

from human subjects. Its use must be regulated and cannot be left to the goodwill and largesse of corporations which are driven by profits. What about pharmacogenetic information based on DNA collected from subjects in trials? This is of value to pharmaceutical companies.

A myriad possibilities exist and we can only address the issues by building trust and sharing among scientists, society and

industry. And we will have to travel some distance to reach that state of affairs. Unlike in the USA during Henrietta Lacks' period, we have no racial divide in India, but this is offset by economic and educational deprivation.

The book is a 'must read' for physicians, researchers, corporates in healthcare, social activists, and those engaged in medical ethics.

Talking reflections

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***Peepli [live]*. Aamir Khan Productions, 2010. Directors: Anusha Rizvi, Mahmood Farooqui. Hindi. 95 minutes.**

When Anusha Rizvi, a journalist who had no previous experience of movie making, came out with a movie on farmer suicides in Indian villages, the first reaction among many was surprise. It is not the sort of story one usually takes up for a career change. Neither is it part of the mainstream approach to Indian film making these days. In earlier times, meaningful stories were discussed by serious moviemakers like Shyam Benegal, Ketan Mehta, Goutam Ghosh, and others. As the intellectual middle class in our country has become more affluent, storytelling has moved from social issues to interpersonal conflicts. Still, with the change in focus we have had movies like *Firaaque* (by Nandita Das) with a serious discussion on social injustice.

Cinema has the power to remind us of the plain absurdity of our lives, and stimulate debate on how to deal with social issues. Anusha Rizvi's decision to present the subject as a satire and to underscore the callousness and hypocrisy of the media and political class in handling the plight of the poor in the country has worked perfectly. One reason for Rizvi's taking up such an approach could be because she herself knows the murkier side of Indian journalism. The race of journalists to get exclusive news for their channels and to accelerate their ratings is never ending. I remember BBC journalist Nik Gowing talking about the absurdity of television journalism, and the dangers of breaking news often without verifying facts. Satire is indeed the best way to bring out that dark side of journalism.

The movie *Peepli [live]* tells the story of two farmers, Natha and Budhia, living in a remote village, who are about to lose their land because of an unpaid bank loan. An easy solution to the problem was to avail of the government aid for families of farmers who have committed suicide because they are unable to pay off their debts. One English television channel picks up the story and, as expected, it becomes a national debate. Natha becomes a national symbol and every television channel anchor poses the question, will Natha actually commit suicide or not? Declaration of by-elections in that village also gives an extra insight on how

our government machinery works. Gradually, Natha, Budhia and family become just a backdrop and the whole scene is taken over by television journalists and politicians. Television anchors discussing farmers' suicides with politicians become the 'daily show' with 'breaking news' focusing on Natha's suicide threat. At once, we comprehend the striking similarity with our day-to-day prime time television viewing.

The advantage of satire is that one can extend the story to any level possible. Woody Allen uses satire to expose issues dealing with morality in man-woman relationships by creating characters that talk about whatever enters their minds. Chaplin used satire in his classic movie *Modern Times* to depict the plight of the working class in an industrialised society more vividly than any documentary film could have done. Here, in *Peepli [live]*, Rizvi has also tried to take it to the extreme. Besides all the laughs, the director is able to make the viewer think about the pathetic situation in which our country is. The brilliance of storytelling is in its details - like bringing in the deep-well pump into the house as one of the characters; the dream sequences of Natha; and the scene where all the characters are running around in circles trying to find Natha. The movie works by maintaining a hectic pace.

Besides, the music is a logical extension of the theme in the movie. The song *Des mera rangrez hai babu* almost summarises what present-day India is. ("*Arre India sir, ye cheez dhurandhar, Rang rangeela parjatantar*" Sir, this India is a great thing / This is a colourful democracy) A colourful democracy indeed! When the people are satisfied with the conclusion of the story (Natha's presumed death), all is quiet. The festival is over and everybody leaves the ground, except the people who live there. The character in the movie, digging the land as if to bury his own body, is a reminder that Natha's story never ends, because his life in the city could be another disaster in the making. Until he takes an unusual decision we never actually see people like him or worry about how they live. *Peepli [Live]* stands up as excellent art apart from being a mirror for our social conscience.