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Festival Beyond Bollywood

In an attempt to showcase the spectrum of Indian films, this year's New York Indian Film Festival screened 25 feature films and 22 shorts, **Bhargavi Kulkarni** writes

— NEW YORK

Film aficionados in the city were fed a high protein diet of avant garde productions from India May 4-8, at the 11th annual New York Indian Film Festival. Organized by the Indo-American Arts Council (IAAC) the films were screened at various locations in the Big Apple. Glamorous stars and celebrities in the Indian film and social world mingled with the hoi polloi and Indophiles eager to get a taste of what's new on the Indian film firmament through seminars and discussions as well as screenings.

Created in 2001 in the shadow of the September 11 attacks on New York City, the festival was started to create a better understanding of the people and stories from the Indian subcontinent, says Aroon Shivdasani, executive director of IAAC. It seeks to present critically acclaimed feature films, shorts, and documentaries from that region and its diaspora.

The films selected for the festival are "like the American indies, they show a different perspective" — one that audiences here would otherwise not get a chance to see or experience, Shivdasani was quoted in media reports as saying.

A Bengali film exploring the tensions between older and newer refugees from Bangladesh over space for their tenements, won top honors. "Sthaniya Sambaad"

(Spring in the Colony) directed by debutantes Arjun Gourisaria and Moinak Biswas, edged past other famous Bengali directors like Aparna Sen and Rituparno Ghosh.

Capping off five days of Indian cinematic extravaganza, the festival closed with a red carpet premiere of Rituparno Ghosh's "Noukadubi" at an event attended by Bollywood stars Rishi Kapoor, Neetu Singh Kapoor, author Salman Rushdie, film makers Mira Nair, Aparna Sen, actor, author and celebrity chef Madhur Jaffrey, former ambassador and IAAC board member Prakash Shah, Consul General of India in New York Prabhu Dayal and other celebrities.

Sen was adjudged best director for "Iti Mrinalini" in which she also acts with her daughter Konkona Sen Sharma. Sen Sharma won the best actress award, playing the same title role at different ages.

Veteran Bollywood star Rishi Kapoor won best actor for his portrayal of Santosh Duggal, a Delhi-based school teacher in "Do Dooni Chaar." Best screenplay went to Mohan Raghavan for "T.D. Dasan Std. VI B". "Bhopali" by Max Carlson was adjudged the best documentary, and the best short film went to "Just That Sort Of A Day" by Abhay Kumar.

Journalist Aseem Chhabra was the festival director and the jury

comprised of artists, critics and academics including New York University professor Claus Mueller, Jaffrey, scriptwriter Sabrina Dhawan and documentary maker Kavery Kaul.

This year's festival also announced three partnerships with film schools in New York and India which include Mumbai-based Whistling Woods International, The Department of Cinema Studies at Tisch, NYU, and the New York Film Academy.

Nominated for best picture was director Habib Faisal's "Do Dooni Chaar," which opened the festival with its North American premiere May 4 and marked the screen comeback of Rishi Kapoor and Neetu Singh Kapoor as a couple.

The film revolves around a middle class family in Delhi and their dreams and aspirations. Other films in contention were "Noukadubi" a story of strangers brought together by a boat accident and "Sound of Heaven: The

Story of Bal Gandharva," a screen bio of the legendary performer.

Among those nominated for the best director award was Habib Faisal for "Do Dooni Chaar" and Ghosh for "Noukadubi." Veterans Shabana Azmi ("A Decent Arrangement") and Neetu Singh Kapoor ("Do Dooni Chaar") were nominated for the best actress award with Konkona. Newcomers Deepak Dobriyal ("Daayen Ya Baayen"), Shahnawaz Bhat ("Harud") and "Subodh Bhawe (Sound of Heaven: The Story of Ban Gandharva)" had to compete with yesteryear's golden boy Rishi Kapoor.

The Malayalam film, T D Dasan Std VI B, which won the award for best script, is the story of a young boy's letters to his father who has left the family and lives in another state.

Mohan Raghavan scripted and directed the film.

Films that explored varied subjects were nominated in the best documentary category. "Bhopali" — the winning film — took another look at the devastation caused by the Bhopal gas leak; "Made in India" took a penetrating look at the multi-million dollar surrogacy industry in India and its costs; "The Bengali Detective" told the



JAY MANDAL/ON ASSIGNMENT



Left, veteran Bollywood actor Rishi Kapoor with his best actor award for "Do Dooni Char" at the closing gala of the 11th annual New York Indian Film Festival at the Asia Society May 8. Above, director Mira Nair presents the best director award to Aparna Sen for "Iti Mrinalini."



Rishi Kapoor and Neetu Singh with director Habib Faisal during a discussion after the screening of "Do Dooni Char," the opening film of the New York Indian Film Festival at the Paris Theater May 4.

Ami Sheth and Poorna Jagannathan came to the five-day event. However, it was the glamorous Neetu Singh Kapoor and Rishi Kapoor duo who stole the show. Right from the start as they came on the red carpet on the opening day, to the closing night gala, the celebrated couple was the center of attraction as they mixed and mingled with other filmmakers and celebrities. Neetu Singh looked stunning in her cream-colored salwar Kameez prior to the screening on "Do Dooni Char" as she walked between her husband and writer-director Habib Faisal. She

act again. Indian films are very youth-oriented, Rishi Kapoor said, adding that the idea of playing "a middle-class character, who is also the main protagonist of the film, in an emerging India," attracted him to the film. "I don't chase women down the valleys and run around trees anymore," he said with a smile. For Faisal, the hero of the film was the storyline. Once he wrote the film, drawing inspiration from his personal experiences, he said he knew he wanted Rishi Kapoor to play the lead role. And once he was roped in, the director was convinced that nobody else but Neetu Singh would fit opposite him. While casting them as the middle class couple, he hoped the audiences aged 35 and above would be swept by nostalgia.



Above, Sen with her best director trophy. Left, celebrity chef Vikas Khanna whose "Holy Kitchens" was among those nominated for the best documentary. Below left, Dr. Sudhir M. Parikh, Padma Shri award winner and publisher of Desi Talk, 2nd from left, and Dr. Manuja Bansal, with Aparna Sen and Pulitzer Prize recipient Dr. Siddhartha Mukherjee at the gala benefit dinner at the Jumeirah Essex House, May 4. Below right, Rishi Kapoor and Neetu Singh with Aroon Shivdasani, executive director of IAAC, 2nd from left, and festival director Assem Chhabra.

story of a sleuth in Kolkata; and "You Don't Belong" celebrated nature; and "Holy Kitchen," made by New York chef Vikas Khanna, explored the feeding of thousands of people each day in Hindu temples, pilgrimage centers and ashrams, mostly in India. Through the five days, glamour and celebrity moved with the screenings, as a big draw for film enthusiasts. Veteran and new actors rubbed shoulders. Aparna Sen, Madhur Jaffrey, Aditya Bhattacharya, Ajay Naidu, Samrat Chakrabarti, Meetu Chilana, Rehana Mirza, Sarita Choudhury,

looked equally glamorous in a blue-salwar kameez at the Asia Society event as she handed the best actor trophy to her husband. During one of the several discussions held during the festival, the couple admitted they were surprised to be approached to play roles in the film. In a May 4 discussion moderated by Chhabra, Neetu Singh admitted it needed more than a little convincing for her to agree to a silver-screen comeback. "I am not ready for a career," she said but admitted that a similar story line or a chance to work with son Ranbir would make her



YOGESH MEHTA

