



Adding Insult to Injury

Sajan Chale Sasural

Producer: Mansoor Ahmed Siddiqui

Director: David Dhawan

Review: Sulagna Mishra

SAJAN *Chale Sasural*, directed by David Dhawan, is a recent film which has made a lot of money at the box office. Replete with the standard formula that is characteristic of most films that achieve commercial success, this is a “clean, super comedy”, as the posters will tell you, meaning that it is free of graphic sex and violence — just another harmless little comedy.

The protagonist, Shyam (Govinda) is a country bumpkin who comes to the city to try his luck as a musician. Coincidentally, he meets Divya (Tabu), the daughter and sole heir to her father’s recording studio, whom he tries to con by every possible means. Divya, however, ends up not only falling head over heels in love with Shyam, but even threatens to commit suicide if her love for him is spurned.

Meanwhile, on a trip back to his village, Shyam finds out that his wife, Puja (Karishma) is conveniently dead. In a series of flashbacks we are treated to Shyam’s former love life with Puja, who like Divya, was won over by his charm and tricks, and eventually married the lovable con artist.

After returning to the city, Shyam generously obliges Divya by marrying her and taking over her father’s company. The real “fun” begins when Puja resurfaces and Shyam suddenly finds himself with two wives. Like a game, the challenge for Shyam is to strategically maneuver between the two women so that neither finds out about the other. Finally, like in all successful films, all is well that ends well. However, in this movie, “happily ever after” takes a new twist as the

lovebirds end up in a cozy nest of three, instead of only two. The film is truly humorous, but at what cost? Women become the butt of all the jokes while male viewers are taken on a ego trip as the hero has his cake and eats it too.

The title of the film, *Sajan Chale Sasural*, means that it is the husband, not the wife, who is going to live with his in-laws. Like the rest of the film, it is an ambiguous name, one that could imply that the husband is doing his wife a favour by not making her leave her natal home. However, Shyam ends up completely taking over his wife’s parental home. By marrying Divya, Shyam also marries into her father’s company. At once, he becomes the live-in son-in-law and also fulfills the role of the son Divya’s father never had.

Shyam’s actions deny Divya of one aspect of Indian social custom that is pro-woman, in spite of itself. The *maika*, or the woman’s natal home, has been the traditional sanctuary for the Indian bride from the duty-ridden clutches of the *sasural*, or the house of the in-laws. Indian folklore boasts of many stories where the wife threatens to go away to her *maika* if her husband treats her unfairly. In fact, the well-known film song “*Jhoot bole*

kauua kate... main maike chale jaungi tum dekhte rahio” (If you lie, the crow will bite you. I’ll go back to my parents’ place, leaving you high and dry) sums up to some extent the importance of the *maika* for the Indian woman. But here, by taking over Divya’s *maika*, Shyam steals from his wife the one place she could have run to in order to escape from his systematic lying. The hero proceeds to cheat and lie to his wife without having to suffer any consequences, all in the name of good, clean humour.

The movie does its best to demonstrate that the women characters are no more than stepping stones for Shyam. By marrying the beautiful Puja, Shyam attains the legacy of her father’s music as well as a union with the most coveted body in the village. His second marriage in the city enables him to sell what he earned from his last marriage — his music. It is a neat case of investment, profit, and reinvestment for our hero, with no risk involved and no losses incurred.

The portrayal of both women as objects devoid of any intelligence or feelings, makes their consumption easy, and free of any regret for both Shyam and the audience, the consumers. Puja’s lack of perception

and intelligence is carefully built up by the fact that she is so easily charmed by the hero. It is as if she is condemned by her femininity itself, since it does not occur to her father to teach music to his only child, a daughter. Divya's father also does not trust his only daughter enough to make her his heir, and bestows this upon her husband instead. Indeed, this multimillionaire father's city-bred, fair, slim, convent-educated, homely daughter is fit only to be the stepping stone to her husband's success.

It is the age-old story of the princess and the kingdom, waiting for the man to come and save the day. After all, business is business, and pleasure is pleasure, and the princess is always relegated to the second category. Both Puja and Divya's lack of feelings is demonstrated by the fact that neither heroine voices any objection to having been taken for a ride. In fact, both are quite content that their husband has the last laugh, even though it is at their own expense.

The humour in *Sajan Chale Sasural* consists of robbing the women of what little security marriage is supposed to offer. Although the tone remains at the level of farce, the humour is devoid of any actual satire — resulting in giving this movie an anti-women tone. In the end, viewers swallow the two marriages of Shyam laughingly and applaud his “virility” and the “natural” gullibility of his nubile young wives as he sleeps with them almost simultaneously in the same hotel during one song sequence. The film provokes laughter every time Shyam lies to one of his brides. The movie is made by men to be seen through a male point of view, so amidst the gales of laughter, it is irrelevant at whose cost we are laughing. Why else, despite reaping all the benefits, does Shyam earn the admiration and not the censure of the viewers?

Just like the rapist who escapes blame because his victim was too “provocative”, the two-timing, go-getting Shyam is applauded for his

wrongdoings because he is depicted as an innocent simpleton — he married Puja by “mistake” when a garland simply flew off of the deity's head of its own volition, passed through his hands, and fell — bang — around the girl's neck. His second marriage to Divya, is also “forced” upon him as she threatens suicide. He is forced to lie to them both because if the first wife found out she would die, naturally, and well, if the second one found out, she would hang herself.

Even in the old classic texts, women who come up against an unjust situation tend to revolt whenever they are given a chance to speak. Sita refused to return to her husband after he repeatedly asked her to prove herself; Draupadi would rather trust a male friend or *sakha*, as she calls Krishna, than her five husbands who pawn her away. But our modern movie heroines don't even feel slighted.

The theme of the two-timing man has been recurrent in many Hindi films. *Pati Patni aur Woh* and *Arth* are two



movies, for example, which treat this same subject very differently. Although *Arth* is a serious film that questions the invincibility of the man's position vis-a-vis the woman in the traditional Indian marriage, *Pati Patni aur Woh* was made in a much lighter vein. Yet both movies have given some consideration to women's feelings.

What does a woman go through when she is expected to make all the compromises in the socio-economical contract of marriage, with no guarantee from the husband's side? Does Indian society punish the "infidelity" of the husband in the same manner as it castigates the wife for the same act? Does the wife suffer quietly or does

she revolt against her situation? Whether the issues are treated seriously or comically, the wives in these films are aware of their vulnerability. Questioning, demanding, and introspecting, they are portrayed as women who are conscious of their self-respect and whose pride would neither let them beg for mercy nor accept their predicament laughingly.

But *Sajan Chale Sasural*, behind an innocent, farcical facade, gives this theme a totally new treatment which no other Hindi film had dared before, because it dodges the moral issues completely. In the last scene of the film, Shyam is finally caught by the two wives. There is only a minor tug of war

between them as Shyam is literally bodily pulled by both Puja and Divya. Finally, Shyam threatens to leave them both unless they agree to compromise and share him between them. Since neither wants to lose him, they not only readily agree to share him in the end, but become the best of friends. In fact, the only person who opposes the husband's role (Satish Shah) becomes the villain. Most of all, just like every traditional value that is turned upside down in the movie, even the advice that Shyam gives to the audience at the end of the film: "It was not my fault that I have two wives, but don't you do it..." is a challenge that actually says, "Look, I got away with the loot, why don't you try it, too?"

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