selection pressures from human/vehicular traffic in streets. FRDs now respond to an increasingly complex array of benefits and threats, which perpetuate conflicts[16,23,26,38,40,45,52].

Humans have lived alongside dogs and other commensals for millennia, yet free-ranging multispecies coexistence remains unsolved in cities[14,41] (Fig.1). Unfortunately, the absence of longitudinal research on FRD demographic responses driven by food subsidies has been filled by casual, pet-dog behaviourists. Their misconceptions—suggesting the possibility of absolute control over FRDs—often help people dismiss the street dog crisis[38]. The risk of commuting in Indian cities signals a shift in mutual street behaviours in response to environmental changes[15]. FRDs are transitioning from village scavengers that negotiated relatively higher resource unpredictability. In rural settings, dogs roam(ed) widely[45], scavenging dispersed waste and occasionally hunting. Such norms of resource acquisition are associated with territorial dynamics that differ from those in current cities[38,45]. Limited insights about how dogs negotiate intra-specific socialities[50] in the built environments affect cross-species human-dog ties, obscuring long-standing *NbS* benefits[2] and, thus, One Health prerogatives[3].

Nature employs parsimonious strategies within biotic communities to facilitate organisms in attaining comprehensive life-history goals[12]. For example, the opportunistic responses of black kites (*Milvus migrans*) in Delhi, which encompass individual-level habitat selection[39] and their resultant population-level outcomes[53], and behavioural responses[25] are concurrently linked to the same urban covariates: access to food-subsidies, built environment and green cover. However, managing multispecies coexistence in a modern urban setup is dysfunctional because humans intervene selectively. We frequently treat symptoms, ignoring ecological causation. Feeding increases commensal population[53], including FRDs, against the backdrop of poor implementation of CNVR. The expansion of impervious surfaces and contemporary infrastructure increasingly disregards the traditional coexistence choices that enabled tolerance of nonhuman species[54]. Our comprehension of how built environments predispose animals to conflict with humans is nascent, e.g., black kite breeders that benefit from ritually tossed meat by Muslims are more likely to attack humans when nesting at the level of balconies in Delhi[25]. This warrants urban planning that anticipates how structural spatio-temporal changes affect demographic and behavioural dynamics. A lack of ecological foresight necessitates quick fixes from policymakers and administrators that currently fluctuate between indulgence and aggressive reactions[15,31,52].

Fig. 1. Urban infrastructure as a behavioural scaffold[25]: structuring canine degrees of freedom and inter-pack dynamics. This image depicts a busy street intersection in an Indian city, where multiple free-ranging dog packs coexist in proximity to humans, commercial stalls, and traffic corridors. The presence of Packs 1, 2, 3, and 4 in distinct spatial zones illustrates how infrastructure shapes the degrees of socio-behavioural interactions among canine groups. While Pack 2 is aligned along a single road segment and exhibits limited, bidirectional interaction, Packs 1, 3 and 4—situated at the crossroad—are positioned at a convergence zone, increasing their degrees of interaction freedom for inter-pack and human encounters. This spatial ecology predisposes the socio-behavioural interface between dogs, other commensals and humans, forming both conduits and barriers[50]. While some humans view these animals as benign or sacred beings worthy of feeding, others perceive them as threats to safety and mobility. This contradiction underpins a multispecies coexistence paradox. Affording food—whether through ritual feeding or waste—induces dogs to respond with heightened alertness and site fidelity, creating "sentinel" effects that are variably interpreted from territorial aggression to protection. This schematic encapsulates urban entanglement by illustrating how infrastructure implicitly structures canine socioecology. Spatial constraints influence mating, aggression, alliance formation, and feeding hierarchies, which remain poorly understood in existing urban animal management frameworks[50]. [*Image generated utilising Gemini AI to clearly and simultaneously represent all environmental elements.*]

The evolutionary trap: kindness with a catch

The practice of feeding commensal animals is growing in prevalence globally[54]. It stems from compassion, often tied to beliefs about *karma* or *dharma*[4,25], which could have implications on cross-species reciprocity that maintain mutual tolerance[55,56]. Feeding rituals operate on the emotional immediacy of gratification about socio-cultural beliefs[4,5]. In modern contexts[4], nonetheless, good intentions that are ecologically incoherent create problems. In cities, e.g., in Delhi, per capita waste production has increased by 300% since the turn of the century. Meanwhile, the capital has overseen similar growth in human and dog populations and the expansion of built-up areas[29,38,57,58]. Regions in South Asia have long-standing issues with unsegregated, ephemeral garbage accumulations[4,29]. Densely populated areas with debris-strewn streets, where people feed commensals, increase and modify human-dog interactions. Crowded multi-use streets are escalating public apprehension about FRDs[32,45].

The consequences spiral and vary, based on local situations: people avoid streets, and some spaces at certain hours; some carry sticks or pelt stones for self-defence, etc.,[20,38], which further complicate behavioural repertoire, based on interaction patterns that perpetuate an arms race[50,55,56]. Unfortunately, committed feeders (some feeding up to 100s) poorly comprehend FRDs' investment criteria in aggression, especially when space, time and feeder predictably converge[26,32,38]. Multiple studies, including the work on kites in Delhi, have shown that constant human exposure, while foraging in proximity, reduces the fear animals have of people[54,59]. In such situations, FRDs may bark, chase, or bite when exhibiting offspring defence (e.g., see[59]), or when they are deliberately or inadvertently cornered—behaviours typically displayed by nursing females and/or dominant individuals. Unlike how committed feeders justify their actions to help reduce conflicts, such food subsidies attract dogs to streets, who guard them to claim higher access to food and associated resources (Fig. 1). The behavioural exhibits frequently extend an infrastructure of protection to committed feeders[6], who may also feel benefited from FRDs' "guarding" of premises. However, given that urban thoroughfares serve as multi-use spaces that fluctuate with time and location, dogs are frequently subjected to persistent and concurrent cycles of feeding and care, as well as regrettable neglect or outright cruelty[26,38,45,54].

The core issue is not the compassionate acts themselves, but rather executing casual feeding divorced from the One Health vision[17,22,38,40]. The practice of providing food to FRDs without concurrently implementing CNVR and spatial planning diminishes the ecological benefits of scavenging services[42]. Dogs reproduce rapidly when food is abundant. A fed population without animal-birth control (ABC) measures covering 70% members re-establishes quickly, nullifying CNVR/removal. The Indian situation exemplifies the complexity of a growing and contentious relationship[23,26,42,45]. While the country is extraordinarily diverse, there is profound homogeneity in how different communities tolerate animals[4]. About 50% of India's population now lives in district headquarters—roughly 800 centres experiencing economic transformation. Simultaneously, 87% of Indians never leave their birth district[60]. Thus, people maintain locally evolved ways of coexisting with dogs while sharing broader cultural attitudes about animals[4,25,38].

District-centred prosperity[60] is frequently associated with deliberate feeding[38], whose consequences on pack dynamics are unknown. Such acts of kindness constitute an evolutionary trap for coexisting people and FRDs, given the high incidence of pups and adults being fatally struck by vehicles[26,38]. Evolutionary traps refer to rapid environmental changes, often driven by human activity, causing organisms to prefer resources—such as food, habitats, or mates—that reduce their survival and fitness, even when better alternatives exist[61].

Multispecies well-being warrants systemic approaches

Feeding free-ranging animals enhances breeding success and survivorship of offspring until fledging/weaning[39]. It affects spatial behaviour and social structure[62,63]. The increasing per capita income in tropical urban centres, such as Delhi, which currently holds the highest rank amongst Indian megacities, has led to a surge in the ritualistic feeding of dogs and other animals[4,38], whose implications on population[53] and behavioural dynamics[25,59] remain undocumented[4,58], except for bite statistics[36].

Furthermore, individuals who meet the dogs' complete daily dietary requirements, typically residing in middle or higher-income areas, generally avoid the detrimental effects of aggressive territorial encounters. This contrasts with blue-collar workers; affluent individuals tend to move predictably within urban environments, owing to the stability of their residential, professional, and recreational zones[38]. Moreover, wealthier communities frequently outsource feeding/care through informal arrangements. This spatial and social buffering displaces conflict costs, while multistorey urban infrastructure simultaneously restructures and redistributes encounter risks across urban settings (*unpublished data*). Conflict perceptions among urban residents often depend on exposure frequency to unfamiliar dogs. Socioeconomically disadvantaged, particularly those commuting on foot or using bicycles/two-wheelers, face disproportionate vulnerability[38,64].

Given that feeding congregates dogs at specific points, such as temple premises, market peripheries, and residential communities (Fig. 1), these spatial responses significantly determine the crisis[25,38,59]. The state authorities and other agencies attempting to limit populations with CNVR[42] miss the underlying spatial responses, modulated by feeding patterns and waste dispersal[37]. Misplaced empathy[25] that prioritises individual gratification over both animals' long-term well-being and ecological significance simultaneously affects human, animal, and environmental health, a phenomenon I will subsequently elaborate upon[1,4,5]. State agencies prioritise visible sterilisation drives in wealthier colonies while neglecting the demographic drivers in adjacent resource-poor areas. Such disjunct measures meet failure[39], since new dogs move in, or existing dogs breed faster to fill the vacuum. Finally, sterilised dogs can still be a public health concern for years, if feeding/waste is ensured[32].

Discussing the contrast between tiger conservation[46] and dog well-being here is instructive. Tiger conservation management rests on scientific foundations that define territorial requirements, prey densities, corridor connectivity, and community engagement protocols. Conservation policies, despite acknowledged shortcomings[65], reflect this ecological understanding[46]. Despite the empathy feeders exhibit, we lack a comparable framework for FRDs, considering ecological and public health concerns[3,18,37,42]. We further lack data about the consequences of temporary and permanent removals of individual FRDs on dog social structures[50].

Meanwhile, rapid urban expansion is transforming socio-cultural profiles[4,5], which in turn affects tolerance for free-ranging animals[25]. We do not know how many dogs a neighbourhood can support before territorial aggression escalates, how waste density sustains large FRD populations, or how feeding patterns affect space use and breeding success[39]. This knowledge gap has consequences, with interventions that remain guesswork; sterilisation programs operate without data on population turnover rates or immigration from surrounding areas[17,42]. Policy formulation and execution that operate in an empirical vacuum will

either underperform or backfire. Each domain—public health, conservation, urban development—operates in isolation[4], missing the systemic nature of the problem. The ecological and health crises are symptoms of this deeper dysfunction[4,60].

To start with, we lack systematic research on how dogs navigate their dual social worlds[5]: conspecific relationships and human interactions[22]. Critical questions that remain empirically unaddressed: *What environmental or social cues trigger territorial defence versus tolerance*? *How do dogs assess threats from humans—is it individual recognition, contextual cues, or learned group behaviour*? *How does the dispersion of food-subsidies shape pack cohesion by affecting micro-scale habitat quality? What factors determine site-fidelity and dispersal of dogs, and how do these decisions relate to age, sex and social rank*[50]? For instance, vaccination campaigns that treat dogs as randomly distributed individuals miss how disease spreads through social networks and territorial boundaries[50,62,63]. Urban design that fragments dog territories, e.g., fencing requested by the SC in November 2025, without understanding ranging patterns and social-ranks, can intensify human-dog conflict[35].

Theoretical bases of multispecies coexistence

Urban spaces create profound behavioural complications for breeding FRDs, as these are not random strays but form packs, employing innate and learned strategies refined over shared living alongside humans[45,48,66]. FRDs are behaviourally attuned to factor human presence as a signal for food availability from deliberate feeding or accessible garbage (e.g., see[39]). But there is limited work on ecological variations of these cross-species behavioural associations, e.g., *how does deliberate feeding in variable ecological settings affect territorial attachment to people and/or their locations*? *Does provisioning heighten boldness or aggression toward unfamiliar humans/nonhumans that approach feeding zones*? *How do dogs reconcile pack hierarchies and access to resources, since humans*[50,62,63]*, rather than natural prey in defended territories, determine food availability and distribution*? Currently, our folk assumptions[5] far exceed empirical knowledge about FRD populations and behaviour, with consequences on coexistence.

To understand the mechanics of this cross-species dependency, we must look at eco-evolutionary trade-offs. Robert Trivers' parent-offspring conflict theory[67] offers a useful lens to comprehend the impacts of provisioning dynamics at the human-dog interface. Trivers proposed that parents and offspring have asymmetric interests: offspring benefit from extended parental investment while parents benefit from reallocating resources to future reproduction. In Delhi, female FRDs—frequently malnourished—rear large litters, in areas where human support is highly variable (Fig. 2). Provisioning alters this calculus. When humans supplement food, pup survival initially increases, extending the duration mothers must nurse and defend larger litters. Consequently, this intensifies maternal investment costs while simultaneously introducing a behaviour dilemma[59]: lactating females must navigate conflicts between accepting food from humans and defending pups against perceived threats from those same provisioners, turning the act of feeding into a trigger for conflict[25].

The complications deepen when pups themselves interact with human feeders. Young dogs imprint on provisioners, following them across streets and roadways where feeding occurs (*unpublished data*). This developmental attachment, combined with the prevalence of roadside provisioning, exposes pups to vehicle strikes[38]. Tragic accidents result not from maternal neglect but from learned associations between humans, pups/adults that gesture food-begging, and specific locations that happen to coincide with traffic corridors[23,26]. Pups that survive face a subsequent challenge: reconciling social bonds with their mother and pack with dependencies on individual human feeders whose identity is obscured by varying traffic[22].

We lack data connecting these physiological and social stressors to behavioural outcomes in FRDs. For instance, *how do lactating females balance the aggression necessary for pup defence with the tolerance required to access human-provided food*? *What happens when provisioning ceases abruptly—do dogs conditioned to human dependency exhibit heightened aggression or anxiety*? *How does early imprinting on human feeders affect adult territoriality and human-directed behaviour, e.g., begging gestures*? These questions matter because dogs are large carnivores with frequently reported cases of major injuries and mauling to humans, livestock and wildlife[17,25,32,44,59]. Behavioural dysregulation born of conflicting selection pressures[59]—accept humans for food versus defend against threats—creates dangerous unpredictability that sits at the heart of multispecies coexistence conundrums. A vicious cycle emerges, where suffering begets more suffering. As a result, territorial behaviours that intensify around feeding zones often misfire, generating conflicts with pedestrians, blue-collar workers, other dogs and nonhumans[38,59].

Fig. 2. Maternal investment conflicts in urban environments: A free-ranging mother dog nursing her litter on an Indian street exemplifies the complex resource allocation dilemmas. The visibly malnourished mother supports multiple offspring while navigating unpredictable anthropogenic food sources and territorial pressures. This scene illustrates the "behavioural bottleneck"[59] where parental investment strategies evolved for natural environments become maladaptive in human-dominated landscapes. Human feeding interventions often target juvenile animals directly, inadvertently intensifying parent-offspring conflicts by disrupting traditional resource transfer patterns. The mother requires approximately three times more calories than her offspring to sustain lactation[68], yet well-intentioned feeding practices frequently prioritise the more conspicuous juveniles. This triangulated resource dynamic—between maternal investment, offspring demands, and human intervention—demonstrates how urban environments create novel selection pressures that challenge conventional approaches to animal well–being and population management. Understanding these complex behavioural ecologies becomes essential for developing effective coexistence strategies in rapidly urbanising regions. [*Image generated utilising Gemini AI to clearly represent all environmental elements.*]

Ecology of coexistence, ethics and legality

India and other developing tropical regions are in the midst of an escalating public-health crisis driven by changing multispecies coexistence[3,4,18,37], yet policy responses have become increasingly reactive and scientifically unmoored. To address this issue, recently, the SC issued contradictory mandates for FRDs, reversing orders four times between August 2025 and February 2026. The original directive to relocate ~2.5 million dogs from the National Capital Region—an area of 4,500 km^2—to (non-existent) shelters within eight weeks was rescinded two days later, following nationwide protests and petitions by individual dog lovers and organisations. With its August 22, 2025, directive, the SC has nationalised the regional mandate prescribed by the Delhi High Court (DHC)[35]. DHC attempted to resolve the FRD crisis in 2009 by creating designated feeding areas[69], which contradicts basic ecological principles of territoriality and typically exacerbates conflicts (Fig. 1, 2 and 3). Approaches to coexist with FRDs inhabit two parallel realities: visible acts of kindness masking invisible cycles of suffering.

Euphemistically termed "purging", the latest position of the SC warrants immediate removal of dogs from ~1.5 million schools, hospitals, and public transport zones across the country, while encouraging fencing to prevent re-entry and banning public feeding (except at designated spots)[35]. This ignores infrastructural challenges, financial constraints, and the behavioural dynamics that could further drive agonistic dog-human encounters[50]. Fencing institutions does not address why dogs congregate near these spaces—often because of accessible waste, deliberate feeding, or food-begging around predictable human activity zones. The order is unlikely to significantly reduce bite frequencies or rabies transmission without addressing underlying attractants[15]. The SC's subsequent orders in November 2025 and ongoing deliberations with various parties in January 2026 have revealed the limitations of reactive policymaking disconnected from ecological realities. The top court is currently attempting to find a middle ground between mass dog removal and animal well-being concerns[35].

The policy deadlock arises not solely because millions are impacted by FRD conflicts, but concurrently because millions do not like to see starving animals[15,38]. Thus, propositions to displace FRDs are likely to be ineffective, given that the dogs acquire much of their food at garbage points and feeding stations[15]. Extending human-FRD coexistence, if it becomes a socio-legal choice for India, warrants approaches that acknowledge how ritual feeding creates unintended consequences[4]. Actions perceived as charitable—habitually feeding street dogs—have been creating socio-legal stalemate, extended in the form of protests in streets[20,35]. We create an "illusion of kindness" that normalises dog presence in hazardous environments, exposing them to vehicular trauma, pathogen transmission[4], and territorial aggression that affects humans, FRDs and other animals alike[25].

The convergence of casual sentimentality and genuine concern for complete animal well-being is predicated on positive reciprocal behaviours from dogs conditioned to specific human providers[9,22]. Such misconceptions among laypeople lead to the inaccurate presumption that feeding concurrently guarantees both canine nutrition and public safety. Coexistence foresight requires reconceptualising human-dog relationships through population dynamics, resource dispersion, spatial behaviour, and multispecies ethics[15,23,26,38]. Currently, municipal authorities and non-governmental organisations across Indian cities operate without baseline ecological assessments[35]. We do not understand how administrative decisions, like the 2012 MCD trifurcation, created heterogeneous resource landscapes sustaining free-ranging populations[39,53]. Finally, demographic analyses focus on crude population counts[17] rather than age-structure dynamics, reproductive rates, mortality patterns, and spatial distribution across urban microhabitats[36,37,52].

The legal institutions[35] are attempting to establish coexistence mandates that overlook prevalent compassion[4], despite the fear instilled by animals attacking people[25]. This policy volatility prompts retaliations, exposing unaddressed gaps in social-ecological relationships spanning informal economies, waste management systems, community feeding practices, and territorial arrangements[4,5]. Culling is not a possibility under the Indian culture of non-violence (*Ahimsa*) and legal premises[15]. Against such a complex and vast backdrop, the SC is currently holding hearings with interested parties, attempting to find a middle ground between mass removal and animal well-being concerns. The nation is divided.

Fig. 3. Standing at the intersection of policy and ecological reality: where well-intentioned court orders meet the complex science of animal ecology and behaviour. This feeding station board at a university campus represents a common urban challenge—*how do we balance compassion with ecological understanding*? While the intention to care for urban commensals is admirable, concentrated feeding can inadvertently create resource competition hotspots, alter territorial dynamics, and increase conflicts. Behavioural research suggests that sustainable coexistence requires moving beyond emotion-driven solutions toward evidence-based strategies that respect both animal well–being and ecological principles. The question is not whether we should care for urban animals, but how it can be done in ways that truly serve multispecies coexistence interests over the long term. [Image of *a Thinkpaws team member during a field survey*].

A way forward to multispecies coexistence

FRDs do not conform to a few fixed identities, like hapless individuals awaiting rescue, idealised companions, or pests requiring elimination[23,26,35,38]. Like other free-ranging animals, these sentient organisms exhibit capacities, specific to their taxa and population[39], for interpreting human-use environments[25]. This way, our socio-cultural practices have been generating adaptive outcomes for nonhumans[59], fundamentally interwoven with communities amidst urbanising ecosystems[4]. However, such One Health dynamics in urban settings pose a considerable challenge for continued coexistence with commensals[3]. Traditional beliefs[5] frequently obscure concurrent trajectories of population and demographic shifts. The latter is especially relevant when the tropical urban is often a conglomerate of variable human agency, e.g., in South Asia[4,5]. Poor acknowledgement of dynamic human-animal reciprocation causes polarisation and conflicts across the city-wilderness continuum[5,55,56]. Consequently, antagonism and animosity can erode traditionally manifested acts of compassion, e.g., tolerance and feeding[4,25].

Human-animal associations are characterised by coexistence trade-offs stemming from mutual decisions, generating inherent tensions[25,59]. Hence, scientific investigation into the site specificity of encounter histories in variable landscapes is crucial for management. Whether acknowledged or not, these, in turn, influence policies, fears, empathic responses, and biases, limiting anticipatory planning grounded in social-ecological realities. This is not a call to vilify FRDs, but to acknowledge dynamic relationships that warrant consistent steering.

Effective interventions necessitate a multi-dimensional approach to waste management, primarily ensuring the unavailability of organic remains for commensals in critical conflict zones[15]. Furthermore, research has suggested that animal agency could be judiciously employed for waste disposal, provided this is substantiated by rigorous studies on integrating this *NbS* into modern practices[53]. Such integration would require spatio-temporal rigour, achieved through the analysis of animal ranging patterns and the systematic screening of disease vectors[3,18,30,44]. Pairing waste management alongside a simultaneous implementation of strategic feeding initiatives and CNVR programs could prevent strong public resistance and social disorder[15].

Public education programs[40,52] specifically adapted to regional requirements—such as addressing harassment or bites in urban environments[36,38] versus livestock and wildlife depredation in the Himalayan region[32]—could potentially redirect public philanthropic contributions away from indiscriminate roadside feeding. Awareness campaigns are essential[40], considering the limited public understanding of the etiology, transmission, and prevention of rabies, particularly in remote regions[5]. Furthermore, sustained, longitudinal monitoring of commensal demographics[53] is essential to gain a fundamental understanding about how the structure of cities—from infrastructure and traffic to cultural behaviour and waste disposal—affects animal populations[15]. Prioritising the vulnerability of children, the elderly, and blue-collar workers to dog-attacks is crucial. These stakeholders may lack adequate representation to voice their concerns[35,38]. Aforementioned cohesive implementation of strategies necessitates institutional restructuring, requiring functional collaboration of the state departments and resident associations currently operating in isolation around shared objectives. And finally, judicial bodies adjudicating matters with timelines detached from ecological realities would benefit from incorporating scientific expertise, which could assist communities advocating for dogs, including those who remain dissatisfied with poorly implemented sterilisation initiatives.

Afterall, coexistence is not a fixed state but a dynamic relationship requiring continuous adjustment as urban conditions change. This means recognising *1)* individual feeding decisions have population-level consequences; *2)* territorial behaviour responds to spatial resource distribution; *3)* disease prevalance and transmission follows human-animal social network structures; and *4)* sustainable management and extension of traditional *NbS* requires integrating in modern shared spaces, where human, animal and environmental well-being are quintessentially tied. Traditional patronising attitudes about nature, which overlook the functional ecology of free-ranging species is creating urban habitats that are ecological traps[61]. To move beyond an emergency state toward successful multispecies coexistence in tropical urban settings, scientific knowledge must be combined with traditional bio-cultural values and practices[5].

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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 27.11.2025 and 29.01.2026.

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