In India’s long fight for independence, the first defeat of the British came not at the hands of soldiers but of untrained teenagers, led by a schoolteacher, in 1930. This piece of history is the subject of “Chittagong,” the opening-night movie at the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles, which runs Tuesday through April 14 at Hollywood’s Arclight Cinemas.

“Chittagong,” having its world premiere at the fest, is the directorial debut of NASA scientist-turned-filmmaker Bedabrata Pain, who was born in Kolkata and has lived in Los Angeles since 1992. Inspired to write the film for its “story of human triumph set in a political background,” Pain also hopes to spread awareness of the historical incident -- which he said is known by few even in India.

IFFLA, now in its 10th year, will screen 33 features and short films. Christina Marouda, a native of Greece who watched many Indian films as a teenager, started IFFLA after working for AFI Fest. “I felt that there was a gap and someone should do something about it.”

In the last decade, she’s seen Hollywood’s interest in Indian cinema grow, following the Oscar romp by “Slumdog Millionaire” and the investment by Indian conglomerate Reliance ADA Group in DreamWorks in 2009. A larger spotlight on Indian entertainment has come, Marouda said, with more Indian actors in such TV shows as “The Big Bang Theory” and “Outsourced” and with the films of Mira Nair, director of “The
Namesake.”

IFFLA screens films made in India, about India and by filmmakers of Indian descent, and Marouda says it’s more than just a festival. “It’s more like a festival/film commission/agency …. We are really the platform that is trying to bridge that gap” between Indian and American filmmakers.

That sometimes means taking an active part in the making of a movie, as with this year’s closing-night film, “Patang.” It’s the feature debut of Prashant Bhargava, whose short “Sangam” screened at IFFLA in 2004. Keeping in touch with the director since then, the festival organizers helped Bhargava find financiers for his feature and are involved in marketing the upcoming self-distributed release of “Patang.” The Los Angeles premiere for the film, about a family reunion at a kite festival, will close IFFLA on April 14 at 7 p.m.

Bookending the event with two first-time feature directors is part of the festival’s endeavor to find new filmmakers, especially as the landscape of Indian movies is changing.

“There is a new, emerging core of Indian filmmakers that are young and hip and willing to take risks,” said shorts programmer Terrie Samundra. “They are films that are willing to make you uncomfortable, critique tradition, taking apart old structures and political alliances -- we see that with [films about] sexuality, relationships, politics, identity.”

But the festival’s 10th year is also a time to look back, as it presents an anniversary retrospective. Chosen in an online vote from IFFLA’s previous audience and jury award winners, the fest will screen three films from past years: “Udaan,” “Lions of Punjab Presents” and “Black Friday,” which was banned in India for its controversial telling of the 1993 bomb blasts in Mumbai.

Awards for this year’s films will be presented following the screening of “Patang,” and IFFLA will host its fifth annual Industry Awards ceremony on Thursday at the House of Blues on Sunset Boulevard.

The awards “highlight those executives that have managed to deal with the challenges of either distributing Indian content or producing Indian content … and bridging the gap between the two film industries,” Marouda said.

Among the honorees this year are Kishore Lulla, chairman and chief executive of India-based Eros Entertainment, and Michelle Satter and Alesia Weston, who head the Sundance Institute’s lab for Indian screenwriters, Mumbai Mantra.

The Industry Awards luncheon — along with seminars and One-on-One, a meet-and-greet for industry professionals and aspiring filmmakers — is part of IFFLA’s effort to be a filmmaker-friendly festival. The hope to be a resource and an inspiration for emerging filmmakers is shared by “Chittagong” director Pain.

“India is a very young country and the youth in India is a sort-of untapped force still, and they can do wonders,” Pain said. My film "in some ways is telling them, ‘Don’t be afraid, just go for it.’ ”

Tickets are available at [indianfilmfestival.org](http://indianfilmfestival.org). Admission is $14 except for the opening- and closing-night galas, which are $75.

-- Emily Rome

*Photo: Delzad Hiwale in "Chittagong." Credit: Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles*