

Cultural attitude towards animals in India: the effects on animal welfare and veterinary medicine

India is a land of extremes, with a shocking mixture of poverty and wealth, kindness and cruelty. It is impossible to generalise about anything in India. The more of India I travelled, the more I realised that my question was going to be impossible to answer. Animals are a central part of the everyday life in India, attitudes towards them vary greatly, as does the standard of animal welfare and veterinary medicine.



Fig. 1 Oxon helping with gardening in the Taj Mahal.

This tiny snapshot view I have of India comes from three weeks at the International Animal Rescue clinic in Goa and a further three weeks exploring the vast country, meeting people who work with animals. The strongest factor that seemed to determine how animals were treated was people's wealth. Lack of education and veterinary treatment as a result of poverty resulted in poor animal welfare.

I learned of an extreme example of this when I visited a bear sanctuary on the outskirts of Agra. The sanctuary was set up a few years ago and now provides a home for 166 'dancing' sloth bears that were owned by the Kalandar people, who have kept dancing bears for generations. They frequently live in poverty with disease and poor education. Often, the dancing bear provides their only source of income. The bear sanctuary is encouraging these people to donate their current bears to the sanctuary and to stop poaching other bears, in return the owners receive money to help pay to set up their own businesses.

These people are far from being alone in depending upon an animal for income. Whilst

visiting the Help in Suffering (HIS) clinic in Jaipur I attended a mobile camel clinic. The camel owners are very glad of the service offered, as their animals are worth a lot of money and invariably represent their livelihood. Until HIS offered these clinics the owners were unable to help their sick or injured camels. It is not that these people are penniless, it due to lack of suitable veterinary services they are unable help their animals.



Fig. 2 A camel at the HIS mobile clinic

Working at the clinic in Goa it also became apparent that most of the problems in pet animals related to the owners lack of knowledge about basic animal care. Frequently owners would be feeding their dogs fish curries daily or they would have unvaccinated animals. Just by education many of the problems seen could be overcome.

In addition to poverty, a major factor involved in the treatment of animals in India is religion. The vast majority of Indians, about 85%, are Hindu. Hindus believe that all animals, including livestock, are sacred. There are estimated to be about 280 million sacred cows in India. Unfortunately, their sacred status does not necessarily lead to better welfare. For instance, they are often left to scavenge by the roadside. From this activity, it is thought that the average cow on the streets of Dehli has around 300 plastic bags in its rumen!

However, the most horrifying sights of poor animal welfare I witnessed were those in stray animal populations. At the clinic in Goa a component of the work was with the large stray dog population. Dogs frequently came off the streets with horrendous maggot wounds. The dogs in the pictures below both had to be put to sleep due to the severity of their wounds. Stray dogs were also frequently admitted with Distemper, some of these dogs were also in a dreadful condition before they were admitted to the centre.



Fig 3. The top picture shows a dog with two severe maggot wounds. The middle picture shows a puppy with a maggot wound penetrating into it's chest. The bottom picture shows a dog with Distemper virus.

It seems that lack of ownership of these animals leads to extremely poor welfare. Rarely anyone takes the responsibility for getting these animals treated. Considering the size of the stray dog population in India it is unlikely that many receive any veterinary attention at all. The government of India tend to overlook this problem. In most cities rubbish is just dumped and dogs feed from this waste, the population of stray dogs could be probably significantly reduced if they simply had a proper waste disposal system. Currently the animal breeding control programmes in clinics throughout the country are working to reduce the stray dog population, but the volume of dogs that need to be operated on is huge.

On a positive note, most of the people I spoke with thought that animal welfare concern in India is growing. Since the animal welfare laws are very well drawn up, the problem lies in their implementation. In the cities pedigree dog ownership is becoming increasingly popular. In these areas excellent veterinary facilities are available, confirming that poverty really is the restricting factor on veterinary medicine in this country. Fortunately, the number of charity clinics in India is also increasing. However, these tend to be restricted to touristy areas and cities, therefore not reaching the rural communities where dependency upon animals is likely to be greatest.

With millions of people living below the poverty line in India, survival comes before sentiment, particularly where animals are concerned. Some people have barely enough money to pay for the healthcare of their children, let alone that of their pets. We must support and aid the development of veterinary medicine in this country, where improving veterinary medicine will help improve many lives.

Menai Anne Edwards