

j.b. spins

Saturday, September 19, 2009

Sikh International Film Festival '09: Mothers and Aviators



1947 was a pivotal year for Sikhs, culminating in mass migrations from soon to be Pakistani cities following the Indian Partition. Though less well known, the highly controversial 1984 government assault on the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar also sent shockwaves through the Sikh community. Of course, the years of 1939-1945 were challenging for most nations, including India, who contributed troops and pilots to the British war effort, particularly in Burma. These dramatic historic events factor prominently in the program of short feature documentaries that opened the sixth annual Sikh International Film Festival.

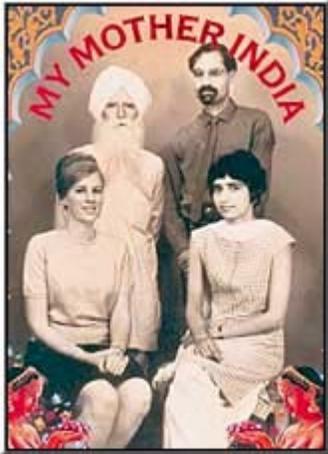
Ironically, the MIAAC Film Festival screened Shyam Benegal's big screen treatment of the life of Subhas Chandra Bose, the Indian nationalist who sought alliances with the Axis during World War II, nearly a year ago in the Asia Society's theater. Last night, the same venue hosted the Sikh Film Fest's world premiere of Navdeep Kandola's *Flying Sikhs*. Unlike Bose, many Sikhs volunteered for British military service, despite their desire for independence, finding disproportionate success in the RAF.

Of course, following the Battle of Britain, RAF fighter pilots were the rock stars of their day, which evidently included the Sikhs stationed in England. *Flying* interviews the two surviving WWII-era aces, Air Chief Marshall Arjan Singh DFC and Mohinder Singh Pujji DFC. Pujji, who flew against the Axis in England, Italy, and Burma, might be well into his nineties, but remains a great interview, providing the film's best soundbites.

Flying is the Sikh Art & Film Foundation's first foray into film production, and it is a good place to start. It nicely utilizes archival film and photos to tell a little known chapter of WWII

history. At forty minutes in length, it does justice to its subjects, without becoming repetitive or bogging down in excessive detail. It ought to have a nice run on the festival circuit and would not be out of place airing on PBS.

Though a much more personal film, historical events certainly intervene in Safina Uberoi's *My Mother India*. With an Australian mother and an Indian father, Uberoi grew up feeling



like a distinct minority because of her whiteness. Her mother was definitely different, often scandalizing the neighbors when she hung her underwear out to dry on the clothesline.

Without belaboring the point, Uberoi also demonstrates how her family history was shaped by the great events of their time. For instance, the difficult trek from Lahore following Partition directly led to her grandparents' irreparable falling out. Then years later, the events of 1984 would inspire Uberoi to embrace her Sikh heritage and convince her mother to finally become an Indian

citizen.

Mother directly addresses notions of overlapping familial, national, religious and ethnic identities. More importantly though, Uberoi and her parents come across as funny and likable people, so the time the audience spends with them (approximately an hour) passes fairly quickly.

Mother and *Flying* both combine appealing personal stories with turbulent historical events, making them effective selections for the Sikh International Film Festival's opening night. The Fest continues tomorrow (9/19) at the Asia Society with narrative and documentary short film programs.

posted by J.B.