

artsentertainment

Beyond Bhangra

The 7th annual Sikh International Film Festival showcased 13 films dealing with stories from across the globe

By BHARGAVI KULKARNI

— NEW YORK

The seventh annual Sikh International Film Festival was held at Asia Society in New York on Oct. 22-23. Organized by the Sikh Art and Film Foundation, the festival celebrates the heritage, traditions and culture of Sikhs and the immigrant experience. A diverse mix of 13 works by Sikh filmmakers, including documentaries, shorts and feature films, exposed audiences to lesser-known facets of Sikh culture.

The mandate of the organization, according to Tejinder Singh Bindra, president of the Sikh Art and Film Foundation, is to create awareness and pride in the diversity, culture and history of the Sikhs.

"Apart from reaching out to fellow Sikhs, the four days of sold-out event was a testimony of the festival's reach to fellow Indians and Americans," Bindra told News India Times.

The festival kicked off with a red carpet gala. Filmmakers Vikas Khanna, Michael Singh; Amrita and Rekha Basu; Preneet Kaur, India's minister of state for External Affairs; veteran actor and politician Raj Babbar; and the cast of the recently released "Walkaway," directed by Shailja Gupta, walked the carpet.

This was followed by the screening of "Holy Kitchens - A True Business," "Harvest of Grief" and "The Rebel Queen." Filmmakers were there for lively Q & A sessions.

Directed by Dalit Singh and produced by Andrew Blackmore and Dobbyn Webberz, "Holy Kitchens: A True Business" is about the Sikh religious tenet of providing free food ("langar"), through temple kitchens, to all regardless of their belief. The film traces the origin of Sikhism. According to a press release, Khanna made the film "not only to increase knowledge about Sikhism," but as a message to his mother about his love for Amritsar - his birthplace.

Amrita and Rekha Basu's film was about voicing the message of their mother, Rasil Singh Basu, through "Harvest of Grief." Both talked about how the experience of making the film transformed them and also moved the government to look into the plight of farmers in Punjab more seriously, the release said. "Harvest of Grief" is directed by Anwar Jamal



Above, pop singer Sukhbir performs at the Sikh Heritage and Awards gala hosted by the Sikh Art and Film Foundation at the New York Public Library Oct. 23. Below, Consul General of India in New York Prabhu Dayal honors artist Arpana Caur for her contribution to the field of arts.



Veteran actor and politician Raj Babbar shakes hands with Tejinder Singh Bindra, left, president of the Sikh Art and Film Foundation and Member of Parliament, Tarlochan Singh after receiving the Vision award.

and produced by Rasil Singh Basu.

"The Rebel Queen" directed by Michael Singh focuses on Maharani Jindan, the daughter of the caretaker of the royal kennels who rose to become a queen and almost brought the British Empire to its knees. The biggest challenge for Michael Singh, the release said, was to work on a film about Maharani Jindan, of whom no visuals exist.

Music, throbbing beats and dancing lightened the solemn mood of the audience at the after-party on the concluding day of the festival, the release said. The highlight of the party was a performance by pop singer Sukhbir.

Films in the competitive category were screened on the second day. These included "Nothing is Impossible," "Cancer Express," "Riding the Tiger" and "Why? We are killing our daughters."

The celebrations then moved to the New York Public Library, where a grand gala ended the festival. Kaur, who was to be chief guest at the gala, could not make it to the event due to a family emergency. She, however, sent a video message complimenting the Sikh Art and Film Foundation for its excellent accomplishment of raising awareness about Sikhism.

Tarlochan Singh, a member of the Indian Parliament, presented Babbar the Vision Award; Ambassador Hardeep Singh Puri, permanent representative of India to the United Nations, gave the Leadership Award to Vikramjit Sahney; and Arpana Caur received the Art Award from Prabhu Dayal, consul general of India in New York.

The Best Documentary award went to "Khanabadosh," and "Nothing Is Impossible" won the Best Short Film. "Riding the Tiger" received a Special Mention



in the category of shorts.

Directed by Mahvish Rehman, Priya Thuvassery, Swathi Bhattacharaya and Tulika, "Khanabadosh," a 22-minute documentary, is a personal journey through the memories and expressions of the mother-daughter duo -Ajeet Caur, a prominent writer, and Arpana Caur, the renowned artist. The film develops from their trauma of the India-Pakistan partition in 1947 and then moves on to the anti-Sikh massacre of 1984 in Delhi, and how each of them chose to express their trauma.

Directed by Nina Duttaroy "Nothing is Impossible" is a portrait of Fauja Singh, a 99-year-old long-distance runner who keeps running. He holds the record for the fastest over 90-year-old marathon race time, and he defies perceived notions of age with a twinkle in his eye and an infectious zest for life, the press release said.

The judges were Amrita Basu, Rekha Basu, Dr. Balbinder S. Bhogal, Aseem Chhabra, Dr.

Narinder Singh Kapany, Robert Lupone, Vicki Mabray, I.J. Singh and Safina Uberoi.

The live auction created excitement among the guests. Ajay Banga, CEO of MasterCard, won Arpana Caur's "Sachcha Sauda" for \$16,000, while a cricket bat signed by the Indian cricket team was auctioned for \$11,500. Half the proceeds raised at the auction went to the charity Khushi, the release said.

As a prelude to festival, a photographic exhibition titled "Tryst With Trees" by D.S. Jaspal was held Oct. 21 at the Indian consulate in New York. It highlights a unique feature of the Sikh religion - the naming of sacred shrines after species of trees.

Kaur, who inaugurated the exhibition, later released a copy of the coffee-table book "Tryst With Trees - Punjab's Sacred Heritage." In his book Jaspal, a senior civil servant in Punjab, has documented more than 58 sacred and historical Sikh shrines in India and Pakistan named after 19 species of trees.