

Chapter 7

Mongoose of India and their conservation

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Abstract: The mongooses (*Urva* spp.) of India constitute a diverse and ecologically important group of small carnivorous mammals distributed across varied habitats, from dry scrublands to dense forests and wetlands. This review compiles and analyses existing literature to document their distribution, vernacular names, cultural significance, and conservation status. Six species are recognised in India, of which five are listed as Least Concern and one, the Indian brown mongoose (*Urva fusca*), as Vulnerable. Mongooses play a crucial ecological role as natural pest controllers and hold symbolic importance in Indian folklore, often representing courage and protection. However, threats such as habitat loss, road mortality, and illegal hunting for mongoose hair persist. The study highlights the need for strengthened conservation strategies, legal protection, and community awareness to ensure the continued survival of these culturally revered and ecologically vital species that contribute significantly to maintaining India's biodiversity and ecological stability.

Keywords: *Urva* species, biodiversity, conservation status, ecological significance, cultural importance, habitat loss, wildlife protection.

Introduction

Mongooses hold a special place in India's natural and cultural landscape, symbolising agility, courage, and resilience (Louppe et al., 2020). Across various regions of the country, these small carnivores have long been admired for their fearless nature, particularly their ability to confront and kill venomous snakes (Sharma, 2016). This remarkable trait has made them a part of Indian folklore, mythology, and rural narratives for centuries. In many Indian communities, the mongoose is considered a symbol of good fortune and protection, often featured in folk tales and proverbs as a clever and brave creature (van der Geer, 2008). Their presence around villages and farmlands is traditionally regarded as beneficial, as they help control rodents and snakes, thus maintaining ecological balance and supporting human livelihoods indirectly (Khoobdel et al., 2016). Ecologically, mongooses play a crucial role in India's ecosystems as natural pest regulators and mid-level

predators (Roy et al., 2002). By preying on small mammals, reptiles, insects, and even crustaceans, they help sustain food web dynamics and prevent the overpopulation of agricultural pests (Fukasawa et al., 2013). Their adaptability allows them to thrive in diverse habitats ranging from arid scrublands and agricultural fields to dense forests and wetlands (SFRTI, 2019). Despite this adaptability, mongooses face increasing threats from habitat destruction, road kills, illegal trade, and declining prey availability (Furqan et al., 2021). The illegal trade of mongoose hair, particularly for paintbrush manufacturing, remains one of the gravest concerns for their conservation in India (Sahajpal et al., 2009). The need for mongoose conservation extends beyond ecological importance; it is also a matter of preserving India's rich biodiversity and cultural heritage. Although most Indian mongooses are listed as Least Concern under the IUCN Red List, species such as the Indian brown mongoose (*Urva fusca*), confined to the southern Western Ghats, are facing population pressures due to habitat fragmentation and deforestation (Ramachandran and Raju, 2020). Moreover, the unregulated exploitation and human-wildlife conflict in rural areas pose continuing challenges. Hence, conserving mongooses is not only vital for ecological stability but also for sustaining the cultural and symbolic relationship between humans and nature that has existed in India for generations. Strengthened legal protection, awareness programs, and habitat restoration initiatives are essential to ensure that these spirited animals continue to thrive in the wild.

Methodology

The present study is based on an extensive review of existing literature to compile and analyse information on the mongooses (*Urva* spp.) of India. Relevant data were gathered from peer-reviewed journals, books (Menon, 2003), government wildlife reports, IUCN Red List assessments, and reliable online databases such as GBIF and Wikipedia, focusing on species distribution, vernacular names, and conservation status. Specific terms, including both scientific and common names of mongooses, were searched. Data consistency was ensured by cross-checking information from multiple references, and taxonomic updates were aligned with current IUCN classifications. This literature-based approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the diversity, distribution, cultural significance, and conservation needs of Indian mongooses (Kumar, 2025).

Results and discussion

The mongooses of India, belonging to the genus *Urva*, represent a diverse group of small carnivorous mammals widely distributed across the subcontinent. A total of six species were recorded from various parts of India, highlighting their scientific names, distribution, common and vernacular

names, IUCN conservation status, and key literature sources. The Indian grey mongoose (*U. edwardsii*) is the most widespread species, found throughout India. Locally known as “Nevlao” in Hindi, it is listed as Least Concern by the IUCN due to its adaptability to various habitats and close association with human settlements. Similarly, the Ruddy mongoose (*U. smithii*), which occupies most of India except the Northeastern states, also falls under the Least Concern category. It exhibits adaptability to scrublands and dry forests and is often confused with *U. edwardsii* due to their overlapping ranges and similar appearance. The Stripe-necked mongoose (*U. vitticollis*) is primarily distributed across peninsular India, including Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Goa, and the Western and Eastern Ghats. It can be identified by the distinct dark stripe on its neck and is referred to locally as “Chen keree” in Malayalam and “Yentawa mungisa” in Telugu. Despite being relatively less common than the grey and ruddy mongooses, it is also classified as Least Concern, suggesting stable populations within its range.

Table 1: List of mongoose species of India

Scientific name (Distribution)	Common name	Vernacular name	IUCN status	Source(s)
<i>Urva edwardsii</i> (Throughout India; Figure 1)	Indian grey mongoose	Nevlao (H), Beji (B), Mungusa (M), Mungi (T) and Munguli (K)	Least Concern	Menon, (2003); Raju and Ramachandran (2016); Ramachandran and Raju, (2020); en.wikipedia.org
<i>Urva smithii</i> (Throughout India except Northeastern states)	Ruddy mongoose	Mungus (H), Mungi (T) and Mungisi (K)	Least Concern	Menon, (2003); Dookia, (2013); Subba et al., (2014); Raju and Ramachandran (2016); Ramachandran and Raju, (2020); en.wikipedia.org

				rg; Harshakumar et al., (2024)
<i>Urva vitticolla</i> (Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Goa, South India, northern Eastern Ghats and Western Ghats)	Stripe- necked mongoose	Chen keree (Mal) and Yentawa mungisa(T)	Least Concern	Menon, (2003); Nayak et al., (2014); Punjabi et al., (2014); Balaji and Satyanarayan a, (2016); Ramachandra n and Raju, (2020); en.wikipedia.o rg
<i>Urva auropunctata</i> (Central and Northern India)	Small Indian mongoose	Newla (H) and Beji (B)	Least Concern	Menon, (2003); Mudappa, (2013); Raju and Ramachandra n (2016); en.wikipedia.o rg; www.iucngisd. org
<i>Urva urva</i> (West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Northeast India)	Crab- eating mongoose	Nevla (H) and Cherpelai ketam (Mal)	Least Concern	Menon, (2003); en.wikipedia.o rg
<i>Urva fusca</i> (Southern Western Ghats)	Indian brown mongoose	Newla (H), Mungusa (M), Mungisa (T) and Mungi (K)	Vulnerable	Menon, (2003); Ramachandra n and Raju, (2020); en.wikipedia.o rg

(H: Hindi; B: Bengali; M: Marathi; T: Telugu; K: Kannada; Mal: Malayalam)



Figure 1: Indian grey mongoose in its habitat

In contrast, the Small Indian mongoose (*U. auropunctata*), widespread in Central and Northern India, is another adaptable species known for its invasive potential in other countries. This species is resilient and thrives even in disturbed habitats. Among the lesser-known species, the Crab-eating mongoose (*U. urva*) is found in parts of West Bengal, Arunachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and the Northeastern states. It is semi-aquatic in nature and feeds largely on crustaceans, as reflected in its name and the local Malayalam term “Cherpelai ketam,” meaning “crab eater.” The Indian brown mongoose (*U. fusca*), however, stands out as the only threatened species among Indian mongooses, categorised as Vulnerable. Restricted to the southern Western Ghats, it inhabits dense evergreen forests and has a relatively small and fragmented population, making it susceptible to habitat loss and anthropogenic pressures. The mongoose species of India shows a wide ecological distribution, ranging from arid plains to dense forests and wetlands. While most species are of Least Concern, their environmental importance and the threats of habitat degradation necessitate continued monitoring and habitat conservation efforts, especially for the Indian brown mongoose. The data compiled from multiple sources reflect not only their distributional diversity but also their cultural significance across India.

How to conserve the population of mongooses?

Conserving the population of mongooses in India requires a combination of habitat protection, legal enforcement, community awareness, and scientific monitoring.

1. **Habitat conservation and restoration:** Protecting and restoring natural habitats such as forests, scrublands, and wetlands is crucial for sustaining healthy mongoose populations. Establishing wildlife corridors can reduce habitat fragmentation and allow safe movement between populations.
2. **Strengthening legal protection:** Strict enforcement of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, under which mongooses are already protected, should be ensured to curb illegal hunting and trade, particularly the poaching of mongooses for their hair used in paintbrushes.
3. **Awareness and community participation:** Educating local communities about the ecological role of mongooses as natural pest controllers can discourage hunting and promote coexistence. Community-based conservation programs can help protect mongooses in rural and semi-urban areas.
4. **Mitigation of road mortality:** Installing wildlife crossings, speed restrictions, and warning signs in mongoose habitats can reduce road-related deaths.
5. **Research and population monitoring:** Long-term ecological studies and population surveys should be conducted to monitor species trends, especially for the Indian brown mongoose (*Urva fusca*), which faces higher risks due to its restricted distribution.
6. **Control of illegal trade:** Regular surveillance, stricter penalties, and awareness campaigns targeting markets and artists can help eliminate the illicit trade of mongoose hair.

By combining these ecological, legal, and community-based approaches, India can ensure the sustainable conservation of mongoose species that are not only ecologically essential but also culturally symbolic of bravery and balance in nature.

Conclusion

The mongooses of India form an integral part of the country's wildlife heritage, both ecologically and culturally. Revered in folklore for their

bravery and admired for their ability to control venomous snakes and agricultural pests, mongooses hold immense ecological significance as natural regulators within food chains. Although most species are categorised as Least Concern, the growing threats of habitat loss, road mortality, and illegal trade for their fur and hair continue to endanger local populations. The Indian brown mongoose (*Urva fusca*), in particular, faces heightened vulnerability due to its restricted distribution in the Western Ghats and the increasing degradation of its forest habitat. Hence, conserving these species is crucial not only for maintaining ecological balance but also for preserving the deep cultural connections humans share with them. Strengthening legal protection, habitat restoration, and awareness programs can collectively ensure the long-term survival of these resilient yet threatened members of India's rich faunal diversity.

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