



# Legacy of a Centenary

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While *Dosa Hunt* represents a particular vibe that relates to a hip, artsy subculture of Indian-Americans, other films like Tenzing Sonam and Ritu Sarin's *When Hari Got Married* touch on the common theme of trying to meld the traditions of our Indian ancestors with modern mindsets of the global desi youth.

And others, while perhaps not telling these types of stories specifically, are the work of both seasoned and emerging filmmakers who are nevertheless the face of a slowly evolving and expanding Indian film scene.

The room for change, however, is still immense in many ways.

A panel of speakers addressed the role of women in the industry and called the question: Have things progressed at all in these 100 years? They largely agreed that the answer is no.

Shivdasani said, "They've always taken on these stereotypical roles of being a *sati savitri* (*saint*) or the vamp or the cruel stepmother — I mean there were such narrow roles. We did have women directors from back in 1933, but they were few and far between. Today, we have many, but that too, not in mainstream Bollywood. All these women directors are in independent film."

Monica Dogra, who appears in Sabal Singh Shekhawat's *Fireflies*, which showed at this year's festival, lamented the continued restrictive roles and images of females on screen: "Priyanka Chopra can wear a sparkly yellow bikini top and that can air all day long, but anytime you have a woman owning her sexuality and being intelligent about it, all of a sudden that is 'adult' and wrong. Independent films get horrible ratings partly for this reason."

The general struggles faced by those in the indie film space — whether because they are female or lack connections or because the level of creativity is not yet being embraced — was a conversation that wove in and out of the five-day festival.

Alexandra Eaton, director, *Bombay Movie*, documented Raja Menon through his process of shooting, talking to get distribution, and the hopeful path to success.

We asked Eaton if her experience as a filmmaker in Bombay mirrored that of her subject, whose film is released on what ends up being the worst weekend in Indian box office history: "Oh my god, yes, totally. At the end of the film, it doesn't work out for them. It was such a massive fail, and in making this film we have met with so much rejection and so many setbacks. You never think it's going to happen to you, but it was a joke between me and the editor, like, 'Oh, this is going to happen to us; we better not put this into the world because we're going to get cursed by it.' And it's totally is happening."

By providing a snapshot into where things stand currently, Eaton and the others directors, some of whom completed their films just the week before the festival, have frozen another moment in Indian cinema history.

The retrospective provided a peek into different eras from the past, but it was just that.

"There was a silent era, the talkies, the black and whites, the colored," Chhabra said. "Then there were melodramas and representations of different times; there are Hindu and Muslim social films, then, of course, Bollywood as it stands today. There are just so many different genres and languages and narrative forms. It would be great if someone made a documentary really tracking this evolution. That doesn't exist, but maybe one day will." ■

## In the spotlight

ARTHUR J PAIS

**H**ansal Mehta, the maker of the sad but rousing *Shahid*, the saga of an unlikely human rights activist, is a self-effacing man.

At the Toronto International Film Festival where his film was well received in September 2012, he said after a public screening that he was glad that people were mostly questioning him about his protagonist, the slain activist and lawyer Shahid Azmi and hardly about his craft.

At the New York Indian Film Festival, where he bagged the Best Director of a Feature Film (Narrative) award, May 4, he dedicated the award to all filmmakers whose work was shown at the festival, which has been drawing some of the best works from India and a few South Asian-themed films made by the likes of Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta and Mirra Bank.

The Best Feature Film (Narrative) trophy went to the emotional Marathi film *Anumati* about love being challenged in the face of death, which also received a Best Actor in a Feature Film nod for Vikram Gokhale. In the Gajendra Ahire-directed film — he also wrote the story and the script — Gokhale, who also won the National Award in India for this role, plays the husband of a dying wife who has to make some tough decisions.

Bank's documentary, *The Only Real Game*, about baseball lending a healing touch in troubled Manipur, was adjudged the Best Documentary Film, *Khaana*, directed by Cary Sawhney, won the Best Short Film.

*Bollywood Style*, directed by Yi Su, picked up the Best One Minute Cell Phone Film award.

Dr Biju, the writer and director of the Malayalam film *Kashathinte Niram* (*Color Of Sky*) about a young robber who is outwitted by his intended victim, a 60-year-old man but who finds an eye-opening life on the island inhabited by the man and his people, won the Best Screenplay award.

The festival was home to several award-winning Indian films, including *Filmistaan*, a comedy thriller about inhuman political divides and the binding ties of Hindi films.

It also served as a platform for several premieres, including one for the biting social satire *Dekh Tamasha Dekh*, which opened the festival but was not considered for any award, at the request of its producers.

Having its New York premiere, was director Avinash Kumar Singh's *Listen Amaya*. An endearing story of a feisty widow, her daughter and an elderly photographer it fetched the Best Actress in a Feature Film award for Deepti Naval.

Though she was not at the festival on the awards night, co-star Farooq Shaikh was very much around and he — along with filmmaker Hansal Mehta — gave the Best Young Actor in a Feature Film award to Suraj Negi for his work in *Hansa*. ■



Best Screenplay: Kashathinte Niram



Best Director of a Feature Film (Narrative): Shahid



Best Young Actor in a Feature Film: Hansa



Best Feature Film (Narrative): Anumati