Celebrating Indian Cinema in the U.S.A.

As Indians living abroad, one grasps every opportunity to stay connected with one’s roots and to celebrate "Indianness." Both Indian cinema and film festivals showcasing Indian cinema abroad are excellent ways for NRIs and the children of NRIs to stay in tune with India, of course, to also be entertained. As Christina Marouda, the Director of Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles (IFFLA), puts it, "There is definitely the factor of nostalgia related to the Bollywood films shown at Indian theaters across the country. That's one way the NRI market feels connected to their country. Films are such an integral part of the India culture, more so than for any other community in the US." The Executive Director of Indo-American Arts Council Inc.,

"AMAL team on red carpet with IFFLA's Christina Marouda"

Aroon Shivdasani further elaborates, "Indian films screened in the United States entertain, educate and inform Indians as well as mainstream Americans about India, life in India and Indian culture. Non-resident Indians as well as children of first generation Indians enjoy them for various reasons—the films themselves, the connection to India, nostalgia."

Vivek Kumar of the South Asian American Films and Arts Association (SAAFA) adds in, "Culture can be connected to in an educational and boring manner or it can be done via the use of song, dance, razzmatazz. As is human nature, the latter is always preferred. Bollywood has plenty of that, hence it is a fun way for both the second generation and the newly arrived, to feel a) good about the gloss they see and b) have some sort of ‘ownership’ because it is popular."
"MUMBAI CUTTING team on Red Carpet with Christina Marouda"

Not only do Indian film festivals in the USA help connect Indians to cinema and celebrate their "Indianness," but "Indian Film Festivals in North America also play an important role in the growth of NRI cinema," says Indian-American actor and director Manan Singh Katohora, who is currently working on a short film titled Extrospection.

Let’s now take a look at the five major Indian film festivals in the USA…

Indian Visions Filmfest DC: Indian Visions, established last year, hosts the annual Filmfest DC in the Washington, DC-area. This year, the film festival will be taking place in October and the Indian Visions team is working diligently to put together a memorable event. According to Sukumar Srinivasan, the Executive Director of Indian Visions, "Our love of Indian films, as well as the growing interest in and demand for quality Indian cinema in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, inspired us to create this film festival." Sukumar adds, "The focus of the festival is to draw attention to India, through the thematic richness, the linguistic variety and staggering array of cinematic styles embodied in Indian cinema. Our goal is to connect our audience, comprising both Indians and non-Indians to Indian cinema beyond Bollywood and Satyajit Ray."

"KISSING COUSINS team on Opening Night green carpet"

Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles (IFFLA): Currently the best Indian film festival in the U.S.A., IFFLA not only features the best of Indian cinema but also gets the best celebrity attendees. This year’s film festival, which took place from April 22 to April 27 was attended by many Bollywood celebrities, including Sudhir Mishra, Sriram Raghavan, Anurag Kashyap, Manish Acharya and Brahmanand Singh. Christina Marouda shares that IFFLA was created seven years ago to offer a "platform for Indian films in the US and in particular in Los Angeles which is the capital city of the film industry. We wanted to go beyond what a couple of theaters away from the city were showing that is mainstream films (Bollywood as some would say) geared towards to the NRI market feeding their nostalgia and homesickness needs."

Presenting films at IFFLA is certainly a golden opportunity for filmmakers— as Christina points out, "Festivals, at least IFFLA, tend to go beyond what’s available and will become available in theaters or in the neighborhood’s video or groceries store. Films shown at festivals may never get distribution, therefore seeing them at the festival might be the only possible platform for them. On top of that having the filmmakers present to present their films is a unique experience. It is important for distributors to see that peo- AMAL team on red carpet with IFFLA's Christina Maroudaple support the festivals and come to watch..."
these films in order to be convinced that a market exists. This is the reason why IFFLA makes it a priority to invite studio, mainly acquisitions and production executives, to attend the festival and meet on a one-on-one basis with the filmmakers."

"LOINS OF PUNJAB REPRESENTS on red carpet"

Mahindra Indo-American Arts Council Film Festival (MIAAC Film Festival): Held in New York each year, this year’s MIAAC Film Festival will take place November 5-9. The MIAAC Film Festival offers a lot of interesting events. As Aroon Shivdasani indicates, "We present post-screening discussions with filmmakers after every film—enabling the audience, media and industry to connect with the directors and lead actors, to ask questions, to learn more about the films screened, the stories they tell and their milieu. Panel discussions, nightly networking parties, red carpet opening and closing night galas and a fabulous award ceremony are among some of the events at the MIAAC Film Festival."

South Asian International Film Festival (SAIFF):
Scheduled to take place in New York from October 22-28 this year, SAIFF has been taking place in New York since 2003. Last year’s film festival was attended by over 8,500 people! SAIFF, as the official Web site states, is "dedicated to supporting established and emerging artists from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. With a focus on dynamic, visionary independent cinema, SAIFF aims to bring communities together to support these artists and unite in celebration of a common spirit."

Spinning Wheel Film Festival: The Spinning Wheel Film Festival, which focuses on Sikh cinema was recently held in Washington, DC at the Kennedy Center on June 21. According to Inni Kaur of The Kaur Foundation that hosts the Spinning Wheel Film Festival, "The Indian Film festivals are mushrooming and filling a void that the community must be feeling at some level.

The Spinning Wheel film festival was the vision of one man Sardar T. Sher Singh of Canada—it was his belief that Sikhs should have an avenue to celebrate their culture, identity, and history on the screen. Dr. B. Ahluwalia of Canada, his friend and a great philanthropist shared in that vision—giving birth to the Spinning Wheel Film Festivals, that are taking place in Canada, the United States and soon across the Far East. The Spinning Wheel Film Festival shares the stories of the Sikh experience in the Diaspora thereby uniting the community and connecting them to their roots. These types of film festivals fill a need that goes beyond the movies produced by Bollywood. Film directors and artists have flown across the globe to talk about their films. It is a wonderful way for the directors and artists to interact with the general public."

BY AMANDA SODHI