



C12 Film Review: 'Kaminey'

C23 Mallika Sherawat Honored in L.A.

C8 Dan Nainan Costars in 'Airbender'

# 'Ocean of Pearls' A Fresh Look at the Sikh Experience

By LISA TSERING  
India-West Staff Reporter

**S**AN FRANCISCO — "Ocean of Pearls" is a story of one Sikh's struggle in America, but it's so much more. The film is a coming-of-age story, a medical drama, a statement about racism and an unsentimental look at the vast divide between generations.

One thing it's not? Predictable. The independent feature film, an assured debut by physician-turned-director Sarab S. Neelam, opens Aug. 21 in San Francisco, and will soon roll out its release to other cities.

Amrit Singh (Omid Abtahi) is a talented young Canadian doctor who receives a once-in-a-lifetime chance to run a multi-million-dollar transplant facility in Detroit. He jumps at the chance, leaving his family, and his girlfriend (Navi Rawat of "Numb3rs"), behind.

But once he's settled in a new country, Amrit faces indignity after indignity — detained at an airport, passed over for promotions, and barred from a nightclub — all because he chooses to wear a turban.

"Oh yeah," said Neelam, himself a turbaned Sikh, when asked if he'd ever faced discrimination. "This is every Sikh's story. Growing up in Toronto, there was a lot of name-calling. People would call us 'Pakis.' People threw tomatoes at me, threw eggs at our house, tried to rip my turban off," he told **India-West** after a screening of the film.

"I didn't want to get into fights. You keep internalizing it. But stares and looks are a routine part of life for us."

But "Ocean of Pearls" is not simply a film about discrimination. It also delves into family dynamics, as Amrit tries to deal with a lifetime of resentment against his father (Ajay Mehta), the family's stern, old-fashioned patriarch who has devoted his life to keeping Sikh culture alive. "Why would someone work so hard to come to the new world



Omid Abtahi as Amrit Singh, a young Sikh doctor facing discrimination in America, in Sarab S. Neelam's "Ocean of Pearls." (Kim Simms photos)

just to keep living in the old one?" muses Amrit in a voiceover.

"Ocean of Pearls" was originally conceived as a medical drama about a young doctor who butts up against the flawed American health system when one of his patients comes to realize that she doesn't have enough money to pay for a life-saving transplant. The story was inspired by Neelam's own experience.

"I came to America to do my residency," said Neelam. "An administrator said, 'If you order tests on this patient, you'll get a bonus. If you order tests for that patient, I'll subtract the cost from your bonus.' I originally wrote the story about a Caucasian doctor battling the system."

But at the advice of Jim Burnstein, a screenwriter and producer



Navi Rawat and Omid Abtahi in "Ocean of Pearls."

[Cont. on page C4]

**Law Office of  
TANMAY P. MISTRY**  
www.mistrylawfirm.com



Providing professional Services for: **LOAN MODIFICATIONS**

• Wills and Trusts • Contract Review & Negotiation • Personal Injury • Civil Litigation • Immigration

451 W. Bonita Ave., Ste. 9, San Dimas, CA 91773

Email: info@mistrylawfirm.com • Tel: 909.592.1971 • Fax: 909.592.1977



# 'Ocean of Pearls' a Fresh Look At the Sikh Experience



Ajay Mehta is Ravinder Singh, a strict patriarch whose own fierce Sikh pride is born of Partition-era tragedy. (Kim Simms photo)

[Cont. from page C1]

who saw the timeliness of the racism issue post-Sept. 11, Neelam — working with gifted young screenwriter V. Prasad — made the character a Sikh.

Since the film is meant for mainstream audiences, one of Prasad's biggest challenges was to present information about Sikhism in an interesting way. So in one scene, we see Amrit tie a turban on his friend and coworker, Susan (Heather McComb), as she asks him questions about his culture and faith.

"I tried to find an organic way

to bring it up in their conversation," explained Prasad in a phone interview. "The scene where he's tying the turban was designed to share information, but it's really about their growing attraction for each other."

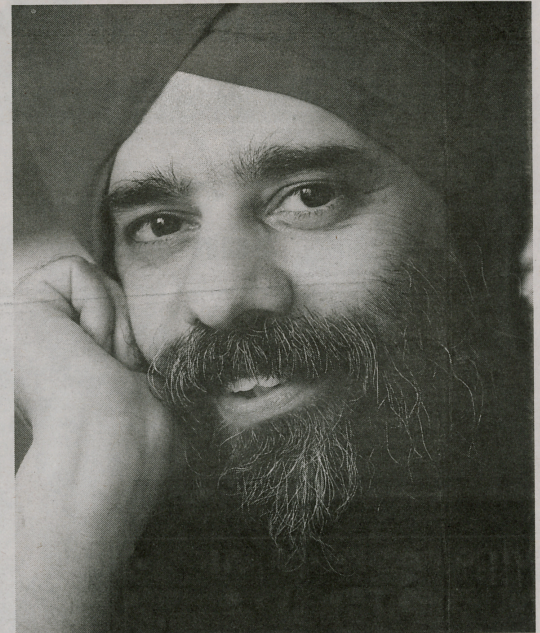
In another vital scene, Amrit stares into his bathroom mirror, scissors in hand, as he decides to cut off his hair.

"Amrit is going through two different emotions," said Neelam. "Profound sadness and profound joy. He's leaving his past behind ... I've talked to a lot of Sikhs who cut their hair, and many of them told me, 'I felt great' after

doing it."

Neelam decided that telling the story was more important to him than finding all Sikh actors, or playing all traditional Sikh music — for example, the role of the patriarch is played by noted TV and commercial actor Ajay Mehta; and the soundtrack is by a non-Indian, New Age kirtan performer Snatam Kaur. Even the pivotal role of Amrit is played by an Iranian American actor (Omid Abtahi's credits include roles on "24," "Heroes," "Ghost Whisperer" and "Navy NCIs").

Neelam, who was born in India and came to Canada with his fam-



Sarab S. Neelam is a gastroenterologist-turned-filmmaker making his feature debut with "Ocean of Pearls."



A scene of Amrit (Omid Abtahi) tying a turban on his friend, Susan (Heather McComb), is used to explain Sikh customs in "Ocean of Pearls." (Kim Simms photo)

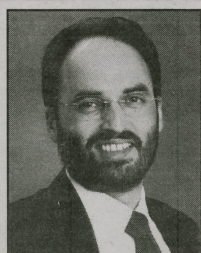
ily as a young boy, has wanted to make films since he was a kid. He supported himself as a gastroenterologist while studying filmmaking with Judith Weston in Los Angeles and making shorts and documentaries. "I'd take two weeks off at a time to study filmmaking," he explained. Later, when he'd put together the "Ocean of Pearls," Neelam took two months off from his medical practice to shoot the film in locations around Michigan, sometimes shooting exterior scenes late into the night in bitter cold. The local Sikh community lent a hand in the production by providing office space, bringing props, tying turbans and organizing extras.

Neelam has largely financed the film himself, and is now traveling around the country to present the film in art-house theaters. He is counting on word-of-mouth, both within and outside the Indian American community, to get more people to see the film.

It has been an undeniable struggle, but a great learning experience that's emotionally fulfilling as well.

"A lot of Sikh youths have told me, 'Thank you for telling my story,'" Neelam told India-West.

"Ocean of Pearls" will open Aug. 21 for a limited engagement at Landmark's Bridge Theater at 3010 Geary Blvd. in San Francisco. For showtimes, call (415) 267-4893.



Gurjit S. Randhawa  
DDS, MDS

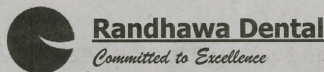
## BRACES...

for you and your child

Traditional Braces/Orthodontics  
Tooth Colored/Ceramic Braces  
Invisalign .. Straight Teeth - No Braces

Complimentary  
No-obligation Consultation or  
FREE Second Opinion

www.510dentist.com



Fremont 510-796-1600  
Union City 510-471-1255  
Alameda 510-521-3300

## SHEENTRAVEL

FLY WORRY FREE®

### SOME OF OUR LOW FARES

|  |                           |                           |
|--|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Mumbai<br><b>\$780</b>                 | Delhi<br><b>\$780</b>     | Chennai<br><b>\$780</b>   |
| Hyderabad<br>Bangalore<br><b>\$780</b> | Ahmedabad<br><b>\$780</b> | Karachi<br><b>\$830</b>   |
| Kolkata<br><b>\$780</b>                | London<br><b>\$220</b>    | Australia<br><b>\$889</b> |

"Get Away from it all!"

### SHEEN TRAVEL Offers

- **Heart of Europe** - 15 Day Escorted Tour from \$2089 /person  
Visit 7 Countries- Book early Save \$200 per couple
- **Adventure Safari In Africa**  
Botswana.....11-Days from \$3378/person  
South Africa 18-Days from \$2576 /person
- **INDIA Wild Life Parks**  
Corbett - 2 Night/ 3 Days from \$248 /person  
Ranthambore - 2 Night/ 3 Days from \$248 /person  
Sasan Gir - 2 Night/ 3 Days from \$248 /person
- **The Luxury Train:** Palace On Wheels 7-Days from \$2498  
Plus more than 50 other itineraries to Europe, Africa, Asia, South Pacific & The Middle East  
please call for special discount rates and availability, some restrictions apply

www.sheentravel.com

## Northwestern Polytechnic University

Programs Designed for Full-time Students and Working Professionals

- Electrical Engineering - BS, MS
- Computer Systems Engineering- BS, MS, DCE
- Computer Science - BS,MS
- Business Administration & Information Sciences - BA
- Business Administration - MBA, DBA

Evening and Weekend classes