

#PETS

Problems of owning a dog in Dhaka

When I moved back to Dhaka from the US in 2021 with my dog, I thought the biggest challenge would be the air transport, medical documents, and import paperwork needed to move a dog across borders. While that journey was indeed a stressful and costly process, what caught me off guard was the struggle of having a dog in Dhaka. From strict prohibitions in almost every residential building to the glaring absence of dog-friendly outdoor spaces, keeping my dog healthy and active turned out to be an impossible effort.

Through interactions with various communities of dog owners, I was disheartened to hear about the woes of hundreds of families who have dogs and of twelve people who had to reluctantly give up their dogs due to housing restrictions.

Those who have pets at home will probably echo my sentiment that our pets are equivalent to our family members. It becomes as important for us to promote the health and well-being of our dogs as it is to provide them with food and shelter.

Researchers and veterinarians constantly emphasise that, in addition to their basic needs like food, water, and bathroom breaks, dogs require mental stimulation, socialisation with both humans and other dogs, and regular exercise to lead healthy lives.

Unfortunately, the ever-present “No Dogs Allowed” policy in a majority of public and private spaces in Dhaka not only hinders residents from having dogs but also deprives those who do have dogs of the opportunity to offer their dogs a fulfilling life.

Housing

Last year, I called various numbers from apartment postings on Bikroy and bproperty. The resulting outreach to apartment buildings in Dhanmondi,

Banani, Baridhara DOHS, Bashundhara, and Mirpur resulted in exactly four saying that they have previously allowed or currently allow dogs to live there. In fact, the building my family rents our apartment in does not allow dogs and we have to maintain extreme caution to keep my dog with us! My saving grace is

significantly more cat owners in Dhaka than dog owners, and having a dog is seen as something only “wealthy people can afford” as shared by a colleague. However, this may not be because dogs are inherently “rich people animals”. One reason this perception may have become prominent is that only the wealthy are able to afford housing where they can comfortably have a dog without objection.

Veterinary care

Several pet owners are of the opinion that veterinarians in Dhaka are ill-equipped to deal with their pets, with the proportion of people who shared this being higher for dog owners. In fact, a majority shared that diagnostic care was entirely unavailable for dogs.

According to Neshmeen, a Bangladeshi animal lover and advocate, the limited foreign vets in Bangladesh are perceived by pet owners to offer better care. Once again, we observe a disparity in financial means between cat and dog owners when it comes to ensuring a high quality of life for their pets.

Outdoor spaces

In Dhaka city proper, there are barely any parks that welcome dogs, even when

One major factor — emphasised again and again — was the importance of socialising.

Dogs evolve in packs and their health and happiness are greatly enhanced through playtime and interaction with other dogs. Sadly, the inability to take dogs to parks or other public spaces in Dhaka has severely limited these opportunities. As a result, dogs in Dhaka are often extremely reactive to each other, tending to bark or growl when they see other dogs.

My personal efforts to create opportunities for my dog to socialise have involved DM-ing every Dhaka-based dog Instagram account or any public account posting they have a dog, at the risk of coming off as “creepy”. While it helped me create a community of dogs that could socialise, constantly being kicked out of places or not allowed to enter buildings deterred us from organising these meetups.

Organisations like Pampered Paws are doing an excellent job of offering care services for pets, but even there, dogs often do not socialise much as they tend to be very reactive, having had limited interactions with other dogs throughout their lives. Efforts to create dog communities are hampered by a lack of spaces for



the fact that my dog is small, which allows me to discreetly carry her down the stairs in a bag four times a day for walks.

It is easier for those who own homes to keep pets there, due to the autonomy that home ownership provides. However, I believe having a dog should not be limited to those with financial privilege. There are



they are on a leash. The only park that has allowed me to bring my dog was Zinda Park in the Narayanganj District. The rules likely only stem from people’s fear of dogs and their worries about dogs being “dirty” as they excrete in public. Ironically, many of these parks are home to stray dogs.

How do other countries mitigate these problems? Likely by enforcing rules that require that dog owners pick up after their dogs. If so much of the world can accommodate dogs in regular city parks, it is frustrating for dog owners in Dhaka to not be able to find open spaces for their dogs to roam. The subsequent lack of mental and physical stimulation can lead to depression and various health issues in dogs. I have witnessed a friend who has had a dog for twelve years return home dejected, after a heated argument and desperate pleas following attempts to bring their dog into a nearby park.

Opportunities to socialise

As a careful first-time dog owner, I spent weeks before getting my dog reading about how to train dogs and keep them happy.

interaction, creating difficulties for dog owners and disproportionate economic implications for who can own a dog in Dhaka.

A plea for change

I earnestly urge both public leaders and entrepreneurs to help create spaces for dogs to interact and be free, and to make it easier for everyone to have dogs. Owning a dog should not be an opportunity reserved solely for the financially privileged. As long as our dogs do not interact with others in our buildings, shouldn’t we be free to keep them without anxiety about getting caught or fear of having to move out or give them up? I hope I can continue to bring together dog owners to urge better treatment of both stray and domesticated dogs.

In the meantime, I encourage everyone to join our community on Facebook: “Dog Friends of Dhaka”. Together, we can raise awareness, share experiences, and hopefully, pave the way for a brighter future for dogs and their owners in our city.

By Numaya Shahriar

Photo: LS Archive/Sazzad Ibne Sayed