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Sikh Film Festival Kicks Off Heritage Week

By [Jennifer 8. Lee](#)



The Sikh Film Festival on Saturday will feature “Ocean of Pearls,” about a young Sikh doctor struggling with the inequities of the American health system and ultimately his own identity. (Photo: Sikh Arts and Film Foundation)

Governors love proclamations. Months, weeks and days are endlessly designated to draw attention to a wide buffet of causes and celebrations. They come with nice, official-looking documents with fancy scripts and seals.

Constituents are happy. Everyone wins.

In his six months in office, Gov. David A. Paterson [has already made 158 proclamations](#), including [Beef Day](#), [Blind and Visually Impaired Entertainer’s Week](#) and [Rabies Awareness Month](#). In just over a year of his term as governor, Eliot Spitzer [declared Brain Injury Awareness Month](#), [Arson Awareness Week](#) and even a [Paralegal Day](#). His last one, on March 10, was [Multiple Sclerosis Week](#).

So today is the first day of Sikh Heritage Week, which was also declared by [proclamation from the governor](#) [pdf]. (Note that the [Jews](#) and [Hispanics](#) get a whole month, while the [Korean-Americans only get a day](#)). If you want your get your own proclamation, the state Web site encourages people to call [the Executive Chamber Operations Proclamations group](#) at (518) 474-6499, or to write to the governor.

Among the highlights of the heritage week is the [Sikh Film Festival](#), which runs all day Saturday, starting at 10 a.m., at the Asia Society on Park Avenue. One short documentary, [“Warrior Saints,”](#) by [Kevin Lee](#), profiles the Sikh community in New York City, centers on Richmond Hill, Queens.

The 9/11 attack spurred the community to organize after an elderly Sikh and two teenagers were violently attacked in Richmond Hill in “reprisal” attacks by fellow Americans. The documentary interviews a number of younger professional Sikh New Yorkers who formed the [Sikh Coalition](#) from the volunteer group, who explain how they came to realize the value of protest in drawing media and political attention to their problems. Most recently, for example, they organized protests around [attacks on Sikh schoolchildren](#).

The group galvanized after a 2004 attack when five men beat [Rajinder Singh Khalsa Ji](#), telling him to remove the “dirty curtain” from his head. The documentary also recounts an episode in 2004 when an [Irish-American M.T.A. employee who converted to Sikhism](#) had been exiled because he would not wear a regulation transit cap.

As a result, among the coalition’s legislative lobbying pushes: a bill that would get the city to form a contingency plan to mitigate backlash violence against Sikhs, Arabs, Muslims and South Asians in the aftermath of events; and another bill that would ban discrimination on the basis of religious garb in New York City uniformed agencies. They also have made a push to educate law enforcement about Sikhism. A 2005 episode saw the police [mistakenly handcuff a group of Sikh British tourists in Midtown](#).

Among other movies at the festival is the feature film called [“Ocean of Pearls,”](#) directed by Dr. Sarab Singh Neelam, about the story of a young Sikh doctor struggling with the inequities of the American health system and ultimately his own identity. There are four documentaries: [“A Dream in Doubt,”](#) directed by [Tami Yeager](#), which profiles the violent aftermath of 9/11 in which Sikhs were singled out because of their turbans and beards; [“The Sky Below,”](#) by [Sarah Singh](#), which takes a contemporary look at the 1947 partition of the Indian Sub-Continent; [“Sikhs in America,”](#) which won an Emmy, shows how Sikhs maintain their traditions while also participating in the American dream; and [“Pahelwani,”](#) by Navdeep Singh Kandola, which traces the history and traditions of the dying art of Punjabi wrestling.