

AFTER the roaring success of *Jurassic Park*, there was speculation that the technological sophistication and artistic finesse of Hollywood would dwarf Bollywood. But the unabated popularity of *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (HAHK), ever since it was released in the middle of last year, has reassured us that Bollywood will not sink.

As reported, certain innovative marketing strategies such as not selling the video rights of the film to anyone, releasing the film simultaneously in all parts of India while at the same time only screening it in selected localities, and stuffing the video of the films songs together with a collage of brief clippings from the film, have definitely contributed to its enormous and sustained earnings at the box-office. It is predicted that the film will earn more than Rs 100 crore, leaving the blockbuster of the '70s, *Sholay*, far behind. In addition, the film has enriched the repertoire of songs that grace many a family and neighbourhood gathering.

The total absence of sex and violence in *HAHK*, and hence its suitability for family viewing, distinguishes the film from others. This achievement is all the more significant given that video tapes of the whole film are not commercially available. *HAHK* stands out in comparison with the recent spate of films containing lewd, double *entendre* songs depicted in equally indecent bodily movements. For instance, one can recall the exquisite body rhythms at the end of the song, *Pehla Pehla Pyaar Hai*, signifying the delight of a pair of love birds. But in the process of rightly silencing all representations of controversial scenes, *HAHK* tips to the other extreme of subtly replaying certain conservative themes about well-fed families.

FILM REVIEW

Hum Aapke Hain Koun

Family as Bouquet

Mahesh Gavaskar

HAHK starts with Kailashnath (Alokant), who began his legal career from a one-room tenement, and by sheer dint of hard work now owns a palatial bungalow surrounded by lush green lawns. Kailashnath has raised his two nephews who had been orphaned in their early childhood. Rajesh (Mohnish Behl), the older one, an already established industrialist, is about to launch his younger brother, Prem (Salman Khan) into the automobile industry. Rajesh marries Puja (Renuka Shahane), the eldest daughter of Siddharthbabu (Anupam Kher), a professor and buddy of Kailashnath from their college days. Prem, the younger nephew, falls in love with Nisha (Madhuri Dixit), Siddharthbabu's younger daughter. When Puja, after giving birth to a child, trips over a staircase and dies,

Kailashnath decides that Rajesh should marry Nisha so that the infant will have a mother. But luckily, Rajesh learns of the love between Prem and Nisha and refuses to accept their sacrifice. Nisha marries Prem and becomes mother and aunt to the infant.

This story line is fleshed out in marriage, birth and death ceremonies interlaced with song and dance sequences. Though glorious trophies are won in the field of business, the world of work is not the thematic focus of the film. The few events in the film located at work come as reports from a bygone period (the economic rise to prosperity of Kailashnath) or as remote news of contemporary achievements (fax from the U.S. mentioning success in launching a business deal). Almost all the film is



shot in indoor locales or nearby. The outside world is of secondary importance to the events unfolding in the interior. Thus, the home provides the setting, leisure the time-frame and play the style to the narrative of the film. Whenever office events crop up it is merely to convey over the telephone messages of domestic significance. The logic of this aesthetic erases the alienating features of the outside world, making it hospitable for relaxation and enjoyment. A hand-cart, otherwise a symbol of drab physical exertion, is a toy-like yellow, and the automobile broadcasts the handwritten message 'I love family' across the fields.

Another mechanism used to extend the allure of domesticity is the deliberate collapse of the worlds of the adult and the child. Besides the newborn and a few smart sisters-in-law, there are no kids in the film. Instead, it is the adults who behave like children and play becomes the predominant metaphor of this transmutation. Cricket

is played by the adults and watched by children. Men wear caps with 'boy' written on them, women wear caps with 'girl' as an insignia. The song, *Joote dedo*, is woven around a contest between the bride's sisters and bridegroom's brothers. On certain occasions men and women, aged and young, team up in rows to dance to the music.

As we enter into the inner sanctum of human relationships, the aesthetic mobilises the conventional theme of woman as the provider of food and offspring. Puja, the ideal woman, distributes the *prasad* for men to receive. Even the act of Nisha and Prem sacrificing their love to

rejuvenate Rajesh is an ennobling enactment of 'giving' rather than a 'giving up' under compelling circumstances. The family doctor plays upon the same theme: women are to men as giver is to receiver, as surplus is to deficit; then he suggests the remarriage of Rajesh to restore the domestic health of the family. Puja passes away, but the life of Laloo's *buaji* is restored. The gimmick smacks of the deist principle of the divine maintenance of the equilibrium of the universe to the point of mathematical precision where every loss is compensated by a corresponding gain.



After her death, Puja's presence shines forth from her photograph, a modern icon. And it is in the presence of this photo that the ultimate reordering of relationships takes place.

Religious undercurrents animate the film's text, hinting at a benevolent gaze of the sacred over worldly affairs. The engagement of Rajesh and Puja takes place at a pilgrimage site. Rajesh's maternal uncle presents a copy of the *Ramayana* as a marriage gift to Puja. The maternal uncle and Siddharthbabu are both professors, yet are shown as having great respect for their religious heritage. The notion of modernisation without westernisation finds expression through these two

characters, whose secular learning has not distanced them from their cultural roots. Puja, herself, carries an element of divinity and Puja's relationship with Prem, her brother-in-law, is modelled on the archetypal bond between Sita and Laxman. Kailashnath compliments Puja's mother for being a Lakshmi rendering Siddharthbabu's house a heavenly abode. Prem resembles fun-loving Krishna, and Nisha, his Radha.

But it is, as expected, towards the end of the film that divine succour becomes overt. The accidental death of Puja leaves Rajesh forlorn. To nurture the infant it is decided that Nisha, Puja's younger sister, should house Rajesh. At this juncture the clash between tradition and modernity comes to the fore. Tradition expects Nisha and Prem to sacrifice their *pyaar* for the *farz* of rehabilitating Rajesh. Both Nisha and Prem, taking guidance from photographs displaying familial warmth, decide to forsake their individual

desires for the well-being of Rajesh and the infant. However, timely intervention allows the film to reiterate the paramouncy of family and brings about the transition from tradition to modernity without any skirmish. Importantly, it grants space for religious legitimacy to function by projecting the change in times as emanating in accordance to a divine plan.

Besides this religious sanction, the very matrix of the film is constituted by a familial web of relationships. Almost all major actors in the film have already appeared in the previous Barjatya production, *Maine Pyaar Kiya (MPK)*. In a sense the actors are

carrying on the tradition of the Barjatya family. When the characters in *HAHK* talk about their *pichla janam* (previous birth) they refer to their roles in *MPK*. In a tongue-in-cheek telephone conversation during the marriage ceremony, one of the sisters-in-law reminds Prem (Salman Khan, the hero of *MPK*) of Suman (the heroine of *MPK*). Prem equally suggestively remarks that his current concern is whether he will greet Nisha in this lifetime. Hit tunes of *MPK* also reverberate along with *HAHK* melodies, recreating tradition on the musical plane, too. And what better illustration of reincarnation, continuity and clone cluster can there be than when *HAHK* turns out to be none other than a rehash of *Nadiya ke Paar*, a Barjatya product of the early '80s. *HAHK* along with *MPK* proclaim themselves as humble descendants of a rich lineage of popular Hindi films.

The appeal of *HAHK* also lies perhaps in its polished fashion of building a sharp contrast between commoditised and non-commoditised relationships. Repeatedly, through various episodes, the message is driven home that relationships are more than money matters. For example, when Bhagyavanti suggests that an *aya* be kept to tend the infant since no woman would like to nourish a step-child, she meets with unanimous disapproval. A mother is an epitome of giving; she cannot be bought. The film equally rejects the idea that motherhood can be achieved only via biological parentage. As Rajesh mentions in the end, even by being a *chachi* Nisha's motherly love for the infant has not diminished. In this context, Bhagyavanti emerges as a character through whom a money-minded mentality is caricatured. Where untainted relationships are valued, Bhagyavanti's harping on



dowry is tantamount to blasphemy. In contrast, memory becomes a mode through which intensity of authentic relationships amidst a proliferating cash nexus is maintained intact. Wealth has not conceited Kailashnath; prompt remembrance of Siddharthbabu even after a gap of many years brings out his humbleness. There is also a possibility that Kailashnath may have remained unmarried because of his sincere but unrequited love for Puja's mother. Conversely, though he complies to marry Nisha, Rajesh has no carnal desire for her. Thus, cherishing their respective beloved ones despite the pangs of separation elevates the realm of human relationships beyond petty concerns.

Thus, the majestic cultural superstructure of domesticity proffered by *HAHK* seems to float above material production embedded in the cash nexus. But the very fact that a cultural artifact acquires such a strong hold over the popular imagination and shrewdly generates such enormous revenues is an ironic comment on the message of the film which projects human relationships as overruling market forces. Thus, Lalloo's taunt, aimed at Bhagyavanti, that the *bahu* of the house turned out to be far more priceless than an exorbitant dowry, tends to gloss over Kailashnath's own lavish lifestyle. The incongruity between the material base and the film's cultural value orientation is too stark to be swept beneath the carpet of entertainment. □

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