International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research
www.socialsciencejournal.in
E-ISSN: 2455-2070
Received: 07-10-2026, Accepted: 06-11-2026, Published: 21-11-2026
Volume 12, Issue 4, 2026, Page No. 182-187

Dogs as family members: Pet-keeping, chosen kinship and the changing Indian household

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.66856/ijhssr.2026.12.4.12380

Abstract
This article examines how dogs come to be classified as family members and what this classification reveals about the changing household, with particular reference to urban India. Drawing on sociological work on kinship, family practices and human–animal relations, it argues that the family status of a dog is an accomplishment produced through naming, domestic routine, consumption and display, and not simply an expression of sentiment. The empirical section is a secondary analysis of recent published data: the 20th Livestock Census of India, consumer surveys by Pew Research Center, Mars Petcare and TGM Research, and a multi-state survey of dog ownership published in 2024. The comparison shows that most pet owners place pets within the family, but fewer give them standing equal to a human member, and that this stronger claim is more common among women, urban residents, unmarried people and households without young children. The article proposes the concept of conditional kinship to describe a bond that is emotionally intense and materially costly, yet bounded by species, ownership and class. It links the rise of "pet parenting" in India to delayed marriage, nuclear households and an expanding pet-care market.

Keywords: Dogs, companion animals, kinship, family practices, urban India

Introduction

Few changes in everyday domestic life are as visible, and as little theorised in the Indian setting, as the movement of the dog from the threshold of the house to its interior. In many urban homes today a dog has a name that is used as a term of address within the family, a bed or a place on the human bed, a birthday marked with a cake, a veterinarian, and a say in holiday plans. Owners describe themselves as the dog's "mother" or "father", and the dog as a "son", a "daughter" or a "baby". These are not merely figures of speech. They are claims about membership, and like all such claims they have consequences for how time, money, space and emotion are distributed within a household.

Classical sociology and anthropology defined the family through marriage, descent and co-residence between humans, and animals appeared in that literature mainly as property, labour or ritual objects. Since the 1980s, however, researchers working on human–animal relations have documented how far companion animals are drawn into the language and practice of kinship (Tuan, 1984; Cain, 1985; Franklin, 1999; Charles and Davies, 2008) [5, 6, 10, 22]. The question is no longer whether people treat pets as family, since large surveys show that most do, but how this is accomplished, how far it extends, and what it tells us about the social organisation of the household.

India offers a revealing setting for this question. The country has a very large population of free-ranging dogs, recorded as 153 lakh in the 20th Livestock Census of 2019 (Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying, 2022) [16], alongside a fast-growing population of owned pets. A consultancy estimate reported in the press puts India's pet population at 26 million in 2019 and 32 million in 2024 (Esquire India, 2026). A 2024 [3, 7, 21] industry survey found that 69 per cent of Indian pet parents were first-time owners, against 47 per cent globally (Mars Petcare, 2024) [15]. The expansion of pet-keeping is thus taking place in a society where, for many households, the dog as an intimate co-resident is a recent experience, and where the boundary between the owned dog and the street dog is socially and morally charged.

This article asks: how are dogs constructed as family members in contemporary pet-keeping, and what does this construction reveal about changing household structures, with particular reference to urban India? It makes two contributions. First, it brings together scattered quantitative evidence from India and elsewhere in a single comparative frame, which makes visible a distinction between treating a dog as part of the family and treating it as equal to a human member. Second, it proposes the idea of conditional kinship to describe the position that dogs occupy: kinship that is affectively intense and practically costly, but limited by species, ownership and class.

The article proceeds in five further steps. Section 2 sets out the theoretical background in the sociology of human–animal relations, family practices and intimacy. Section 3 describes the design, sources and limitations of the secondary analysis. Section 4 presents the empirical patterns. Section 5 discusses how dogs are made into family and what this implies for household change, and Section 6 concludes.

Theoretical background

1. From pets to kin

Yi-Fu Tuan's (1984) [22] account of pets as creatures made through a combination of dominance and affection remains a useful starting point, because it refuses to separate love from power. The pet is cherished, but it is also fed, bred, named, confined and sometimes discarded at the owner's discretion. Serpell (1986) [20] had earlier observed that human societies both idealise and exploit animals, and that pet-keeping is a particularly concentrated expression of this ambivalence. Franklin (1999) [10] connected the intensification of pet-keeping in late modernity to wider social transformations, among them the weakening of traditional ties, the shrinking of the extended family and the search for relationships experienced as stable and uncritical.

Sociologists working with interview material have shown that the incorporation of animals into the family is an active interpretive process. Sanders (1999) [19] described how dog owners attribute minds, intentions and biographies to their dogs and sustain these attributions through daily interaction, so that the dog comes to be treated as a person with a distinct character. Irvine (2004) [14] showed that companion animals can contribute to the self-understanding of their owners. Charles and Davies (2008) [6], in their study of pet owners in Britain, found that people regarded pets as kin, but that the status of the animal within the family was negotiated rather than fixed. Fox (2006) and Power (2008) [9, 18] added a spatial and practical dimension, showing that the dog's place in the home, on the furniture, in the car and on the walk, is the site where the boundary between human and animal is negotiated day by day. Haraway (2003) [12] offered the most philosophical formulation in her idea of companion species, in which humans and dogs are shaped through their relationship and not prior to it.

2. Family as practice and display

A second strand of thought comes from the sociology of the family. Morgan (1996) [17] proposed that family should be understood as something people do rather than something they have. Finch (2007) [8] added that family practices must also be displayed, to relevant audiences, in order to be recognised as family. Seen in this way, calling a dog "family" is not the description of an already given fact but a practice of family-making whose success depends on being displayed and accepted by others, whether through photographs, festive celebrations, social-media accounts, or the expectation that visitors will greet the dog. Weston's (1991) [23] work on chosen families, although concerned with gay and lesbian kinship, similarly shifted attention from blood and law to commitment and care as the grounds of kinship.

This approach allows the analysis to move away from the question whether dogs "really" are family, which is a philosophical rather than a sociological problem, and toward two questions that can be investigated: which practices make the claim credible, and who is in a position to make it.

3. Individualisation, intimacy and commodified care

Giddens (1992) [11] argued that intimate relationships in late modernity are increasingly organised around mutual disclosure and emotional satisfaction rather than duty, and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) [2] linked the pursuit of intimacy to the individualisation of life courses, in which people assemble their own biographies out of choices that were once prescribed. If the household is increasingly a chosen arrangement, the dog, which offers affection without negotiation over language, career or inheritance, is a well-suited member of it.

The same literature, however, warns that intimacy is rarely free of the market. Zelizer (2005) [24] showed that people routinely combine economic transactions with intimate ties and work to keep the two morally distinct. Hirschman (1994) [13] documented how the relations of American consumers with companion animals were entangled with consumption, as owners bought goods and services for their animals as expressions of kinship. Together these accounts suggest that the family status of dogs is produced at the intersection of three processes: interpretive work by owners, family practices that are displayed to others, and market provision that supplies the goods, services and vocabulary through which kinship is expressed.

4. Dogs in the Indian setting

Indian sociology of the family has historically concentrated on the joint and nuclear household, caste endogamy and marriage, and has given little attention to non-human members of the home. Yet dogs are not absent from Indian cultural life. They appear in well-known religious and narrative traditions both as faithful companions and as figures of devotion, and in other idioms as creatures associated with impurity and with life outside the domestic threshold. This duality matters because it means that the movement of the dog into the house is not the continuation of a settled tradition of pet-keeping, as it may be said to be in parts of Europe, but a negotiation with older and conflicting meanings.

The contemporary Indian city adds further conditions. Housing is increasingly in apartments and gated societies, where rules on pets, lifts and shared spaces make the dog's place a matter of collective regulation as well as private choice. Households are smaller, marriage is occurring later in many urban groups, and the pet-care sector has expanded to supply veterinary, grooming and boarding services. The Indian case, in short, combines a recent and rapidly expanding practice of keeping dogs as family with a large, visible and contested population of dogs that belong to no household. The remainder of this article treats that combination as analytically productive.

Methodology and data

1. Research design

The study is a conceptually driven secondary analysis. No new primary data were collected. The article assembles published figures from five sources, treats each as a partial and situated account of pet-keeping, and compares them with the theoretical expectations set out above. The approach is closer to documentary analysis than to meta-analysis. Because the sources use different samples, questions and response categories, their figures cannot be pooled or tested statistically, and the comparisons made here are descriptive and interpretive.

2. Data sources

Table 1 summarises the sources. They were selected because they are recent, publicly accessible, and speak directly to one of three matters: the scale of dog populations in India, the extent to which owners place dogs within the family, and the social characteristics of those who do so. Where a figure is quoted in this article it is reported as published and attributed to its original source.

Table 1: Data sources used in the analysis

Source	Coverage	Method and sample	Period
20th Livestock Census (Government of India)	India, national	Enumeration of households and wards across the country	2019
Pew Research Center	United States	Online survey of 5,073 adults, including 2,963 pet owners	April 2023
TGM Research	India	Survey of 715 adults aged 18 to 55+, weighted to the	June–July 2024

		population structure	
Mars Petcare (with Ipsos)	20,000+ owners and non-owners; about 1,000 in India	Online survey of dog and cat owners and non-owners	March–April 2024
Brill *et al*.	Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand	Household survey in seven settlements: 563 dog owners and 9,282 non-owners	Published 2024

Source: compiled by the author from the publications cited in the text.

3. Limitations

Four limitations should be stated plainly. First, two of the five sources (Mars Petcare and TGM Research), together with the consultancy estimates quoted in the press, were produced by or for commercial organisations with an interest in the pet-care market, and their categories, such as "pet parent" and "pet humanization", are marketing as well as analytic constructs. Second, the commercial surveys were conducted online and are likely to over-represent urban, connected and relatively affluent respondents, so their figures should not be read as national household rates. Third, question wording differs between the Pew, TGM and Mars instruments, and the Indian and American figures are therefore comparable only in a loose sense. Fourth, the Livestock Census relies on enumeration practices that are widely believed to undercount free-ranging dogs, especially in cities (Al Jazeera, 2025) [1]. The findings are therefore indicative and not causal, and the discussion that follows is offered as an interpretation to be tested by fieldwork.

Findings

1. Scale and growth of dog-keeping in India

The 20th Livestock Census recorded 153 lakh stray dogs in India in 2019 (Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying, 2022) [16]. This count is itself contested: journalistic extrapolations for Delhi suggest that the real number of free-ranging dogs in the capital may be many times the census figure (Al Jazeera, 2025) [1]. The national statistics consulted for this article do not offer an equally reliable count of owned dogs, which is itself a finding, since it shows that owned dogs are a recent and still poorly enumerated category in official data.

Commercial and survey sources point to rapid growth. A consultancy estimate puts India's pet population at 26 million in 2019 and 32 million in 2024 [21], with a forecast of 41.5 million in 2026 (Esquire India, 2026). TGM Research (2024) [7, 21] reports that 55 per cent of the adults it surveyed owned a pet in 2024 [21]. This figure comes from a weighted but online sample of 715 respondents and should not be treated as a household rate. A far larger household survey provides a more cautious picture. Brill *et al*. (2024) [3] surveyed 563 dog owners and 9,282 non-owners in seven settlements in Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Uttarakhand and found significantly fewer dog-owning households in Gujarat than in Tamil Nadu, although data from Ahmedabad and Vadodara indicated rapidly rising ownership.

Two further findings from these sources matter for the argument. Dog ownership in the Brill *et al*. (2024) [3] sample was more common in households of higher socio-economic standing, and settlements in Uttarakhand more often kept dogs for reasons other than companionship. The companion-animal model, in which a dog is kept chiefly for affection, is therefore only one of several ways in which dogs live with Indian households, and it is unevenly distributed by class and region. The Mars survey adds that in India most dogs come through friends, family or breeders, with 23 per cent obtained from pet shops and only 6 per cent adopted (Mars Petcare, 2024) [15].

2. Degrees of family membership

Table 2 sets out the main indicators of family membership available from the surveys. They fall into two groups that must be distinguished. The first records whether owners place a pet within the family at all. The second records whether they place it on the same level as a human member, or in a relationship of parent and child.

Table 2: Indicators of family membership among pet and dog owners

Indicator	Source and setting	Result	Year
Pet owners who say pets are part of their family	Pew, United States	97%	2023
Pet owners who say pets are as much a part of the family as a human member	Pew, United States	51%	2023
Dog-only owners who say the same (cat-only owners: 48%)	Pew, United States	53%	2023
Pet owners who consider pets family members	TGM, India	57%	2024
Pet owners who regard pets as their children	TGM, India	16%	2024
Pet parents who say pets are central to their lives (global mean: 37%)	Mars, India	68%	2024
Dog owners who value dogs for family completeness	Mars, India	40%	2024

Source: Brown (2023); TGM Research (2024); Mars Petcare (2024) [4, 15, 21]. Question wording differs between surveys, so figures are indicative and not strictly comparable.

The contrast between the two groups is the first substantive result. In the United States, almost every pet owner (97 per cent) says that pets are part of the family, but about half (51 per cent) say that pets are as much a part of the family as a human member (Brown, 2023) [4]. Dog-only owners (53 per cent) are somewhat more likely than cat-only owners (48 per cent) to make the stronger claim (Brown, 2023) [4]. Inclusion is nearly universal, whereas equality is a minority-to-majority position that divides owners.

The Indian figures are consistent with this pattern, although they come from a different instrument. TGM Research (2024) [21] segments owners by the emotional attachment they report, and finds that 57 per cent consider their pets family members and 16 per cent regard them as their children. If, as the segmentation suggests, these categories are mutually exclusive, 73 per cent of Indian owners place their pets in a kin position of one kind or another, but only a small minority adopt the specifically parental idiom. The Mars survey, which asks a different question, finds that 68 per cent of Indian pet parents say their pets are central to their lives, nearly twice the global mean of 37 per cent, and that 40 per cent of Indian dog owners value their dogs for

making the family complete (Mars Petcare, 2024) [15]. These are commercial measures and cannot be equated with the Pew items, but the direction is the same: India shows high levels of emotional centrality attributed to dogs, even though the pet population is newer.

3. Who makes the stronger claim?

The Pew data allow a closer look at the social distribution of the claim that a pet is as much a part of the family as a human member. Table 3 reproduces the main differences.

Table 3: Pet owners who say their pet is as much a part of their family as a human member, by group (United States)

Characteristic	Group	Share (%)
Gender	Women / Men	57 / 43
Residence	Urban / Suburban / Rural	61 / 47 / 50
Family income	Lower / Middle / Higher	64 / 46 / 43
Pet type	Dog-only / Cat-only owners	53 / 48

Source: Brown (2023) [4], Pew Research Center survey, April 2023 [4].

Women, urban residents and lower-income owners are the most likely to make the stronger claim. Unmarried owners and those without children under 18 at home are also the most likely to do so, while parents and married people are less likely (Brown, 2023) [4]. The share does not vary notably by age, race or ethnicity. Two points follow. The first is that the claim is strongest where human family ties are thinnest or where the household has no dependent children, which is consistent with the view that pets are drawn into kinship where there is room for them. The second is that the relationship with class is not simple. In the American data, lower-income owners are more likely than higher-income owners to say that pets are fully family (64 per cent against 43 per cent), whereas in the Indian multi-state survey dog ownership as such is concentrated in higher socio-economic households (Brill *et al*., 2024) [3]. The two findings concern different things, the intensity of the claim among owners in the first case and the likelihood of ownership in the second, but together they suggest that who has a family dog and who treats it as a full family member are different social questions.

4. Obligation and emotional cost

The surveys also show that family status brings obligations and costs. Thirty-two per cent of Indian dog owners report guilt about leaving their dogs alone, and the emotional pain of losing a pet is the most frequently cited reason, at 23 per cent, for not owning a dog in India (Mars Petcare, 2024) [15]. In the American data, 51 per cent of owners who see their pet as fully family say that society places too little emphasis on pets' well-being, compared with 13 per cent of owners who see their pet as family but not equal to a human member (Brown, 2023) [4]. Claiming a dog as kin, in other words, shapes not only private feeling but also public opinion about what animals are owed.

Discussion: how dogs are made family

1. The vocabulary of kinship

Naming is the most visible act in the construction of family membership. The terms "pet parent", "fur baby" and "canine baby" that circulate in Indian commercial and media discourse are not neutral descriptions. The language of parenthood casts the dog as a dependent who is owed nurture, protection and attention, and it casts the owner as a responsible carer rather than a proprietor. The finding that 16 per cent of Indian owners think of their pets as children (TGM Research, 2024) [21] shows that this idiom is available and used, although it is not the majority choice. In the terms of Finch's (2007) [8] analysis, vocabulary is the first element of display: to speak of a dog as one's child is to ask others to recognise a relationship.

2. Routine, space and display

Kinship is sustained in routine. Press accounts describe Indian pets accompanying their families on holidays, being photographed in destination shoots, and being cared for by pet-sitters booked through online platforms when owners travel (Esquire India, 2026) [7]. The guilt that many owners report about leaving dogs alone (Mars Petcare, 2024) [15] is evidence of a felt obligation that structures the household's timetable. Following Power (2008) and Fox (2006) [9, 18], these routines can be read as the means by which the dog's place in the home is negotiated. A dog that is allowed on the sofa, consulted in decisions about travel and included in family photographs is being practised as family, and each of these acts is also a display to guests, neighbours and online audiences.

3. The market and the supply of kinship

The distinctive feature of contemporary dog-keeping, as Hirschman (1994) and Zelizer (2005) [13, 24] would lead one to expect, is that kinship is expressed through consumption. Veterinary care, grooming, premium food, accessories and travel services give owners ways of showing care that can be measured and compared. The market research on which much of this article relies is itself part of the phenomenon. TGM Research (2024) [21] describes "pet humanization" as an opportunity for businesses, and the category of the pet parent is as much a segment for marketing as a sociological type. This does not make the sentiment less real, but it means that the family status of dogs is produced partly by those who sell to families. The low rate of adoption in India (6 per cent for dogs) and the importance of purchase and breeders (Mars Petcare, 2024) [15] suggest that acquiring a family dog is, for many households, also an act of selection and purchase, which reinforces a hierarchy between the chosen, often pedigreed, dog and the street dog.

4. Boundaries: the family dog and the street dog

The idea of conditional kinship is clearest at the boundary between owned and unowned dogs. The same species is present in two socially opposed forms. Inside the house it is a family member; outside it, in the 153 lakh free-ranging dogs counted in 2019 and in the larger numbers many observers believe to exist (Al Jazeera, 2025) [1], it is more often discussed as a public-health and public-order problem. Brill *et al*. (2024) [3] found both positive and negative attitudes toward roaming dogs among owners and non-owners alike, which suggests that affection for the family dog does not translate automatically into tolerance for the street dog. Sociologically, this is a case of boundary-work: the moral category of the family dog is defined partly by what it excludes. Religious and caste-inflected ideas of purity, which may have made bodily closeness to dogs contentious in some households, also help to explain why the movement of the dog into the home is a notable social change, and one that deserves study at the level of particular communities.

5. Dogs and household change

The patterns in Section 4 are consistent with, though they do not prove, the view that the dog's rise as family member is connected to changes in household structure. Press accounts link the growth of "pet parenting" in urban India to later marriage, nuclear families, dual-income households without children and urban isolation (Esquire India, 2026) [7]. The Pew data show that the claim of full family membership is strongest among the unmarried and among owners without young children (Brown, 2023). Read through Giddens (1992) [4, 11] and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) [2], these findings fit an account in which individualised life courses leave room for relationships that are chosen, affectionate and relatively free of negotiation, and in which dogs provide such a relationship.

Two cautions are needed. The first is that a compensatory reading, in which dogs simply fill the place of absent humans, is too simple. The finding that parents and married owners are less likely to claim full equality for pets may reflect competing claims on time and attention, and not an absence of attachment. Human family ties, where they exist, take priority, and the dog's membership is correspondingly elastic. The second caution is that the household most able to sustain a family dog is also the household with the income and space to do so, which is why the class gradient in ownership noted by Brill *et al*. (2024) [3] matters. Dogs are becoming family in precisely those households that are most affected by the shifts that sociologists associate with late modernity, and that are also best placed to pay for the practices through which family membership is expressed.

6. Conditional kinship

The evidence assembled here supports the concept of conditional kinship. The kinship is real in that it is expressed in vocabulary, routines, expenditure and felt obligation, and in that most owners, in the United States and in India, say that they regard their dogs as family. It is conditional in at least four senses. It depends on species, since a minority of owners claim equality with humans and many hold the dog's claims below those of people. It depends on ownership, since the status accorded to the family dog is not extended to the street dog. It depends on household composition, since it is strongest in households with fewer human dependants. And it depends on resources, since the practices that display family status are costly. The concept has the advantage of keeping together two features that the literature on human–animal relations has often treated separately: the generosity of the bond and its limits.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the family status of dogs is a social accomplishment, produced through naming, routine, display and consumption, and that its distribution reveals the shape of changing households. The secondary analysis of Indian and international data shows three things. Nearly all pet owners include their pets in the family, but only about half claim that pets are fully equal to a human member. The stronger claim is more common among women, urban residents, the unmarried and those without young children. And in India, the rapid growth of pet-keeping, the high share of first-time owners and the importance of the market in supplying the vocabulary and goods of pet parenting suggest that the family dog is closely tied to urban, middle-class household change.

The study has clear limits. It rests on published data, much of it commercial, and cannot show how owners themselves understand the claim of kinship. The sources reviewed contain little evidence from smaller towns and from regions such as the North-East, where the history of living with dogs, and the uses to which dogs are put, may differ sharply from those of the metropolitan centres. Future research should therefore combine interviews and household observation with survey work, ask owners what it means in practice to call a dog family, compare households that keep a dog with those that feed street dogs, and follow the dog through moments, such as death, illness, marriage and the birth of a child, at which the limits of its kinship become visible. Such work would test the idea of conditional kinship proposed here and would show whether it describes the position of dogs in Indian households more generally.

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