Don't Go By Bad Logic, Cooked-Up Data

How Supreme Court can be logical and compassionate on the stray dog issue

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If it endorses a view that stray dogs should be put in shelters – implicitly treating the Animal Birth Control (ABC) programme as a failure and sidelining Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act – Supreme Court will push a solution that is anthropocentric, scientifically unsound, fiscally reckless, and epidemiologically counterproductive.

Few know that Dr Chinny Krishna and the Blue Cross of India introduced the world's first **neuter-and-return** programme in 1964. Its name, ABC, also underlined its administrative simplicity. WHO recognises the model as the most humane and effective way to manage stray dog populations and has successfully been adopted by many countries.

Unfortunately, what's unfolding in SC isn't a clash between compassion and safety, or animal welfare and human rights, but a pathway that risks perpetuating fund mismanagement in the name of sterilisation and shelters – potentially channelling even more resources to the same states, municipalities and affiliated NGOs that make a mockery of ABC rules.

SC may not be convinced by individuals' claims that most street dogs are friendly and social. But peer-reviewed research by IISER Kolkata's Dog Lab, based on observations of free-ranging dogs in West Bengal and other cities that supports this view. Indian street dogs, IISER concluded, are '**facultatively social**' – they can survive as scavengers while forming stable bonds with humans, a trait shaped by domestication rather than ferality. Fear of street dogs is driven more by cognitive bias and episodic amplification than by actual behaviour.

Much of judicial concern hinges on dogbite **statistics** – but, the figures are misleading. Submissions in SC have noted that from FY2020-21 to FY2023-24, reported dog bites matched the number of anti-rabies vaccine doses provided. That is a mega methodological flaw. Here's how: Per a 2023 Rajya Sabha response, ₹97.8cr was allocated for anti-rabies vaccines and serum for 2023-24. At an average cost of ₹270 per dose, this translates to approx **37L doses** – often data-dressed as 37L bites.

Vaccines are administered after scratches, precautionary contact, occupational exposure, or even friendly handling – especially by pet owners, veterinarians, ABC staff, and shelter employees who take pre-exposure prophylaxis. None of these involve a bite. Yet every dose is counted as one.

A single suspected exposure requires 3 to 5 doses per person. Counting doses rather than exposure events inflates bite numbers. Moreover, vaccines administered after exposure to cats or monkeys are also recorded as dog bites. There is no verification whether a bite occurred, if it was from a pet or a community dog, or if at all it was a bite.

Further, Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme data show that between Jan 2022 and Jan 2025, 14 states and UTs reported **zero rabies deaths**, including Delhi, Goa, Haryana, Telangana, Uttarakhand, J&K, Ladakh, Puducherry and Sikkim.

Livestock Census 2019 shows stray **dog numbers have dropped** from 19.1m in 2007 to 11.7m in 2012, and to 9.4m in 2019, reflecting the tangible impact of sterilisation, albeit insufficient. It underscores the need for genuine, on-the-ground sterilisation – not just on paper – alongside updated data.

Affidavits by 13 states and UTs show that **ABC coverage** is between 6% and 35%. Several states provide no auditable data. Delhi's affidavit is contradictory: reported sterilisations exceed even theoretical capacity of facilities. Rajasthan stands at 6%, while Karnataka, Haryana and UP hover between 20% and 35%.

The most dangerous assumption is that removal of dogs will improve public health. Science says the opposite. Per WHO, vaccinating at least 70% of dogs is essential to interrupt rabies transmission. Removal does not preserve this immunity; instead, it creates **ecological vacuums**, filled by unvaccinated animals migrating from surrounding areas, reintroducing rabies into zones where it was controlled. Removal of stray dogs allows rats and snakes to proliferate.

High-density 'mega shelters' are **disease amplifiers**. Without rigorous quarantine protocols, biosafety standards and veterinary surveillance, they risk becoming zoonotic hotspots. And there's the cost. Sheltering 10% of the dog population would cost over ₹12k cr over a decade, without accounting for land, capex and opportunity cost of using prime urban real estate. In contrast, achieving 70% sterilisation would cost less than ₹500cr operationally.

If governance failures, including **corruption**, are acknowledged, policy choice is clear: conduct a stray dog census, fix bite-data collection, and follow ABC route instead of an expensive, permanent intervention bound to backfire. Anything else would amount to barking up the wrong tree, wasting both time and scarce public resources.