

Written Transcript of Our Hen House Podcast Interview with Pradeep Nath

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JASMIN: Welcome to Our Hen House, Pradeep!

PRADEEP: Thank you very much for giving us this opportunity.

JASMIN: Well, we're very excited that you've taken time out of your day to chat with us. I know you have a lot going on there and we are eager to hear all about the many programs you're working on. We know that the VSPCA has many aspects to its work, but we really want to hear about the Kindness Farm first of all. It's a very intriguing name, but even more than that it's described as an eco-sanctuary and model farm. I would love it if you could tell us a little bit about it, including what an eco-sanctuary is.

PRADEEP: The Kindness Farm is actually one of the main projects of the VSPCA. And the program has been launched to have a sanctuary where we can have a lot of different kinds of animals and where we say that there's always a space for another, for any kind of animal to come in. And this farm is actually based completely where we are aiming at being self-sustaining and where we produce the biogas, where we have the natural fertilizers and we also make natural medicines from the dung and the urine from the cows that we rescue from. And then we grow our own vegetables and it's completely organic. And so that this, the concept is stretched all around. And this is completely based in the rural area. And our concept is that over the years this Kindness Farm will be able to spread the message and also have a kindness impact with all the humans and the animals, and it'll be a kind of self-awareness program that spreads all across the -- and supports the workers and their families. And then we are also growing more than 10,000-15,000 different kinds of food-bearing trees, where we make -- and this is not compromised with our buildings for the animals, it's all in the boundaries.

JASMIN: Where do you rescue your animals from?

PRADEEP: Well, we -- there's two animals basically from the roads, from all kinds of -- also from different kinds of situations. And they're mostly -- they're all, it's all kinds of animals, like the cows, the dogs, the fowls, the chickens, the ducks, the goats. We also have emu birds that we have rescued recently, and even wild animals also.

JASMIN: Wow.

MARIANN: It just sounds like a fascinating place and I love the idea that you're trying to make it self-sustaining and to help the people in the area. Before we go on, now, VSPCA, which is the umbrella organization for the Kindness Farm, that is -- I'm gonna try this -- Visakhapatnam SPCA, is that right?

PRADEEP: Yes.

MARIANN: Visakhapatnam Society for Protection and Care of Animals. And I know that you do many things other than maintain this wonderful farm. And one of them is working on cow slaughter. It's hard for us in the United States here to understand the status of cow slaughter in India, 'cause we understand that cows are very revered there but also that there are significant problems. Can you explain the situation and what progress has been made?

PRADEEP: Yeah, it's very unfortunate that despite we have -- cow is first revered as a religious animal. It is known as a second mother, and it's supported by very strong laws excepting in two states in the country, yet most of the slaughtering that is happening to cows and their progenies. And it's rural smuggling across the borders, and also within the many different states this is happening. And the transportation is of course, it's related and it's very bad. And it's not -- it's more with the cows, and what we call it over here is that it's more to do with the religious factors. So that's why we say that religion is one of the main reasons that you have lots of cruelties to the animals.

JASMIN: What is the Plastic Cow Project?

PRADEEP: Well, the Plastic Cow -- actually the cows are left, the owners leave the cows on the road. And these cattle, the cows and even including the buffalos and others, they just eat the plastic with the food that is thrown on the roadsides. And we don't have a proper garbage system where it is all covered and taken away immediately. There is no sorting out, there's no waste men. Waste just builds up and it's still not, it started over there and no [...]. Therefore all the cows that are roaming on the road, the owner just leaves it alone so that he has less money to spend on the feed for himself. And this plastic gets in their stomach, and over a period of time they suddenly can collapse and they will die of a bloating stomach and the plastic gets stuck in one of the four stomachs that it has. Therefore we try to rescue these and strive to do some operations and try to remove them. But it's a big long process and the way out is that we need to have a lot of awareness and we have also recently filed a case in the Supreme Court, the hearing of which is -- we have the final stages that we will take in the next few months. And we are hoping that we are going to have very strict orders to see that these plastics are banned, I mean, any kind of plastics are banned in India.

MARIANN: Oh, that would be amazing progress. And I really want to hear what happens with that lawsuit. I know that, regarding cow slaughter, you also do some work on the legal side, and try to get some legal progress made regarding cow slaughter. Can you tell us how that is working out?

PRADEEP: Well, the way we started to rescue the cows -- invariably all the cows, because this is a state animal and the laws are involved, therefore the police is the one who has to file the case. And it is a non-deliverable [?] offense, this one is. And therefore, so that the moment we started the rescue and we have to file a case in the court. So every rescue that happens with the cows and with the transportation also, so we have to go to the court. And the state, the police has to represent with a public prosecutor. And we have to give added information to them. I myself is now a practicing lawyer, so therefore I am also involved in this. And so far we have been doing this through legal cases in the past 15 years, in this case.

JASMIN: And who are the temple calves and what is the VSPCA doing about this?

PRADEEP: This is a major project and we have been struggling to rescue these small baby calves, days-old calves, in the past 12 to 15 years. Actually, what these do is that they just come and they leave the babies on top of the hill and then babies are dragged 1,000 steps to the temple and they are just left over there. And there is a contractor which the temple allots every year, and he takes them away every Saturday, and in their -- they all go to slaughter. And it is very ironical that the temple, that's such a religious thing and then where you say that you pray to the cow as the second mother, and the babies are also considered very auspicious and holy. And yet these are going to the slaughterhouse, it's very unfortunate. So therefore what we did was, we tried many ways, including sitting on this flag, raising slogans, shouting in front of the executive officer's office, and then finally we went to the minister and we got this canceled -- and the auction was canceled.

And now the next battle is -- that was at one shot 15,000 male calves we have been able to stop in the past two years. But the problem is that now the Jersey cows, now the temple will take in only the Indian breeds, and they consider the Jersey calves as not holy because it's a mixture. And therefore, they're left on the roads. And these are 90% of the 15,000 that come in. But we have made a major inroad in that out of 10,000 of the -- we do our awareness program in all the religions. There are more than over 200 religions. The population has reduced -- I mean, the donations have reduced to 4,000. And now these 4,000, what we try to do is we are trying to take them from the donations, I mean, for the devotees that they come in. And then we try to give it to very poor farmers to see that they can look after because they can use their dung and their urine. And we are trying to propagate the message to them so that they can do the organic farming and uplift their own, the economic benefits of the entire village.

MARIANN: Well, that's great work but it really shines a light on what a huge problem dairy is, no matter where it is, and how many hidden problems there are behind dairy, both here in the United States and clearly in India, because of all of the calves that go to waste. And I so admire the work you're doing trying to save these calves. And I know that you

mentioned before your work goes well beyond working with cows, and I know you also feed homeless street dogs every day. Can you talk a little bit about that?

PRADEEP: Yes. Since my childhood I have been involved in trying to feed street dogs. In those days the dogs used to be killed by electrocution. And we didn't have enough laws with that. But then subsequently as I started growing up, then I started trying to see for rescue homes and for adoptive homes. And then after that, this feeding is now almost 40 years now that we're involved with what they're doing. And this is the foundation project of the VSPCA. And because of this project the VSPCA has a home and we started to grow from here. So this -- we feed around -- we have around 12 stations now. We continue to feed more than 300 dogs per day. And these dogs are mainly basically from areas that they're very weak and they couldn't be looked after well. And this is -- we have now officially named it as a one-stop feeding station for the animals, street animals.

MARIANN: I think it's great that these dogs are being fed, but I know that street dogs tend to be an ongoing problem that keeps getting bigger and bigger because they reproduce so much. And has there been any progress made in reducing the size of the street dog population?

PRADEEP: Yes, 1998 we had filed a case in the High Court and we brought a spay -- that we are supposed to do, the government is supposed to do the spay and neuter, including anti-rabies vaccination. And since then, we continue to work with them and we have covered more than 100,000 dogs under this program. And we have achieved zero rabies in this city since the past four years now, and we intend to continue to spread now with all the success that we have achieved in this program to the rural areas because -- the reason is that the rural areas is where all this rabies situation and the problems arises. And looking at this progress, now we have started to make a mobile [...] enlisting support from other agencies for this program.

JASMIN: What are astrological parrots? I can't even imagine. I feel like they're parrots that know that I'm a Scorpio and can tell me my future. And how is the VSPCA involved in this issue? Astrological parrots.

PRADEEP: Yes. This also has been one of our main success programs, in the sense that parrots are kept in very tiny cages, hardly, they're less than half, a few feet at least, and they can hardly move around, and they are very cruelly trained. Nearly, while training, 50% of the parrots die, it's so hard and cruel. And there is a sect of people who try to -- hunters are different, who hunt and train, and then they give it to this man who go around doing the astrology part. Now the astrology is trained, but he has different cards, all the scattered cards and all the place and he's trained for that. Now we have seen -- this also took me almost eight years to really get a success because they had complained against us to the higher authorities, and then the higher authorities came and told us to give them two years' time. And after that, they said, you can do what you like, because under the law it is illegal. It is -- the parrots are under -- in our Indian Forest laws it is under schedule 3. Therefore we have the right to protect them, and it is also -- under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, it is also very illegal to keep them in such tiny cages and without any food and proper water, and most of them has disease, they are almost half blind, and have leg injuries, and their wings are very cruelly cut. So we have started this and now Visakhapatnam does not have any parrot astrology in the city. If by chance that fellow, that person, he doesn't know, by mistake he may enter, but otherwise anybody knowing Visakhapatnam, they're not going to enter in the city.

MARIANN: Well, that's great to hear, and let's hope that that legal precedent spreads so it's such a bizarre practice. It just seems out of date in this day and age. But one thing that's very important in this day and age -- and I can't believe the breadth of the issues that you're involved in, but you're also involved in wildlife conservation. I know you're in a coastal area and there are substantial wildlife issues. And tell us some of the things you've been doing to protect wildlife.

PRADEEP: One of our first and major projects, even though I started to deal with the dogs because it is a common animal in front of us, we see it every day, and feeding different kinds of the common and domestic animals. But then, as an organization about 18 years ago, we didn't have all the resources to do, really to have a hospital or a program to do the spay and neuter.

So what we started was to deal with this sea turtle project. We have come to know through the national geography and also through the other kind of TVs that sea turtles do come along the coast. And we started -- because this is a simple walk in the morning and it's very easy, it does not require any kind of, a lot of finance to do anything. And we started to move. And this is also our indigenous species. So from 1996-97, we have started this program. This is one of the first India programs. And the sea turtle was very cruelly -- they used to be killed. Despite the very strict laws and despite this being under schedule 1 of the Forest Department Act, they were still being slaughtered, the eggs were being stolen, the babies were being sold and they were being exported, so all kinds of cruelties were happening. But then we have taken advantage of this, that this sea turtle also has a religious belief, a strong religious belief is there. So we use this one, and we started doing the awareness program because we strongly believe that to get the desired results overnight, we need to do something practically to the community areas. So therefore we started spreading the message in the fishermen. So overnight, we had started -- the slaughtering of this turtle stopped. And in fact, the fishermen started to pray. They went over, the turtle was caught in the net, they used to gently take it out, they got in it to put the **[formula?]** on the forehead and then release it back on the ocean, so this was a lasting change. And so we have become the founding fathers of this sea turtle project on the entire coast.

So apart from that, we also do stranded mammals along the ocean also, if anything, if any stranded -- like sperm whales, all these, they come ashore, the dolphins, we have done that. And then the hunting of wild animals used to also take this so we also did that and stopped these huntings. Also the circus, the animals, wild animals that they use in the circus, that also we have stopped. And now there are five animals that are all banned as part of the law in the circus also. So wild animals include, I mean, many others also, like wild boar hunting, all these also we have stopped.

JASMIN: Wow, that's unbelievable. A lot of times, we as vegans are accused of not caring about people and only caring about animals. And I know you've been advocating for animals for over 40 years, which is really amazing. Not only do you help animals, but can you tell us a little bit about how VSPCA helps people?

PRADEEP: Well, the first thing is that from day one, we started doing the humane education program to bring change in the people, the schools, the colleges, and the religious communities.

And then our major project with the human also was to help the abandoned 60- or 70-year-old people who are abandoned by their children. They don't want them, their families and all. And we have noticed that especially in the night, after 8:30 or 9, they -- all of them, they're all sitting in the, sleeping in the pavements or in the shops, closed shops, outside verandas and all those things. And the dogs were the first thing that was their first company. And the first morsel of food that they gather throughout the day was given to the dog. Even my -- I was very touched to see even my own dogs in the house, they go out and sit, eat with them and then come back even though we give them all the kind of food. So this really made me to touch, and then I started to go around in the nighttime and see and observe these things. And I wanted to see how we can connect, that we say that we are not only for animals, we're also for the humans who are affected, and also dealing with disaster, natural disasters. Most of the time I get the criticism is that, why do you want to help them? They're all the livestock that live with the humans. But then, our concept is that we have some kind of bond between the human and the animals, to see that they are related, to see that the humans are educated like this way. So we -- this is known as the kindness mobile restaurant, which is completely 100% vegan, nutritious vegan, very hot when we sell them. And we have been doing this in the past three years. And they are our front-run soldiers in the sense that, if there is any animal that is injured, if there is anything that they have to tell us or inform us, all to protect the animals. The animals themselves also sleep with them, protect them, protect their belongings. So it's a win-win situation all around.

MARIANN: That's a really beautiful story and you have so many successes, but I know you just alluded to the recent problems you've been having and I know you've had a really, really tough year. And can you tell us a little bit about what's happened as a result of the weather you've been having this year?

PRADEEP: We actually generally we receive six cyclones every year. And it can range from a depression to super cyclones. But then this time, after 125 years, we thought that we are very, very lucky with the cyclone. But then the eye of this Hudhud cyclone was right over us, so that completely battered us. And it was, the eye was almost 40 miles, I

mean, 40 kilometers, so our boathouse shelters have been under this. And the one that is very near to the coast has been brutally battered. But then every bad situation always gets us moving faster, better, and teaches us a lot. So in a way we are happy that this has happened because it's really brought us to do something more, and it has connected us with more communities, villages, more people, and made more friends and then I think we are much more equipped to deal with such kinds of situations.

JASMIN: Wow, that's just unbelievable. How can we help? How can people from the US become involved?

PRADEEP: Well, I think maybe volunteering in Visakha with any of the projects, and also marketing. We need a volunteer for the marketing, website design, fundraising, these kinds of things, which you can do -- even if they do not come here, they can do it from there also. And we also, we need specialists like the biologists, the vet students, and the fundraisers of those kinds. And we have different projects where you can sponsor an animal on the website. So like this, I think, these kind of things. And then they also can see our Facebook update and they can spread the word about us.

MARIANN: Well, I certainly do hope that people do at least donate and if they have the ability to volunteer, think about volunteering, and as you said, some of your volunteer positions don't have to be onsite. They can be done from anywhere really in the world. And of course I'm sure money would help. And I know you're taking a very upbeat approach to the damage that was done by the cyclone, but I know you've suffered a lot and we really, really admire the work that you're doing there.

JASMIN: Yeah, and we are so grateful to you, Pradeep, for joining us today on Our Hen House, and we'll definitely link to your Facebook page on the article that corresponds with today's podcast episode so our listeners could find out more about that there. And we'll also include a transcript of today's interview there for people who want to spread the word that way, so we greatly appreciate all that you're doing to change the world for animals for so long. And we look forward to staying on top of your happenings over at the VSPCA. Thank you.

PRADEEP: Thank you, Jasmin and Mariann, thank you for this opportunity. I'm very touched.