



The newspapers recently reported the case of a lady in Vasco who was attacked by street dogs while walking to her home; she suffered multiple bites and had to be hospitalized for a night. The news was shocking and also depressing, given that it was not the first such incident in Goa in recent years. Also because the fallout was already known: angry, ugly and irrational demands, in the media and social media, for an immediate end to the 'stray menace'. The usual articles showed up – of the rising number of dog attacks (which revealed that serious attacks are actually very few, that rabies has been controlled in Goa, and that most dog-bites in general are by pet dogs to their own owners), and also of the increasing population of dogs on the streets. Here the tone varied from dismay and horror, both absolutely understandable, to – more often – fury and demands for a Final Solution, so to speak.

It is interesting how a dog attack always leads to these kinds of demands – for the mass killing of strays – even though the incidents of fatal attacks are very rare, even at a national level. Compare this to traffic fatalities. A whopping 404 accidents were reported in Goa this year before the end of February, which left 41 people dead. Yes, forty-one lives lost in less than two months. But is there any fury about this horrific situation? Any demands to immediately eliminate cars? Or at least curb vehicular use, or, at the very least, vehicular speed? Not a peep. But wiping out the stray population is apparently a reasonable response to one non-fatal attack.

Listen to the Vasco MLA Krishna Salkar, of the ruling BJP, who rued “the stringent laws due to which we can’t do much”. The maximum he could do, he said, was to sterilize the dogs and leave them back in the same location.

But had he actually done this “maximum”? Had he, or his government, actually tried to create an effective sterilize-and-release programme? Or were they leaving this, as always, to the various under-funded and under-staffed animal welfare groups in the state? No prizes for guessing. Because, if he had taken it up seriously, he might have discovered – as many animal lovers in Goa and elsewhere have – that this strategy is quite effective, bringing the population down over time, and making a giant difference to the number of dogs on the streets.

But it won't bring the population down to zero. Nor, in fact, can this be achieved by even cold-bloodedly killing all the strays. Simply because new dogs would soon take their place – thanks to us.

Yes. The dogs on the streets have not dropped down from the heavens. Nor have they come

from the jungles, like the poor monkeys, bison and leopards, who are dealing with loss of habitat thanks to human destruction of the forests. The dogs on the streets have come directly or indirectly from human homes. They are all the result of human irresponsibility, callousness, or, even downright cruelty.

The most common irresponsibility is in not sterilizing pets. This is followed by the cruel dumping of new-born pups on the road, or in a public garden, or a market, or anywhere else far away, sometimes even before they open their eyes, sometimes all tied up together in a sack. Many of such pups die, but a tiny minority manages to survive – as street dogs.

This attitude is changing, but hardly for the better. Many dog-owners in Goa now sterilise their female dogs – because they don't want to deal with pups – or don't adopt females at all. But the males remain unsterilised and, even worse, many are regularly released by their owners to mate with female street dogs when the latter are in heat. 'He should have his fun,' explained a neighbour to me. Thus female street dogs in heat get chased by huge numbers of males – fifteen to twenty in our locality before the female streeties were spayed – with most of these males wearing collars. And then the poor pregnant female is left to give birth and raise her 'stray' pups on the street.

Add to this the fact that breed dogs – including ones bred specifically for aggression, like pit bulls, Rottweilers, and Dobermans – are becoming prestige symbols in today's Goa. Lack of sterilization coupled with the freedom to mate – with stray females – means that aggressive genes are also getting passed on to the street.

And what about the owners callous enough to dump their pets when sick or old, when the latter need them the most? Besides adding to the numbers on the street, these dogs would again be unsterilized and, if fertile, sure to mate with the street dogs as well.

There are also those owners who adopt cute pups for their small kids, as if buying them toys, and then, when the kids grow up and aren't interested in the dogs, throw the latter out along with other toys.

And those who adopt and then move to some place which says 'dogs not allowed' and, instead of fighting this illegal rule, again dump their dog without a second thought.

And on top of all these owners, there are also the breeders whose business continues to flourish, but whose 'failures' get dumped on the street, and even successes too, if the supply-and-demand calculation calls for it. Also dumped are the exhausted mother dogs once their use as pup-producers is over.

The list can go on. Basically, it is we who put dogs on the street. This is why, even when all the street dogs in an area are spayed – like our locality in Miramar, Panjim – the population continues to grow. Who Let – Or Threw, Rather – The Dogs Out?

Most dogs are docile with humans, even more so if sterilized, and especially with humans who are good to them, but even with many who are not, like owners who hit them or keep them tied up, or passersby who throw sticks or stones at them. But things can change, especially with regular abuse, or at night, and when the dog is part of a pack.

But all these are hardly unsolvable problems. All they require is a government interested in human and animal welfare. Awareness programmes in schools and colleges would help. Making sterilization of pets compulsory, and enforcing this with the help of vets and animal lovers, would help. Making sterilization operations completely free would make a huge difference. And banning breeders, and replacing them by an ‘Adopt, Don’t Shop’ policy, would help hugely as well.

Let’s face it. Dogs have danced to the tune of humans for not just centuries, but millennia. So, if there is a dog problem, you can be sure it has something to do with humans. Hitting out at the dogs will not solve it.

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