



SIKH ART &
FILM FOUNDATION
preserving Sikh heritage



SIKH
INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL
2009

2009

**Sikh International Film Festival
&
Sikh Heritage Gala
New York City**

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COLORS, SIGHTS AND SOUNDS COME ALIVE AT THE SIKH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL & HERITAGE GALA

Over a thousand guests witnessed firsthand the rich and vibrant traditions, culture and heritage of the Sikhs over the **September 18-19** weekend in New York City. Hosted by the **Sikh Art & Film Foundation**, the **Sikh International Film Festival** and **Heritage Gala** were completely **“Sold Out”** events, second year in a row!

The festivities started off on Friday evening with filmmakers, celebrities, artists and jury members walking the **Red Carpet Reception** for the Film Festival at the **Asia Society** on Park Ave. This was followed by the **Feature Session** where prominent British artists – **The Singh Twins** presented **1984 and the Via Dolorosa Project** to mark the 25th anniversary of the genocide in India when thousands of innocent Sikhs were killed in the aftermath of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s assassination.

This somber and emotionally charged film was followed by the *first documentary funded by the Sikh Art & Film Foundation* – an upbeat *World Premiere* of **Flying Sikhs: A History of Sikh Fighter Pilots**, directed by the acclaimed **Navdeep Kandola**. This film documented the valiant contributions of Sikhs towards the Allies victories in WW I & II. Flying Sikhs reminded us that Sikhs with their characteristic turbans were at the forefront of defending the freedoms and liberties of the western world, while sixty years later in the present US armed forces Sikhs cannot serve for the very same reason – the turban!

The colors, sights and sounds at the Asia Society’s theater came to an overwhelming crescendo as if the audience was a part of a dream painting by the legendary Indian painter **M. F. Husain**. The **“Picasso of India”** was the **honored guest** during the screening of Flying Sikhs, and wished *“future successes to the Sikh Film Festival.”*

The final showcase presentation at the Feature Session was **My Mother India** – a powerful tale of love and hate, exile and belonging, loss of identity and return of faith. Indo-Australian director **Safina Uberoi** documented the lives of her white Australian mother and eccentric Sikh father against the backdrop of the 1984 genocide against Sikhs in Delhi. The film had the over-capacity audience in spells of laughter, followed by poignant sadness. In the Q&A that followed, Uberoi spoke eloquently about the responsibility artists take upon themselves to make thought-provoking films, *“we first have to acknowledge the truth, accept it, and only then, can we heal from it.”*

The power packed evening ended with a typical high-energy **Bhangra “After Party”** at the Garden Court where over four hundred guests danced the night away with filmmakers, local celebrities, and Foundation members to the infectious rhythms produced by **DJ Kucha**.

Saturday, the second and final day of the Film Festival started off with the screening of six documentaries in the **Short Films Session**. These films ranged from the lives of taxi drivers in the post 9/11 world as documented by the talented **Vandana Sood** in **Street Smarts**, to **Unravelling** – an inter-generational poetic dialogue in Urdu between the director **Kuldip Powar** and his grandfather – a War Veteran who fought for the British in WW II, discussing the complexities of war, personal loss and India’s colonial legacy.

This was followed by the final four films screened during the Documentary Session. Topics such as the growing urban gang violence in the South Asian community as documented in **A Warrior’s Religion** by

Mani Amar, to the fascinating history of the turban – from ancient Christianity to modern day Sikhs in the *US Premiere* of **Turbanology** directed by the spirited **Jay Singh-Sohal** resonated with the packed audience. **Turbanology** is powerful documentary explored the impact of the war on terror and western society's reaction to a simple article of faith – the turban.

A noted jury with members such as **Vicki Mabrey** – *ABC News Nightline*, **Dr. Sarab Singh Neelam** – *Director of Ocean of Pearls*, and **Aseem Chhabra** – *Film Critic & SAJA Board Member*, sat with the audience to select the winners in the Short and Documentary genres. This year the Foundation again presented a total of \$15,000 in prize money to films that were selected and won at the Festival.

Capping off the screening of thirteen great films was the closing night **Heritage Gala** at the luxurious **Cipriani Wall Street** on **Saturday, September 19**. Hosted by the talented **PBS World Focus** news anchor **Dr. Daljit Dhaliwal** the grand event kicked off with a beautiful video message from the guest of honor – the accomplished film director **Mira Nair** (who had to rush to London for last minute editing of the upcoming feature **Amelia** starring **Hilary Swank** and **Richard Gere**).

Ms. Nair said that she believed strongly in the mission of the Foundation, “*if we don't tell our story nobody will.*” She further added that both her parents are from the holiest of Sikh pilgrimages – Amritsar and that her love for the culture was evident from her immensely successful movie **Monsoon Wedding**.

The focus then shifted to the annual **Heritage Awards** presented by the Foundation to individuals who have contributed towards elevating the Sikh experience.

Mr. Tejinder Singh Bindra – *President* of the Foundation invited **Shelly and Donald Rubin** – *Co-Chairs & Founders of the Rubin Museum of Art* who were presented with the **Award for Vision** by the **Honorable Thomas DiNapoli** – *Comptroller of New York State*. The RMA had hosted the critically acclaimed art exhibition in 2006-07 titled *I See No Stranger: Early Sikh Art & Devotion*.

The **Award for Leadership** was presented to **Mr. Analjit Singh** – *Philanthropist and Founder & Chairman of the Max Group of Companies*, by **H. E. Ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri** – *Permanent Representative of India to the U. N.* and his wife **Ambassador Lakshmi Puri**. Presenting the award, he praised the work done by the Foundation to preserve Sikh heritage, art and customs, and said “*the Sikh community both here and in India is recognized for its hard work and commitment!*”

The final Heritage **Award for “Sewa” (Community Service)** was presented by **Dr. Narinder Singh Kapany** – *Patron of the Foundation and Father of Fiber Optics*, to the one and only **Sardar Ujagar Singh** – *Director of Camp Chardi Kala*. His untiring efforts have created a new generation of activists and leaders based on very clear understanding of the Sikh and American value system of community service. Undoubtedly, the cream of Sikh youth in America, including leaders at SALDEF, Sikh Coalition, and United Sikhs have all graduated from his camps!

The suspense and wait to present the Film Festival winners finally came to an end with **Dr. Paul Johar** – *Film Festival Chairperson* introducing the nominee videos of the Short and Documentary Session and inviting **Ambassador Prabhu Dayal** – *Consul General of India, New York*, to present the awards. Following up on the inspiring words of Hardeep Puri, **Prabhu Dayal** added “*the Sikh community is also known for its excellence!*”

The **Best Short Film** award went to **Unravelling** directed by **Kuldip Powar**. While accepting his award he said that Sikhs had to fight two battles before filmmaking, *“the first is to convince your family that having anything to do with art is good, and second was to get funds for non-mainstream films.”*

Winner of the **Best Documentary** was **A Warrior’s Religion**. In his acceptance speech, director **Mani Amar** who grew up amongst the urban violence, said *“but that’s what I really want. I really want to fight for peace.”*

With the presentation of the Heritage and Film Festival awards over, co-emcee **Mr. Harmeet Bharara – Gala Chairperson** invited **Mandeep Sobti – Fundraising Chairperson** to announce the start of the Live Art Auction. Exquisite paintings by the distinguished Sikh and Punjabi painter **Arpana Caur** highlighted the exciting bidding process!

Finally the festive part of the entire weekend celebrations was capped off by the infectious beats and sound of the pioneers of UK Bhangra – **Rhythm Dhol Bass (RDB)** featuring the melodious voice of **Nindy Kaur**. Fresh off their multiple successes from title soundtracks of **Singh is Kinng**, **Kambakkht Ishq** and **Aloo Chat**, they literally shook the illuminated Cipriani Wall Street. Actor **Samrat Chakrabarti** made it back in time from the premiere of his film **Waiting City** at the **Toronto International Film Festival** to Bhangra the night away, while the lovely **Pooja Kumar** – leading lady of **Bollywood Hero** looked radiant in her sequined sheath dress dancing the night away to the beats of DJ Kucha spinning the latest Bhangra and Bollywood hits!

The Saturday night Late After Party at **Leela Lounge** capped an end to the Film Festival with several filmmakers and celebrities mingled with the capacity crowd entertained by the House, Bhangra , Hip Hop and Bollywood from the hyper-energetic DJ Kucha.

Explaining the overwhelming success of the 2009 Film Festival and Heritage Gala, **Mr. Hansdip Bindra – Marketing Chairperson** said *“We built on the tremendous success of last year by further expanding our partnerships, online and new media presence to reach out to the targeted audience. We had guests who flew out all the way to NYC from southern California and Chicago for the weekend events! The Sikh International Film Festival has established itself as the worldwide leader for showcasing independent films about the Sikh Diaspora.”*

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