India has a dark, hidden side," says private investigator Rajesh Ji, subject of documentary *The Bengali Detective* — who investigates everything from copyright infringement to murder.

His point is echoed and sharpened by Sampat Pal Devi, leader of the Gulabi Gang (aka the Pink Gang) and focus of another documentary, *Pink Saris*. Devi, an outspoken women's-rights activist who is separated from her husband and lives openly with a male lover, opines that the root of India's dark side (and resultant social dysfunction) is its rigid caste system. "If we were all equal ... our country wouldn't be in the mess it is today," she says forcefully.

Those words are especially resonant now, with India embroiled in controversy over news reports (spiced with WikiLeaks cables) that the country's seemingly robust new economy is benefiting only the socially elite and politically corrupt, while the lower caste/class is being plunged further into poverty. Against that backdrop, the films in the Indian Film Festival of L.A. — even the big, glossy, escapist musicals — buzz with subtextual commentary.

The festival contains three films whose titles contain the declarative "I am ...," and all three deal pointedly with issues of class or social struggle. The fest opens with *I Am Kalam*, a crowd-pleaser from Nila Madhab Panda, which puts a light spin on *The Prince and the Pauper*, with hardworking, good-natured, lower-caste Chotu befriending a young prince whose royal family has fallen on hard economic times while holding fast to its privileged status. The friendship between the preteen boys, who at times trade clothes to see how the other half lives, is put through assorted tests meant to illustrate that caste divisions are permeable through relationships.

Many of the docs shown this year painfully underscore the wishful thinking in that proposition (such as the bottom-caste girl in *Pink Saris*, who is devastated when her upper-caste boyfriend's family forcefully separates them), but *Kalam* almost sells it on the strength of its cute child actors.

Sonali Gulati's *I Am*, in which the openly lesbian filmmaker returns home after her mother's death and muses on the difficulties of being queer in modern India, manages the trick of being both familiar and groundbreaking. LGBT talking heads address their battles with familial and societal homophobia in testimonials that range from heartbreaking to triumphant, while man-on-the-street interviews capture a society still grappling with the notion of queer rights. As rainbow flags fly and activists spout watered-down queer theory, you can't help but wish Gulati had cleared space to show something of India's history of same-sex unions before colonialism — and the homophobia brought by the Brits — eradicated that aspect of Indian culture.

For the first 20 minutes or so of *Pink Saris*, Devi comes off as one of the most kick-ass women ever captured on film. A tireless advocate for abused women, she backs down from no one. But just as it starts to seem director Kim Longinotto is too enamored of her subject to pose hard questions, Devi's megalomania kicks into high drive ("I'm the messiah for women") and her divalike treatment of those around her reveals her as often far less than noble. By the time she sells out a female relative, you realize that Longinotto, in giving the self-professed heroine enough rope to hang herself, has slyly painted a
portrait of a complex, wounded, often unthinkingly cruel woman who falls victim to her own hype.

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7. Thu 25

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- **Top Five**, 6.9 mil, 6.9 mil
- **Big Hero 6**, 6.1 mil, 185.2 mil
- **Interstellar**, 5.5 mil, 166.8 mil
- **Horrible Bosses 2**, 4.6 mil, 43.6 mil
- **Dumb and Dumber To**, 2.8 mil, 82.1 mil
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- **Wild**, 1.5 mil, 2.4 mil

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  TV continued to unmoor from its origins and transform into something else this year. No longer tethered to a specific appliance, a particular kind of storytelling or even commercial concerns, "television" now feels like an increasingly obsolete word. But that's a discussion for another time, for we've come to celebrate...

*Inkoo Kang @ 1:25 PM On Wed, December 17*