

# FEEDING THE PROBLEM :

## How Provisioning Fuels Man-Monkey Conflict in Delhi

- Mukesh Chand, Parvaiz Yousuf

Macaques are one of the wisest primates who have learned to live alongside humans. In major cities of India like Delhi, encounters with macaques are a common sight. For instance in 2018, municipal bodies estimated that up to [40,000 monkeys](#) are living in Delhi, most of which used to and continue to coexist with humans in the busy streets of the city. The havoc they cause is hidden from none. From damaging the property to injuring humans, Rhesus macaques have been blamed. However, the problem is not one-sided, or it's not only the monkeys that are on the wrong here. We humans are to be equally blamed. Here, we try delving into how thousands of monkeys were caught and shifted to the sole Wildlife Sanctuary in Delhi - the Asola-Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary (ABWS).

### The Backstory

Once the Government of the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi decided to capture macaques from the busy streets of Delhi, they began disappearing from certain areas like Chandni Chowk. However, in another part of Delhi, in and around the AWBS, the number of macaques started to rise. People living in and around ABWLS began encountering more and more macaques (Figure 1).

“Before the COVID lockdown, we used to walk in the jungle, taking leftover food like chapati, rice, or any other food to feed the monkeys, which were very less in number”, says a woman from Sangam Vihar in Tughlaqabad, New Delhi. Since the number was low, the macaques would receive enough food in the forest and did not need to come out of the Sanctuary. However, the biggest challenge was not to relocate the macaques to Asola, but to restrict or contain them within the boundaries of ABWS. But before coming to that point, let's try understanding how macaques and humans have come to the present situation.



Figure 1: Rhesus Macaque holding a stolen Parle-g biscuit.

### A Shared History: From Coexistence to Conflict

Rhesus macaques (or rhesus monkeys) have evolved alongside humans. Historically, they [coexisted](#) peacefully with us. However, as our needs grew, we encroached upon and destroyed natural habitats, converting them into residential areas, agricultural fields, and industries. This Anthropocene era has been challenging for many species, but some, like the Rhesus macaques, survived through their excellent adaptability and high cognitive ability.

Rhesus macaques have shown remarkable resilience, easily surviving and breeding in habitats disturbed and modified by human activities. In a bustling city like Delhi, the capital of India, it is hard for humans to survive, let alone wildlife. Yet, Rhesus macaques have adapted well to this human-dominated landscape. Their [population](#) has increased over the last few decades as they lost their erstwhile natural habitat. With the disappearance of their habitats, macaques found little natural food to survive. Consequently, they migrated towards agricultural fields, colonies, shops, houses, and garbage dumps in search of food. This food, more nutritious and readily available than their natural sources, provided them with a better breeding ground, leading to a rapid population increase.



Figure 2 & 3: Feeding Rhesus macaques at Asola-Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary

## Feeding the Monkeys or Feeding Conflict?

Since Asola-Bhatti is a Prosopis-dominated forest, there is no significant natural food available for monkeys. Moreover, it's very difficult for such a small area to accommodate such a large number of macaques along with thousands of other herbivores and carnivores. The Government, which had earlier banned people from feeding monkeys, has now resorted to the same activity, albeit from a sense of compassion. The Government decided to feed the monkeys in ABWS and over 18 feeding points were created in the Sanctuary (Figures 2 & 3).

This population surge and quest for food made their presence unavoidable amongst human communities. The alarming rise in the macaques' population and an increase in monkey bites and raids on government buildings and residential neighbourhoods developed a sense of stress, fear, and bitterness between humans and macaques. This heightened conflict soon led to public outcry, demanding solutions.

### Increase in Conflict and Judicial Intervention

In 2007, in response to a PIL, the [Delhi High Court](#) banned feeding monkeys in public areas and instructed municipal authorities to fine those who violated the ban. The Court also directed the Government to remove monkeys from urban areas and translocate them to the forest of Asola-Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary on the Delhi-Haryana border. An expert committee was also set up to explore the option of population control through the sterilisation of macaques in the Sanctuary.

Over 15 years have passed since the HC Order, and authorities have translocated some [20,000 monkeys](#) to the Sanctuary. According to the Asola-Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary [Management Plan \(2015-2024\)](#), a total of 18,507 rhesus macaques had been translocated to the Sanctuary until January 2015. In the absence of natural predators, their population has increased significantly. The tropical thorn forest of the Sanctuary cannot meet the natural food requirements of these primates. However, the biggest challenge was to keep these intelligent primates restricted within the boundaries of ABWS.

The Government is spending a staggering amount of around ₹1 crore annually to feed monkeys which equals to around 8 lakh rupees per month (Figure 2). The feeding of monkeys in Delhi is surely a short-term solution, unscientific and unsustainable. Rather than solving the problem, the Government is worsening the situation. The monkeys have more than sufficient food resources and are reproducing in huge numbers, close to their carrying capacity. The day the government stops feeding the monkeys, we can imagine what will happen to the national capital of Delhi. However, not all the monkeys are restricted to the ABWS. Since macaques are territorial, there is huge competition for these 18 feeding points. A large number of macaques still come to the settlements around ABWS and cause havoc. Moreover, we observed people still feeding a large population of macaques on a road connecting Delhi and Haryana, which should not be done. Although sign boards indicate a fine for feeding monkeys, these rules and laws fall under the rubble. Due to religious reasons, the practice of feeding macaques goes unnoticed (Figure 4).

### What Do People Think About It?

We conducted field surveys from April to June 2024 in the periphery of Asola-Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary, including 200 household interviews.



Figure 4: Provisioning and warning board outside sanctuary gate to not feed rhesus macaques.

The survey addressed two questions: 1) Has the number of monkeys increased in the area, and if yes, are they coming from the Sanctuary or elsewhere? 2) Were the people aware of any provisioning activity carried out by the State Forest Department inside the Sanctuary? (Figure 5)

About 78.4% said house-raiding macaques have increased in the last five years. Of these, 62.5 % observed macaques coming from the Sanctuary periphery and 10 % from nearby markets. On the second question, 86.3% were unaware of any provisioning inside the Sanctuary as they had never visited the core areas where the feeding stations have been established. About 13 % were aware of provisioning, with 7 % knowing due to their working as daily wage labourers inside the sanctuary (Table 1).

### The Broader Impact: Ecological and Social Ramifications

Provisioning affects more than just the immediate [behaviour of the macaques](#). Studies suggest it can alter their foraging patterns, social interactions, and habitat use, ultimately impacting the broader ecosystem.

For example, macaques that rely on human-provided food may not disperse seeds effectively, disrupting the natural regeneration of the forest. Additionally, the frequent aggressive interactions between humans and macaques can escalate, leading to serious injuries on both sides.

Studies conducted in the Sanctuary suggest that despite daily feeding, many macaque groups move outside the Sanctuary boundaries in search of food. Dominant groups often monopolise feeding centres, preventing other groups from feeding. Additionally, the protection afforded within the Sanctuary has turned it into a safe breeding ground, with the population perhaps close to or exceeding its carrying capacity, leading to severe conflicts with surrounding human communities.

Although Schedule II of the [Wild Life \(Protection\) Act](#) ensures the protection of wild species, in December 2022, the Union Government removed Rhesus macaque from the same, stripping them of protection from hunting.

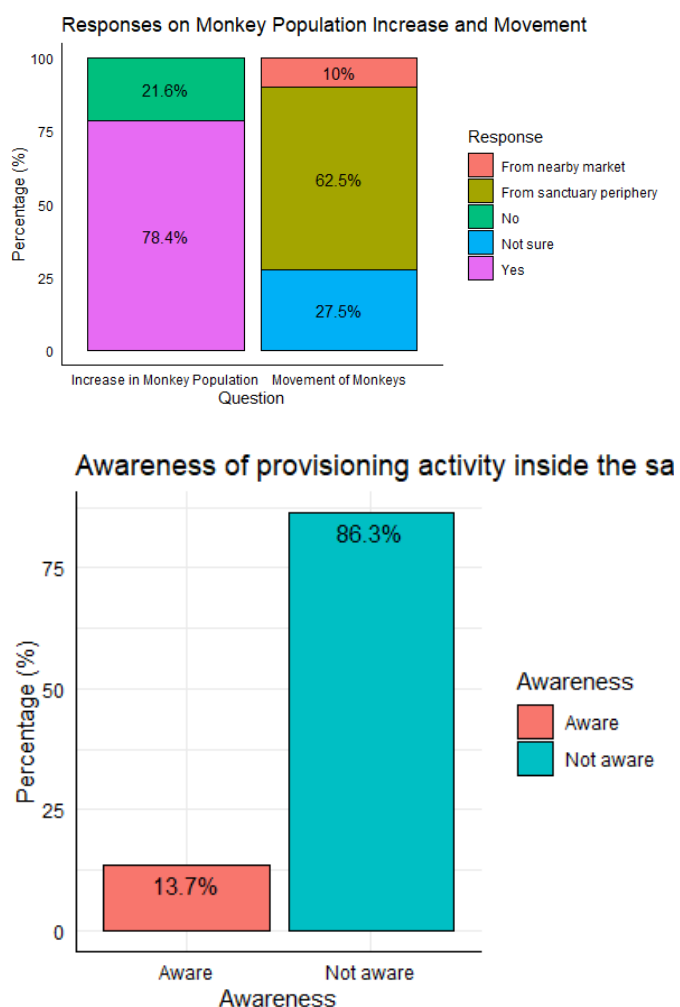


Figure 5: Graphical representation of Survey results

## Conclusion

The relationship between humans and macaques in urban areas like Delhi is complex and challenging. The measures taken so far, including the translocation of monkeys to the Sanctuary and the provisioning of food, have not provided a sustainable solution. The population of macaques continues to grow, and conflicts with humans are rising.

Sustainable management must go beyond immediate fixes, focusing instead on restoring and enhancing natural habitats, promoting coexistence, and implementing ongoing population control measures like sterilisation (easier said than done, and efficacy needs testing & field trials). These efforts, combined with public awareness campaigns about the consequences of feeding wildlife and the importance of maintaining a safe distance from these animals could help reduce direct human-primate interactions.

The challenge of living alongside macaques in urban environments is not unique to Delhi; it is a global issue that requires innovative and humane solutions. By understanding the root causes of the conflict and addressing them through science-

based management practices, we can hope to create a future where humans and macaques coexist peacefully. This will benefit the macaques and enhance the quality of life for people living in affected areas.

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	Question	Response	Percentage (%)	Number of Households (n)
1.	Has the number of monkeys increased in the area in the last five years?	Yes	78.4	157
		No	21.6	43
2.	If yes, are they coming out of the sanctuary or from somewhere else?	From sanctuary periphery	62.5	98
		From nearby market	10	16
		Not sure	27.5	43
3.	Are you aware of any provisioning activity happening inside the sanctuary?	Not aware	86.3	173
		Aware	13.7	27
4.	If aware, the reason for awareness (working as daily wage labour inside the sanctuary)	Daily wage worker at the sanctuary	7	14
		From newspaper	6.7	13

Table. 1: Household survey for human-macaque conflict.