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News

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- Calendar
- Entertainment
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- Movie Finder
- Weekend Edition
- Business
- Politics

- Classified
- JobSource
- AutoSource
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- Births
- Engagements
- Weddings
- Reunions
- Obituaries
- Columns
- Letters
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- Editorials
- Police Reports

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'Sikhing' justice through documentary filmmaking

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by Karen Schafer
Staff Writer

Anger inspired Harpreet Kaur to make a movie. And if this Gaithersburg High School alumna has her way, "The Widow Colony" will help shake up the Sikh community and the Indian government — and lead them to help change the lives of about 1,200 women and their children now living in a New Delhi slum. The award-winning documentary will be shown Saturday afternoon at the American Film Institute's Silver Theatre in Silver Spring.

If nothing else, 29-year-old Kaur is passionate. Speaking in rapid-fire staccato, she proclaims, "India is covering up the issues. The world's largest democracy is playing games with its people. We want justice."

Kaur is referring to the massacre of some 4,000 Sikhs in New Delhi in 1984. Since childhood, she had heard stories of the four-day pogrom that followed the assassination of the country's beloved Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her two Sikh bodyguards. The police turned a blind eye as unruly mobs marched through Sikh neighborhoods dousing men with gasoline and setting them on fire and dragged Sikh victims out of their yellow X-marked homes to certain death. Some gangs raped Sikh women. In the end, no one was prosecuted, and, Kaur contends, some of the suspects have been promoted to high government offices.

While the murderous rampage was bad enough, what happened to the widows and their children since then is equally disturbing. India has never been kind to poor widows, no matter their age or religion. The subject is depicted in the feature film "Water," in which widows as young as 8 years old are banished from their community. Of course, these Sikh women were marked for life, with their broken families quickly herded to the west side of New Delhi into what the country called "India's Unsettled Settlement," where they live in abject poverty, often begging for food. With only each other to rely on, they continue to relive 1984, Kaur observes.

For her film, Kaur offers eight widows' eyewitness accounts of those 96 hours and what has happened to them and their children. She also includes news footage of the events. Using her own funds and with the help of the Sikh Research Institute, the film was completed in 2005. It earned the best documentary award at the 2006 Female Eye Film Festival in Toronto and a nomination for best documentary at the 2006 India Film Festival in Los Angeles.

Kaur was raised in sleepy suburban Gaithersburg, earning a degree in communications from Pennsylvania State University. After working as a broadcaster for Montgomery County's Channel 21, she left her job to pursue documentary filmmaking in 2003. Since her husband works for IBM and only needs a laptop to do his job, they moved near friends in Austin, Texas, where the cost of living is lower, and she began working on the film.

With charge cards in hand, the couple traveled to India twice to film the women. At first, the victims weren't exactly happy to talk to this tiny film crew. Over two decades, many others had come asking questions. After years of relaying their stories to reporters and seeing no results, they were leery about revisiting the issue with another outsider. Once Kaur explained her intention to create a film that would be seen in India and abroad, they started talking. After completing the film, she returned to India and offered a special showing of the film for the victims, who, she says, were satisfied with the result.

This experience took an emotional toll on Kaur. During two trips to India, she and her husband spent long days interviewing and taping 20 widows. Staying with family, she says they would come home late "burned out mentally. We needed to be quiet at night." Often Kaur cried herself to sleep.

Her family couldn't understand what all the fuss was about, figuring that along with filming, the young couple was out touring during the day. Finally, she brought a cousin along on a shoot, and he was stunned that these women lived just 15 minutes from his home.

"He didn't even know they existed," she recalls.

She hopes this 73-minute documentary will be a catalyst for change.

"The Widow Colony" will be shown at 1 p.m. Saturday in the AFI Silver Theatre, 8633 Colesville Road, Silver Spring. Admission is \$20. Call 301-983-1153.



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Photo courtesy of BVS

Harpreet Kaur, who grew up in Gaithersburg, has created "The Widow Colony," a documentary film on the 1984 massacre of Sikhs in India.

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