

Powerful Film Explores Ugly Side of U.S. Race Relations

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BERKELEY, Calif. — Without knowing anything about Valarie Kaur's documentary, "Divided We Fall: Americans in the Aftermath," one might be tempted to assume it would be a pedantic, preachy downer of a film. Set in the weeks following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the film features interviews of Sikhs and other individuals singled out for racially motivated hate crimes.

But your assumption would be wrong. The must-see film is a moving portrait of one of America's rawest periods, and grips the viewer from its very first scenes. As Kaur explains in the film, many Sikhs and Muslims faced discrimination, vandalism and outright violence post Sept. 11 — and continue to do so — but this is going largely unreported by the mainstream American media.

"My grandfather crossed the ocean to become an American," says Kaur in the opening moments of the film. "Years later, I crossed the country to learn what it means to be an American."

Kaur, 25, is a third generation Sikh American who grew up in the Central Valley farming town of

Clavis, Calif. She says she has now spent one-fifth of her life making the film. She was just 20 on Sept.



Valarie Kaur enjoys a quiet moment before a capacity crowd gled into a UC Berkeley classroom Jan. 31 to view her documentary, "Divided We Fall." (Lisa Tsering photo)

11, and was a junior working on a Religious Studies degree at Stanford University, when she learned about the terror attacks. She had just received a grant to study India's Partition, but she had a change of heart and immediately went to her student adviser with the idea that she and director Sharat Raju wanted to film across the United States with a camera, so that she could interview Sikh men and women across the country who were affected by the prevailing

mood, and explore America's ideas of "us" and "them."

Kaur told *India-West* that she was especially inspired to make the film after hearing her grandfather repeat one of Sikhism's best known aphorisms: "Naam, Dan, Isnan," which means, "In order to connect with God, or realize yourself, you must act."

In the film, Kaur interviews the family of Balbir Singh Sodhi, the Arizona gas station owner murdered Sept. 15, 2001, and even travels to Punjab to talk to his widow; and interviews young and old men and women, most Sikh but

not all, whose homes and temples have been attacked or vandalized. One woman she speaks to, Swaran Bhullar, owner of a San Diego Indian video store, describes driving home one night in her car.

"I saw two men on my left in a black motorbike. They opened my door. They said, 'This is what you get for what you people have done to us, and I'm going to slash your throat,'" before cutting her with a blade. Doctors had to staple her scalp back together. Her assailants were never found.

Kaur was surprised to find that even on the day of Sept. 11 itself, just hours after the attacks, Sikhs in New York City were being harassed by citizens and police just for wearing turbans — later, one of the subjects in the film explains that hatred of Middle Easterners (or anyone who looked like one) had been simmering since the 1970s. The Sept. 11 attacks suddenly exposed that hatred in an explosive reaction felt across the country.

The film — directed and produced by Sharat Raju ("American Made") from an idea of Kaur's

— has screened in the Third I South Asian American Film Festival, the Spinning Wheel festival of Sikh films, and numerous other festivals. Last November, Raju and Kaur were presented with a resolution passed by the California state legislature acknowledging their contributions to the state of California through their work on the film by Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante.

Kaur is presently on tour across the United States, and presented the film to a packed classroom at UC Berkeley on the evening of Jan. 31. That week alone, she would take the film to Stanford and to San Joaquin Delta College in Stockton; and in February and March, she will accompany the documentary to New Hampshire, Connecticut, Washington state, Nebraska, Massachusetts, Michigan, Washington, D.C. and New York.

"What struck me about Valarie was her wide-eyed questioning," said Berkeley presenter Jaideep Singh, managing director of the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund. "That's the mark of a true intellectual."

TOP 12 ALBUMS

Survey Period: Jan. 24 to Jan. 30, 2007

FILM SOUNDTRACKS

No. Name of Film

- 1 Guru
- 2 Salaam-e-Ishq
- 3 Dhoom 2
- 4 Anwar
- 5 Don
- 6 Honeymoon Travels
- 7 Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna
- 8 Bhagam Bhag
- 9 Red
- 10 Naha na Daba



A still from Valarie Kaur and Sharat Raju's documentary "Divided We Fall." (Christian Parley/The Fresno Bee photo, used with permission)