

## PET COLUMN

# Where Children Learn To Trust from an Indog

● **Pratima Shantaveeresh**

**T**he students from this school learn from books, teachers, their fellow classmates and Bianca.

Wondering who Bianca is? She is a cute Indie dog who shares the school space with the students at Parikrma Humanity Foundation, Jayanagar branch. And, what does she teach them? Morals, with none of the heavy preaching around it.

As part of The Dog's Project, Bianca plays with students, eats with them and comforts them when they are sad – through their Friendship Project. That second project is basically a brightly painted bench that any child who feels sad can sit on. It is a call for help and any student or teacher who notices the child joins him or her, and sometimes it is Bianca who hops on to the bench.

Shukla Bose, founder of this school for the economically disadvantaged, has been finding ways to make her students feel equal to any other in the country. According to the school's website, "Dropout rate in government schools is close to 50 per cent by Class V and 70 per cent by Class VII. Attendance is as low as 15 per cent." Through the school, she wants to bridge the gap between state and private schools. The children here study CBSE English curriculum. The morals lessons here, once learnt, can't be forgotten. Thanks to Bianca who is always on her toes running behind children or happily sleeping in the "dead roach" position, on her back with legs in air.

"The students who come here are from dysfunctional families. 98 per cent have alcoholic fathers and 92 per cent have family members in jail. Struggle for survival makes them angry and abusive. The project would help them become compassionate," she says calling Bianca a "change agent". She helps them relate her to society. "Bianca sensitises children. This prompts them to think about something more than themselves. They will care for the larger society when grow up," she says.

Bianca is part of their classroom lectures, models for them in their drawing class and slow learners read to her as she doesn't judge them. The children show their love to her by sharing their food with her. The classes are graded every week and the one that does well gets to take care of the one-and-a-half year-old for a week. They take her for a walk, make sure she has water and food, bathe her and accompany her during the vet visit.

The younger children learn colours like brown, black and white touching her fur and her black and white snout.

The school that started with just one branch in Koramangala is now spread across four branches in Sahakar Nagar, Nandini Layout and Jayanagar. They all have dogs with Shakespearean names – Titania, Romeo, Juliet and Isabella. Bianca is in their Jayanagar branch. All of them were christened in an elaborate naming ceremony. The names were picked by children depend-

ing on how well they understood the characters. The dogs were picked up from streets by these children.

But dogs were not always seen as friends by the children. "They've grown up seeing dogs fight or bark at them to protect their territory. New children tend to be wary of Bianca. I make them give her a high-five by patting her on her back," Shukla says.



Students of Parikrma school with the founder Shukla Bose (left), their teacher (right) and Bianca