

## Sharp satire illuminates farmers' plight

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Sep. 17, 2010



Vishal Sharma as Kumar Deepak and Farukh Jaffer as Amma in "Peepli Live" (Photos courtesy of UTV Motion Pictures)

Until I saw Indian producer Aamir Khan's new film, I had never heard of the suicide epidemic among India's poor farmers between 1997 and 2007, when an estimated 125,000 died by their own hand.

Khan (his 2001 film *Lagaan* was nominated for an Academy Award) has not made a Bollywood film with singing and dancing, though his shrewd use of color and music shows how these cultural motifs can mask the perception of reality. *Peepli Live* is a satire about India's ineffectual and corrupt government, the media, and the human collateral damage of single-crop farming using genetically modified seed provided by global agribusiness. Both government and industry envision a big financial return for this policy.

In 2010, *Peepli Live* became the first foreign film ever to be shown in competition at the Sundance Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize.

Anusha Rizvi wrote the screenplay and codirected it with her husband, Mahmood Farooqui. Their freshman effort has created a film that is as entertaining as it is dreadful.

Natha (Omkar Das Manikpuri) and Budhia (Raghuvir Yadav) are brothers who live in the small farming village of Peepli.

Natha's wife, Dhaniya (Shalini Vatsa), and their two sons share the home along with the brothers' fire-breathing, pot-smoking invalid mother, Amma (Farukh Jaffer). When the brothers default on their farm loan, they appeal to a local politician who is standing for election for help. He laughs them off and suggests that one of them commit suicide because the government pays about \$2,000 as compensation to the family of each farmer who kills himself. The family can use the money to pay off the loan. The brothers decide that Natha, who is smarter than he looks, should be the one to die.

A journalist overhears the conversation and the next day the news of Natha's impending suicide is on the front page of the local paper. A major television network learns the news and sends a reporter and crew to interview the family and film the event. Soon, news vans from around the country arrive, creating chaos in the small

village. The story makes its way to the minister of agriculture, who is also running for re-election. He believes the country needs more industry rather than farming, which confuses television reporters and audiences alike. The local head of a nonprofit group that distributes pumps for wells drops one off at the family's hut in the hope that this will prevent Natha's drastic action. When they ask the man for the parts that connect it to the well, he says that the organization only provides the pump and drives off. The brothers move the pump to their shack and it becomes part of the furniture, a symbol for ineffectual foreign benevolence.



The film's title, 'Peepli Live,' refers, of course, to the television

news coverage of the upcoming suicide. The film is darkly funny, sharply satirical and sad. Director Rizvi explains that she first saw the story about farmer suicides in a brief television news story and decided that she needed to respond in some way. It took her five years to write and refine the screenplay. She calls herself an 'accidental' filmmaker who wanted to reflect the reality of the situation. This is an impressive first effort.

The actors, for the most part, are not professionals. Their lack of pretense and artifice is greatly appealing. However, Jaffer is a well-known actress in India. Here, she is a shrew no one will ever tame, although her daughter-in-law is determined to try.

The human rights themes of 'Peepli Live' are made visible through the abuses and negligence in this fictional tale where government is a charade and a greedy minor partner to global corporations. The suicides due to crop failure and loan defaults continue today, although precise numbers are not easy to determine. According to one calculation in 2008, 1,000 farmers a day commit suicide in India.

Although the payment to families of suicide victims (by the way, suicide is illegal in India) is meant to help a family manage, this policy became an incentive for a family's survival.

'Peepli Live' reminds me of John Sayles' 1997 'Men With Guns' ('Hombres Armados'). In that film's fictional Central American country, devastated by war between government soldiers and guerrillas over land rights, people are starving because the country has been parceled into crop specialties such as coffee or corn. People no longer grow their own food. When the single crops fail or the market is bad, there is no cash to buy food, but there are no supermarkets or farmers' markets anyway.

Much of the world lives a bleak existence because of the clash and crush created by unguided globalization and the creeping and deadly drudging pace of national infrastructures to catch up. The disconnect between the powerless dirt farmers and the powerful estates of government, industry and media depicted in 'Peepli Live' left me sad and somewhat breathless. 'Peepli Live,' through the universal language of film, lets us see another dimension of human reality and asks us to respond. Globalization does not have to be inhumane.

[Sr. Rose Pacatte, a member of the Daughters of St. Paul, is the director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles.]

**Support independent reporting on important issues.**



---

**Source URL (retrieved on 07/28/2017 - 14:15):** <https://www.ncronline.org/news/global/sharp-satire-illuminates-farmers%C3%AD-plight>

**Links:**

[1] <https://www.ncronline.org/donate?clickSource=article-end>