

FILM REVIEW

A wake-up call on HIV

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AIDS Jaago. Four cinematic short films on HIV/AIDS. Directors: Vishal Bharadwaj, Farhan Akhtar, Santosh Sivan and Mira Nair. Available on: <http://www.jaman.com/aidsjaago>

Produced by NRI film director Mira Nair's company Mirabai Films, and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, *AIDS Jaago* is a collection of four short films on HIV/AIDS in contemporary India. Made by top directors, they fall in the middle zone between public awareness campaigns and feature films. Utilising leading actors as characters, they aim to educate on a major public health issue. Without the concerns of producers about box office success, the directors are expected to utilise the cinematic medium to illustrate issues creatively, while keeping mass appeal in mind.

Blood Brothers (18 minutes 18 seconds) by Vishal Bharadwaj stars Siddhartha Suryanarayab as Arjun Dutt, a young advertising executive living a face-paced life. Following a (presumably) routine blood test, he is told by his doctor he has tested HIV positive. Distraught that he has put his life and the life of his pregnant wife (and to-be-born child) at risk through an extra-marital fling, he leaves home to roam the streets. An eccentric Dr Bhootnath (Pankaj Kapur) rescues Arjun, injured after a street fight, and gets a re-test done which shows that he is not HIV positive; it's a case of mistaken identities. Arjun tries to reconcile with his family and communicate the results to the other Arjun Dutt who got tested at the same time. It's strange that there was no confirmatory test in the first place, and that Arjun finds his "blood brother" simply by bribing the clinic guard. But then, the sensibilities are drawn from Bollywood where anything is possible. There are sensitive portrayals by the lead actors, and Pankaj Kapur is a delight in a brief role as the gruff, straight-talking doctor.

Positive (18 minutes 56 seconds), directed by Farhan Akhtar, focuses on the turmoil in a family where the photographer husband (Boman Irani) has trysts with his models. His wife (Shabana Azmi) refuses to acknowledge his lies, and the son (Krish Chawla as the young Abhijit and Arjun Mathur as the older one) is caught in between. To distance himself from his dysfunctional family, Abhijit moves to South Africa, but is brought back by a phone call that his father has AIDS. The rest of the film deals with the conflicts between father, son and mother, and their reconciliation as they deal with the illness. The performances explore the emotional upheavals in a family coping with HIV. The film also touches on practical concerns as

when the insurance company refuses to cover hospital care for a patient with AIDS.

Prarambha (13 minutes 24 seconds), is the only film of the four in a regional language, Kannada, and I found it to be the best. Santosh Sivan tells the story of an HIV-positive child, Kittu, whose mother deserted him. During his travels in search for his mother, he hitches a ride with a truck driver. The bond built between the two and the boy's isolation on losing his mother and on being ostracised and thrown out of school are sensitively brought out. The failed reunion with the mother, who refuses to acknowledge her son (for his own good, she says) while she is dying of AIDS in the hospital, and Kittu's struggles for re-admission in school highlight the stigma faced by people with HIV. The complexities of morality, parental insecurities and misinformation, the role of the law and the media are all touched upon. The story line seems to draw from the recent incident involving HIV positive school children in Kerala. Prabhu Deva as the street-smart truck driver Puttaswamy Gowda and Skandhar as Kittu portray believable characters the viewer connects with.

Migration (17 min 31 seconds), directed by Mira Nair herself, packs many tracks in a short time. Drought-instigated migration brings farmer Birju (Shiney Ahuja) to a construction site in Mumbai where he encounters Divya (Sameera Reddy) who is trapped in a loveless marriage. Her husband Abhay (Irrfan Khan) is unable to tell his wife that he has a male lover. Exposing the dirt underneath the surface of middle-class India, as she did in *Monsoon Wedding*, is Mira Nair's forte. This includes using the "pregnancy as cure to all problems in a marriage" theme. Birju returns to his village, gets his wife Yamuna (Raima Sen) pregnant, but also infects her and thus their newborn child with HIV. It's unfortunate the director did not use the opportunity to inform on prevention of parent to child transmission. The nurse's disclosure of the diagnosis immediately after delivery, without counselling or consent, seems inexplicable. Still, the portrayals in *Migration* bring out a myriad of emotions, from guilt, frustration to desire.

These films are a good attempt at exploring the human side of HIV/AIDS, and successfully merge entertainment and social messages. However they seem to have been made for a primarily urban audience. The central characters are male; it would have been good if at least one of the movies focused on the impact of HIV on women. Released in 2007, they seem to have been mainly in the festival circuit and some slots on news channels. They are available at Jaman, an online movie library.