

WestCoastNewsline

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Rahman magic sweeps Pan-Asian Fest

NANDINI SHARMA

Palo Alto, Calif

RENOWNED composer AR Rahman charmed the Bay Area last week not so much with his music but with his self-deprecating sense of humor and a surprisingly humble demeanor.

In town to accept Stanford University's tribute to him at the Pan-Asian Music Festival, Rahman participated in an on-stage interview, and watched a retrospective of his films as well as performances of some of his songs by the students.

"He is one of the most celebrated composers in our time," said Prof Jindong Cai, the festival's artistic director, while introducing Rahman. "We honor him for all his contributions to music and we thank him for opening a door for all of us so we can know about India's diverse culture," he added.

While planning the festival, which focused

on South Asia this year, Cai wanted to move beyond Indian classical music. "I want Bollywood," he said.

And Rahman is the best of Bollywood. Ethnomusicologist Natalie Sarrazin traced the evolution of Indian film music and highlighted Rahman's contributions to it. "The first thing Rahman has done is taken the orchestral music and completely got rid of it. He makes us listen to each sound," she said. She made note of his use of repeated patterns, mastery of both rhythm and melody, and his ability to put together two completely incongruous sounds such as the Indian traditional and the western theatrical sounds.

During the interview that followed, Rahman made light about his rise to success. "I was terrified in the beginning. I only knew how to do 30-second jingles. But then I learnt all you have to do is repeat it," he said of his transition from advertising to films in the early 90s.

Within a span of nine short years, he has

been won some of the most coveted industry honors including the Padmashree. He credits his collaboration with Bharat Bala on *Vande Mataram* and *Jana Gana Mana* as the key to that recognition. "We've done something for society without realizing it. Everywhere I go in the world, people relate to me," he said.

He was certainly the highlight of the week-long music festival, which also included a *qawwali* concert by Farid Ayaz, Sufi rock by Salman Ahmad, Hindustani and Carnatic performances, and the North American premiere of *Songs of Five Rivers* by the British-Indian composer Naresh Sohal. A symposium on Sufi music rounded out the performances.

To Rahman, music is a uniting force. "There's so much hatred in the world now. I'm blessed to be a musician, to have crossed all that," he said. With over 75 Indian films, Sir Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Bombay Dreams*, and now *Lord of the Rings* (the stage musical by Matthew Warchus which opens in Toronto next month) to his credit, what of the future? "I don't plan anything. I believe in God—he is a better planner," he says.



March masala: celluloid treat from Asia

SAM RAO

San Francisco, Calif

AUNTIE G'S, the short film that made it big on the internet circuit recently, will be one of the most keenly-awaited offerings at the 11-day San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival between March 16 and 26. It will be screened in theaters across San Francisco, Berkeley and San Jose.

Organized by the Center for Asian American Media, the festival is the largest event dedicated to Asian American and Asian cinema in the country. The 24th edition of the festival will feature more than 22 movies and shorts by Indian and South Asian filmmakers out of a bouquet of 126 films. The event will host over 200 filmmakers and industry guests from across the globe, in addition to the expected attendance of more than 23,000 filmlovers.

"This year's Narrative Competition boasts an incredible list of 12 new feature films—three of which are world premieres—a remarkable growth since 1997's record-breaking year," said Chihui Yang, Festival Director 2006.



Saif Ali Khan and Vidya Balan in a still from *Parineeta*

One of the centerpieces at the SFIFF will be Deepa Mehta's controversial and critically acclaimed film *Water*—part of her 'Elemental trilogy' series. To be premiered at the prestigious Castro Theater in San Francisco, Mehta is expected to be in attendance at the event.

Other South Asian highlights include the USA premiere of *Dreaming Lhasa*. Made by Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam, the film is the story of a young Tibetan who travels to Dharamsala to make a film about the exiled community, and to escape her crumbling personal life back in New York.

Veteran filmmaker Buddhadeb Dasgupta brings to the event his 27th celluloid offering *Memories in the Mist or Kaalpurush*. Set in Kolkata, this playful but satirical family drama is about a shy Kolkata office clerk who finds his thoughts drifting into his peaceful past as his powerful father and newly successful wife spawn feelings of social inadequacy. The film stars Rahul Bose, Mithun Chakraborty and Sameera Reddy.

First-time filmmaker Pradeep Sarkar's commercial blockbuster

Parineeta also features at the festival. An adaptation of a novel of the same name by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, the drama here is set in 1962. Saif Ali Khan and Vidya Balan play young Shekhar and Lolita who are involved in a friendly relationship, until the arrival of a businessman (played by Sanjay Dutt) sparks the discovery of love amongst them.

Meena Nanji's documentary on Afghani women and their three decade tryst with their Afghani politics, *View from a grain of Sand*, is also a world premiere. This gritty documentary is set in the refugees camps of Kabul and in the rugged NWPF.

Bay Area resident Tanuj Chopra's *Punching at the Sun* debuts at the San Jose leg of the festival. Along with 3rd I—a non profit organization specializing in Indian-American cinema—the SFIFF will also feature a number of shorts by South Asian filmmakers from the Indian diaspora. These include Umesh Kulkarni's *The Grinding Machine*, Nandini Sikand's *In Whose Name*, Avie Luthra's *Lucky*, Geeta Malik's *Auntie G's*, Kevin Lee's *Daastar-Defending Sikh identity* etc.

California Dreams: A Passage to India

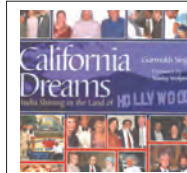
EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

THE past few years have seen a burgeoning of successful Indian Americans in the California Valley. And along with that have come the scribes who want to mirror these achievements in black and white. *California Dreams: India Shining in the Land of Hollywood* is one such effort in lots of color. The coffee-table by journalist Gurmukh Singh, sums up the century-long journey of the Indian community in Southern California.

The book begins with a foreword by Stanley Wolpert, Professor Emeritus of South Asian History, University of California. Writes Wolpert: "Much has been written about the 'outsourcing' of American business to India, but far less is known of the singular influx of Indian talent and wisdom that has enriched this country in every field of creative activity and enterprise, from fine arts and philosophy through industry and all of the sciences."

He also pays a glowing tribute to Inder Singh as a 'flag bearer' of the Indian-American community and recommends the book to every Indian home in California.

Gurmukh Singh, who has earlier authored *The Rise of Sikhs Abroad*, gives us glimpses into the lives of over a dozen community achievers. The selection criterion seems sim-



**CALIFORNIA DREAMS:
INDIA SHINING IN THE
LAND OF HOLLYWOOD**
By Gurmukh Singh
British Columbia
Price: \$30

ple: be famous or be seen in the community, or have an outstanding achievement in any field of life. Hence, 'Okra King' Harbhajan Samra rubs shoulders with the co-founder of the Lasik surgery Dr Mani Bhaumik, sitar maestro Pandit Ravi Shankar teams up with Qualcomm technology wizard Dr Sanjay Jha.

The opening chapter: *The Journey So Far* says how Indian immigration into the US began—four Sikh men first landed in San Francisco in April 1899. Then others followed and gradually moving into Southern California where they worked as farm hands, they became owners of the same land by entering into marital alliances with Mexican women. But they were still denied the US citizenship, for which people like Bhagat Singh Thind initiated a fight in the US courts. Dalip Singh Saund pursued relentlessly until all Asians were given the voting and citizenship rights and Saund became the first Asian Congressman in the US. Immigration got further boost with relaxation in immigration laws in the 70s and today, Indians are one of the wealthiest people in the US.

