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The networking of brand India

Two very different groups of NRIs met separately in the Washington area last weekend, almost oblivious to each other's existence. One group consisted of East Coast IITians meeting for the second year, this time for a pow-wow on "Looking into the Future," including the familiar theme of giving back to India. The other was a largely writerly crowd, also gathering for the second year under the aegis of the South Asian Literary and Theatre Arts (SALTA) Festival, to talk matters literary and celluloid.

At the techies meet, distinguished alumnus like Dr Praveen Chaudhari, who heads the Brookhaven National Laboratory (and is less known as the inventor of the rewritable compact disc) delivered a panoramic address touching upon some of the most frontier areas of science. The group also roped in Vint Cerf, widely acknowledged as the father of the Internet, and Dr William Brody, President of the Johns Hopkins University, for the keynotes. It was all a day's work for the geniuses of India, now riding on nearly half a century of institutional legacy, although they have been touched by fame only recently.

The literary types are more familiar with fame, but they are they are yet to band in an institutional sense. Although writers such as Salman Rushdie and Ved Mehta and film makers such as Ismail Merchant and Brothers Amritraj have carried the Indian flag in the west as long as the techies, the artsy-literary folk have never been organized, probably because they are more individualistic and are from different schools and backgrounds. They certainly are not as clubby as the tech crowd, where a referral from a school chum or dorm mate can activate the network and open doors.

The SALTA fest (which refreshingly also involved writers of Pakistani origin, although Sri Lanka, which too has rich talent, was missing), took one small step towards addressing that shortcoming. This year, for instance, the young guns of SALTA put together an impressive show with film-maker

Mira Nair, script writer Sabrina Dhawan, and publishing mavens Anna Ghosh and Anjali Singh among the speakers. The effort was not just to discuss the art of literature and cinema, but also the commercial, financial and networking aspect of it: How to find funding for a film, how to get published etc.

In that sense, the lit and film folk are now into what the tech and medico crowd has been doing for awhile now – mentoring. As Mira Nair told the delegates, many of them aspiring or threshold writers and filmmakers, when she first came to the United States in 1979 to study film, it was a pretty lonely experience, with very few people from the sub-continent in the field. She had to literally scam her way to raise the \$ 800,000 she needed to make Salaam Bombay in the 1980s.

Now, with enough people in the playing field, she could not only mentor but also tap funds for anyone with a good idea. One example of such desi networking: Delhi-ite Sabrina Dhawan, who wrote the Monsoon Wedding script, connected with her while studying a film course Nair taught at Columbia University.

Desi mentoring is now beginning to take hold in other fields too. Young Indians now come to the US to study not just engineering, science and medicine, but also finance, management and law, and more recently, writing, film, theater, fashion and other ‘soft’ pursuits. And they are beginning to connect through organizations such as Salta, Saja (South Asian Journalists Association) and Saba (South Asian Bar Association). We may be looking at the making of the global Indian brand, one that spells intellectual excellence.