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Tapping the promise of Punjab

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If anyone tells Joginder Jaswant Singh that the Punjabi language is dying or the younger generation has no affection for it, the retired Indian Army chief of staff narrates the story of Fauza Singh, who was sent from Amritsar to Chennai to spend three months with a battalion there.

When Fauza returned to his home base, his superiors asked him if he had learned Tamil, which was one of the goals of sending soldiers to units elsewhere. The soldier said he hadn't. 'Sir, they all spoke Punjabi there,' he answered.

J J Singh, the Indian Army's first Sikh chief, told the story to 500 guests who packed the Sikh Heritage Awards gala October 3 at the Wall Street venue of Cipriani.

The general, now the governor of Arunachal Pradesh, spoke extensively about how the northeastern state could become one of India's most prosperous states if its untapped resources are properly exploited.

But the main thrust of his speech at the event — which had famous baseball slugger Darryl Strawberry as a guest — was that Sikh culture and Punjabi culture in general was prospering and those who were worried about Sikh heritage diminishing need not worry. In a sense, as Fauza Singh discovered, every Indian is a Punjabi, General Singh, who was the chief guest at the event, said with a chuckle.

What do Indians do when someone hits a six — the equivalent of a home run — at a cricket match or other sports event, he asked. "We put up our hands," he said, putting up his own, and moved them as if there was a musical beat. "See," he said, "it is like doing the *bhangra*."

The awards gala, organized by Sikh Art and Film Foundation, preceded a full-day event the next day at the Asia Society where over a dozen documentaries, short films and a feature film about Sikh her-



■ Former baseball star Darryl Strawberry, second from left, at the Sikh Heritage Awards gala in New York, October 3



■ Actor Navi Rawat, left, PlanetSpace founder Chirinjeev Kathuria and actor Katheryn Winnick



■ Citi Asia Pacific CEO Ajay Banga, Arunachal Pradesh Governor retired General J J Singh and hotelier Sant Singh Chatwal

itage and its Diaspora were screened.

The master of ceremonies was Dr Chirinjeev Kathuria, founder, PlanetSpace, Inc. Kathuria's plans to become the first Sikh senator in the United States were unsuccessful at the primary level in Illinois. The winner in the contest was Barack Obama. You get to emcee a show when you are defeated in an election, Kathuria quipped. His friend of four years, actress Katheryn Winnick, was the other master of ceremonies.

Among those present was Strawberry, who has had his own battles to fight. He has an extensive record of drug abuse and jail sentences and house arrests. He met his third wife Tracy when both of them were attending a drug recovery convention in 2006. The two then founded The Darryl Strawberry Foundation, dedicated to children with autism.

Strawberry said the Teji Bindra family, the key backers of the gala and the Sikh Art and Film Foundation, has helped him in his autism endeavor. He is learning a few things about Sikh religion and culture, he said, adding that he has an open mind that helps him to know more about other

cultures and faiths.

Among the honorees at the gala was Stuart Rabinowitz, president of Hoftra University, where the Bindra family has a chair in Sikh studies and has instituted an Interfaith Award.

Hofstra is the host of the third and final presidential debate and Rabinowitz said the school is very busy organizing it. But he felt that the heritage awards gala was also an important event and he just could not think of missing it. He hoped to make Hoftra the most important resource center for Sikh studies in the West, he added.

Other honorees at the event were Ajay Banga, chief executive officer of Citi Asia Pacific (leadership), and Susan Stronge, senior curator at the Asian Department of The Victoria & Albert Museum (for creativity). Under Stronge, major Sikh art exhibition and connected events have been held in London. In 1999, she curated the acclaimed V&A exhibition *The Arts of the Sikh Kingdoms*, which traveled to the Asian Arts Museum in San Francisco and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. She edited the exhibition book of the same name, which included chapters by leading international scholars as well as her essay on the arts of the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

One of the most influential names in the banking industry, Banga joined Citigroup in 1996, and has worked as business head for CitiFinancial and the US Consumer Assets Division and as division executive for the consumer bank in Central/Eastern Europe, Middle East, Africa and India. He is a member of the Financial Services Roundtable, vice chairman of the Board of Trustees of the New York Hall of Science, and a trustee of the National Urban League and of the Asia Society.

Reflecting on General Singh's talk, Banga too said whenever he traveled abroad, Indians gravitated towards him seeing his turban. In New York, on several occasions he got free rides from Sikh cab drivers, he said, much to the envy of his non-Sikh friends.

The cultural highlight of the evening was the passionate rendition of half-a-dozen Punjabi (and one or two Hindi) songs of protest against sectarianism and division by singer Rabbi Shergill. As you watched the turbaned singer belting out the songs and playing the guitar, anyone who

Films on strife and redemption

When his brother is murdered in America's first post-9/11 revenge attack in Phoenix, Rana Singh Sodhi begins a journey to reclaim his American dream and fight the hate that continues to threaten his community. The fight is part of a vivid documentary, *A Dream in Doubt*, which was screened at the Sikh Film Festival held at the Asia Society last week. One of the important things we see is Sodhi and his wife visiting their son's school and sharing crucial information about the Sikh faith with the children.

The Sodhi family's struggle — despite many setbacks and a second devastating tragedy in which Rana Singh Sodhi's brother is murdered in San Francisco within a year of the Phoenix murder — stirred the audiences at the New York film festival.

At one point in *A Dream in Doubt*, Sodhi says he is troubled by not only the attacks on Sikhs who some Americans believe are Arab Muslims but the fact that peace-loving people in other communities are also insulted and assaulted by a small minority of Americans.

"We need to see more films like this," said Anita Singh, a Long Island school teacher, "for they can be empowering not only for the Sikhs but other minorities from India and other parts of the world who are facing hostility here."

She also admired *Sikhs In America*, a beautiful and often

tenets and also on second-generation Sikhs slowly moving away from their parents' faith. The film, which won an Emmy, also shows young Sikhs who attend summer camps and learn about their religious and cultural heritage.

The films came from different sources and from Canada, India and America. Many looked at the Sikh Diaspora and the challenges the community faces. *Pahelwani*, named after the dying art of barefoot wrestling on the soil, bemoaned the lack of support from the government to keep the tradition alive. The film asserted that traditional wrestling had forged a bond for centuries between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. But during India's Partition in 1947, much of that bond was destroyed because of political interference. Yet, the *pahelwans* tried to rise above sectarian divisions.

New York-based Sarah Singh presented a truncated version (running for about an hour) of documentary called *The Sky Below*. The film, based on interviews with historians, social workers and people in western India affected by Partition, has been presented at a number of film festivals. It had to be shown in a shorter version at the Sikh Film Festival because of time constraints.

Singh traveled across the borders of Pakistan and India and taped the sane voices like historian Romila Thapar who wants the atrocities of

stronger ties created between the people of both countries. Singh also talked about genocides on both sides of the border.

One of the disturbing accounts in the film involved an Indian social worker who recounted the arrival of thousands of young women from Pakistan who had been separated from their Hindu and Sikh parents. The women had been abused; many had been raped. But hardly anyone from their families came forward to accept them in India. On the other hand, the social worker said, she had heard accounts of women who had escaped from India into Pakistan being welcomed by many families and helped to find grooms, these including those women who had been raped.

So detailed and insightful is the documentary — even the truncated version — that the viewers are surprised to learn that Sarah Singh, who was born in India and raised in America, worked on it single-handedly. She admitted that she used her own money and that she just did not feel like hiring people she could not pay.

Ocean Of Pearls, the only feature film shown at the day-long festival, focused on a young Sikh doctor from Canada who takes up a job in America and struggles with the inequities of the American health system as well as his identity.