A Kinder Vision
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Animal Advocate Amala Akkineni

She was one of India's darling film stars-pretty, vivacious and a stunning dancer. Winning overnight fame in a Tamil film by famous director T. Rajender, she charmed cinegoers in a flurry of fifty films. But "I felt this emptiness inside me," she recollects. After a series of visionary past-life experiences, she walked away from the glitter of movie stardom and entered the hapless world of Hyderabad's sick, beaten and homeless stray animals. And found total joy.

By Anandhi, Hyderabad

I get down from the car and approach the door. Before I could even panic, two dogs, one a big dalmatian, put their forepaws on my shoulders and breathed right into my face! Anywhere else I would have screamed. But Amala appears in the doorway. "Sheru! Lassie!" she orders them off me. I relax. "Vanga, teacher," she greets me in Tamil with touching respect still alive after many years since this famous film star was my pupil at Kalakshetra College of Fine Arts in Madras. She gives me a hug and all four of us enter the house. We sit down and a maid brings in Akhil, Amala's five-month-old baby, all bathed and powdered. I hold him in my arms, trying to make him smile with unintelligible sounds. The aroma of sambreni dhoop fills the room and mixes with baby smell and fresh coffee brewing in the kitchen.

As we talk, I see in her the girl of years ago-affectionate, athletic, outgoing and so spirited. She excelled in yoga asanas and was always selected for demonstration programs. But under the soft facial features, she had an iron will. Interestingly, Rukmini Devi's historic dedication to preserving India's dance was matched by her deep involvement in animal welfare. She nurtured in all her students, including young Amala, a pervasive vision of ahimsa, non-hurting.

A Day in the Life

Amala met her husband, Telegu film star Nagarjuna, when they were doing a film together. He is actually the president of their animal welfare organization, the Blue Cross of Hyderabad. Amala is the secretary, driving force and oversees all the day-to-day affairs of the BCH's three animal hospital/shelters. The BCH has four main services: rescuing sick and injured animals with an ambulance; preventing cruelty to animals and finding homes for their adoption; birth control operations; and protecting animals against disease.

Though BCH is her main work, she is active on other animal/environmental fronts as well. Fearlessly. Once in Rajasthan, film star Vinod Khanna invited Amala and Nag for dinner. Amitab Bachan was there too. Amala was seated beside an elderly man dressed in a white sherwani. She was telling him the gory details of bear hunting. He listened graciously, then said, "My child, I have killed many a bear in my life. I never imagined it would be so horrifying for people like you. I promise today I will not hunt bear anymore." Amala pulled out a petition form from her hand bag calling for regulation on all bear slaughter and trade and asked him to sign. He did and then introduced himself-the Maharaja of Udaipur! After dinner, the ladies of the Maharaja's family, with tears in their eyes, told Amala no one had ever had the courage to talk to him like that.

Amala and I were chatting in her shaded patio enclosure. A broad-leafed philodendron winds its way up to the balcony. A few Japanese bonzai plants line one side. The lawn is denuded by the playing of her dogs. Bird sounds are everywhere-magpie, robins, pigeons and the screeching treepies. Akhil wakes up. Amala kisses him. Every few minutes the phone rings. Between calls, Amala disappears to feed Akhil. This call she answers in Telegu. It's about getting a phone at a BCH shelter. While she is on the phone, I look around-no film photos of either of them. On one wall is a big poster of humpbacked whales and a banner "Protect our land and sea" hangs in their bedroom.

Everything for Amala and BCH is in a total growth mode. She has recently applied for permits for land to build a large new animal shelter with an education center where school children will come and learn about animal care and welfare. She recently took over the city's municipal pound, a testament of the public trust she commands. The municipal pound was killing 150 dogs a day. She now sterilizes them, gives them rabies shots and, in the long run, promises to reduce the city's

rampant dog population. She is an engaging speaker and addresses audiences-from school children to civic officials-confessing, "I must say, my image as Amala the film star helps." Though genteel, she is a tigress when it comes to protecting her cub, compassion. If she is in car and sees an animal being used in a street side show, she stops the car and scolds young and old to grow up and entertain themselves not at the expense of animals. She writes a regular column in the local paper and publishes tracts on animal welfare and environmental protection containing practical advice like buying Beauty Without Cruelty cosmetic products (not tested on animals.) A recent article explained how animals are naturally telepathic and how to communicate with them.

In the next room she takes another call-the daily BCH report. The manager tells her, "Two old dogs have been abandoned near the shelter." Amala tells her to take care of them until the doctor comes. "Also, keep the attendants ready at 1pm. Dr. Lakshmi is coming to remove stitches from several dogs." Then she calls the three centers and checks on the condition of the animals.

Then another call-"What? He hasn't come? If nobody is there, I will come and help Dr. Lakshmi." "Come teacher, let's go!" We go. The BCH facility has a spacious compound. We go into the operating room in an adjoining shed. I was surprised to see how young Dr. Lakshmi is and learn that she pays back to BCH whatever she receives for her services. Dr. Lakshmi begins to remove the stitches. The first two dogs are quiet. The third one resists and almost falls from the table. "Amala!" calls Dr. Lakshmi. Amala runs to the table, clutching the dog's fore legs and begins talking to him in a soothing manner. "We won't hurt you. Don't be afraid. "

We come home for lunch. A cheerful Nag joins us. Amala reports to him everything that happened in the morning. That evening, again, Amala is back on the phone."How many dogs? Four?" I drift off and reminisce the day I got a letter from her announcing so proudly that she had become a vegetarian. Here, years later, I see that same compassionate soul so matured, selfless, bringing love into the lives of thousands of unloved animals and inspiring others with a deeper, kinder vision of our earthly co-habitors.

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Interview

Hinduism Today: What inspired you to take up this kind of animal welfare work?

Amala Akkineni: My earliest memories as a child are of animals. My playmates were all animals-puppies, kittens, rabbits and chickens. My mother would allow me to bring even the most flea-ridden, wretched animal into the house and then show me how to clean it and take care of it. It was at Kalakshetra listening to Rukmini, Sarade teacher and you [Anandhi Ramachandran] that made a difference. I began to realize that I was eating what I always felt were my companions. My father would tempt me with non-veg delicacies. They were astonished at my willpower. Today, we have a poster that says, "If you love animals, don't eat them!"

HT: But weren't you mostly interested in dancing?

AK: Actually, when Rukmini asked me what I wanted to be, I always said a vet. When I joined movies, from the first day I stood in front of the camera, I felt, "This is not me." Though the artist in me enjoyed the work, every bit of it, I still felt an emptiness inside of me. But I didn't know what to do. After nearly four years of films, I went to the US for a vacation. During this trip, something very special happened. I had read books about reincarnation and experiencing past lives through regression. The day I arrived in Texas, I booked an appointment with a hypnotist in San Antonio and was able to live through a few past lives and see my progress as a soul in these lives. It was amazing. What my Higher Self was trying to tell me was simple: I had gone through so many lives doing nothing of relevance where I could look back and say, "That was a very good life." It hit me so hard. They were not bad lives, but they weren't anything special, lives of quality, lives lived to the fullest opportunity given. I realized that was why I was feeling so empty inside.

"Two months later, I went to a hypnotist in San Jose, California, and this time I saw myself in the life of an American Indian. I think that life has something to do with what I am doing today. That was a normal tribal life, quite interesting. I feel that my love for animals and my love for nature comes from them. In this American Indian incarnation, I became an old woman and nearing death. I was so sad to leave my husband, leave my tribe in death. I have read in Theosophy teachings that if you are a devotee of Sri Krishna or Mahadeva, your deity will come to gently take you across to the "other side" once you leave your body to help relieve your grief from leaving loved ones. In that life, I had a mare as a mode of transport for the tribe.

She was my friend. She died of old age. For this crossing, at that moment of leaving my body, this mare came to take me instead of a divine being. I could see myself rising above higher and higher over the roof and feel the grief of leaving loved ones too. I could see my husband sitting there with great sorrow. I could see the tribe around. Suddenly, from somewhere came this magnificent creature, galloping, then engulfing me with her radiance. It was like seeing divinity. For the first time, the Kalakshetra prayer we used to recite was meaningful to me. "Hidden life! Vibrant in every atom. Hidden light! Shining in every creature" was there. It was a very special, powerful experience. In the joy of being and communicating with her, I forgot my grief. That memory has haunted me ever since. Later, I read that the American Indians believe that the Spirit Horse comes to take them "across." From that day, my life has taken a turn. I feel all the animals are my fellow creatures.

HT: Did this compassion-for-animals aspect of your nature ever come out during your film days?

AK: Yes! I would put my foot down if I saw any animal ill-treated during shooting. There were several incidents. During an outdoor shoot, I tried to stop a mahout from beating a baby elephant, only eight-years-old and so cute. He reminded me of Ganesha. The onlookers were so insensitive. When I intervened, they got very upset and the people in the unit told me to mind my own business.

HT: You seem to have Nag's full support?

AK: I will tell you! Some days Nag asks me, "What are you doing now in your animal welfare work?" I tell him that I am doing everything that is humanly possible and he says, "Not enough!" We have to do 100% more. He drives me.

HT: India has this culture of seeing divinity in animals. We revere Go Mata, "mother cow." Our favorite God is Ganesha with an elephant head. We worship the serpent as the symbol of kundalini and every Deity has an animal as His or Her mount. Even the rat has a place. But paradoxically, Indians think a dog is unclean, seeing a donkey is inauspicious, a cat brings bad luck. There is a proverb in Tamil which says, "A bull will not obey unless beaten." The monkey is venerated as Hanuman, but nobody would lift a finger for the monkeys that suffer untold misery in labs. It must be an uphill task for you to care particularly for stray dogs and cats?

AK: The main criticism I have to face is, "She is wasting money and time on animals." Other people taunt me, "Today they say don't kill dogs. Tomorrow they will say don't kill mosquitoes." I respond: "Today we kill dogs; tomorrow we will say it's alright to kill old people, sick people because they are not productive. We wonder why criminals are on the rise. We heard a man killed his wife. Mothers kill their female infants. Mothers-in-laws kill their daughters-in-laws.

HT: Do you ever get discouraged?

AK: This is a thankless job and, yes, we feel disheartened sometimes. Nobody ever says, "You are doing a wonderful work. God bless you!"* When I get too deeply involved, high strung or depressed and say, "Enough is enough," Nag recharges me to face everything. And, more and more, I feel some kind of force is guiding us and bringing more people to help us.

HT: Do you meditate?

AK: Yes! The technique I use is Vipassana meditation. I learned it here when I was pregnant. I have tried many types of meditation. Vipassana is more suited to me.

*("God bless you, Amala!" On behalf of all who love animals and dharma, allow us to commend your selfless seva. What India needs now is ten thousand more like you. -Hinduism Today staff)