



Love's LABOUR WON

Chhaya, an animal hospital and shelter home on the outskirts of Kolkata has become the lifeline for hundreds of strays, thanks to the efforts of **Sharda Radhakrishnan**, a retired school teacher, says **Jimmy Arora**

As one enters the sleepy Aswathberia village of South 24 Parganas on the outskirts of Kolkata, green lush fields with the chirping of birds offer a welcome relief from the hustle and bustle of the city. Farmers can be seen engaged in their work while children grovel in the dust outside their muddy houses. Before you start to get lost in the rhythm of rural life, the sudden barking of dogs comes like an unwanted intrusion and disturbs the senses that were being soothed in the lap of nature.

On being inquired about the noise, villagers point to an animal hospital located a few meters away and term it as a 'pride' of their village. Curiosity arises to visit the hospital that halted the rendezvous with nature. The main gate reads Chhaya, an animal hospital and shelter home.

A little query reveals that it is a one-stop destination for stray dogs found injured or abandoned in various parts of Kolkata and its periphery.

Locals say that Chhaya, around 30 km from the city, has emerged as one of the most sought-after centres for animal lovers, who do not want the homeless dogs to suffer cruelty at the hands of the people outside. Sharda Radhakrishnan, one of founders, says that Chhaya was set-up under the aegis of People for the Respect & Care of Animals (PRCA), a charitable trust in 2008. Sixty-year-old Sharda, who had worked as a school teacher for over two decades, says that she decided to dedicate her life for stray animals after being moved by their plight. "I used to get really upset to see dogs lying unattended on the



streets with injuries due to accidents or being beaten up by people simply for barking at them," she says. "I thought about it a lot and eventually decided to quit teaching and dedicate the rest of my life for the well-being of stray animals who do not have anybody to take care of them." Sharda, who's followed around the campus by the canines like a shadow, says, "I wanted to have a space where the animals could live without any fear of being tortured or haunted."

But it was easier said than done as arranging money to acquire land was a major issue. "I had limited resources and didn't have money to buy a piece of land for the animals. I desperately knocked on every door for help but in vain," she says. Eventually, her prayers were answered in the form of a chance meeting with Vishakha Doshi, daughter of former cricketer Dilip Doshi, who was also thinking of setting up a similar shelter for animals. It was Vishakha, who arranged a donor for buying the land in South 24 Parganas in 2008. "We started the hospital in the same year. Initially, I used to pick up the stray dogs in my car and drive them here for treatment. It was my everyday routine to go in search of animals that needed treatment and bring them here," she says while taking a trip down the memory lane.

Situated on 2.5 acres of land, Chhaya offers complete treatment of animals, including critical surgeries and also animal birth control operations. The cured canines are discharged only after being vaccinated against rabies and those who have nobody to take care of them outside stay in the large enclosures. The hospital-cum-shelter home is equipped with solar geysers, solar lights and bio-gas plant.

Chhaya has employed two four-wheelers that criss-cross over 100 km in the city every day to bring the stray dogs here for treatment. Sharda is very strict when it comes to rules and doesn't allow the treatment of pet dogs in her hospital. "Firstly,

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The immense faith and confidence that Chhaya enjoys among the animal lovers could be understood from the fact that Shreya Singha Ray, a government school teacher from Hooghly district along with her friend Debasmita Chakraborty, covered a distance of nearly 100 km to get her stray admitted to Chhaya for cancer treatment. "I have been looking after the dog for the past seven years. He usually roams near the school where I teach. He has been suffering from cancer and the locals were planning to kill him. I had to cover a long distance because I'm sure that he would get the best treatment here," said Shreya sounding assured of his recovery.

Chhaya has also managed to create employment opportunities by offering jobs to local youth. Around 31 villagers are working here in different capacities. "I have been working here for the past five years. I was scared initially of dogs and had no training to handle them, but I learnt while working here. I have been beaten five times by a dog but it hardly matters now. I really feel pity for the animals that are brought here who are sometimes so sick and even unconscious. It is not my profession but has become my passion to cure them," said Nazir Gharamai, 21, showing the bruise marks left by the animals.

Apart from dogs, the hospital also shelters and treats cows, mules with broken limbs and even kites. Sharda claims that Chhaya has conducted over 8,000 Animal Birth Control (ABC) surgeries since inception with 30 surgeries being done per week. It has also treated 20,000 canines and 10,000 other animals in the past one decade.

About their future plans, Sharda says she dreams of a day when no injured animal would be seen lying unattended on the road. "I dream of a day when I would walk into the city without seeing a single injured or abandoned animal. People should have compassion towards animals and the cruelty must stop. They also have every right to live." ●

they would find difficult to adjust to the environment here and our mission is to save those animals that are roaming on streets or abandoned by their owners. The pets are being nicely taken care of by their owners. We consider abandoned pets for treatment or shelter," she says, adding that the treatment and all the services are offered completely free. "We do not charge a single penny for the surgeries or any treatment. We have been relying on donors and well-wishers for the past nine years and fortunately Tata Trust has chipped last year and has offered support to us."

At present, Chhaya has over 600 canines out of which 150 are staying permanently. "Our vehicles bring around 16-17 stray dogs on an average every day from the city. We first de-worm them before shifting them inside and starting their treatment. We also offer them meals twice a day," says Pranab Chatterjee, an employee at the centre.

