



A Preliminary Survey on Preferences and Awareness on Dog Breeds in Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

In human history, pets have been regarded as a prized possession above all others, with the dog being one of the most revered. The present survey shows that Indian pet owners are on the rise (51%), and 46% of participants own dogs as pets. Modern pet owners place the most importance on pet maintenance (32%), when choosing pets. Despite knowledge of indigenous dog breeds among participants (75%), they are unable to recognize many at first sight. On sight, participants were more familiar with exotic dog breeds and could distinguish the German Shepard (8%), the Doberman (7%), the Golden Retriever (7%) and the Pug (7%) from indigenous breeds. It is essential to scientifically document the exemplary traits of Indian indigenous dog breeds to save them from extinction.

HIGHLIGHTS

- People are more obsessed with possessing the foreign/ exotic breeds than Indian indigenous breeds.
- Various factors such as maintenance, size, etc. influence the type of dog chosen. Even though people have heard of many breeds of dogs, visual identification of dogs is a problem.

Keywords: Pet, Dog, Indigenous, Exotic, Extinction

Human and Animal Interactions (HAI) have been studied and emphasized for centuries. The human relationship with animals is complex and dynamic, from domesticating animals for work or farming or food to keeping them as pets and companions, we have come a long way. HAI is a broad area of study and one of the sub-areas is the Human-Animal Bond (HAB) and our relationship to pets (McCune *et al.*, 2014). It is unclear when or how humans started looking at animals as more than food and help but as pets for entertainment and pleasure. The exact transition of animals to pets is an unsolved problem in science with many theories but the exact date and timeline remain elusive (Lear and Harris, 2012).

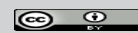
In recent years there exist many research publications that emphasize the medical value and therapeutic nature of the human-pet bond (Hussein *et al.*, 2021; Lass-Hennemann *et al.*, 2020; Matchock, 2015; Lentino *et*

al., 2012). Many studies have investigated the relationship of pet and owners and the benefits for persons affected by loneliness (McNicholas and Collis, 2000), depression and other mental ailments too. Having an interactive pet has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety, ease depression and loneliness (Hussein *et al.*, 2021; Young *et al.*, 2020; Brooks *et al.*, 2018), interacting and owning pets also has been shown to increase the level of physical activity and social interaction of the owners (Coleman *et al.*, 2008).

Even though our lives have been turned upside down by the pandemic, our need for companionship and the Human-Pet bond has not diminished. We consider our pets valuable members of the family. A pet can offer companionship,

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be an expression of our style, and support recovery and therapy. Since prehistoric times, almost every culture around the world has had pets, and India is no different.

Animals in Indian religious culture are exalted as Gods or companions to Gods. From Sangam Literature to modern movies of Bollywood or Kollywood the virtues of animals have been extolled numerous times. But in the role of pets, animals have taken a back seat. The idea of owning a pet animal was even abhorrent to some Indian communities. In the last decade, this has changed with the rise of the urban middle-class many families have taken to owning pets. Surveys show that the number of households with pets in India has gone from 13 million in 2014 to 18 million in 2018 (Rastogi, 2021). The present study has tried to glimpse into the minds of pet owners and non-pet owners alike.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The state of Tamil Nadu lies at the southern end of the Indian subcontinent. With a quick-growing urban economy with many cities and a large chunk of nuclear families, the outlook towards pets is changing. To identify the types of pets and the awareness among these pet owners on indigenous breeds of animals a questionnaire was prepared and circulated as a Google form. The questionnaire was circulated on social media and through personal and professional contacts. The participants were requested to pass on the questionnaire to their friends and family. The results were tabulated and statistically analysed. A total of 1,023 participants were part of the survey.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pet ownership

Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary provides the most basic definition of a pet: “A pet is an animal kept more for its pleasure than for its utility.” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2022). Pet ownership has increased around the world and India is no exception. The Indian pet population is estimated to be around 29 million at present (Tandon, 2021). A survey conducted by Rakuten Insight an Asian Company, showed that more than 59% of people across twelve Asian Countries have pets in their homes (Rakuten Insight, 2021). The results of the present study show

a similar trend with 51% of the participants being pet owners and 49% not (Fig. 1).

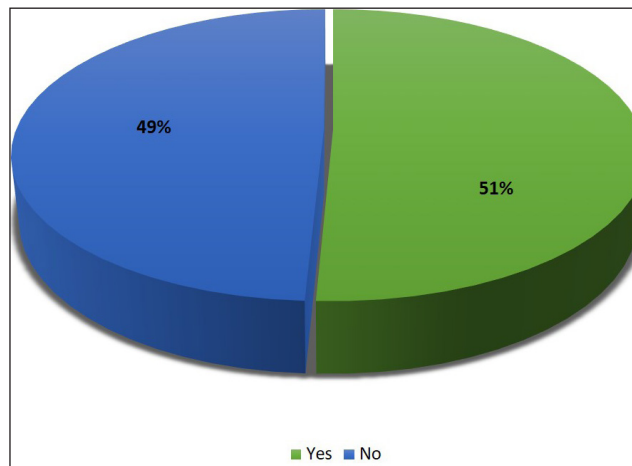


Fig. 1: Percentage of participants who were pet owners

Choosing a suitable pet can be a daunting task for the uninitiated. But advice and guidelines abound in the form of books, blogs, vlogs and websites. A new pet owner has a variety of choices depending on their lifestyle, accommodations, and preferences. According to our survey, maintenance (32%) and animal care (22%) were the two major considerations before getting a pet. The cost of training the animal (5%) was the least of their considerations (Fig. 2).

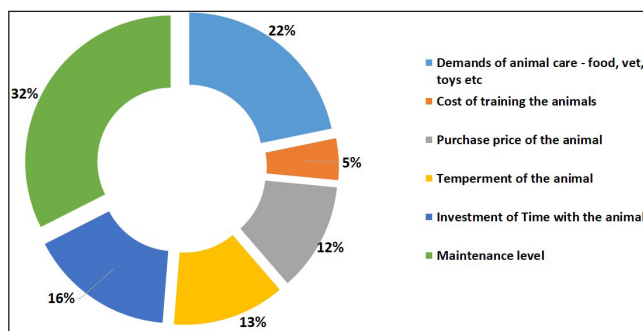


Fig. 2: Considerations taken into account by Participants before having a pet

The media campaigns have also shaped the way pets are viewed and owned. Mini videos of the antics of pets abound on social media today and many are faithful followers of those pets that they like. People have developed a habit of going online and watching these cute pet videos to help

relax their minds and bring a smile to their faces. It is also possible to adopt a pet virtually to deal with the lockdown blues. As a result of social distancing norms, lockdowns have brought out an increased sense of isolation for humans, and pets give humans a sense of purpose and responsibility (Sharma, 2020).

Increasing middle-class bracket, rising nuclear families are a few of the reasons Indians are changing their attitudes to pet ownership. As an offshoot of this change the pet industry including pet food and grooming has boomed. Increasing pet humanization has led to the demand for premium products for pets too (Tandon, 2021; Sharma, 2020).

Dogs – the most popular pet

Canis lupus familiaris, the domesticated dog, is a species that has evolved alongside humans. It is perhaps today one of the few species to show a great range of phenotypic variation and remain the same species. Additionally, humans have selectively bred the animals for multiple purposes with remarkable success. Humans have come to associate dogs with companionship, laughter, joy, calm, and wellbeing. Humans have been associated with these animals since they lived in hunter-gatherer societies thousands of years ago. Dogs are the first animals domesticated by humans (Frantz *et al.*, 2020; Larson and Bradley, 2014).

Our survey has shown that dogs are the most popular choice of pet (46%), fish and birds come in a close second (20%) and third (19%) respectively, and cats fourth (12%) (Fig. 3).

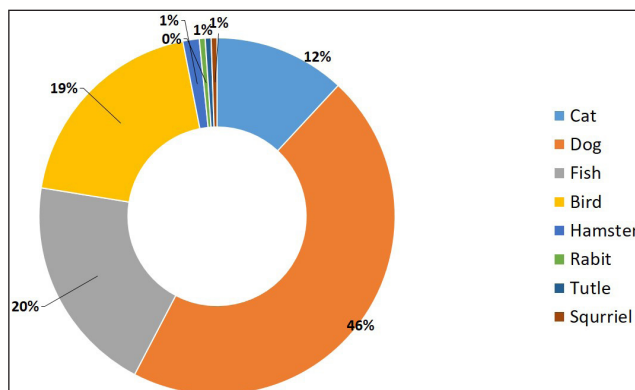


Fig. 3: Common pets owned by the participants

Indigenous Vs Exotic breeds of Dog

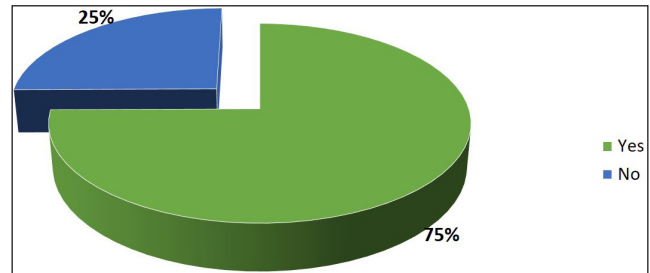


Fig. 4: Participants who were aware of the existence of Indigenous dog breeds

Indigenous or Native animals are the ones who have originated in the region and have adapted to suit the climatic conditions of the region. In a bid to know if people were aware of indigenous dog breeds of India the participants were shown images of both indigenous and exotic breeds. It was observed that 75% of the participants were aware of Indigenous dog breeds (Fig. 4) but it was sad to note they could not identify them (Fig. 5).

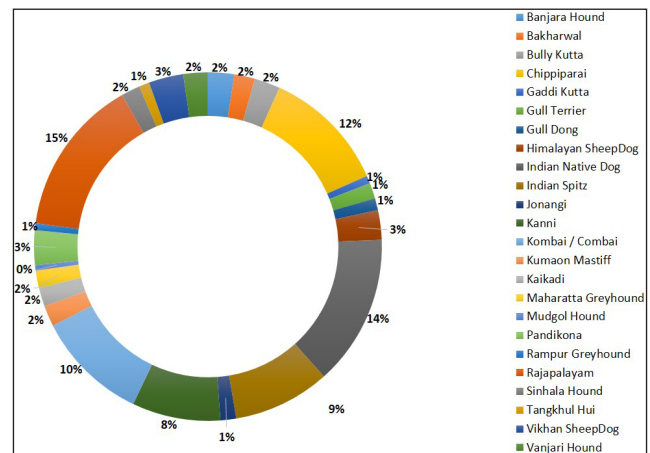


Fig. 5: Percentage of participants who recognised the indigenous dog breeds on sight

The breeds like the Rajapalayam (15%), the Native Indian Dog (14%) and the Chippiparai (12%) being the most recognized. Breeds like the Rampur Greyhound (1%), the Jonangi (1%) and the Tanghuku Hui (1%) were the least recognized. On the other hand of the 24 exotic breeds that were shown the German Shepard was the most easily identified (8%), the Doberman, the Golden Retriever, the Labrador Retriever, and the Pug tying for second place.

The Saluki and the English Terrier being the hardest to identify (1%) (Fig. 6).

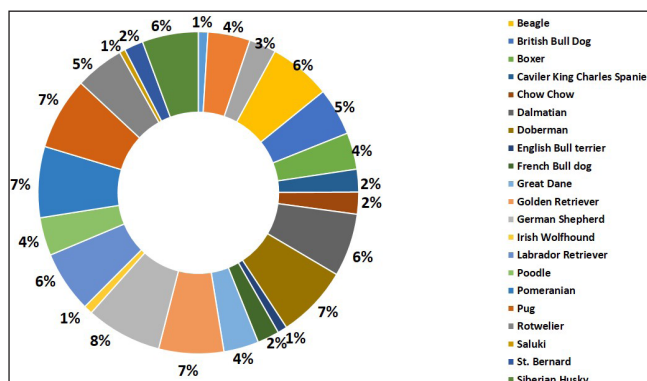


Fig. 6: Percentage of participants who recognised the exotic dog breeds on sight

We are perhaps more familiar with breeds like the Labrador, Retriever, Dachshund, Great Dane, Pomeranian and Dalmatian. But we fail to realize that these breeds are all from European countries and are therefore exotic to ours. As dog lovers, we seem to be at a loss to name indigenous breeds of our country. The indigenous breeds of India are not accepted as pedigreed breeds in our country, let alone outside India. This was not always the case.

In history's annals one can find many references to Indian breeds being prized possessions. In his book 'The real Indian Dog', Theodore Baskaran, quotes many such instances, the earliest being Pliny the Elder of the first century Greece saying, 'From India comes the dog that is larger than all others.' The Persian King, Xerxes I, who reigned during the 480 B.C., was said to have designated five villages to maintain hunting dogs from India. He is said to have been accompanied by the Indian hounds when he invaded Greece, but the use of the dogs remains unrecorded according to Herodotus (Forester, 1941). Our own history depicts the magnificence of these animals from cave paintings to stone carvings to Sangam literature that have all portrayed the Indian dogs in majestic roles. The earliest reference to dogs is seen in the Rig Veda. There are stories in the Ramayana and Mahabharata too about the faithfulness of dogs.

Many of the breeds mentioned in these writings are extinct or unidentifiable and the few that remain are traveling down the road towards extinction. The breeds mentioned look nothing like the dog breeds seen today.

In their 2017 bulletin, 'Guidelines for management of Animal Genetic Resources of India', ICAR–NBAGR stress the importance of phenotypic and genetic characterization of indigenous breeds of animals. Although most scientists are working on livestock, the dog too deserves a place in this mass conservation drive. Indigenous cattle breeds like Kangayam are being thought of because of traditional practices like jallikattu and steps are being taken to save the animals and the traditional practices. Dog breeds may have been bred for hunting purposes which are now outlawed but if steps are not taken to conserve these animals, then they will soon be extinct. Dogs may be easier to integrate into modern lifestyles than we think.

The American Kennel club (AKC) recognizes 202 breeds as on date but none of the native Indian dogs are listed. The Fédération Cynologique Internationale, another independent organization, recognizes 337 pure dog breeds, there are also mixed breeds, cross breeds, and natural breeds. Its representation in India is the Kennel club of India with its head offices in New Delhi (Estd.1978). There are many more indigenous breeds in India and other countries around the world that are not recognized. According to the Fédération Cynologique Internationale (FCI) statistics 2017, there are 6,83,50,000 total number of registered dog owners (pure breed or not) in India and 15,75,00,000 registered pure breed dogs (<http://www.fci.be/en/statistics/ByYear.aspx?year=2017>).

In India the idea of owning a pet, especially a dog has a few strong ideas attached to it. It is demotivating to note that people here prefer exotic breeds than the local or indigenous breeds. Though they are aware of the availability of Indigenous breeds they prefer the exotic ones. They do not look at the demerits of bringing a Siberian Husky or a St. Bernard, animals bred for cold climates, to Madurai Tamil Nadu a place just 9 degrees away from the equator.

There is also no documented evidence of how the indigenous dogs are bred. Dog shows are on the up and rising in popularity among Indians. The Indian Kennel club also hosts special shows for Indigenous dog breeds but there is a huge knowledge gap here. There are no written breed standards for Indigenous breeds nor are their pedigrees traceable past a few generations. But there are numerous breeders popping up selling puppies passed off as pure breeds. The IKC has a notice on its website

warning against these fake breeders but to the population at large it falls on deaf ears. Then Indian Council for Agricultural research (ICAR) has only included a registry of indigenous dog breeds from 2012. It is sad to note that only 3 breeds – the Rajapalayam, the Chippiparai (Tamil Nadu) and the Mudhol hound (Karnataka) have been registered till date.

Scientific studies on the Morphometrics of the Indigenous breeds should be conducted and this will ensure a breed standard is created for all Indigenous breeds. Genomic studies on the breeds will help identify the molecular signature of the breed, any chromosomal anomalies and even any unique SNPs. This will help scientifically establish the origins of the breed and be the backbone of good breeding practices in future.

As the dog has evolved in the same environment as humans, they now are affected by many of the diseases that affect us. From diseases like cancer and tumors to mental health issues like anxiety and behavioural disorders the dogs have it all. Numerous studies are being done today using the dog as a model organism to study and compare human diseases.

CONCLUSION

Since ancient times, dogs have been beloved companions. While Indians are becoming more interested in dogs as pets, they prefer exotic breeds over native ones. There is a growing threat of extinction for indigenous breeds, and more scientific knowledge is necessary for all aspects to preserve this genetic resource. The 25 breeds must all be registered under ICAR in the future. In the past, indigenous dogs were used as hunting and battle dogs. Today, they can serve as law enforcement dogs and aid in disaster relief.

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