



Hindi films. Varma and his brother began their careers with two horses and today, twenty years later, they own thirty-seven horses spread over two stables, one at Filmalaya Studios, Andheri and the other near Film City. Nowadays the Varma Brothers concentrate their business only on horses, and were forced to stop rearing camels only because the dromedaries couldn't get proper fodder in Bombay.

I visited Varma's stables to have a *dekho* at the star *ghodas*. A mingled smell of leather, hay, and of course, horses hit my nostrils. Row upon row of them stood there munching steadily or nodding away drowsily. One dark horse standing quietly in his corner, caught my eye. Even I didn't need horse sense to tell that something was wrong with him. When I asked Varma about him, he stroked the animal gently, and said, "He was injured during the shooting of 'Betaab'. Whilst shooting the scene where Sunny

# ANIMALS IN SHOW-BIZ! THE SILENT STARS OF THE SILVER SCREEN!

**R**emember the cute pachyderm of 'Haathi Mere Saathi' who imperiously fetched (dragged?) a reluctant doctor and even performed a *puja* for an ailing Rajesh Khanna in the film? He stole all the *taalis* and *wah-wahs* from the ex-superstar with a mere wave of his *soond*. And in the process, trampled all over the Khanna's elephantine ego!

It's really nothing new. These so-called dumb quadrupeds have turned in better performances than their sometimes dumber two-legged co-stars in a *hazaar* films. Only no one's ever given them any glittering Oscars or *Pillumphare* awards. And Follywood's Rajus, Motis and Dhannus can compare pretty well with Hollywood's Benjis, Lassies and Rin Tin Tins. But of course, no simple animal could ever do all those dare-devil stunts and cho-chweet tricks without being trained by some clever, clever humans. I mean making these star animals act or even just face the camera, must be one of the most difficult tasks. How are these animals trained? Who are the people behind the animals in show-biz?

In his late fifties, tall, slim and erect, **Mr. Varma** has been supplying trained horses to Hindi film producers for donkey's years. The bucking black mare of 'Betaab', the daring Dhannu of 'Sholay', the huge stallion that was made to gallop through a roaring forest fire in 'Kabhie Kabhie', the beautiful horses in 'Mera Gaon, Mera Desh'—are all sterling members of Varma's stables. Almost every block-buster in the past few years has relied on his animals to literally carry them through their dangerous and nail-biting sequences.

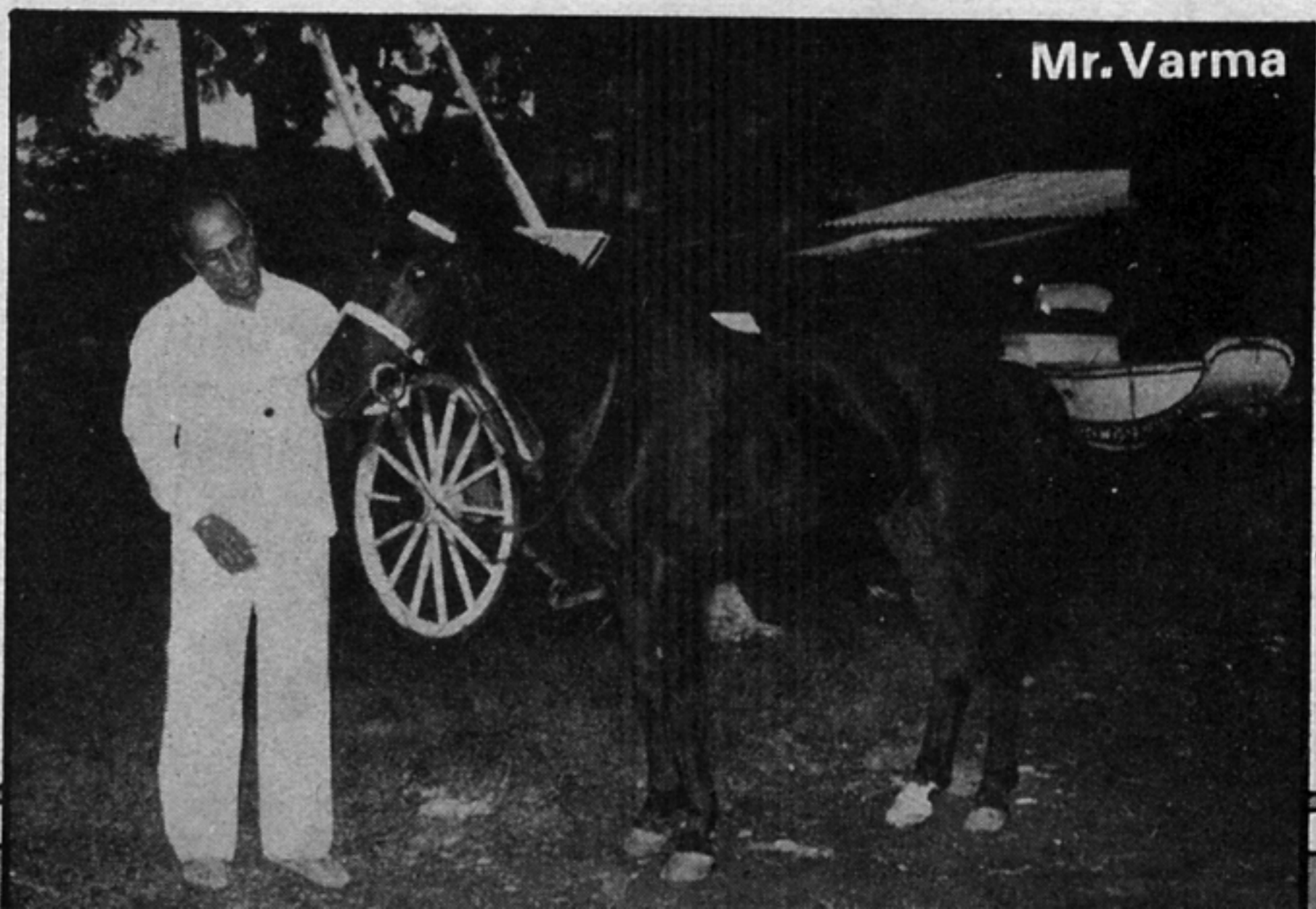
Tinsel town beckoned Varma from the hot sands of Rajasthan, where he (a *jagirdar's* son) owned a lot of camels, horses and ancestral property. He came to Bombay seeking fame and fortune as a screen villain, but didn't find it. Finally, he settled for the *janwar duniya* and started training horses and camels for

Deol tames a wild horse, he hurt his front leg (the horse, not Sunny). Now it won't mend. We don't feel like putting him to sleep, since we've had him for so long."

In fact, seeing the impossible situations they're put into, it's not surprising that the animals get injured quite often. I wondered aloud if the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (S.P.C.A.) didn't object. "We don't allow our horses to give very dangerous shots," clarified Varma. "Once some troublemakers did complain to the S.P.C.A. saying that we make our animals gallop through glass and tie them with wires and hang them! But the S.P.C.A. gave us a clean chit after a thorough inspection."

Rumours that the trainers deliberately hurt their horses during dangerous shots, to collect insurance, were also denied vehemently by Varma. "We even asked the S.P.C.A. to check on all the insurance claims we've made so far. In any case, we have insured only ten or twelve of our best horses."

Maintaining star animals seemed an expensive proposition. Was it worth it, I wanted to know. "It's become more of a *shauk* now," agreed Varma. "As my sons are all earning, I don't depend



solely on my income from this business." The Varma's spend almost thirty-five rupees per horse per day. Fodder, a man to look after each horse, plus riding gear, are all very expensive. Besides, the horsey business has its ups and downs too. The monsoon is a dreary season, with no shootings in the city. Sometimes there is a windfall (both for the Varma's and the horses) Like when Shekhar Kapur hired twelve of the Varma horses and transported them all the way to Ladakh for 'Joshilaay'. "We hope to earn a lakh on this stint," said a proud Varma. "It's things like this that make it worthwhile to keep the horses."

Whenever the animals are sent on an outdoor trip, Varma insists that a member of the family accompany them. The death of a single horse means a substantial loss to the owner. Once the horses were being sent to the northern border for a sequence in 'Abdullah', when the truck in which they were travelling, toppled into the river. The three horses met a watery end. Freak accidents during actual shooting, also take their toll. A horse tripped and fell into a trench while a sequence for 'Bhola Bhala' was being shot. The Varma's have stoically come to accept the losses as part of the business.

Had they only stuck to training horses, perhaps the Varma's would have gone bankrupt long ago. A flourishing riding school is one of their latest enterprises. Flourishing more due to *filmi* patronage. Right from Nirupa Roy to Anita Raj, a number of heroines have learnt to ride here. For once, most of them get taken for a ride. On her very first day, the horse sent Anita flying. "She sat there, stunned but before the fear could register, I had her back in the saddle. That's the best way to get over it." Neetu Singh, Tina Munim and Amrita Singh have also been under Varma's tutelage. "My best pupil has been Amrita. She rides beautifully." (talk of affinity!).

And our dashing heroes? Varma laughed. "Manoj Kumar is absolutely terrified of horses. He won't come within a mile of one. But he wanted his sons to learn. When he brought them over, he would stand way apart. Initially his son Kunaal was frightened but he got over it soon."

Among the damsels, Parveen Babi can't stand snorting stallions or stampeding steeds. A scene in 'Razia Sultan' required her to be on a horse, but she point-blank refused to do it. No one else could double for her since it was a close-up. After much cajoling, Parveen reluctantly lowered her seat onto the saddle, when the animal, sensing her nervousness, reared up suddenly. *Bechari* Parveen turned white as the horse she was on, but the professional that she was, went ahead with the shot.

Rameshwari Talluri is off horses forever, ever since the time she had a bad fall that blighted her eyes and career (?) equally. She blames the horse for sabotaging her acting life. An agitated Varma explained, "in that shot, Rameshwari was wearing a silk dress and the horse's saddle was also decorated with a piece of silk. Naturally Rameshwari slipped and fell down injuring her eye with the broken piece of her bangle. She insists it was the horse's rein."

One actor who harbours a grievance against a Varma horse is Danny Denzongpa. He is a very good rider, but once while he was cantering along Juhu beach, the horse suddenly flung him down and galloped away all by itself to the stables.

The animals like the stars, also have their moods! Only they are not as predictable. During the shooting of 'Mr. Natwarlal', producer Tony made some of Varma's horses go through a lakh rehearsals and takes. Finally one horse (Tony's) protested. It sunk its teeth into him as he was dismounting. "Understandable," said Varma rather defensively. "After one or two shots the horses need a rest. They become irritable. Their mood has to be changed before they are made to work again." But where do our

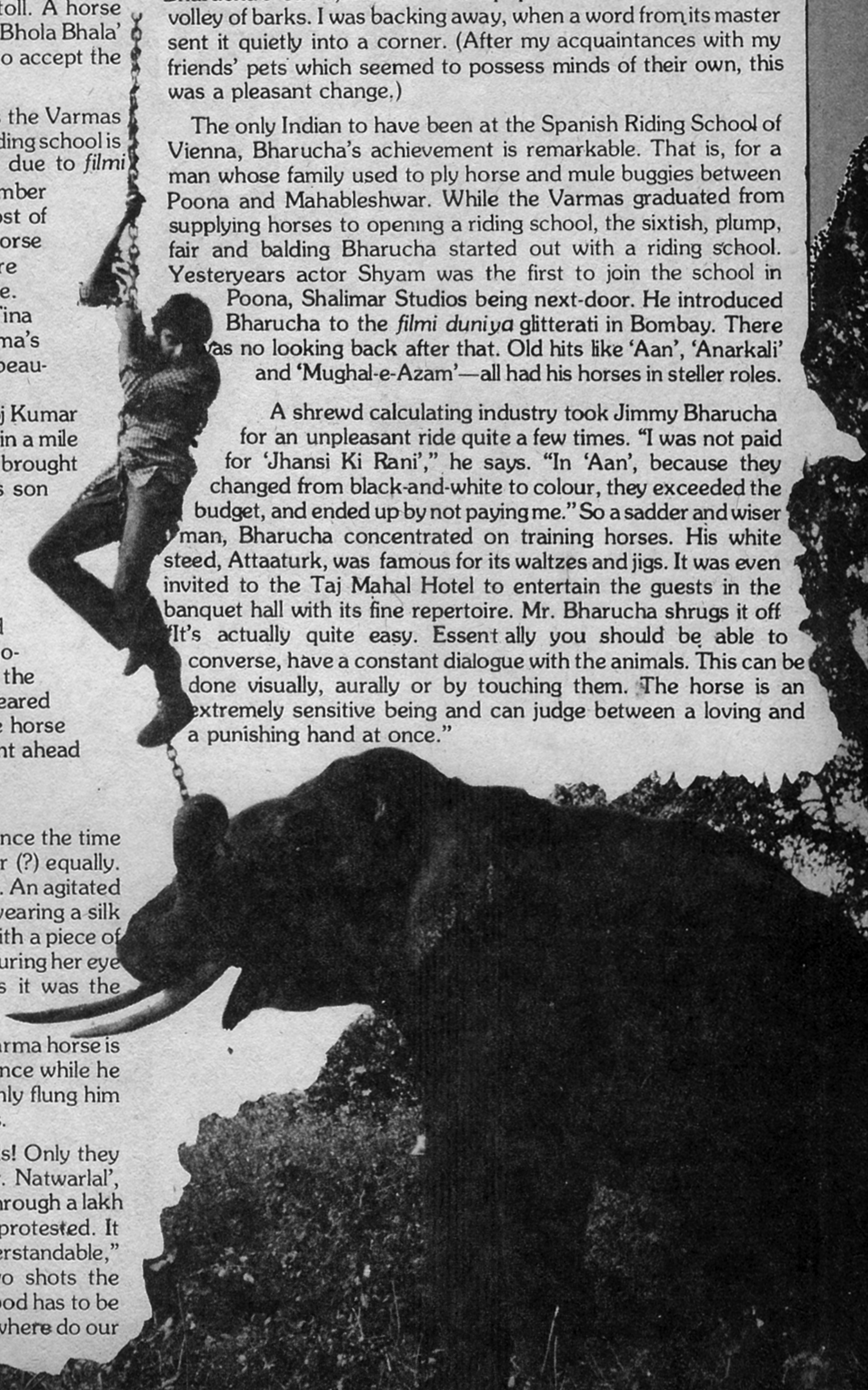
kanjoos producers have the time and money to cater to the horses' needs? "In that case, we use more horses. It's not evident, but in 'Betaab' we had seven horses. We painted the white and brown ones black. It would have been impossible for a single animal to do the entire film."

For the Varma horses, a trainer is specially sent for all the way from Rajasthan. In a movie called 'Apsara' the horse was trained to preen itself before a mirror! The story goes that a princess is cursed by a witch to be a horse by day. (If it was Amrita playing the role there wouldn't be any need for a horse...) "The mare's first reaction," says Varma, "was to hit out at its reflection. Eventually, after eleven days of doing the same thing, she learned to accept it."

Jimmy Bharucha of the Amateurs' Riding Club is considered by Varma to be the best horse trainer in India. As I entered Bharucha's office, a Doberman pup tied to the table let out a volley of barks. I was backing away, when a word from its master sent it quietly into a corner. (After my acquaintances with my friends' pets which seemed to possess minds of their own, this was a pleasant change.)

The only Indian to have been at the Spanish Riding School of Vienna, Bharucha's achievement is remarkable. That is, for a man whose family used to ply horse and mule buggies between Poona and Mahableshwar. While the Varma's graduated from supplying horses to opening a riding school, the sixthish, plump, fair and balding Bharucha started out with a riding school. Yesteryears actor Shyam was the first to join the school in Poona, Shalimar Studios being next-door. He introduced Bharucha to the *filmi duniya* glitterati in Bombay. There was no looking back after that. Old hits like 'Aan', 'Anarkali' and 'Mughal-e-Azam'—all had his horses in steller roles.

A shrewd calculating industry took Jimmy Bharucha for an unpleasant ride quite a few times. "I was not paid for 'Jhansi Ki Rani'," he says. "In 'Aan', because they changed from black-and-white to colour, they exceeded the budget, and ended up by not paying me." So a sadder and wiser man, Bharucha concentrated on training horses. His white steed, Attaaturk, was famous for its waltzes and jigs. It was even invited to the Taj Mahal Hotel to entertain the guests in the banquet hall with its fine repertoire. Mr. Bharucha shrugs it off. "It's actually quite easy. Essentially you should be able to converse, have a constant dialogue with the animals. This can be done visually, aurally or by touching them. The horse is an extremely sensitive being and can judge between a loving and a punishing hand at once."



What about the effects of a *filmi* set, the glare of arc lights, cameras and *hazaar* people milling around all the time? Jimmy Bharucha agreed that it did put the animals into a dither. "But I expose my horses to a shooting atmosphere right through their training. They can give a perfect shot in one take. I never give them an opportunity to throw tantrums." He is, in fact, one trainer who refuses to let his animals be put through too many rehearsals. He insists that a shot be directly picturised. "They lose interest otherwise, and their coat tends to get hot under so many spotlights. I give a director only five minutes for one shot and then take the horse out for some fresh air. After all our studios are not air-conditioned like in Hollywood."

An incident which shattered Bharucha was the death of his first pupil Shyam in a riding accident. The headstrong actor in a film by the Mukherjis, wanted to give a difficult shot on horseback himself. Mis timing it, he fell off, and his leg got caught in the stirrup. He was dragged for quite a distance before someone held the horse.

Nowdays, Jimmy Bharucha trains and supplies more dogs and less horses. "I just about survived with the horses, but my dogs brought me the money." After 'Love in Simla', he supplied his canine stars to almost every Sadhana and Joy Mukherji film.

And when dealing with recalcitrant producers, Bharucha's bite is worse than his bark. As the producers of 'Hum Hindustani' soon learned. They had 'forgotten' to pay him for an earlier film, so he refused to come to the sets with his dogs after half the shooting for the film was over. The producers panicked and paid up promptly.

Every dog trainer has two or three proteges who look alike but have differing temperaments. Like Bharucha's Caesar. He was a fierce fellow but had a milder companion. The only difference was a big spot on Caesar's forehead. So whenever the other dog was used, a spot was painted in on his forehead. Said Bharucha, "Dogs are easier to handle than horses. They are highly emotional like human beings, and feelings of love are reciprocal. They give it back in double measure."

I wouldn't like to be in a thief's shoes if I met up with one of **Sudhir Khare's** huge dogs. A father and son team, the Khares have shifted their attention from training and supplying dogs for films to supplying them for night-patrolling. After one of their dogs died of exhaustion on a *filmi* set, they are pretty wary (understandably). The director of 'Akhrī Dao' made the dog run a mile for a score of times, until it died of a heat stroke.

The Khare's little cottage in a distant suburb of Bombay resounded with a cacophony of barks and sundry other animal noises, reminding me of old Macdonald's farm. The kennels teemed with huge alsatians, yapping terriers and fierce labradors. I certainly wouldn't want one of them as a co-star. Jagdish Raj would agree. While shooting for 'Koi Jeeta Koi Haara', the Khare dog took a fancy to Jagdish's juicy arm and had a rather big nibble at it. Fortunately, both the animal and actor survived.

Though they have twenty-three dogs, the Khares have switched full time to the security business, after bad experiences in 'Achanak', 'Jai Bangladesh' and 'Mati Mange Khoon'. **Sudhir Khare** explained "Providing dogs for a night patrolling is a full year's job. We get only one or two films a year and they hardly pay enough to maintain the dogs. I spend twenty-five rupees per dog per day, and I get only two hundred and fifty rupees for all of them a day, from the producers. It's not economical to rely on the film industry entirely."

Madras has its share of star menageries. A prominent trainer and supplier to films is **Mr. Govindraj**. And for a change he provides not tame, domestic animals like dogs, cats and horses, but wild ones like tigers, lions, and other animals including hyenas, bears and pythons. And it seems they can become as star-struck as any *filmi* fan.

During the shooting of 'Mr. Natwarlal', a tiger fell in love with our angry middle-aged hero. The lunch-break found the tiger refusing to eat. Govindraj was in a flutter wondering if it needed the doctor. Then as soon as the hero began eating, the tiger returned to its food. From then on, every day, the tiger would eat only after he did.

The same feline took a dislike to the angry middle-aged hero's girlfriend Rekha. He would have an attack of the blues everytime he sighted the actress. In one scene, the tiger was required to stalk majestically out of his cage, but he refused to budge till Rekha was unceremoniously packed off to her make-up room.

The last fifty years have seen the Govindrajs' house being converted into a mini-zoo. The man's love for wildlife is legendary. It doesn't do to jump out of your skin if a python winds itself lovingly round your leg, while you're sipping coffee in his living room. Or a lion or a tiger gives you company, glare for glare. Unless they are forewarned about visitors, Govindraj prefers to let his animals roam free. Since his wife comes from the circus-world, she doesn't leap on to a chair the moment she sees a big cat. "It's been a family business for years. We used to go to the forests and capture animals ourselves, till a ban was imposed on it. Nowadays we buy them from a circus or zoo," he said.

The Govindrajs have a separate training enclosure where they put the animals through their paces themselves. They slip a trained animal inside a cage with an untrained lion or tiger. Then either husband or wife enters it, wielding a whip. "Lions and tigers are terrified of the whip," explained Govindraj. "We give the trained one instructions and with its help, soon the untrained animals start imitating it, and learn to obey us themselves."

They supply both the Bombay as well as Madras film industry. "We have special cages to transport them by train and later to the place of shooting by lorry. When we were shooting at Film City a few months back, they were all housed there. But they didn't get proper food in Bombay," complained Govindraj.

Unlike horses and dogs, lions and tigers cannot be insured. Fortunately, only one of their animals have been injured so far and that too only once. Govindraj doesn't recall the movie, but a tiger

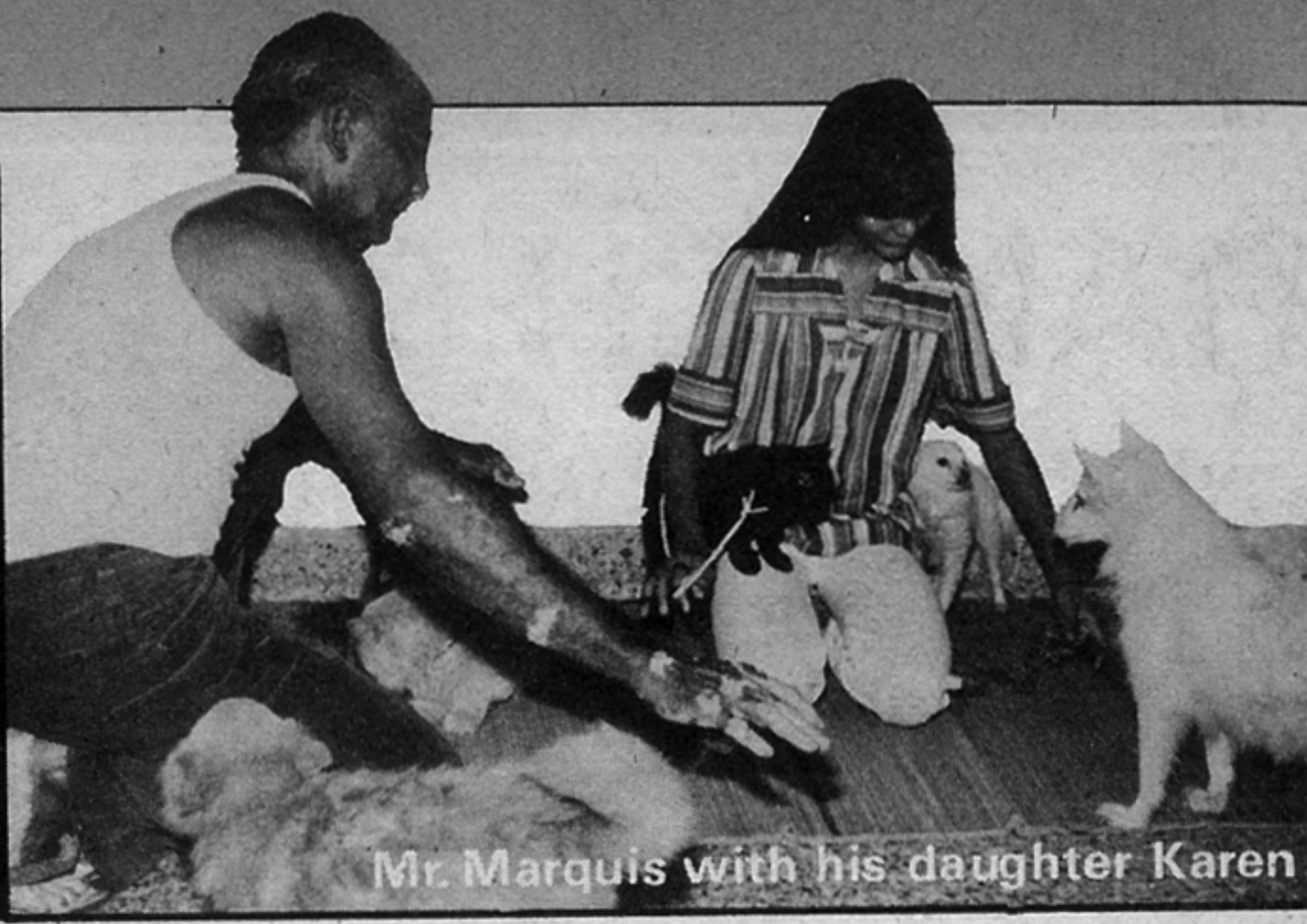


Mr. Jimmy Bharucha



Rekha and her 'souten'





Mr. Marquis with his daughter Karen



had to run through a flaming forest and burnt its legs in the process. He couldn't move for days together. Govindraj accepted this as a professional hazard.

Nearer home, in the heart of teeming *Mumbai*, is a little oasis, a Noah's Ark of animals. The Marquis Pet Corner is a store run by a father-daughter team. In the past, every morning, all the neighbours would collect to watch the peacocks in their glory, and the frolicking deer. Till the people from the forest department came and took away the deer and peacocks (they are a protected species in India). At one time the family had thirty-one dogs of all breeds, but when the father migrated to the Middle East, daughter **Karen Marquis** couldn't maintain such a large number and sold them all. For besides them, no one in the family is so besotted with the four-legged tribe.

"We really love animals," smiled Mr. Marquis. "I hardly sleep at night worrying about one of them or the other." Father and daughter are up by 4.30 in the morning, to begin their daily routine of feeding and cleaning the menagerie. I suspected that the neighbours wouldn't be too easy about living with a *hazaar* dogs, cats, snakes and god-knows what next doors. But the fifteen-year-old school-girl Karen's taken care of that. "I've kept them pretty *khush* by giving all my neighbours a dog each," she winked mischievously. Even her school teachers and friends have come to accept Karen's affair with her animals. Every year, on the last day of school before they break up for their summer vacation, she always walks in with one of them. And the teachers have resigned themselves to her bunking classes whenever there is a shooting.

The young girl's (mis)adventures in filmland would fill volumes. "One of the first films I helped in was 'Charandas' where there was a dog party in one scene. Since all the dogs used were ours, you can imagine the confusion. All the thirty-one of them were supposed to run down the stairs and some of them would go through the wrong doors and disappear. Then they were supposed to sit at a table and have cake. I was under the table all the time in case they fell."

The Marquis family have cut down on film assignments recently. "We are not very keen because it means troubling the animals too much. It's okay in the mornings but they get tired by afternoon. Anyway, they hardly get paid one hundred and fifty rupees a day. I prefer to lend my dogs to ad films," reasoned out Papa Marquis.

Karen has become a heroine of sorts due to her *filmi* connections. While other girls of her age talk of clothes and boyfriends, Karen can narrate exciting stories of her animals and films. In fact, at times the stars are scared of the animals, or the dogs get frightened looking at the stars (the *filmi* ones). In a film called 'Kasme Rasmee', Jayshree T. was supposed to say *choo* to the dog, so that the dog would go and attack comedian Jagdeep. But Jayshree was so frightened that the dog would pounce on her instead, that she refused to do it. So finally, Karen had to get into Jayshree's clothes, and with her back to the camera perform the scene. Then the dog had to lick Jagdeep's face. The dog objected and Karen chipped in instead.

Another film found Mr. Marquis enacting a police inspector. That particular shot had his Dobberman chase the angry middle-aged hero along the railway tracks, and cross them the moment a train sped in. But the dog was so frightened when it saw the train, that it turned tail. Eventually, Mr. Marquis in a police uniform had to run alongside with him. "It was very exhausting. There were barbed wire fences to crawl under."

Recalls Mr. Marquis, "This same Dobberman had to sit next to Rishi Kapoor in one movie, on the sofa, while a police inspector walked up and down with a stick in his hand. The poor dog thought the stick was meant for him and he snapped at the person closest to him i.e. Rishi. That really frightened the poor guy out of his wits!"

Vinod Mehra was another star who was bitten (if you can call it that) by one of the Marquis' dogs. The unit of 'Kahani Ek Chor Ki', wanted two dogs for their film—one a ferocious Dobberman and second a small French bull dog. The scene was as follows: The Dobberman was to chase Vinod Mehra who is supposed to be running away with a brief-case, while the French bull dog was to sit quietly in a corner. When after *hazaar* rehearsals the director was ready for the take, instead of the Dobberman, it was the French bull dog who barked and attacked Vinod Mehra and even bit him on his ankle, when the star refused to let go off his brief-case. "You know how actors are," explained Karen disapprovingly. "Vinod Mehra's mother came to our house everyday to make sure that our dog hadn't died. And no amount of assurances from us about the bite being harmless could pacify her."

However, the stars do not show the same concern for the animals that aren't well. Or let's say that everybody is not an Amjad Khan. Once during the shooting of 'Kation Ka Katil', Amjad was to do a scene with a Persian cat. "He suddenly realised that she was pregnant, and saw to it that she was treated very carefully and that she did not exert herself too much," revealed a touched Karen emotionally.

Everyone in Karen's class at school is *maha* thrilled by the fact that she owns so many animals, and give her a lot of *bhav*. "In the seventh standard, we were doing a lesson on the snake and mongoose. No one had ever seen a mongoose, so with the teacher's permission, I got the one I had, to class."

Karen wants to travel and collect more animals. The fact that they live in a tiny flat doesn't discourage her. Besides, four-legged creatures, she has birds and fishes. Her father has designed aquaria for a lot of people, even for a sheikh in Muscat. My only regret (relief?) when leaving the Marquis' house was, that I didn't get to meet their snakes. They had slithered out on a shooting stint.

What more can I say about these silent stars of the silver screen, but that they are more intelligent than Shabana Azmi, more talented than Smita Patil, much more moodier than Rajesh Khanna and that they make much better copy than Shatrughan Sinha!