

BEHAVIOURAL OBSERVATIONS OF PETS AND STRAYS DURING LOCKDOWN AND UNLOCK PERIOD DUE TO PANDEMIC COVID-19

Meehir Pawar, Gaurang Tawde and Shaila Mane

Department of Zoology, Bhavan's College, Andheri (West) Mumbai- 400058
dr.shaila.mane@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

Behavioral changes in mammalian pets like cats, dogs and stray animals during the lockdown phase due to the pandemic COVID-19 were studied through this survey. The survey was conducted through phone-based Google form, which got responses mainly from Mumbai, nearby places and a few from other states. Pet owners responded about their pets and stray animals in their vicinity through this form and also suggested some ways to avoid difficulties faced by stray animals. Based on behavior of animals before and after the lockdown, the questions were of given comparative-objective and descriptive type. As per the responses obtained, it is seen that negative behavioral changes like aggression, weakness, hunger, etc. were observed more in stray animals than the pet animals due to unavailability of food. Since the owners were taking proper care of their pets, the change in their behavior was almost negligible. It was also noticed that not only the pet owners but other people also were taking care of stray animals which is the most appreciable effort towards animals during difficult situations.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, Pandemic, Pets, Stray animals, Lockdown, Behavioral changes,

INTRODUCTION:

The nationwide lockdown to control the spread of COVID-19 was initiated on 25th March 2020. In the initial phase, almost all workplaces were shut, and only essential services were functioning. Soon the Government demarcated regions as Green, Orange, and Red zones as per the intensity of spread of the disease. It also announced Containment zones within these zones. The lockdown was extended far beyond its initial expectations due to various reasons (Agrawal, and Ashraf, 2020). Irrespective of work profile, geographical region, etc. people were affected economically, emotionally, and socially due to the complete lockdown (Prayas Health Group, 2020). Misinformation linking dogs and local community animals with spread of COVID-19 led to the ill-treatment towards strays, abandonment of pets, harassment of those who feed strays and shelter animals, came to the fore (Ghosh and Aggarwal, 2020). Many were abandoning their pets as they were not able to bear the expenses majorly due to an increase of economic strain. With regards to strays, there was tremendous food scarcity. The

animals were also ostracized because of rumors linking them to be the carriers of Corona virus (Hindustan Times, 2020). Lack of food hinted at the possibility of strays becoming aggressive as well as a rise in death of strays due to starvation. The main objective of this survey was to study the impact of this unprecedented situation on pets and strays and to understand about the awareness of people towards the emotional status of animals, effect on their behavior due to a sudden change in their routine life, lack of food and other essentials like healthcare. Since the entire world is facing the consequences of this pandemic at social, economic, political, environmental and personal level, it was obvious that other animals also must be facing some issues related to their survivals due to the sudden changes in their routine life. That triggered the thought of understanding the impact of this changing scenario on pets and stray animals.

METHODOLOGY:

This Survey was deployed through Web Survey Method by means of Google Form, which gained responses from 100 pet owners mainly from Mumbai, nearby places like Panvel, Ratnagiri, Sangli, Amravati, Solapur, etc. other states like Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, etc. Of which 63% were from Urban and 37% were from Rural area. The survey was conducted during 13th May 2020 to 9th September 2020. Majorly, this survey was focused on most common mammalian pets and strays like cats and dogs. The survey included objective type questions which were framed in accordance with awareness of owner, their interaction with pets, availability of pet necessities and healthcare in their vicinity, emotional stability of pet, the condition of the stray animals under the circumstances of lockdown etc.

The questions were about the pets as well as the strays such as:

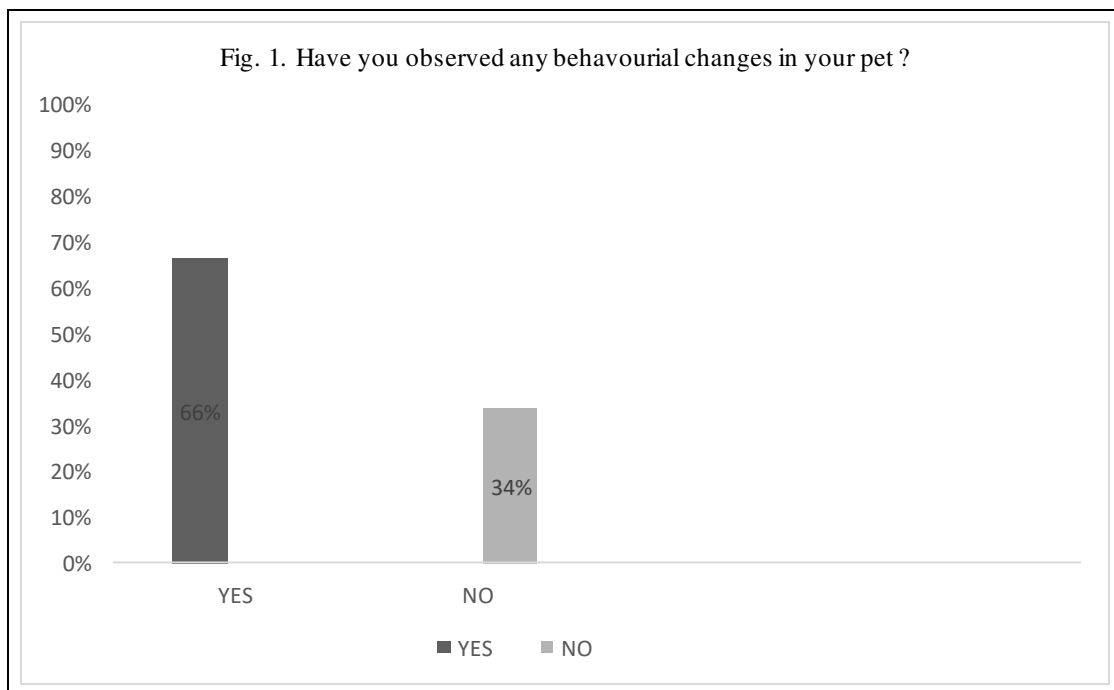
- Have you observed any behavioural change in your pet? Is it difficult to fulfil your pet's needs due to lockdown? Is the veterinary clinic open in your vicinity? Have you observed any animal abuse in your area?
- Descriptive questions were included on basis of observation of behavioural changes of pets and strays, opinions on helping strays and protecting animals from disease. Some of the descriptive questions were like, What is the change in behaviour of pets and strays during lockdown? What help should be given to stray animals during lockdown period? What type of precaution to be taken to protect them from the infection like COVID-19?

- The respondents were asked to mention their name, age group and the containment zones they belonged to.
- Telephonic discussions with some of the pet owners also added to the information. The analysis was done by considering all the responses obtained from Google form and the telephonic discussion. Then, the total data collected was analysed by Standard statistical methods like graphs and percentage.

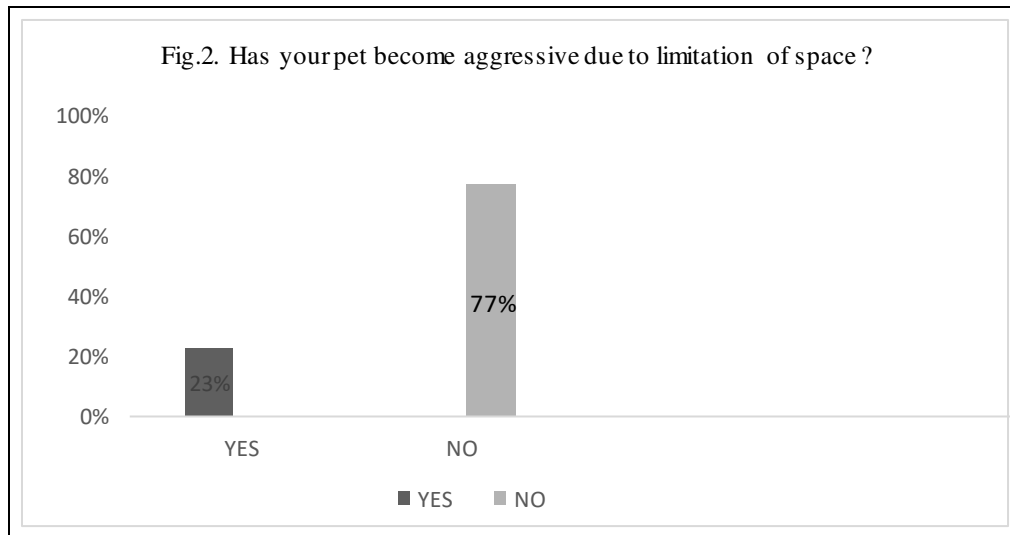
RESULT:

The survey focuses on common mammalian pets and strays like cats and dogs.

RESPONSES ABOUT PETS: From the total responses obtained, 57.6% owned dog, 25% owned cat while 17.4% owned both as their pets. These responses were both from urban and rural regions. The presence of pets had a calming effect on the owners, as 89.1% of the owners felt the same. Although a few behavioural changes were observed, with many having complaints of increase in mood swings (Fig. 1).



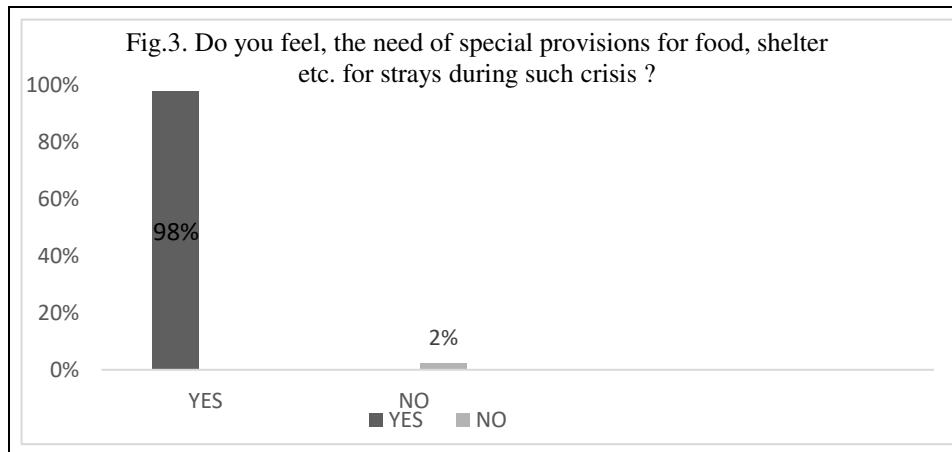
This aggressive behaviour was mainly due to lack of outing and space. Aggression in pets was rarely observed whereas 77% of respondents suggested that the pets were actually joyous due to the constant presence of the owners (Fig.2.).



Pet owners did not face any major difficulty in taking their pets out for a walk. 63% of the pet owners were able to take their pets out, while 37% of the pet owners were not able to take their pets out as earlier. Although, 43.5% of the pet owners gave affirmative responses that their pet missed the daily routine which used to be outdoor exercises and enjoyment. Few pet owners were facing trouble to bare the expenses of their pets due to an increase in economic strain created by lockdown condition. Due to functioning veterinary clinics in the vicinity of some pet owners, the necessary medical care was available. Shops being closed initially, on account of COVID-19 outbreak resulted in shortage of pet food, supplies, medicines, vaccines etc.

RESPONSES ABOUT STRAYS: From telephonic conversations for the survey, it was evident that stray animals suffered more than pets during the lockdown. Absence of human activity, led to a sudden lack of food for the strays. Hence, they became more aggressive. This was mainly due to starvation. Absence of food also led to many deaths among the stray animals. Not much animal abuse was observed as 23.9% of the respondents reported animal abuse while 76.1% did not observe any (Singh, 2020). On the contrary, people were going out of the way to feed the strays and provide shelter in such a trying time. In accordance, with the emotional and physical status of stray animals, majority of the people suggested that these stray animals should be provided with proper food, clean water, shelter, medication and other basic necessities (Fig. 3).

There was a shortage of medical facilities especially for stray animals as majority of the NGOs and government hospitals were either closed or they lacked adequate staff and medical supplies and equipment. An undersupply of medicines was also observed.



DISCUSSION:

Due to the outbreak of Novel Corona virus worldwide, lockdown was announced by the Government of India on 25th March 2020. This unprecedented pandemic affected humans as well as animals irrespective of them being domesticated or not. This survey collected information about the effects of the lockdown on these animals. Initially, both pets and strays were affected on large scale during complete lockdown. Later, after the start of unlock periods, the situation was seen to be almost normal. Since the shops, dispensaries started working, availability of essential things was possible.

IMPACT ON PETS: Pets are completely dependent on their owner. Some instances were observed where people abandoned their pets on the streets (Singh, 2020). This was probably due to misconceptions about the animal-to-human transmission of corona virus. Many animal activist groups and NGOs took care of such abandoned animals. Later, The World Organisation for Animal Health and other associations tried to spread awareness that, there is no evidence of the transmission from pets to humans observed till date (OIE, 2020). Aftermath, the number of animals abandoned started decreasing day by day and people started taking care of their pets as before the lockdown. On the other hand, act of kindness was seen where migrant workers refused to abandon their pets and took care of them on their way while migrating in such a calamity. Cats, dogs, even ducks and rabbits were spotted with the migrating workers on Mumbai-Nashik expressway (Prayag, 2020). The above survey was carried out during complete lockdown to 4th unlock phase. As per the responses obtained it was discerned that even though the pet owners had difficulties in their personal life, they were behaving equally responsible about their pets and were taking care of them. So there was not much adverse effect of complete lockdown on the life of pets except some aggressiveness and

mood swings in the beginning because of not having exposure to the outside world at all .The conditions started coming back to the normal with every unlock period.

IMPACT ON STRAY ANIMALS: Similar to the pets, strays also rely largely on humans directly or indirectly in terms of the food given or foraging the leftovers/garbage respectively. In the beginning of the lockdown, the condition of strays was worse due to the lack of food. Because of the lockdown, people stopped travelling frequently and this was the main reason where strays did not receive food from their daily feeders. These strays then engaged into fights with each other due to scarcity of food. Many strays died due to starvation (Dedgaonkar, 2020). NGOs and activists worked toward helping the strays with proper food and medications. Due to high population it was not possible to fulfil their needs everywhere. When people observed the adverse condition of these animals, many of them came ahead to help by adopting the strays to provide better nutrition and shelter (AFP, 2020). In the beginning, during complete lockdown the main source of food from the nearby residents was at a standstill, hence the strays were facing the issue of starvation. When people started realising the issue, they started feeding the strays. As the unlock periods proceeded, the availability of food was not a problem for them. NGOs and some local citizens who were taking care of the strays, continued their activity even after the unlock period.

CONCLUSION:

Initially during the lockdown, the pets experienced lack of outdoor activities and space. Meanwhile, pets proved to be the stress busters for their owners during the tensed situation created by lockdown. The impact of lockdown was trivial on the behaviour of majority of the pets due to good care taken by the owners, availability of food, systematic functioning of veterinary clinics in some areas etc. Shortage of food and medical facilities were observed in case of strays during the initial phase of lockdown. This lack of food led to aggression and death in stray animals. When people observed the critical condition of strays in their vicinity, they started providing food and other basic needs as per their capacity. Individuals who were not much concerned about the strays before, were also seen helping them during this tough period. Some people even adopted the strays. Majority of the respondents have expressed the need of facilities of shelter and food for the stray organisms during such crisis. Complete lockdown affected the routine of people on a large scale. People were struggling in daily life with the fear of covid-19infection in their mind. They started experiencing stress even after staying home. The workers of essential services and their family members were facing tremendous anxiety. In such a difficult time, pets played a vital role in relaxing the tension of

their owners. In spite of having many difficulties at personal and social level, pet owners were taking care of pets as their own family members. People displayed humanity and selflessness toward stray animals too, by providing food and shelter. The drastic changes were seen in the entire functioning of society as well as in the human interactions with each other. In such adverse conditions also, people displayed a great level of humanity and kept human-animal interaction intact, rather made it stronger. This was the major reason of pets and strays not being affected much seen during the worldwide pandemic covid-19. This indicates a very positive approach of human beings towards nature and other organisms. Human behaviour seems to be equally important to influence the effect of pandemic on pets and strays. This protective activity is contributing in the conservation of animals and creating more awareness in the society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

We are thankful to Dr. Asha Rao (Head, Department of Zoology, Bhavan's College) who encouraged, guided and supervised us while completing this survey report. In addition, thanks to our parents for supporting us. Special thanks to our friends Shubham Maurya and Meet Kaskar. We are grateful to our respondents for their cooperation without which the survey would have not been possible.

REFERENCE:

AFP, *Cute, furry pooches come to the rescue of Indians feeling lockdown blues, more people adopt strays*, Economic Times E-News, 26 August 2020

<https://m.economictimes.com/magazines/panache/cute-furry-pooches-come-to-the-rescue-of-indians-feeling-lockdown-blues-more-people-adopt-strays/articleshow/77762169.cms>

Agrawal, N. and Ashraf, H. (June 2020). *COVID-19 Impact on Daily Life (CIDL) Survey*. Retrieved from Dvara Research Foundation

<https://www.dvara.com/research/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/COVID-19-Impact-on-Daily-Life-CIDL-Survey.pdf>

Dedgaonkar, S. *Stray dogs in city hit hard by corona virus lockdown*, Pune Mirror, 13 April 2020

<https://punemirror.indiatimes.com/pune/civic/stray-dogs-in-city-hit-hard-by-coronavirus-lockdown/articleshow/75112921.cms>

Ghosh, S. and Aggarwal, M., *Slim pickings for strays and pets during COVID-19 lockdown*, Mongabay-India, 31 March 2020

<https://india.mongabay.com/2020/03/slim-pickings-for-strays-and-pets-during-covid-19-lockdown>

Hindustan Times, *Amid misconceptions about Covid-19 spread through animals, owners abandon pets in Pune*, Hindustan Times E-Paper, 24 May 2020

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/pune-news/amid-misconceptions-about-covid-19-spread-through-animals-owners-abandon-pets-in-pune/story-adQIPubYS2OxwvpkV6dApK.html>

Prayag, S. A., *When you love, you don't give up: Migrant workers refuse to part from their pets*, Hindustan Times E-Paper, 14 May 2020

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/when-you-love-you-don-t-give-up-migrant-workers-refuse-to-abandon-their-pets/story-smlC1ggDnu6Fy1OL5jHtuI.html>

Prayas Health Group (2020), *People's perceptions about social distancing and perceived risk of acquiring COVID-19*, 2020

<https://prayaspune.org/health/images/download/COVID%20Risk%20Perception%20Research%20Report%20Prayas%20June%202020.pdf>

Singh, V., TNN, *COVID lockdown: Disturbing trend of pets being abandoned in Mumbai, Navi Mumbai*, Times Of India, 16 June 2020

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/navi-mumbai/covid-lockdown-disturbing-trend-of-pets-being-abandoned-in-mumbai-navi-mumbai/articleshw/76410215.cms>

Singh V., TNN, *Mumbai: Violence against animals, feeders during lockdown*, Times Of India, 26 April 2020

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/mumbai-violence-against-animals-feeders-during-lockdown/articleshw/75392745.cms>

World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), *Questions and Answers on COVID-19*, 9 June 2020

<https://www.oie.int/en/scientific-expertise/specific-information-and-recommendations/questions-and-answers-on-2019-novel-coronavirus/>