

Ishq In A Backpack

A HONEYMOON ADVENTURE

MOVIE REVIEW: LAAGA CHUNARI MEIN DAAG



HOOKER WITH A HEART OF GOLD?

Family and money collide in this woman-scorned weeper

BY SONA CHARAIPOTRA

Last week, on TV, I saw Rani Mukherji quite cockily say that for her to be involved in a film, it has to be something really special. (And I thought Aishwarya was full of herself!) Still, as irritatingly obnoxious as it may sound, the Bengali-born actress has picked a slate of above-par projects since committing herself to more serious, thoughtful Bollywood fare like 2002's *Saathiya*, 2004's *Yuva* and 2005's *Black and Paheli*. Still, she's also had her share of big Bollywood clunkers (recall *Ta Ra Rum Pum*). And after seeing Rani's latest release, the family drama *Laaga Chunari Mein Daag*, I have admit, she's rightfully choosy. Despite a facile ending, with its strong script, well-developed characters and exquisite cinematography by Suchir Rajpal, *Laaga* is definitely right up there with *Devdas* as a new Bollywood classic.

The film stars Rani as Vibhavari, a down home and unsuspecting Benares-ki-kuri, who is transformed into uber-expensive big-city call girl Natasha. No cheesy double-role gimmicks here, though. The circumstances are thoroughly realistic--despite their stunning haveli, Vibhavari's old-money family has run out of funds. Throw in a sick father (Anupam Kher), a frustrated and exhausted working mother (Jaya Bachchan), her brainy sister Chutki's expensive MBA education, and a scheming drunkard chacha who wants to usurp the family home as his own, and the weight on Vibhavari's slender shoulders becomes quite formidable.



So, inspired by a Bollywood film-wali who comes scouting their home as a possible film set, Vibhavari takes off to make it big in Mumbai, despite her barely tenth-grade education.

The Big City eats Vibhavari alive. It hardens her, steals away her innocence and exuberance. She does what she has to do to keep the home fires burning, but becomes a soulless-though-stunning doll in the process. Then, on a "business" trip, meets Rohan (Abhishek Bachchan), a patents and clearances expert who becomes quietly enraptured

with her. Despite their obvious chemistry, they go their separate ways as duty calls for Vibha. And upon her return to Mumbai, Vibhavari is shocked to find her little sister Chutki (Konkona Sen Sharma) has made herself entirely at home in Natasha's gorgeous sky-view flat.

The rest of the story unfolds as Vibhavari tries to hide her double-life from Chutki, protecting her family's reputation while continuing to cough up cold, hard cash for her sister's elaborate wedding, the repairs on the haveli, and to her blackmailing chacha and his sinister son. Although the film reverts to an all-too-easy and happy Bollywood ending, the film is worth a view for cinematographer Suchir Rajpal's impressive visual stylings. *Laaga* is beautifully shot, juxtaposing breathtaking, contrasting images of Benares and Mumbai, from striking diyas on a sunset-cloaked Ganga to stately Victorian buildings and modern, upscale sky-view apartments.

Besides its stunning cinematography, the film offers fine, restrained performances from Mukherji, both Bachchans and Anupam Kher. But especially appealing is Konkona Sen Sharma's Chutki, who in turn spirited and engaging, then effectively torn and tragic. Sen

has also shown fine judgment in picking her parts, from the title character in the political drama *Amu* to *Page 3*'s refreshingly naive and idealistic journalist to *Life In A...Metro*'s exasperated singleton. Perhaps indie-edged Sen can further guide Mukherji in defining an elevated artistic strategy.

