

From Page to Celluloid: Adapting books for the big screen, a panel featuring, from center to right, filmmaker Mira Nair, actor Nandita Das, and author Mohan Sikka.



Chaya Babu attends the first IAAC Literary Festival

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OUR STORIES, their words

As art exhibits, film festivals, fashion shows, and more dedicated to South Asian arts and culture become more vibrant and prevalent in the United States, especially in New York, visibility for literary arts with roots in the subcontinent has also flourished here. Adding a new chapter to that was the first Indo-American Arts Council Literary Festival, which took place in Manhattan November 7 to 9.

Along with Columbia University's South Asia Institute and *India Abroad*, *India in New York's* sister publication, the IAAC brought together a litany of names from across the literary and publishing worlds through panel discussions, Q&A sessions, and readings. Taking place at Columbia's stately campus in Morningside Heights, with opening and closing receptions at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, the event traversed areas related to fiction and non-fiction, poetry, different types of media, and covered genres from comedy and food to urban life and politics.

"This, our first IAAC Literary Festival, boasts a whole weekend of amazing sessions," said Aroon Shivdasani, director, IAAC, pointing out that the entire affair was organized in just eight weeks.

"And now for this evening," she continued at the opening reception, "it's really exciting: Best of the Booker, author Sir Salman Rushdie. Friend of the IAAC for many, many years, a supporter — we've twisted his arm for so many things. 'Come and walk this carpet; please be here for a fundraiser; please be *the* fundraiser!' And he's rarely said no because he's so, so supportive of young artists, and he

obviously recognizes and supports all the arts."

The brilliant Sir Rushdie — in all his usual eloquence and humor — joined in conversation with Professor Akeel Bilgrami, director, SIA. The two created an entertaining dialog that had the crowd engaged and laughing; Rushdie, on top of his mastery of the written word, possesses a captivating wit and charm on stage. He and Bilgrami wove through a range of topics: Rushdie's life in Mumbai, London, and now New York; Manhattan in the 1970s; discipline in the practice of writing; rock and roll; Shakespeare; the decolonization of the English language in India; and more.

"I think literature works at both ends," Rushdie noted at one point. "Literature works when it's minimal and when it's maximal. It doesn't work in the middle. So you can take one tiny hair from the head of the goddess and turn it to the light and write about that — that works. Or you can let the crowd in and the carnival and the noise, etcetera, and that works. Both ends work. Nothing in the middle works. The middle is ordinariness. And if you want to not be ordinary, don't go there."

Saturday and Sunday were a look at the voices in the South Asian literary space, both high-profile and emerging.

Day 1

In 'Writing the City: Tales from the metropolis,' authors Suketu Mehta (*Maximum City*), Kalyan Ray (*No Country*), and K Anis Ahmed (*Good Night, Mr Kissinger*) discussed how stories are born out of cityscapes, their

characters and narratives shaped by the culture of chaos and energy inherent to bustling urban centers. From Mumbai and Delhi, to Dhaka to Dublin to New York, these places served as a starting point for a dialog on colonialism, violence, migration, and globalization.

"South Asians should take liberty to write about any place we damn well please," said Mehta, touching on the point of authenticity, and who gets to write about what.

Mehta's *Maximum City* is based in Mumbai, but he is working currently on a book about New York and has written extensively about Rio de Janeiro. We don't have to be from or of a place to write about it, the panel emphasized, and even so, the meaning of that has changed. Mehta pointed out that people have allegiance to multiple cities, and even migration means something different from what it once did.

"What is exile when a round trip ticket home is \$500?" he asked.

Ahmed added, "The challenge and the fun for us, where we are now, as part of a global conversation, is to move away from what used to be, in academic parlance, the 'native informant position.' I think you can speak in other voices without managing to leave that position — so it's not just the act of picking up, but rather how you're addressing (*the topic*) and who you're addressing and if you're actually managing to leave that position. And I see that more and more."

Mira Nair, Nandita Das, and Mohan Sikka spoke to a