



Coming into their own



Filmmakers, actors and the organizers pose for a group photograph at the New York Indian Film Festival closing gala, May 10.

The five-day New York Indian Film Festival — May 5 through May 10 — organized by the Indo-American Arts Council, saw some fierce competition as the independent jury had to weigh several extremely well made gems from India and other countries.

The 14th edition of the festival will be remembered for the triumph of new directors, who shot past big names like Anurag Kashyap (*Ugly*), Buddhadeb Dasgupta (*Anwar Ka Ajab Kissa* (Sniffer)) and Aparna Sen (*Goynar Baksho*).

The top awards went to Nagraj Manjule, *Fandry* (best director), Geethu Mohandas, *Liar's Dice* (best picture), Naseeruddin Shah (best actor, *The Coffin Maker*), Geetanjali Thapa (best actress, *Liar's Dice*), *Gulabi Gang* (best documentary) and *Blouse* (best short).

A semi autobiographical film in Marathi about the continuing caste discrimination in India, *Fandry* is an engaging narrative with flashes of humor.

It centers around an 'untouchable' or Dalit boy and his love for a girl from a higher caste.

On the surface, it may look like a conventional love story, however, it is anything but a *masala* film.

The *Hollywood Reporter* called it 'a film made with anger and indignation at India's caste system.'

Manjule, who received a warm welcome in New York, after the screening of his film, said the caste system and concomitant exploitation continued to ride high in India because politicians and vested interests worked together to keep it thus.

"We are thrilled to be able to share this film with New York audiences," Aseem Chhabra, festival director, NYIFF, said. "Fandry is, in my book, perhaps the best film made in India in 2013."

The Coffin Maker, a story of sudden impending death, also holds promise for first time filmmaker Veena Bakshi.

Geethu Mohandas's *Liar's Dice* — a grim film about displaced people and workers with precarious existence in far off parts of India — was well received at the festival.

It tells the story of Kamala and her child Manya who leave their native village in search of her missing husband and meet an unknown army deserter.

Little-known films leave a big impression at the New York Indian Film Festival, finds Arthur J Pais



A scene from *Fandry*, which won Nagraj Manjule a best director nod at the festival.

The film, also featuring Nawazuddin Siddiqui, was first screened at the Mumbai Film Festival this year. It became the second film to be selected in the competition category at the Sundance Film Festival after Anusha Rizvi's *Peepli Live*, four years ago.

A stark, but engrossing film about 'invisible' people whose lives are mercilessly exploited by the powerful vested interest, *Liar's Dice* was photographed by Rajiv Ravi, Mohandas's husband.

The filmmaker, who began her career as a child artist in Malayalam movies (as Gayathri) and graduated to playing

lead roles, took to serious movies over a decade ago.

It was not an overnight decision to get into direction, she said. The self-taught filmmaker made a short film *Kelkkunnundo* (*Are You Listening?*), which received a world premiere at the International Film Festival Rotterdam and was screened at the International Film Festival of India.

"That gave me a stepping stone to do something bigger," she said in an interview. "For independent filmmakers, it is very difficult to secure funds to make a film. But because my short film had premiered in Rotterdam, I was exposed to the Hubert Bals Fund for Script and Project Development. The film's journey started from there."

It is imperative, Mohandas said, for low budget films to have artists who are razor sharp, follow the director fast and with enthusiasm. She said the actors in her film helped her complete the project in about three weeks.

Geetanjali Thapa is 'fabulous' because 'she is a very unassuming actor,' Mohandas said. 'I think she completely trusts her instincts and turned out to be a very quiet support for the entire film.'

'Her chemistry with Nawaz was also very beautiful. Nawaz is completely a director's actor,' she added. 'He trusts the director and asks a lot of questions. But once you tell him what the feel and the mood is, he just speaks out. I think he is a delight to watch.'

Why did she choose such a difficult terrain — the borderland across Nepal — to shoot the film?

Mohandas said she found the subject compelling. It reminded her of people from Kerala and other regions of India, who travel thousands of miles to work under very hostile conditions.

She added her unit had to be careful of landslides and leopards. 'But these factors did not deter us.'

Another gem from unusual quarters was the Pakistani film *Zinda Bhaag*.

It tells the story of three young men trying to escape the reality of their everyday lives and succeeding in ways they had least expected. The directors of the film — Delhi-born