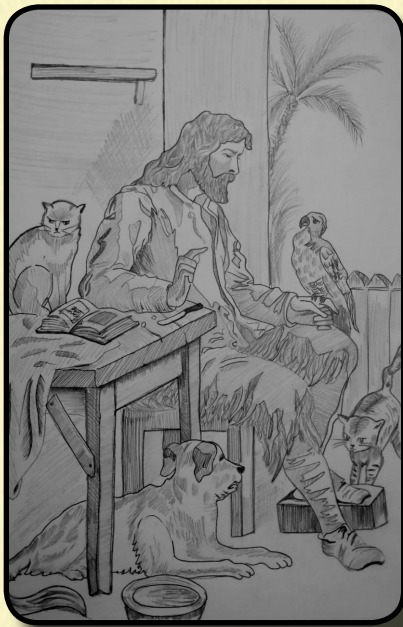


# PET CARE IN US AND INDIA

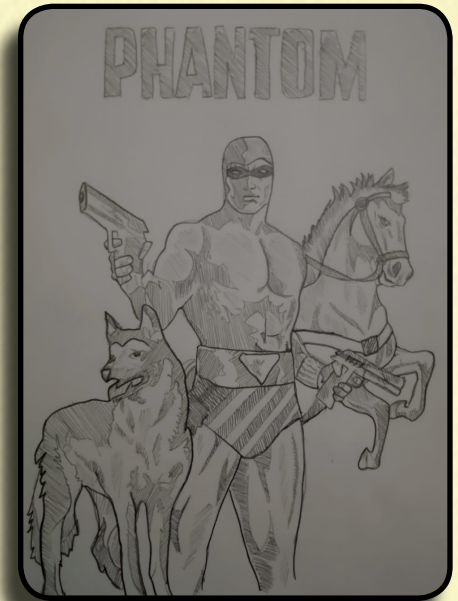
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By Simran Tyagi

In Daniel Defoe's 1791 novel, Robinson Crusoe spent some 28 years in isolation on an island off the coast of Venezuela with his pets- a dog, a talking parrot, two cats and a tame goat. Out of these his dog not only gave him company but also helped him in hunting, herding, patrolling the island and most importantly, comforted him when Robinson was ill. Many of you will also remember growing up with Lee Falk's famous character- Phantom, the ghost who walks, who along with



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his horse named Hero and dog named Devil safeguarded lives of tribal people living in Africa from pirates, thieves and criminals. The ability of Devil in sensing danger and to identify people with ill-intentions makes him one of the most memorable comic book character from animal kingdom.

Historically, domesticated animals and pets have played a critical role in human evolution, helping with hunting and farming etc. In modern times, pet owners, who now like to be called pet parents/guardians, keep pets not only for companionship, emotional support, safety of their homes and property but also because of their love for animals. Elderly adults who live alone, or do not have their working children around the whole day, or do not have much social life, like to keep pets. In western countries many hospitals utilize trained animals to take care of the physical, social and emotional



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needs of patients. Many patients who suffer from low blood glucose and seizure disorder can opt to have a “service dog”, trained to identify early signs of medical deterioration alerting other family members or patients to take corrective actions.

The aim of this paper is to discuss how pets are taken care of in the American and Indian society. Although there is a long list of different pet animals, in both the countries, and in fact the world over, dogs are the most favourite pets. So, this paper is written with reference to dogs to maintain a common thread.

### **Which pets ?**

Pets are beloved members of family in the United States of America (US) with almost 70% of households owning some type of pet. Although dogs and cats are the most popular, many people have fish, birds, rabbits, reptiles like lizards, bearded dragons as well as rodents like guinea pigs and gerbils as their pets. In India too love for pets has increased in the recent times. The constitution of India gives every citizen of India a right to own a companion animal [Article 51(g)]. Here, people own a variety of animals that are domestically found like dogs, cats, fish (in aquariums), horses, cattle etc, but some animals like rodents, turtles, and birds like parakeets are not allowed to be kept as pets. In India, dogs are the most popular pets and number of people keeping dogs is increasing, but reliable data on proportion of households having a pet in India are not available.

Pet owners in India face some opposition and conflicting situations from neighbours and Resident Welfare Associations or society management, who treat pets as a nuisance but under the guidelines of Animal Welfare Board of India, people do have a right to keep their pets.

### **Managing pets**

Millennials (those in the 25-39 age group) comprise the largest pet owning demographic in US. They delay marriage and start families late therefore they consider pets as important part of their family. Considerable money is spent in buying hi-tech toys and gadgets, pet clothing, pet strollers, special food items, and organic and natural products etc. It is a challenge for working people in America to manage their pets, especially when they are away from their home for work or vacations. The society recognizes need for someone to care for animals in absence of the owner. Several options are available. Some pet owners hire part time pet sitter to have their pets fed, walked, and bathed while they are at work. Others opt to drop them at a pet day care

facility. This is a more expensive option, but day care centres allow dogs and cats to be out of the house and in a friendly and social environment. Day cares have good amenities which include pools, beds and personal TVs for their clients! Owners who are missing their pets can even communicate with them through web cams. In US, pet day care centres become critically important when the owner needs to be away from home for an extended period due to unexpected illness or travel. It is refreshing to point out that in such instances, neighbours and sometimes even strangers are happy to care for the pets if placing pet in day care is financially difficult for the owner.

Indian society is catching up in this regard. An unthinkable possibility two decades ago, dog boarding services are now becoming increasingly available in large metropolitan cities in India. For instance, there are some 34 such centres in Delhi where working couples can leave their dogs during the day with payment per day. Predominantly, nuclear families in which both husband and wife are working, and children are busy in their activities use such facilities. Those who can afford can also hire private trainers to take care of their pets in a professional way. Some arrange an exclusive household help for this purpose; in other instances, the work for the pets is shared among the family members. In the latter case, the major tussle is who will take the dog for a walk. It is not difficult to find disinterested people, with eyes glued to the cell phones, holding leash in another hand, eager to return home as early as possible.

## Health care

Veterinary Hospitals in the United States offer a wide range of services for pets which



include testing for fleas, worms, skin conditions, allergy testing, cancer treatment, cardiology, dental care, vaccinations, eye care, emergency and critical care as well as surgeries. Most hospitals incorporate diagnostic tools like ultrasound, digital X-rays and electrocardiogram (EKG) to diagnose diseases. Lasers have proven to be useful tool for modern veterinary medicine and many clinics use them as a surgical tool.

Microchipping is widely available in US veterinary clinics. It is a small chip inserted beneath the pet's skin containing all the identification information on it. It is used to identify rightful owner in case the pet is lost or separated from its family. It is popular as it provides permanent identification that cannot fall or be removed, and it will last a pet's life time. Such facility is seldom used in India.

## **Preventive Care for pets**

**Preventive care or general wellness visits are proactive approaches to health care. Regular check ups with veterinarian can detect problems early in a pet or prevent them altogether. Preventive check-up can help in avoiding nutritional deficiencies, dental problems, fleas and ticks etc. Vaccinations are critically important part of the preventive care offered by the providers. Proper vaccination for pets is a legal requirement in the US.**

**In the US hospitals and clinics, check ups normally begin with a general health evaluation. This includes a thorough history about a pet's breed, age, life style behaviour and diet. A physical exam is done to check weight, temperature, pulse, breathing, to preventive care like vaccinations, parasite control, reproductive counselling, diagnostics (blood work, x-rays etc.), dental care and weight maintenance and a plan for follow up and next scheduled visit.**

**Preventive care in India too is picking up in recent times on exactly the same lines as in US, though not so prevalent yet. Animal hospitals offer a comprehensive dog wellness program consisting of annual or half yearly preventive care examinations. Pet owners are educated by the experts on what to do at home to keep their dogs fit. For a good advice, the doctors assess the health status of the pet based on the answers by the owners and a full physical examination.**

## **Pet Insurance**

**In the US paradoxically, only 1-2% of pets are insured which shows that despite the high percentage of pet ownership, there is a low participation in pet insurance. Pet insurance plans are generally reimbursement plans- you pay the bills upfront and are reimbursed by the insurance provider. Basic pet insurance covers routine services like exams and wellness visits while a more advanced insurance covers surgeries and other non-routine procedures.**

**Similarly, pet insurance is not popular in India. Insurance companies do not find it worthwhile as pet care is poor and as many pet owners are not very particular even about the vaccinations and the mortality rate of pets is very high. Moreover, in the absence of any target clients, insurance companies do not find it profitable to spend money on costly advertisements. Therefore, in India, insurance is mainly available for the racing horses, cows and buffaloes etc., as the owners of these animals depend on them for their livelihood, but there is no significant insurance market for other pets.**

## Laws

In US, people are very serious about humane behaviour towards their pets. Animal protection laws in America, known as anti-cruelty laws, regulate the abuse of animals. The Animal Welfare Act authorizes the United States Department of Agriculture to regulate the use of animals in research settings, exhibitions, circuses and transport. Cruelty to animals is a serious crime. Those convicted, can face substantial fines and up to seven years in prison. Still, there are countless instances where animals are abused and are ill-treated. Fortunately, there are many organizations who rescue such animals, provide them proper care, shelter, medical care and eventually find a proper loving home for rescued animal. Many of such organizations are voluntary undertakings by champions of animal lovers and safety advocates. Mostly, these organizations receive generous financial support from common citizens. Like any other charitable activity, there are examples of financial misappropriations by some of such organizations, but majority of reputable animal welfare organizations do an exceptional work to help animals mistreated or abandoned by their owners.

In India the Prevention of Cruelty of Animals Act 1960 defines cruelty against animals as beating, kicking, torturing, starving and mutilating the animal. These are cognisable offenses. The penalty for such acts is unreasonably meagre Rs 10 to Rs 50 only. The Act provided for establishment of an animal welfare board to supervise the laws relating to cruelty against animals and advising the government on amendments of laws, prevention of suffering of animals during their shifting, slaughtering, sheltering during their old age etc. Amendments to this 1960 Act are under consideration with a proposal to make animal cruelty non cognisable because in the current form there is no major deterrence to ill-treatment of a pet by its owner.

In America, legally all pets must wear a collar and ID tag when out in the public. Dog waste is a potential source of E-coli and other bacterial infections that can contaminate the water supply and soil. Therefore, by law, all pet owners are required to remove or clean up all faecal waste deposited by their dogs on public and private property. This includes neighbour's yard, sidewalks, city parks and school properties.

In India too, pet dogs are required to wear a collar when out of the house. However, most dog owners display no respect for cleanliness of the roads, back lanes or even the parks when they take their pets out for a walk. Such undisciplined behaviour is unacceptable and laws are required to prohibit pet owners from contaminating the public space.

**Pets will continue to play an important role in human society. However, owning a pet is an important responsibility that should not be taken lightly. Pets need to be treated with love and affection. Their basic nutritional and health care needs should be met. The owners need to ensure that their pets do not pose any danger or nuisance to the neighbours or society. A happy and well-behaved pet tells more about its owner than about its own pedigree.**

**In a housing complex in Orlando, US, a specific area is earmarked for the residents to take their pets for a walk. If the pet relieves itself on the way to that area, the owner is supposed to clean the spot. For this purpose, pet care stations (that have a roll of plastic bags that can be torn off one at a time, and a small trash can) are set up at various places throughout the complex. Violations of the clean up policy are enforced with the help of CCTV cameras. Besides the office maintains a record of DNA of the pets of the residents in case there are repeated violations at an area not covered by CCTV's. All these measures serve as a deterrent against pet owners dirtying the complex. However, visitors to the US report that in many places no one bothers to keep their area clean and people have to walk with their eyes glued to the pathway (places not mentioned here) Humans are alike everywhere.**

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