Two powerful and engaging films set against a time of political turmoil highlight the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles, which continues through Sunday at the ArcLight.

Sabiha Sumar's "Silent Waters" opens in Pakistan in 1979 just as Gen. Zia ul-Haq has declared martial law, a precursor to the nation becoming an Islamic state. In the small town of Charkhi in the Pakistani Punjab along the border with India, Ayesha (Kirron Kher), a stately widow of 45 lives in a modest home with her 18-year-old son Saleem (Aamir Malik).

A kindly woman who augments her pension teaching the Koran to girls, she dotes on the handsome Saleem, who is spoiled and unambitious. In short, he is ripe for recruitment by Islamic fundamentalists at just the moment large numbers of Sikhs are converging on Charkhi, the site of one of their most sacred shrines. For some these increasingly tense times call forth painful memories of the violence of the 1947 partition from India, when many Sikh women were abducted by Muslim men or were forced by their families to commit suicide to protect family honor. (Sikh men also abducted Muslim women.) A few Sikh women managed to run away and make a new life as Muslims.

Among the Sikh pilgrims who have come to Charkhi is a man (Navtej Johar Singh) determined to locate his long-lost sister. The interplay of his search and Saleem's escalating militancy infuses the film with tension. Sumar proves to be a director with an equal mastery of actors as of the camera.

Sudhir Mishra's "A Thousand Dreams Such as These" is a sweeping melodrama set in the early 1970s and leading up to Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's declaration of a state of emergency in 1975. Siddarth (Kay Kay Menon), the son of a wealthy, liberal former judge; Vikram (Shiney Ahuja), self-described son of the lower rung of the middle class; and Geeta (Chitrangda Singh), daughter of conservative scientist, are graduating from a prestigious Delhi college. Geeta loves Siddarth, but he is determined to join an altruistic movement devoted to helping peasants. Vikram loves Geeta, but having been rejected by Siddarth, she leaves for England.

Five years pass before the three meet again. Admitting that he's interested in getting in the system when others want out of it, Vikram has become a wheeling-dealing businessman. Now an unhappily married journalist, Geeta returns to Delhi, and the lives of the three friends intertwine in dramatic fashion, with the dashing Vikram emerging as a Gatsby-esque figure.

A lot of sex talk

Bryan Poyser's "Dear Pillow," the American Cinematheque's Alternative Screen presentation tonight, is among its most challenging offerings. Although devoid of sex on screen, it has the most explicitly sexual dialogue imaginable for a serious film. It centers on Wes (Rusty Kelley), a lonely, virginal 17-year-old who lives with his divorced father (Cory Criswell), a macho cop (or security guard) in a large Austin, Texas, apartment complex.

As a depiction of the innocent exploited by the experienced, "Dear Pillow" is disquieting but is itself not exploitative as it explores the sexual generation gap and the pervasive subterranean sexual fantasies and activities pursued by lonely people regardless of gender or age. The sexual psychology of this venturesome film is persuasive and provocative -- in the intellectual sense -- but it is so candid that it is strictly for the open-minded and definitely not for the easily offended. Poyser, who will discuss his film after
its screening, is a skilled filmmaker, witty and perceptive, but "Dear Pillow" is not for everyone.

Other special screenings this week at the Cinematheque include Ken Loach's highly regarded 1969 "Kes," about a boy raising a falcon and "The Velvet Hammer Burlesque" -- a documentary on the neo-burlesque troupe that will be accompanied by a live burlesque performance and "Broad Daylight," an hourlong collection of modern-day burlesque stars in performance.

* Screenings

Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles

* "Silent Waters," today, 8 p.m.
* "A Thousand Dreams Such as These," Sunday, 6 p.m.

Where: ArcLight Cinemas, 6360 W. Sunset Blvd., Hollywood

Price: $11; seniors, students and ArcLight members, $9.

Info: (310) 364-4403 or www.arclightcinemas.com

American Cinematheque

* "Dear Pillow," today, 7:30 p.m.
* "Kes," Tuesday, 7:30 p.m.
* "The Velvet Hammer Burlesque," Wednesday, 7:30 p.m.

Where: Egyptian Theatre, 6712 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood

Price: $9; $8, seniors, students and Cinematheque, $6.

Info: (323) 466-FILM or www.egyptiantheatre.com