

PHOTOGRAPHS: FARZANA BEHRAM CONTRACTOR

Stray at Heart

Perhaps it was the poet in him which prompted him to look at strays with the kindness and compassion which one does not generally associate with a toughie like **Pritish Nandy**. He started *People For Animals* years ago and now even Hollywood has acknowledged his humanitarian work in the world of animals. **Farzana Behram Contractor** shoots questions at him and also has a field day shooting him and his dogs at his home

Who or what inculcated the love for animals in you? Have you had pets from a young age? Any other childhood/youth memories.

I loved animals as a child, but not particularly. We never had any pets at home but I loved all the birds, animals, trees that were part of my everyday life in school and home, most of them currently missing. Sparrows, swallows, crows, kites, butterflies, dragonflies, moths with beautifully engraved wings, squirrels, dogs, cats, mice, fireflies that lit up our nights, majestic horses that went for a run outside the race course. Kids today see few of them. In fact, my grown-up daughters are scared of mice, moths, earthworms, dragonflies which



we played with as kids. Kids in the future will be scared of squirrels and donkeys because they won't see them around. Species are disappearing everywhere. Ordinary, humble ones as well as the more exotic ones we keep reading about in nature magazines.

I did not need to love animals as a kid. They were a part of my everyday life. We shared our lunch with dogs on the road. We petted cats. We refused to dissect frogs in the school lab even if it meant getting lesser marks in the exams.

Tell me about Pritish Nandy, the pet parent. How does it feel to have Mojo and Mowgli with you now, and about

your past pets, as well? Obviously they are extended family, do you think of them as your children?

To be honest, every child of mine is unique, special. Be it Kushan or Teesta, Rangita or Ishita. So it is with my other children. Each one has been very special and as loved as my own kids. They all bear the Nandy surname.

Magic was the first, a rescued pom. Then came Mogambo, the most handsome Boxer you would ever see. He outclassed George Clooney. Mystique was an Indian dog rescued and brought home by Rangita who outlived everyone else. She walked like a ballerina. Then there was Rani, another Indian dog who was left

outside the gate of my bungalow in Delhi with her head bashed in. We saved her and she came back with me to Mumbai after I finished my term in Parliament. There was also Mambo, another Boxer, gifted to me from Rashtrapati Bhavan. He was Rina, my wife's favourite, and stunningly handsome. We have Mowgli now, rescued from monkeys atop a tree, by Rangita during a film shoot in Kodaikanal. And Mojo, my beautiful white Lab daughter, the apple of my eye. She's quite a handful.

The two I miss most are Mogambo and Rani. Rani was a little short on temper and bit everyone in sight, including me at times. But she protected me better than any gunman could.

How did they come into your family? Was it Rangita's doing? Rina's role?

They all came in tiny and grew up in the Nandy home. The Indian dogs live long, anything between 12 to 15 years. The pedigreed dogs are all genetically defective and die within 5 to 6 years. Bad breeding, I guess, but also because they are not half as strong and street smart as the Indian dogs. Nor are they as good watch dogs. Rangita brought in the two lovely Indian dogs. And Rina, she hates us when we bring them in. But she works the hardest for them. Their food, their medicines, their vaccinations, their care: it's Rina all the way. She adores them but loves complaining when they climb onto our beds and sofa sets or eat off the table at meal time. Ishita takes them to the doctor and ensures they stay in perfect health.

Who gave them their names and why?

Most of the early ones I named. Now everyone names them together since everyone takes care of them.

Any special characteristics of your current two that need mentioning? How do they get along?

Mowgli and Mojo get on famously, though they are both girls and both very pretty in their own ways. Mowgli is quiet and very ladylike. Mojo is full of life and has no idea how big she is. She jumps on people with great affection and they collapse under her weight. She is a charming person full of energy and wonderment. She is barely two years old and still very curious about the world. Mowgli is reserved but friendly

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and extremely well-behaved. In fact, too behaved as a dog. I suspect she was royalty in her last birth. I simply can't believe she fell off a tree because the other monkeys were making fun of her monkey mother for breast feeding her!

What do you do in your quality time with them?

Discuss matters of great national importance. Currently we are discussing Dhoble and the Presidential polls. Mowgli prefers Sangma because they are of similar height. But Mojo wants Pranabda.

Do you (or your family) indulge in any special activities where your dogs are concerned? Birthdays, dress-up, swimming, treks, holidays...

None of the above, alas. I never have

holidays in that sense. But yes, we go out together once in a rare while. We are very happy at home together. That's the kind of family we are. We spend most of our time either at work or with ourselves, having fun. And our children have grown up that way as well. So they run around the garden, play ball with me, or hide and seek. They like chasing people away so that they can have us to themselves, which frankly suits me very well. I don't know about the others. And yes, we talk a lot among ourselves. Like us, most of the children speak English though Rani knew a smattering of Hindi as well. She was a Delhi girl.

What are the animal causes that you support? Tell me a little about your TV shows on animal rights. Your association with Maneka Gandhi.

Years ago, I founded *People for Animals*. It was meant for Maneka from the start. We published her books, did some outstanding events to raise money which went into animal causes all over India. Husain designed our first logo. Today, it must be one of India's biggest NGOs, all thanks to Maneka's efforts.

We did some terrific TV shows together on animals, animal rights. Not the usual preachy stuff, but fun shows that also educated people and made them realise that animals are not really very different from us. You don't need to own them or colonise them or civilise them. They actually are better equipped to own you, colonise you and civilise you. It is just that they leave you alone. Every dog that came into my life (and Mischief, the cat who co-existed with them and bossed

them around) actually owned me. Most things I learnt in my life, I learnt from them.

On receiving the Genesis award in New York. How does it feel to be the first Indian to be honoured with this prestigious award?

It's an honour and I must confess I am very proud of it. *The Humane Society of the United States* does remarkable work among animals, and I am proud they chose to give me their International Humanitarian Award. It's humbling too, because all these years I never thought I was doing humanitarian work at all. The animal work I do is part of my normal day to day life. It's nothing special. I try to stop cruelty. I try to help animals in distress. And I try to build a community of like-minded people who



The strays know us and love us as much as I know and love them. We have their pictures up on our bedroom walls. Together with pictures of the ones who stayed at home. And yes, the walls are full.

love animals, particularly stray and abandoned animals, and would like to help them live a decent, dignified life.

There is too much of savagery all around. The BMC was killing strays till we stepped in and prevented this wanton murder. People were bringing in camels all the way from Rajasthan and making them run races on the Juhu beach. They

died within six months, each of them, unfed, untreated, unloved, uncared for. Look at the way the horses are treated by Victoria owners. How can anyone be so inhuman as to go on joyrides on them? Very often we do not notice the violence we commit on animals. Once you learn to notice that, you can stop it. That's all I did.

And yes, it all began with Maneka. She opened my third eye.

Producer, journalist, poet, painter, politician, and most importantly, humanist with a soft spot for animals. How does the last one contribute to your personality?

It's all me, Farzana. It's one life, for better or for worse. I have not exercised any choices. My careers found me. My life found me. My children found me to share the magic of our existence. My friends found me. I am privileged. I truly mean it. I love my life. It makes me whole.

How do you make time for your pets in all your madness?

They are my madness, my *junoon*. I don't have to find time for them. They find time for me. They honour me with their love and companionship. I am who I am because of them, trust me.

Bollywood has no super animal-based movies. Do you plan to bring about a change, probably on the lines of some greats, such as *Marley and Me*, *Hachiko*, *Benji*...?

I would love to. We have two great scripts in mind and one remake of a Hollywood film, *Hotel for Dogs*. We are talking to the original producer in Hollywood. The *Genesis* award makes that much easier now and since everybody was there at the awards in March, I got an opportunity to reach out to Hollywood and make friends. So it may be easier now to get the rights of works like these and adapt them for our audiences.

You write a lot about all the animals in your life, have you ever written poems?

I have written some thirty books of poems. I won my *Padma Shri* as a poet in my twenties. And the *EM Forster* award. In fact, I was possibly the only full time poet this country has seen in recent times. I made my living for almost a decade, the first decade of my working life, from writing poetry and translating it from different languages. I wanted to prove that it was possible to make a living as a poet. Yes, I have written poems on my dogs.

How many dogs have come and gone through your life, how have you coped with the loss of those gone?

Loss is always difficult to cope with, Farzana. I still miss my father after 34 years. I miss my mother after more than a decade. It is never easy to say goodbye. I remember every death clearly and with great sorrow. I miss each one of them at different times. They were an intrinsic part of my life.

In fact, it does not apply to those who live at home with me. I know every dog in the neighbourhood who Rina and Ishita feed and look after as if they are our family members. They are all strays, all deeply loved by us. They know us and love us as much as I know and love them. We have their pictures up on our



bedroom walls. Together with pictures of the ones who stayed at home. And yes, the walls are full.

I miss them when they pass away. Shabby was an Embassy dog. When his owners went back home, they left him on the street to fend for himself. His white coat became grey in weeks and the street dogs went after him every day because he was the unwelcome stranger. Yet he waited patiently for his owners to come back and take him home. He chased every car that passed by, often risking his life. Every night, he went to sleep dreaming that he will find his owners again and every morning he woke up to the dreadful realisation that he was all alone and abandoned. He was a pedigree dog and had no survival skills. But he survived by sheer grit. He taught me that faith and hope are what keep us alive. We began feeding him, and slowly the group grew, every day, every

week, every month. Today we try and feed every dog in the neighbourhood. We try and save every sick animal we see. But it's tough. It's tough seeing so much hurt, pain, sorrow. Yet they smile, they laugh, they wag their tails and come running whenever we are there. That's what love is all about. They want nothing from us. Just a pat on the head and they are happy.

Have you ever bought a dog?

I don't need to. Every day so many dogs come up for adoption. Indian dogs. Strays. Abandoned dogs of immaculate pedigree. Danes, Huskies, Afghans. My job is to try to find them good homes. The sad part is I often fail.

I do not have the luxury of choosing a new family member. They come on their own, into my home, make it their own; I am just a tenant here. As indeed, I am just a tenant on this planet. 🐾

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