

## PUPPY LOVE

By SOWMYA RAJARAM, Bangalore Mirror Bureau | Jul 31, 2016, 04.00 AM IST



*A city school is doling out life lessons in goodness with the help of our four-legged friends. And it's working like a charm*

Ask Gowtham (10) if he is scared of dogs, and he nods before adding quickly, "but not of Bianca". And then he smiles. As does founder-CEO of Parikrma Humanity Foundation (a not-for-profit venture that educates children from underprivileged sections of society) Shukla Bose, who beams with pride as she watches him speak, because Bianca - with her brown coat, dark eyes, black snout and a perennially wagging tail - inspires affection, not fear. Like the other kids at the Jayanagar branch of Parikrma, Gowtham pets Bianca before getting into class every day, plays with her, and shares classroom space and time with her. It's exactly the outcome Bose was hoping for when Bianca was adopted from the streets by the school a year and a half ago. "I wanted to teach them empathy," she says. "That we are not alone in the world, and that we must learn to live with other creatures in harmony. Why not teach that through dogs, instead of through moral science lessons?" Indeed, why not?

Bose, who went from a self-confessed "dog-liker" to a dog-lover, and an activist somewhere along the way, started 'The Dog Project' at her schools in January 2015. The idea was to teach children compassion and responsibility by taking care of animals. It began by bringing in abandoned street dogs. "I was very clear that we did not want pedigree dogs but street dogs that were survivors, very much like the Parikrma children themselves," she says. But it didn't stop there. Each dog was christened in a formal naming ceremony by the children. And they were to be named after characters in Shakespearean plays. Shakespeare, really? "I'm a literature student. And I don't want Shakespeare to remain the preserve of the privileged," Bose says. And therein lies the rub. Not only is The Dog Project a way of creating sensitive citizens, but it's also a means of empowering them and inspiring confidence in their abilities, no matter what their life and economic circumstances. The same week, Bose found her children scouring Charles Lamb versions of Shakespeare's plays in the library, to come up with appropriate names for their new pets. "My approval depended on how well they could understand the character. Bianca was a little boisterous and promiscuous," she says with a laugh of the character - and the dog named after it - from Othello.

Today, each school has adopted one dog, and in one case, two. The nervous little white dog in Koramangala became Titania from A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Sahakarnagar got a Romeo, followed by a Juliet - a "handsome pair" as Bose calls them. The Nandini Layout school found an Isabella from The Tempest to guard the doors.

With each wag of their tails, these dogs are doing for the kids what no moral science class can. When a student passes by Bianca's corner in the compound and sees her bowl empty, he/ she refills it. That teaches them empathy. When she comes to class and sits in their 'circle time' with them, where they decide on how to deal with problems in their midst, they learn to be inclusive. And when slow learners read to Bianca in their remedial class, they feel empowered, "because she won't judge them," Bose explains. Indeed, what better audience to help build confidence in one's reading and elocution skills than an encouraging dog who is - quite literally - all ears?

"I always tell my daughter: marry someone with a dog because that itself is indicative of a personality, and a sense of humility. It's when we forget that we're not the only living beings on the planet that we begin to commit acts of cruelty," Bose says. Which is why Bianca is integrated into all aspects of the school curriculum. "In the Show &

Tell in kindergarten classes five-year-olds, who were exposed to English for the first time, are taught to feel Bianca's fur and learn the words 'soft', 'brown', and 'short'.

They count numbers by prying open Romeo's mouth and peering into his teeth. They learn action words by observing Titania and Isabella. The dogs become an artist's models in art class." In the process the children begin shedding their fear of dogs - one learnt from early childhood experiences of being bitten by stray dogs in their slums, or from watching others throw stones at dogs or being attacked by them.

In fact, time with the dogs is a privilege to be earned by the schoolchildren, not a task to be checked off their list in the pursuit of good grades. For instance, the best class in Sahakarnagar is rewarded by getting to take Romeo and Juliet for walks - a prize the children treasure far more than the traditional 'stars' on a mark sheet. When the lucky class reads the list of dos and don'ts for taking care of the dog, it learns to read. When it feeds her, helps bathe her, takes her out to play and takes inventory of her food stores, it learns mathematics.

And then there's empathy; it's the cornerstone of Bose's philosophy. Imperative, when she reels off the numbers. "Ninety eight per cent of children's fathers in our school are alcoholics. Ninety two per cent have someone in jail. I have children coming from an orphanage where both parents are life-term prisoners.

These kids have so much anger in them; they come from such deprived backgrounds. There's no better way to teach them to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner than through animals," she believes.

And it's working. Take Tasmia, who got off her bus, picked up a crippled dog from the street and brought it to school. Its paw had been crushed after a motorist had run over it and driven off. The vets told them the leg would have to be amputated. "I informed the girl. After all, this was 'her' dog. I wanted her to be part of the process.

Would she like to keep the dog? She said she would. But I told her that taking care of a three-legged dog in a slum would be tough. We involved her mom in the decision, who agreed, given that she too would be away all day, working. Finally, we put it up for adoption," Bose says. Along the way, both the child and her classmates learnt something. They wrote essays about the experience. They also learnt the concept of morality - the right and the wrong. "How can this situation be averted? They said if the motorist had taken the puppy to the vet straight away, the leg could have been saved," Bose recalls.

Questions of moral relativity also came up in a fictitious scenario Bose gave the kids. In it, she had to leave the country and her dog, Benny, could not come with her. Neither was he getting adopted. She asked the kids what could she do? Options were discussed - should she change her plans and not go? Should she abandon the dog on the street or in the shelter? And opinions were varied. "Some kids said 'change your plans. Don't go away. If Benny were your mom, would you have left her? Benny is family too'. Others said pay up at the shelter and at some point Benny will get adopted. Still others contested that by saying just giving Benny a physical home wasn't enough. Dogs have feelings too - Benny will feel abandoned even at the shelter. In that case, they felt the most humane option was to put the dog down," Bose shares.

There you have it - critical thinking, analysis, moral relativism. And all of it with compassion and sensitivity at the top of mind.

That the lesson is taking root is amply clear. As we walk around the school on a muggy Tuesday afternoon, the good vibes are palpable. Unlike most city schools, this one doesn't wear a deserted look because of the recent transport bandh. Classes are packed to capacity, and only one teacher is absent. In one class, kids listen with rapt attention to a retired NASA scientist talking to them about space. In another, they have just finished watching The Beauty and The Beast. Bose asks the kids if they're scared of the Beast - "doesn't he look terrible?" she asks. A small but assured voice pipes up. "His looks are terrible, but he has a big heart," says a little girl, beatifically.

Her classmates nod, Bose beams. That is empathy right there. And a brown girl called Bianca has a lot to do with it.

GALLERIES

			
Halla Bol	The year that it was!	Stardust 2015	HAL Platinum Jubilee celebrat...