

# A Beautiful Prize

## Review and Report on the 2024 Sundar Prize Film Festival

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The inaugural Sundar Prize Film Festival was a beautiful festival that achieved its goal: celebrating human resilience (see Fig. 1). Even though 2024 was the inaugural year of this festival hosted by the Sher Vancouver LGBTQ+ Friends Society, there were over 400 in attendance and an extensive list of sponsors and partnerships with all the major Vancouver film festivals. The festival awarded \$17,000 in cash prizes to the winning films along with opportunities to collaborate with the festival’s community partners. Despite being brand new, the festival is recognized as an Film Festival Alliance member, a Gold FilmFreeway event, and an IMDb qualifying Festival. The festival featured nine prize categories, including for fiction and nonfiction, that received submissions from around the world. A small part of the festival funding came from ticket sales and film submission fees; however, most funding came from the community sponsors. This festival could not have been made possible without the work of the co-founders Alex Sangha and Vinay Giridhar, the festival director, Sidartha Murjani, and the entire Sundar Prize team (Fig. 2). I have been fortunate to have joined the festival’s planning committee in November 2023 and continue to work with the planning of the 2025 festival. This article summarizes my work on the festival in the context of film festival studies to provide a review of the Sundar Prize.

### WHAT IS FILM FESTIVAL STUDIES?

Film festival studies is a field of research that has been growing since organization like the Film Festival Research Network was “founded by Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist in 2008” (de Valck and Loist). Film festivals and research on them has been around for decades, but it has been noted by scholars, like Ilona Hongisto and colleagues who note in “The Geopolitics of Programming at Documentary Film Festivals” the phenomenon of how “everyday screening diminish[ing]”



Fig. 1 | Sundar Prize FF logo. <https://sundarprize.com>

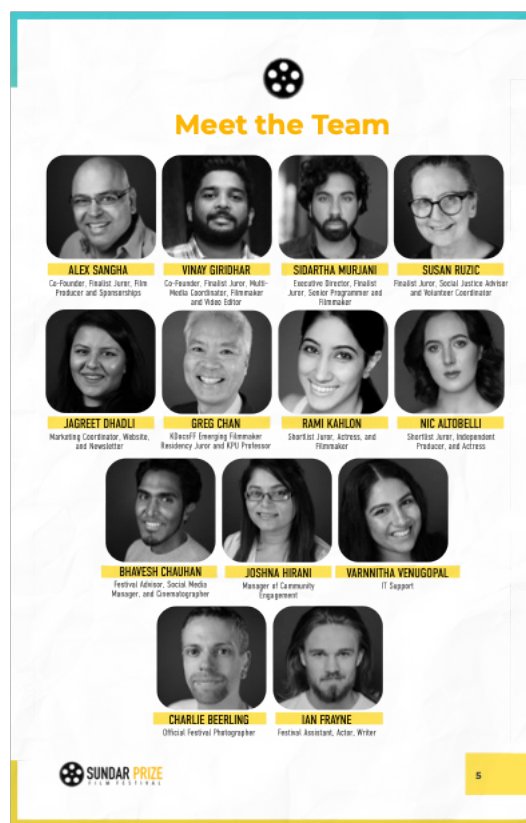


Fig. 2 | Page 5 from the 2024 Sundar Prize FF program designed by Vinay Giridhar, 2024.

has lead to an increase in festival screenings. This trend has been ongoing since the early 2000s where the rise of diversification of documentary distribution helped film festivals and “[c]reative documentary” reflect the times of our “ongoing social political transition period” (Vallejo and Winston vi; Hongisto et al. 74). Sandra J. Ruch, Executive Director of the International Documentary Association from 2001 to 2008, stated in an interview with Samara Chadwick that “positive and powerful change” is taking place because there is an increase in audiences at “niche” documentary film festivals. Sundar Prize Film Festival is in a significant position as a new festival during this movement because it screened a diverse group of films which were all programmed around the central theme of human resilience. The winning films, the non-fiction and fiction, were all awarded for their exemplary filmmaking but also because they served as narrative documentaries: films that all focused on inspiring real social justice. Some of them are based on real event, but all were created to address real social justice issues. This was achieved in part by the festival’s host, Sher Vancouver, bringing in the element of social work to the festival. Alex Sangha—who is also a registered social worker—is proud to co-found this festival, saying that the ability for the festival to screen films about social justice, about queer communities is “breaking barriers in Surrey...still a very conservative city” (Sundar Prize Festival). Film festivals can help shape the global human rights culture by screening films that show the sad, the triumphant, and the possible reality of human society (Colta 128; Nash 394; Giridhar 3). Though new, I believe this growing field of study will help foster more festivals that can represent positive social change on screens and at the programmer’s meeting tables.

### WHAT WAS MY PART IN THE FESTIVAL?

Though I was not heavily involved in the funding or programming of the festival, I can reflect on the process of the festival from planning to actualization. This article follows the tradition of practice-led research. This practice was articulated by Lyle R. Skains to be critical explanations of research “on the nature of creative practice, leading to new knowledge of operational significance” (85). My work experiences—or practices—lead me to articulate the “cultural practices [of the festival] in a self-reflexive, intersubjective way” (Colta 131). My reflections in this article seek to answer questions about the festival. It covers brief overviews of my involvement with the festival (see Fig. 3), the festival proceedings, the history of the festival’s conception, some theory surrounding the festival’s ideals, and final thoughts I can add to the growing conversation between festival programmers and academics about supporting human rights through festivals.

I was first introduced to this festival through a practicum program hosted by my university, KPU. During my placement interview for the course, I described my experience working in the film industry as well as my passion for social activism. My English degree had been teaching me how to formulate, research, and organize ideas but I hadn’t used my skills to



**Fig. 3** | Ian Frayne interviewing Curtis Woloshuck from VIFF. Charlie Beerling Photography, June 15, 2024.

work in the *real* world. When my teacher placed me with Sher Vancouver, I believed I would be tasked with making a little video or to helping with grant writing. While I did learn about video production and writing for non-profits, my experience during the four months of my practicum would untimely lead me to work alongside the Sundar Prize team.

The practicum program involved some class time but primarily I was working directly with my host supervisor, Alex. Planning and funding had begun earlier that year, so I was tasked with creating the filmmaker reception invite list and assisting the shortlist jury. On the jury, I reviewed a few films to understand the kinds of films submitted to the festival. I was mentored on how to use FilmFreeway’s platform to critically review each submission, rating them in categories such as acting, writing, directing, set-designing, pacing, and cinematography. I also evaluated whether they align with the values of the festival: celebrating human resilience. As an Arts student, I was able to apply what I learned about critical analysis and narrative structure in school to make this task easy and efficient. My work reviewing made me appreciate the difficult task the finalist jury had while deciding the winning films and helped me appreciate the number of artists creating films about social justice.

The bulk of my time in the practicum was spent connecting with over 300 filmmakers from the BC film community; some had attended or won awards at other BC film festivals, and most were found through online networking. Working side by side with Alex, we found filmmakers who had profiles listed on social media and databases such as Storyhive. Following the recommendation from the Sundar Prize Social Justice Advisor, Susan Ruzic, I looked first for artists from the BIPOC and LGBTQ+ community, as they often underrepresented in internet searches and repeatedly neglected by algorithms (Gillespie; Saltyworld). This work was also done for the community reception by another the manager of community engagement, Joshna Hirani, to invite community members who are interested in films and social justice issues.

After my practicum I was hired on as a Festival Assistant where I served on the planning committee taking meeting minutes, and later participated as one of the red-carpet



**Fig. 4** | Jason Pillay (right) after interview with special guest. Charlie Beerling Photography, June 15, 2024.



**Fig 5** | Page 11 from the 2024 Sundar Prize FF program designed by Vinay Girdhar, 2024.

interview hosts during the festival. In taking the meeting minutes, I learned how to participate by listening. When asked or when I had something to clarify I spoke up, but my recording kept me in the mindset of translating the conversations of the group into action items. This responsibility of reflecting on each meeting prepared me for this hosting the red-carpet interviews. The other interviewer—Jason Pillay (Fig. 4)—and myself met several times to discuss questions based on the films. Jason was able to share tips and advice with me from his experience to

encourage my confidence and efficiency while talking with filmmakers, politicians, partners, and Sundar Prize team members. Having a red-carpet interviewer at the festival served to create more content for the marketing team as well as give the filmmakers a little practice answering questions before the panel discussions. I am grateful for the conversations I had and hope that other film festivals hire interviewers internally to keep the questions focused on the festival's overall theme.

The Sundar Prize Festival ensured that screening beautiful films—sundar is Sanskrit for “beautiful”—and cultivating beautiful conversations by allocating resources for receptions. For me, the most powerful aspect of this festival was seeing the community’s work ‘on stage’ at the festival and ‘behind the scenes’ in the programming and curating stage. This article is my reflection on the festival which is informed my history—as a member of the Sundar Prize Planning Committee, an academic, a filmmaker, and a person of privilege. I have seen the festival come together from planning to actualization. To help keep this article objective, I conducted research into Film Festival studies and hope this paper adds to the growing body of research. Like the Sundar Prize Film Festival itself, I hope that this paper inspires conversation about social change and celebrate the resilience demonstrated by all who helped create this festival. I am truly inspired by the work I saw from filmmakers, programmers, audience members, and members from my community. It is my hope that more events like this can take place around the world.

### SO HOW DID THE FESTIVAL RUN?

Each day was organized into two sections for a total of four. Each section generally followed the same pattern: red carpet interviews, opening remarks, screening of the winning short film(s), screening a feature film, and finally the panel discussions (see Fig. 5). The interviews and panel discussions were recorded and the Sundar Prize team will likely have them publicly posted within the year. At the end of each day there were receptions for food, music, and conversation after the films were complete. The festival was held at the New Surrey City Hall, with films screened in the council chambers and the receptions held in the atrium.

### JUNE 15<sup>TH</sup> MORNING: SECTION 1

The first day began with Section One, when I conducted interviews with the filmmakers as well as founding festival partners from Vancouver International Film Festival and Vancouver Asian Film Festival. The screening were for the Best Animation, *Unstoppable Beat* (2023) directed by Luke and Rufus Dye-Montefiore, and the Best BC Film, *Dil Rakh: Gloves of Kin* (2023) directed by Dalj Brar. The day was opened with Indigenous land acknowledgments, thanks to the festival sponsors and partners, as well as speeches from the Mayor of Surrey and MLA of Surrey-Panorama before the films began. After that, the panel about “Building Empathy through Film: Fostering Understanding and Connection” began.

*Unstoppable Beat* features the story of a Hattian immigrant to Brazil after the earthquake that forced him to search for work far away from his family. Combining vibrant music and colour, the story explores the trauma of leaving one's family for the sake of finding them a better life. The film uses animation to show the explosion of hope and culture despite the grim reality faced by many immigrants. The musical rhythm ensures that the audience never forgets the protagonist's culture and creates a beat that ensures everyone who listens know "there are thousands like me...we dance to the same beat" (*Unstoppable Beat* 04:27: 04:35).

Immediately following this punchy short film was the boxing drama, *Dil Rakh*, which tells the story of a complicated reunion of Sukh Sidhu (Dalj Brar) with his adult son Dayton Sidhu (Umar Farooq Khan) after Sukh is released from prison after twenty years for allegedly killing a police officer. It is a drama that is further complicated by the intergenerational trauma and racism of small-town politics. The story explores themes of family, dignity, and forgiveness through the lens of South Asians living in a small, white town. Brar pulls the film forward with his powerful charisma on camera and brings out gritty, honest performances from the entire cast with his direction. Though it is a fictional story, Brar spoke to how all the characters in the film are based on people who have been in his life. Dayton's friend Brook (Joey Munroe) gives a brutal performance of a closeted gay man who takes out his grief with discrimination. The mother of Dayton and wife of Sukh has only a few scenes, but Rita Sudhu (Rami Kahlon) is given an earnest and personal performance. In speaking with Kahlon, she said she was very connected with her character, to the point where Rita's fear of driving is parallel to her own. As a South Asian actor raised in BC, Brar knows that racism also comes from institutions but sometimes from close friends. His film reflects his desire for healing and growth despite the systems of hate influencing out communities.

The panel discussion (see Fig. 6) was moderated by Amit Dhuga—a filmmaker who was part of the crew on *Dil Rakh*—who spoke with the Dalj Brar, Umar Farooq Khan, Rami Kahlon, and Dave Mann—executive produced the film. The filmmakers from *Unstoppable Beat* were not able to fly in from the U.K, and consequently their film was only discussed a few times during the panel. The primary focus was on the creation of the film, and the filmmakers' various opinions on whether South Asian representation in the film industry is improving.

## JUNE 15<sup>TH</sup> EVENING: SECTION 2

After an intermission, Section Two began with interviewing the filmmakers whose films were screening in the evening: Shubham Chhabra, winner of the KDocsFF Emerging Filmmaker Residency Prize for *Cash Cows* (2023), and Jason Loftus, winner of the Rogers Group of Funds Best Canadian Documentary for *Eternal Spring* (2023). Interviews were also conducted by a third-party news team from NTD on the screening of the film *Eternal Spring*, as the news sites is "aligned with Falun Gong"



**Fig. 6** | From left to right: Dalj Brar, Rami Kahlon, and Umar Farooq Kahn. Charlie Beerling Photography, June 15, 2024.

and its members are the subject of the documentary ("Eternal Spring' Wins"; Wilson).

*Cash Cows* began the evening with laughter. The film is a brilliant display of how comedy can demand activism. The grounded performances of the main character (Dikshant Joshi) and the wild farce of the film drive home the main themes of how international students are taken advantage of. The film shows the kind of discrimination between members of the same minority community. The internalised trauma of all the characters is brought to life by tight pacing and brilliant performances from the supporting cast. The contrast between Joshi's grounded performance and the ridiculously arrogant Ash (Shivam Arora) made many audience members laugh out loud. As a first-time short film director, Shubham exhibits clear skill and style: it is the emergence of a great director. His residency at KPU will help connect him with established and knowledgeable mentors to help him create his next feature film based on similar themes as *Cash Cows*.

In contrast, *Eternal Spring* is a grim and direct documentary of the social injustice perpetuated by the Chinese government against religious minorities. This powerfully visual film takes full advantage of interviews, animation, and behind the scenes footage of the documentary itself to create a flowing narrative to share a message of peace. Though I had never seen a film that combines live action and animation, Jason Loftus responded to moderator Greg Chan (see Fig. 7) in the panel discussion that he was inspired by other films that he had seen such as *Waltz with Bashir* (2008).

that he was inspired by other films that he had seen such as *Waltz with Bashir* (2008). The transitions between the various types of footage works to lead the audience through the process of creating the film and sitting in on the interviews creates a deep level of sympathy with the characters and their story. I had never heard of the TV hijacking or Falun Gong, but the representation of how they were treated in China is a bold and clear example of China's authoritarianism.

The panel was moderated by Greg Chan—the director of the KDocsFF Emerging Filmmaker Residency and Editor-in-Chief of *Mise-en-scène* journal—and included filmmakers from



**Fig. 7** | Jason Loftus accepting Best Canadian Documentary prize from KDocsFF's Greg Chan. Charlie Beerling Photography, June 15, 2024.

*Cash Cows*, Shubham Chhabara and Kaileigh Coles, plus Jason Loftus. The fourth panelist was not a filmmaker but was one of the film subjects of *Eternal Spring*. Mr. Zhang Zhongyu was featured in the film as one of the members who was persecuted by the Chinese authorities for his connections with the high-jacking. While all the filmmakers were able to answer insightful questions about how comedy was used in *Cash Cows* or animation was used in *Eternal Spring*, Mr. Zhongyu shared with the audience his first-hand experience living through the events of the film and his memories of the people killed during the persecution. This addition of non-filmmakers to the panel helped Sundar Prize to foster conversation about how to move activism beyond watching the films, putting a face to the names presented on screen.

After the panel, the audience was encouraged to continue the conversation with filmmakers in the atrium where food and drinks were provided. The food was a South Asian buffet, and the music that ended off the night was the “experimental indie pop band with Indian roots and American influence”: हज़ार Hazar (Giridhar 18). During the conversations, there was a surprise visit from Alexi Liotti and Grandma Losha who was celebrating her 66<sup>th</sup> birthday. She arrived with friends, and they shared a warrior women’s song with all who were present.

### JUNE 16<sup>TH</sup> MORNING: SECTION 3

Similar to the day before, I began Section Three with interviews with the filmmakers. I also interviewed many of the core team from the Sundar Prize such as Alex, Vinay, Joshna, and Susan. This section began with two short films played back-to-back: the Best Short Film *A Good Day Will Come* (2024), directed by Amir Zargara, and the Best International Documentary *Swallow Flying to the South* (2022), directed by Mochi Lin. After an intermission there was the screening of the Best Environmental Film *Rematriation* (2022), directed by Alexi Liotti. The theme of this section’s panel was “Hope in Times of Crisis - Finding Resilience Amidst Adversity.”

*A Good Day Will Come* is inspired by the tragic execution of pro-Iranian wrestler Navid Afkari who was unjustly



**Fig. 8** | From left to right, Rainbow Eyes, Grandma Losah, and Alexi Liotti with Lady Chainsaw. Charlie Beerling Photography, June 15, 2024.

imprisoned and executed “after a grossly unfair trial” (“Iran: Secret Execution”). Sia Alipour gives a devastatingly subtle and steady performance as Arash, a pro wrestler who, like Navid Afkari, stands up against the Iranian government and is wrongly imprisoned, tortured, and executed. Zargara’s unflinchingly accurate presentation of the authoritarian rule tells a powerful message of how the greatest fighters can be legendary peacemakers in times of war.

Similarly powerful, *Swallow Flying to the South* uses the medium of stop-motion animation to present a story of injustice under the authoritarian rule of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century China. Lin’s film—it truly is her film, as she claims every role except composer—is a quiet and grievously sad film about a child living in a boarding school. The painstaking details and work that went into crafting the puppets and stop-motion-animating this film is so beautiful and delicate compared to the grim scenes of forced bathroom times. The film culminates with the young girl crying for herself, while all the adults around her cry at the news of Chairman Mao’s death. The fact that this film was essentially made by a single creator is extraordinary.

The third film of the section, *Rematriation*, combines stunning nature videography journalist documentation to convey the tragic deforestation of the old growth forest on Fairy Creek on Vancouver Island. As the film title suggests, the film has many interviews with activists who fight for Indigenization in the form of rematriation to combat the exploitative industrial system. The film often goes back and forth between the various voices to communicate how large of an issue clear cutting is, and the connection between harmful industries and deteriorating quality of life. One of the main interviewees is Grandma Losah, who shares about the rainbow nation who gathered to protect the old growth forests. The film takes on a grim subject and a darker side of Canadian culture. However, the stunning cinematography and humility of the director to give the interviewees screen time to share their wisdom makes the film a hopeful story for continued action to uplift the women who protect the forests. In the words of Grandma Losah (Fig. 8), the film shows how “to take the bull by the horns and lead him. In a grateful, peaceful, loving way” (01:03:32-1:04:05).

The panel was moderated by Rami Kahlon and featured the filmmakers Alexi Liotti, Amir Zargara, and two of the film subjects from *Rematriation* who opened the panel with a traditional drum ceremony: Grandma Losah and Rainbow Eyes—also known as Angela Davidson. Like the previous panel, the combination of filmmakers and activists encouraged many action-oriented discussions.

#### JUNE 16<sup>TH</sup> EVENING: SECTION 4

The next and final section of the festival started with the last of the filmmaker interviews. The first screening was the Best Student Film *Dosh* (2023), directed by Rahda Mehta, and the best Feature Film *ROSIE* (2022), directed by Gail Maurice. After the films, there was the last panel discussion and the community reception.

Mehta's master's thesis film, *Dosh*, is a skillfully subtle film of the mental and physical barriers can create conflicts in a family. The film presents each character's fault—or *dosh*, which is the Hindi word for fault—in their own light but also how they work together as a family. The film is dramatic and serious but ends on a wonderfully hopeful note. Where this film truly shines is in how the director was able to present the main character's auditory experience when she loses her hearing aids. Mehta is hard of hearing and knows what is like to hear “the hum of the air conditioning” when not using an aid (“Interview with Rahda Mehta”). The audio of the film provides the viewer with an intimate perspective of the protagonist's experience. This film truly demonstrates how film can inspire empathy in audiences.

The most appropriate film to end the festival was *ROSIE*, which caused laughter and cheers to erupt throughout the film. The film follows Rosie (Keris Hope Hill) a young Indigenous girl in 1980s Montreal who is forced upon her aunt (Mélanie Bray) after her mother dies. The story is exceptionally heart-breaking and heartwarming. Though the film addresses some of the most horrifying experiences in Canada—residential schools, the 60s Scoop, foster care, homelessness, poverty, discrimination, and personal family grief—the film is ultimately a love story and a comedy. The characters are a vibrant and vulnerable family of misfits, making it impossible not to fall in love with them all. Though nothing is going for the characters at the start, through working together and maintaining love for each other, their film ends in a wondrously hopeful way.

The panel discussion was moderated by David C. Jones who spoke with Jamie Manning, a producer from *ROSIE*, Rahda Mahta, and Alex Sangha. Unfortunately, Gail Maurice and Mélanie Bray who were scheduled to join the panel had to cancel their trip, as they had already begun production on their next project. This meant the red carpet interview questions I had translated into French had to return to English for Jamie Manning, and the panel discussion shifted focus to evenly discuss *Dosh* and *ROSIE*. An essential responsibility of film festival workers is to pivot when inevitable mix-ups occur. Thanks to the team and the present Jamie Manning, a producer on *ROSIE*, the section ended smoothly.

Despite the emotional and physical exhaustion of the Sundar Prize team, the festival closed with celebration and music from Caro Silva, a musician “from Colombia who specializes in Alterlatino music” (Giridhar 18). After food, there were speeches of congratulations given by Alex Sangha and Sidartha Murjani, there was another birthday celebration for Rami Kahlon, and an open microphone available for filmmakers in attendance who were not connected with the festival to speak about their upcoming projects and connect with potential collaborators.

#### HOW WAS THIS MADE POSSIBLE?

Alex Sangha and Vinay Giridhar entered the film festival world through their award-winning film *Emergence: Out of the Shadows* (2021). Their experience in filmmaking and touring the festival circuit gave them the knowledge and drive them to host their own film festival, where films made with the same passion they exhibited could be shared with their Surrey community. With their respective experience as a social worker and filmmaker, Sangha and Giridhar set to gathering a community to create a festival. First, they began to work with program directors from other film festivals. Most significantly, Sidartha Murjani joined the Sundar Prize team and brought his knowledge. Murjani is an award-winning filmmaker who also worked behind the scenes of several large film festivals: programming at Vancouver Asian Film Festival (VAFF) and Vancouver International Film Festival (VIFF), pre-screening films for the Whistler Film Festival, as well as work in European festivals. Murjani joined the co-founders of the Sundar Prize to ensure the practical needs of festival planning were met and exceeded. As film festivals, like films, involve collaboration they kept the focus “providing value for filmmakers and film goers” through prioritizing filmmaker prizes and a reception at the end of each event” (Murjani). They consulted with other Vancouver film festival directors throughout their journey and used the support of established festivals to secure funding.

Alex was able to collect—or rather gather—an incredible number of sponsors for the festival because of his experience directing *Sher Vancouver* and with the help of the founding festival partners (Fig. 9). The largest financial sponsors were from different branches of the Canadian government, with Rogers Group of Funds sponsoring the Best Canadian Documentary, and Kwantlen Polytechnic University/KDOcsFF who sponsored the Best Emerging Filmmaker Residency Prize. The credibility gained from having high-profile sponsors made applications for government grants and extending the Sundar Prize community with private organizations exponential easier.

#### WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS?

It is my opinion, supported by my reflections an experience, that the Sundar Prize Film Festival succeeded because of a strong team supported by proper funding. During the planning committee meetings, every member was given a voice to present ideas from their individual background. The team kept



Fig. 9 | Pages 16 and 17 from the 2024 Sundar Prize FF program designed by Vinay Giridhar, 2024.



Fig. 10 | Alex Sangha with Sidartha Murjani with Sundar Prize Volunteer team. Photo taken in the Marigold booth, June 16th, 2024.

a problem/solution focused mentality which helped us solve problems instead of assigning blame. While the team is formed by passionate, dedicated, proficient activists, I am unsure if this festival could have been as successful without its incredible sponsors, particularly the Government of Canada. This festival is an example of Canada’s commitment to sponsoring the Canada Arts Council and funded organizations such as Creative BC. On the panels, there was discussion about how some of the films which are critical of governments, were not allowed to be screened in the countries which their film depicts. *Rematriation* is an exception; the film critically portrays the faults of certain Canadian government branches at Fairy Creek—most significantly the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and government backed logging industries (Rematriation 00:23:07-00:27:46). The Canadian government’s pledge to support the arts even those that are critical of other branches, made it possible to sufficiently pay the festival workers, and allow so many filmmakers to be present for the panel discussions. I am keenly aware that this privilege is not available to all people living under other governments. Outside of government support, this festival shows how important community connections are for creating an inaugural festival of this scale. The positive influence of Alex Sangha and Sidartha Murjani was able to gather community sponsors and foster a festival which supported its own community (Fig. 10), as well as the broader social justice film festival community.

Through this practice-led research, I hope to begin filling the gap of “research is needed to understand the challenges, decisions and responsibilities of festival workers who, through their labour and creative approach, highlight certain perspectives over others” (Colta). I encourage other potential film festival scholars to work alongside festivals, at any level of seniority, to see how the challenges are addressed and what it means to engage with impactful films. ■

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