



PEEPLI [LIVE]

Spring
Season
2011

Review by Mayank Shekhar, Hindustan Times:

It appears a scene straight out of an Indian version of *Yes Minister*. The agricultural minister (Naseeruddin Shah) in the room is one of those suave, telegenic politician faces we're used to watching endlessly gab on late night news debates. His young colleague, a bureaucrat, is quick to figure the embarrassing enormity of a small situation at hand: it's the story of one farmer attempting suicide that every news channel has played up across networks.

The minister, forced to intervene, asks for that farmer to be passed on an Indira Awas, or a 'Jawahar Rozgar', or an 'Annapoorna'.... Naah! Each of those government grants, the IAS officer tells him, concern the homeless, the unemployed, the starving... He says, "Central government schemes don't cover farmers who are still alive. They only cover those dead!" Earlier, when the local MLA had heard of the same story building up into something big, he'd ordered his minions to deliver to the dying man's house a "Lal Bahadur". It means in simple English, a tube-well.

Jawahar, Indira, Lal Bahadur, these are of course gift vouchers for India's political class that counts its personal worth in public patronage, not public service. Everybody rightly loves a good drought.

One, obscure Natha, is the farmer under fatal debt. His village in fictional Mukhya Pradesh makes for thousands of such across India where life's cheap; time's still; air, inescapably dull. It's the sort of place where people simply live off the motto, 'I am, where I am'; suitably divide the day between *ganja*, other idleness, and I guess, the wait for the monsoons. Life reveals itself to them completely, for good, better or worse. The acceptance is complete. Natha's eyes, already dead, show no signs of curiosity.

The firm test of a film set around the everyman is when you just can't tell if those before you on screen aren't the people they're meant to be. Lovers of Italian neo-realism, for instance, were deeply upset to learn that the cast of Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* had actually comprised auditioned performers. Like that dying old woman in *Pather Panchali*, the dowdy village grandmother in this film almost jolts you up for how 'unreal' real she is. I'm absolutely certain you've met the numbed Natha before.

His ecstatic brother (Raghuvir Yadav, one of India's most under-rated actors) tells him: "*Na marneka hand-pump, marneka soch!* (Hand-pump for staying alive, imagine gifts of death!)." The brothers have reasons to feel lucky. They're currently under national spotlight. Television only goes where some research or ratings point them to, news merely being a function of the lowest common denominator's pleasure.

Peepli just happens to be a village that falls under a constituency up for a by-election. The opposition would like Natha dead. The government in power would prefer him alive. Both seek mileage from this rare event, while various TV stations and their ambitious reporters break each other's heads over broken news. The satire is irresistible; the subtext, compelling. And yet neither shows itself up in any form of self-seriousness. The comic writing (Anusha Rizvi) is immaculately inspired.

India's mass media, whether in the ridiculousness of Hindi television, or even excitable super-stars of English news, leave little scope for parody. The risk involves spoofing a spoof itself. Journalists, and their consumers as well, will instantly recognise dark truths in these intended laughs. Sometimes facts are almost as outrageous as limits of fiction.

This makes the film then, at once the most intelligent and humorous Indian commentary in a long time. It is for sure the only true black comedy in Hindi to appear in 27 years. If you're wondering what happened in 1983, well, two journalists and a *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro*. *Peepli's* right up there! I don't know a better compliment to pay. I think you should certainly pay for a ticket.

Review by Cath Clarke, The Guardian:

Armando Iannucci could not have done it better: a reporter with a sad face plastered on interviews an elderly woman: "Look at Indian motherhood, with a ravaged heart," he implores. The camera cuts to the cantankerous old dear puffing on a reefer. There is a deadly serious message about India's rural/urban divide in first-timer director Anusha Rizvi's satirical gem, but it also happens to have a juicily vulgar streak. *Peepli Live* has been compared to *Slumdog Millionaire*; here the little guy is a bankrupt farmer Natha (superbly played by folk-theatre actor Omkar Das Manikpuri). Natha decides to kill himself so that his family will qualify for a government scheme compensating families of farmers committing suicide. The story explodes into a media event, a will-he-or-won't-he-top-himself saga that grips the nation. Rizvi is a former journalist and is savage on the sham compassion of the media and political elite. She closes on a scene of genuine and forceful poignancy: a construction site in the city where dispossessed men from the sticks like Natha are building luxury apartments, more ghosts than men. It is an image so bereft of feelgood, if anything you'd have to describe *Peepli Live* as the anti-*Slumdog* itself.

