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ONLINE ONLY: Polyester Dreams

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Bollywood stars Aishwarya Rai and Abhishek Bachchan announce marriage plans just days after GURU releases

By Sona Charaipotra

The timing couldn't have been more perfect. On Jan. 14, just two days after the glitzy New York premiere of their latest collaboration, *Guru*, in the heart of Times Square, Bollywood stars Aishwarya Rai and Abhishek Bachchan got engaged in a traditional Hindu ring ceremony at his family's Jalsa estate in Mumbai, India.

"I wouldn't use my personal life to promote a film," Rai has said in the past. Still, the actress—who has been previously linked to co-stars Salman Khan and Vivek Oberoi—has now done five films with Bachchan, whom she has reportedly been seeing since late 2004. This includes recent Bollywood blockbuster *Dhoom 2* and arthouse remake *Umrao Jaan*.

Usually low-key director Mani Ratnam's *Guru*—a keen drama about an upstart middle class Indian textile worker turned Steve Jobs-esque industrial icon—is the first mainstream Bollywood project to make an attempt at a full North American crossover, complete with premieres in Toronto and New York. Betting on the fact that more than seven Hindi-language films have broken into the American box office in the past year, taking in a healthy \$2 million each, distributors are also playing on the pairing of real-life couple Rai and Bachchan.

For his part, Bachchan has nothing but praise for his intended's acting abilities. "It's always a pleasure to work with [Aishwariya]," he said at a press conference for *Guru* on Jan. 12. "Aishwarya's a wonderful co-star and a very talented actor. It was wonderful to see her essay such varied and different roles."

While the pair were mum on their next collaboration—though Indian press reports say the couple could tie the knot as early as Feb. 19 in Mumbai—they had plenty to say about making the film, which is already garnering raves from *The New York Times* and *India Abroad*, the largest South Asian publication outside of the subcontinent.

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"When director Mani Ratnam approached [me] to work with him on our first film together, Yuva, I was very excited to work with him," he said at the press conference. "But I was under-confident. Would I be able to live up to his expectations? Because I knew his expectations would be very high. After Yuva was released, there was the confidence that, 'OK, you are able to do this.' So when Mani came to me with Guru, I knew that he would take care of me because this film would be even more challenging. Half of me believes that Gurukant Desai is the role of a lifetime. You don't get to work with directors like Mani very often."

Still, Bachchan, 30, claimed he's not in it for the praise, despite the stretch this role represents for him. "It's not about awards, although awards are great confidence-builders," Bachchan says. "Every actor has a dream – but that dream isn't about winning awards, it's about doing the best work he can do. It's about being able to entertain the audience.

Our common goal is to put out the best film we can and then leave the decision up to God and the audiences."

Marked by Ratnam's signature lush photography and detailed character development, Guru is the director's most ambitious project to date. He even required heartthrob Bachchan to grow a full-on beer belly for the film. "Mani has a mantra—it's called, 'Make it real.' And he saw Guru putting on a bit of weight as he aged, so he was very keen that I put on a bit of weight for the film," Bachchan recalls. "It's what the character demanded. So there was a lot of eating involved. And I obliged, gladly. It gave me the license to do what we actors don't get to do—which is eat what we want. But shockingly, all that eating actually became very cumbersome after a few days. You look forward to putting on weight because you can eat as much chocolate and ice cream and mithais as you want to, but after two or three days you tend to get a bit sick of it. And that's where it becomes tough because you still have to pile on the kilos. And by the end of it, nothing remains your favorite. You just can't wait to shed the weight."

While the svelte, 6'3" actor has lost the extra baggage, he's set to gain a lot with Guru. "I'm very, very proud—I think that's the most important criteria for an actor," he says. "At the end of the day, whether you take home good, fond memories and whether you're proud of your work. The film might be a box office success but if I have no fond memories or I didn't learn anything from the film, I have nothing to take home with me. I've taken a lot home with Guru." Including his bride-to-be, Aishwarya.



* Photos from Jan. 12th New York press conference, courtesy of Gunjesh Desai.