

When Cats Go Veg

By RANJITA BISWAS

At Karuna Kunj, an unusual shelter cum boarding house for cats and dogs, the carnivorous felines aren't feasting on mice, fish or chopped chicken. They are given a vegetarian diet, and seem to be thriving on it.

As you enter the compound on the outskirts of Kolkata, West Bengal, you see a big enclosure covered by chicken wire, where cats of different sizes and hues are curled up enjoying the sun or playing, not pining in cages. The walls have colorful murals and there are playthings and props to keep them busy—shelves, perches, logs and wire tunnels. Says Debasis Chakrabarti, founder of Compassionate Crusaders Trust, which runs Karuna Kunj: "We want them to feel happy. If we like color and playthings, why wouldn't they?" Chakrabarti is also the Kolkata trustee of People for Animals, founded by animal activist and Member of Parliament Maneka Gandhi.

Places to hide, play, and rest in safety make the cats happy at Karuna Kunj, a boarding kennel and shelter on the outskirts of Kolkata in West Bengal.

SHELTER

Pet Care at the Doorstep

PetXpress of the Compassionate Crusaders Trust is an ambulance that brings pet care to the homes of people who are pressed for time or unable to take their animals to the veterinarian. The van has a fully equipped air-conditioned treatment chamber and operation theater. People can sit with their pets to reassure them during treatment or surgery. The service is available 24 hours a day for emergencies.

PetXpress was donated by The William and Charlotte Parks Foundation for Animal Welfare in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Rex Moser, then director of the American Center in Kolkata, inaugurated the van in 2002 on the eve of International Homeless Animals' Day, to highlight the plight of abandoned or unwanted pets.

Some of the animals at Karuna Kunj have been abandoned or injured. Others are boarders, whose owners pay a fee to have them cared for while they are traveling. Still others are long-term boarders. They may be street cats, placed in the shelter by a departing diplomat or a local resident who sends donations for their care. Or perhaps the owner marries someone who doesn't like the pet, or a child develops an allergy to it, or the family moves into a flat where the landlord doesn't allow pets. The shelter cum boarding kennel is an unusual combination. "Maybe the concept is new or has not been attempted elsewhere, so it may seem strange," says Chakrabarti.

Also unusual is the vegetarian diet fed to the cats at the shelter. "The veg food we give them has all the proteins they need and they are quite healthy, as you can see," says Chakrabarti. What prompted the idea, he says, is that "Some members of the trust that runs the shelter are vegetarians. They wondered if the cats in the shelter could be served vegetarian food without cutting down on their nourishment."

After a lot of searching, the trust members found an Italian company manufacturing such a product with all the ingredients necessary to maintain good health for the felines, especially taurine, the amino acid they need. When the pellets were spread out in the feeding pan at lunchtime, the cats ate eagerly. The pellets expand and apparently are quite filling. Food is given twice a day.

"Before introducing the pellets, we weighed the cats and monitored their health," says Chakrabarti. "At first we chose 10 of them and segregated them to see if they accepted the new food. We also mixed

the pellets with milk to ensure acceptance."

According to the Vegetarian Society of the United Kingdom (<http://www.veg-soc.org/info/catfood.html>), cats are natu-

tarian Union (<http://www.ivu.org/faq/animals.html>) special diets must be provided for vegetarian cats, as they require taurine, which is found in meat. Synthetic taurine has been developed, and is used in commercial (non vegetarian) cat foods.

Chakrabarti was training to be a physician in the 1970s when he stopped half-way through to take a course on animal psychology. "From my childhood, I saw my mother sheltering stray animals or giving them food. So I had a natural empathy for them," he says. He started by rehabilitating biter dogs rejected by the owners.

Douglas G. Kelly, the American Center director in Kolkata, visited Karuna Kunj recently, saying he was impressed by the way the cats roamed freely and didn't hiss at strangers. "I have seen so many stray



Photographs courtesy Compassionate Crusaders Trust

ral carnivores and are unlikely to willingly forego meat from their diet. So they are likely to hunt for birds or mice even if they are otherwise being fed well. While cats may enjoy certain plant foods, vegetarian diets high in fiber and polyunsaturated fatty acids may be detrimental to their health. If a cat is put on a veg diet, it should be given supplements, the society advises.

According to the International Vege-

cats and dogs, I wondered if any non-governmental organization was doing anything about it. When I heard about Karuna Kunj, and the American Center's past involvement with Compassionate Crusaders Trust (see box), I wanted to see how

For more information:

Compassionate Crusaders Trust

<http://www.animalcrusaders.org/door.html>

the place was run and also express support for the effort,” Kelly says.

He also came across cats eating vegetarian food during his stint in Zaire (now Congo). “People who couldn’t afford meat or fish, and largely depended on yams for nutrition, cooked rice and yam leaves together to feed their pets,” he says. “Animals can adjust to food habits, just like humans can switch from non-vegetarian to vegetarian food.”

In Bengali, *karuna* means kindness and *kunj* means garden, and it seems to be an appropriate name for the shelter. It has a capacity to accommodate 300 cats, although that many have never stayed there. Presently, there are 39 dogs and 52 cats, and even a blind monkey. Twelve of the cats are handicapped. One is blind;

“I care not much for a man’s religion whose dog and cat are not the better for it.”

—Abraham Lincoln,
16th President of the United States

for human welfare services,” says Kim Bartlett, president and publisher of the Clinton, Washington-based newspaper *ANIMAL PEOPLE*, which donates to Karuna Kunj (<http://www.animalpeoplenews.org/>). “We have visited the Compassionate Crusader Trust facilities...and find them very innovative,” says Bartlett. “And we like it that Debasis is such a positive thinker.”

Besides a small cat clinic, Karuna Kunj also has a burial ground where city residents can bury their pets for a nominal amount and leave messages of their love.

The center also provides free services to surrounding villages, including treating goats, cows, and holding awareness campaigns on how to take care of animals. A three-wheeler ambulance, which can navigate narrow roads, picks up animals in emergencies and rushes them back to the hospital for treatment.

The Compassionate Crusaders Trust also runs a multifaceted animal hospital, Ashari (Animal Shelter Hospital cum Research Institute), spread over approximately 1.7 hectares of land. It opened in 2001 and has since treated about 70,000 animals, Chakrabarti says. There are about 25 cats, and some dogs roaming around the open area after being spayed or neutered. They are not on the vegetarian diet. Handicapped ones are usually sent to Karuna Kunj. There is also an effort to encourage adoption.

For Chakrabarti, however, a great satisfaction is to see people wanting to take their pets back home, even those who may have earlier applied for permanent boarding and paid accordingly. “In fact, if you see fewer

cats today (at one time there were 120) it’s perhaps a good sign,” he says, “because it shows that owners are today bonding more with their pets and willing to take care of them. We counsel them on how the pets are missing them, that they need the love and care of the owner.”



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Above left: Douglas G. Kelly, director of the American Center in Kolkata, visits Karuna Kunj.

Above: Cats being weighed during a health check-up at Karuna Kunj.

another has a nerve problem and cannot climb.

Homemaker Majeda Islam is a regular donor to Karuna Kunj. Some of her cats are permanent boarders, while she leaves her

favorite pets at the shelter only while traveling. “When I am out of town, or can’t manage to hire help to look after my cats in my absence, I leave them at Karuna Kunj. They are looked after very well and I can be at peace when they are there.” She admits that when the cats are home, she gives them the usual rice and fish and they adjust well.

“There is a huge need for animal welfare services in Kolkata, just as there is a need