

FILM

## **Peepli Live**

**Abhijit Ghosh-Dastidar**

Anusha Rizvi's first directorial venture, "Peepli Live" (Hindi, colour, 115 mins), unrolls in an isolated village in Madhya Pradesh. A man in a car dreams he is running. He wakes up in a rural highway, in a milieu of villagers tilling land, camels on roadside, four-wheeler trekkers, three-wheeler autos, small town shops and demonstrations. Unshaven Natha (Omkar Das Manikpuri) and his brother, Buddhia (Raghuvir Yadav), both peasants, have just returned from a bank. Natha's wife, Dhariya (Shalini Vatsa) is furious when she learns that the cultivated land would be mortgaged to the bank, for failure to repay bank loans. With slippers, Dhariya beats up Natha and Buddhia. There is a close up of boiled eggs sold at a village shop, as stories of bank loans debt induced suicides amongst farmers spread. Buddhia's young wife had died in a well. Natha and Buddhia's old mother/Amma is bed ridden, and helpless in the economic distress. Local politicians and police discuss the new suicide Yojana Scheme, where by cash reward of Rs. 1 lac will be awarded to the family of any poor farmer committing suicide. There are quarrels over who would sacrifice life. TV news is full of forthcoming Madhya Pradesh bye-elections. Agricultural minister Salim Kidwa's (Naseruddin Shah) upholds farmers suicides out of national causes. Discussions flow on more of industrialization and Gonda caste—Communist raj. The district magistrate summons a newspaper editor for publishing news on farmers' suicides.

Natha shows limits to security of poor farmers, and decides to commit suicide. Journalists, TV crew and police arrive to speak to Natha. The district officer promises a gift of a tube well to Natha, with fitting costs. There are quarrels over TV interviews. Police lathi-charge. Buddhia and Natha cling on to their goats. Villagers indulge in songs and revelry. Dhariya is interviewed by TV channels. Politicians arrive with gifts. Natha has elevated the name of caste and community. Fairs, weaving threads, and ice-cream vending machines arrive in the village. The Chief Minister and election candidates request Natha not to commit suicide. The Union Secretary, Agriculture observes that government schemes do not allow benefits to farmers alive. There are candle light vigils for "Save Natha". Leaving his family, including the three children, Natha goes missing. Buddhia and a poor farmer, who has been tilling a vast pool, die of hunger, TV reporters, Rakesh(Vishal Sharma) and Nandini (Malika Shenoy) lead the TV onslaught, amidst head lights of procession of cars. A fire from a kerosene oil lamp leads to an incendiary, fatal casualty in a barn. Shankar Raman's zooming camera shifts from below poverty line cards scenario of villages to highways, to toll gates, to city flyovers, tracing Natha, now clean shaven, working as a construction labourer in a city. Anusha Rizvi's film is a strong satire, funny and fascinating. A highly mobile camera, with enormous angle variations, makes a moving showcase of rural poverty and political hypocrisy. Avoiding reportage, Rizvi's script builds a sturdy overview of rural life. The unfettered acting is immensely entertaining. □□□