

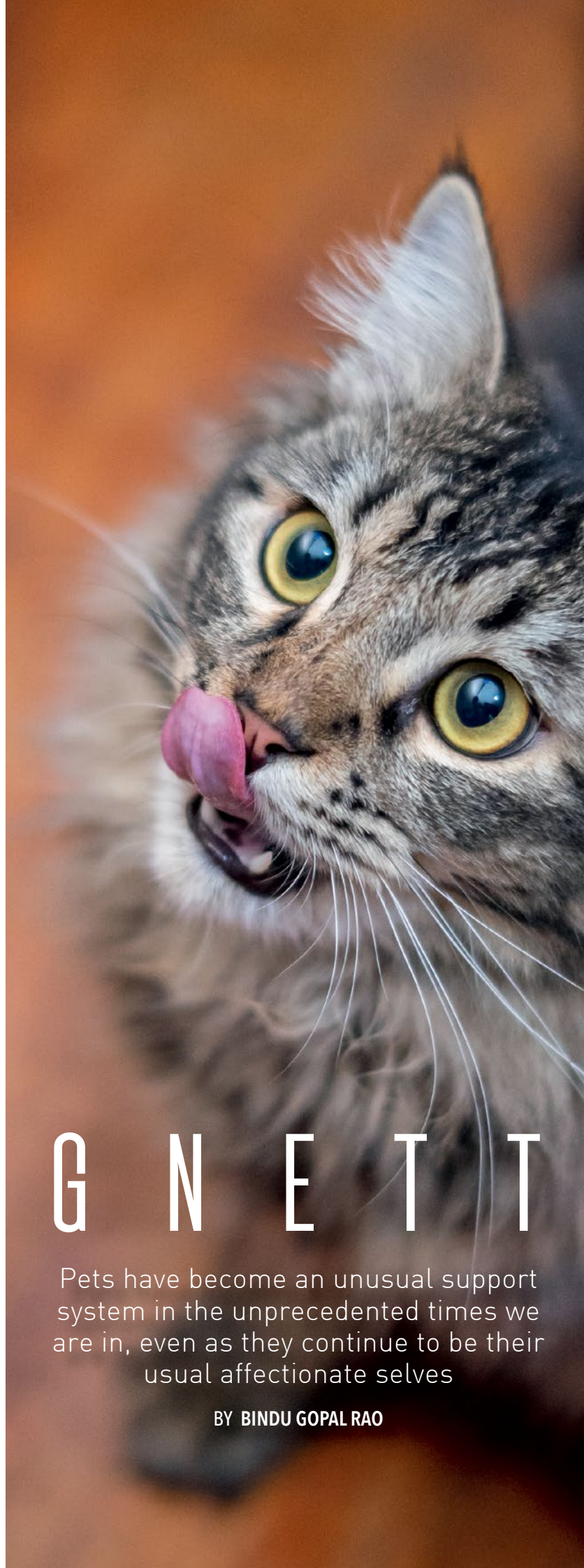
COVER STORY



PET VIGNETTES

Pets have become an unusual support system in the unprecedented times we are in, even as they continue to be their usual affectionate selves

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO





“Ever since Kiki came into my life, I do not just love him, I love his entire kind,” says Ketan, one of the oldest employees of Heads Up For Tails. A regular day scrolling on social media turned into one of the best days of Ketan’s life. He saw a post on Facebook saying that a litter of 30-day-old kittens, abandoned by their mother, were up for adoption.

Upon visiting the foster parent, he learned that all except two had been adopted. He sat and spent some time with both and while one kitten was playful and outgoing, the other was more introverted and observant. The shy one spoke to him; Ketan saw a reflection of himself in his behaviour and mannerisms. While he was in the cab taking the kitten to his new home, the radio played the song, “Kiki, do you love me?” In the playful moment that followed, the kitten became Kiki. Today, thanks to Kiki, Ketan is an ardent cat

lover. He encourages everyone around him to firstly, adopt and secondly, give equal consideration to both cats and dogs. He is thankful to Kiki for plenty of reasons but, mostly, for demanding early breakfast and, hence, turning him into a morning person.

WHY PETS MATTER

Pet care has evolved in India from just getting a dog to guard your home to getting a dog to guard your heart. India will be home to 31.41 million pet dogs by the time we reach 2023 as per Statista—a statistics portal for market data and market research. Today, there are new-age pet parents who treat their pets like family, understand their pets for who they are, give them the kind of love and care that helps them thrive. Anushka Iyer, Founder & CEO, Wiggles.in, opines, “Pets are the new babies of the millennials. The world has probably grown more aware of the solace and joy that pets provide in



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these COVID times. Most people prefer adopting or bringing home a pet such as a dog, cat, hamster, turtle, goldfish, rabbit and so on or, better yet, taking care of the strays on the road. The new-age pets are social influencers and have quite a fan following. Nowadays, pets have become smarter and more adaptable to climate changes, diet and environment, work from home schedules, with their only condition being that they are able to stay close to their humans. New-age pets are the perfect antidote for the new-age generation that thrives on change every 30 seconds.”

PET PLANET

While Indians traditionally always preferred dogs as pets, there is slow acceptance of cats as well. Micro-families are increasingly looking to extend their pack family through pet adoption. With this new exposure to people’s emotional behaviour, new-age pets are quick to adapt and up their emotional IQ, which is helping them earn a special place in every family.

Architect Nilanjan Bhowal, who is a pet dad himself, avers, “New-age pets belong to the millennials and Gen-Z who are confident, curious and drawn to the digital realm. They are influenced by what is hot and what is not. They like to try out the latest technology and these days spend a lot of time at home. They prefer customisation and like to invest their time and money in keeping feline company, availing the best veterinary care and pet services.”

ADOPTION CUES

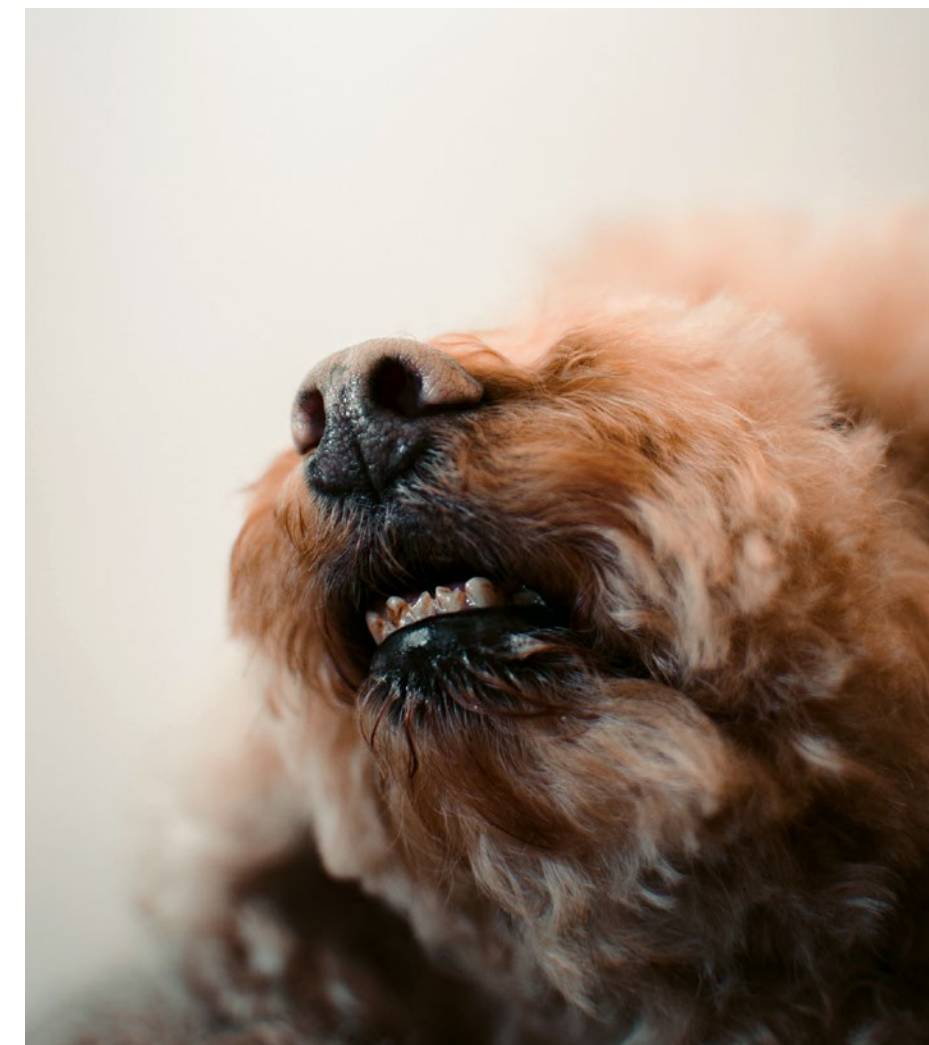
The lockdown has meant that people have increasingly turned towards adopting pets. Anindita Kannan, Bengaluru-based independent brand consultant, says, “My husband and I always wanted to adopt a dog but never got the chance because of work and other responsibilities. We were

able to take the decision to adopt in October 2020 purely because we had the option to work from home, hence it was easier to take care of a puppy. During the lockdown, we noticed a lot of abandoned dogs and a lot of new street puppies being born. It was sad to see many of them die. We spotted a little one roaming alone next to our house and we instantly fell in love and got him home. Since then, he is part of our family and a great friend, too.”

TREND CHECK

Pet parents have started to observe their pets closely and recognise that their pets have unique traits as well as personalities. “Many pet lovers now showcase their pet’s identity globally,

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making them new-age superstars on social media. In some cases, this became a full-time profession for the pet parent and helped earn a living. With the emotional bonding people develop with their pets, they now understand them better,” says Ambika Ramachandran, Founder, PawsnCollars. Pet Instagram accounts are also popular; it is not just actor Priyanka Chopra who has a page for her dog. As soon as people get pets home, they want to share this happiness with the world, and so they document their journey, all their cuteness on one feed.

“Other than that, as the world is shifting towards natural remedies and ayurveda, organic products for pets are gaining a lot of popularity. Pet parents want to make their pets a part of their transition to a healthy, sustainable way of life. We, at Heads Up For Tails, have always tried to provide sustainable/chemical-free products for pets: we recently launched Paws For Earth,

an eco-conscious collection with toys as our first category; there is also our in-house range of natural and chemical-free grooming products for pets,” says Rashi Narang, Founder & Creative Director, Heads Up For Tails. From pet spas to organic products to products that cater to unique needs of pets at different life stages, pet care has evolved from being just about basics like food and walking gear and litter to ensuring that all the needs of pet parents are addressed. Some luxury brands like Gucci, Chanel and even Swarovski have accessories for pets.

RESCUE ACTS

Apart from cats and dogs, new-age pets like birds, rabbits, hamsters are becoming popular. The pandemic-induced lockdown has meant that more pets found homes during this time. “Some of us have taken pets to keep company at home while others have provided shelter to homeless ones due to the pandemic. But the trend is to have an uncommon pet,” says Kolkata-based PR professional



Paayel Sengupta. Incidentally, she rescued an African Grey Parrot last year during the lockdown when the supercyclone Amphan hit Bengal. “I found this bird panting by a lakeside in front of my house, trying to sip water from a utensil, and I brought him home and he has been a great companion. African Grey Parrots have the unique capability of mimicking humans and talking like them. So, my bird, Shoshti, started talking after settling down within a few weeks. It is great fun to teach him new words every day and then hear him chatter it out after a few days. He is a very social bird and loves human presence,” adds Sengupta.

Prior to founding PawsnCollars, Ramachandran says that she and her team have done a lot of rescues both in India and the USA. “We recently rescued a pregnant mother cat, which was stuck in a gymnasium post-lockdown for over seven days and we were able to successfully help deliver her kittens. We also rescued a cat that was stuck in an abandoned PG hostel due to COVID-19 and was in a near-death condition due to starvation. Another rescue story is of a one-month-old puppy who was run over by a bike and had broken his hip completely. He is now in our care and we have started working on ‘Wings with Wheels’ project where we build





accessories for handicapped pets that will help them lead a normal life again.”

MEAL TIME

From serving home-cooked meals to their pets to feeding them high-quality manufactured pet food suiting their body type, pet parents have become more conscious as to what they are feeding their pets. Additionally, influencers and bloggers have taken to social media platforms, educating and informing people on the sources to buy the best products for their pets.

Ganesh Ramani, General Manager - Petcare at Mars International India Ltd, the brand that owns Pedigree, says, “There are different nutritional requirements for each dog or cat needs at a particular age and size. To meet these needs, we have carefully manufactured pet food that brings complete nutrition and balanced

minerals for their growth and development. To meet other needs such as hygiene and care, we have varied offerings to best meet their requirements.”

Many pet parents are even making a switch from commercial dry food diets to home-cooked gourmet meals for their fur babies. Ishmeet Singh Chandiok, Founder, Harley’s Corner (a ready-to-eat wet gourmet pet food brand), says, “The current switch that people and vets are making is moving dogs to a home-cooked style diet rather than the commercial kibbles. While the kibbles are convenient and easy to feed, the effects of keeping dogs on that diet is harmful and has been proven, too. A study (*Prince Laurent Foundation Price Essay*) done by some vets in the European Union has proved that dogs on a home-style diet live almost 30 months longer than dogs on a commercial dry food diet.” In fact,

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his dog Harley is also the CTO – Chief Tasting Officer and all products get launched only after his approval.

MENTAL WELLNESS

Pets have proven to help their owners keep a healthy mental well-being, with their unwavering support. The bond between human and pet is in many ways like the parent-child bond. Ashna Dhanuka, certified life coach and motivational speaker, says, “Dogs, for instance, are shockingly better at interpreting our tone of voice, body language and gestures, and they often try to understand our emotions. If dog ownership is a concern, one can always go for animal-assisted therapy. A pet does not necessarily have to be a dog or a cat, they can be chosen based on the need of the person. Birds can encourage social interaction and help keep your mind sharp, while even watching fish in an aquarium can help reduce tension and lower your pulse

rate.” Recent studies have proven that human-animal bond, especially with dogs and cats, has a therapeutic effect on the owner.

Pets can reduce stress, depression, anxiety and ease loneliness. These fur buddies encourage exercise and playfulness and even improve your cardiovascular health. Pets have always been great companions and keeping one has healing effects. Besides filling the need for companionship, they help children become more responsible and caring towards another companion sharing their space. Pets are no longer treated as playful and cuddling companions but more of a buddy and mate for humans.

TAKE CARE

The recent rise in adoptions boosted the confidence of many entrepreneurs in the pet services space to go beyond and expand. “One needs a lot of

patience in building a bond and giving time for the pet to understand you better. A lot of first-time pet parents get them home with a lot of excitement without knowing what is in store as part of their day-to-day responsibilities and this is quickly becoming a big problem, leading to abandoning of these precious innocent beings. This is where PawsnCollars has stepped in and started sharing a wealth of information in terms of responsible pet parenting through an educational social series called Paw Academy. With more responsible pet parents, this world will be a beautiful place for our four-legged companions,” says Santhosh Pasupuleti, Co-founder, PawsnCollars. Kamal Pruthi Kabuliwala, actor, director and performance storyteller, who has been bitten by stray dogs not once but four times, decided to reach out to strays by feeding them in the pandemic and has since befriended three dogs whom he feeds biscuits every day. Kabuliwala believes this gesture has helped him make a connect with animals that will hold him in good stead.

THE DOG BULLETIN

1. Pawthon works towards getting indies or abandoned pets adopted and finding them right homes.
2. The Modern Mowgli, through its social media network, is trying to create awareness about the Yulin Dog Meat Festival held annually in China, where thousands of dogs are killed for their meat. The organisation is urging people to go vegan and avoid the killing of innocent animals for meat.
3. Stray Dogs India continues to create awareness about dog and animal abuse and calls out people who prefer breeds over indies.
4. Doggstation in Delhi is devoted to rescuing animals, getting them adopted, fighting for their rights and spreading awareness through its social media reach. 🐾