Peepli [Live]: A Social Satire on Contemporary India

by
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DEPARTMENT OF LIBERAL ARTS

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A Thesis submitted
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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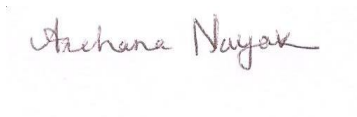**INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY HYDERABAD**

APRIL, 2015

Dedicated

to

my father, Pramod Kumar Nayak

and

my friends

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis represents my own ideas and words and where others ideas or words have been included; I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources. I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misrepresented, plagiarized, fabricated or falsified any idea/data/fact/source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will result in disciplinary action by the Institute and can also evoke penal action from the sources that have not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

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Short Abstract :
(Use separate sheet, if required)   Attached

Recommendation/Remarks of the M. Phil. Evaluation Committee: While the thesis certainly merits the award of a degree, the candidate could refer to a wider range of literature in taking the work forward.

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CERTIFICATE

It is certified that the work contained in the thesis entitled *"Peepli [Live]*: A Social Satire on Contemporary India"* submitted by Archana Nayak (Roll No. LA13M1001) in partial fulfillment of the degree of Master of Philosophy to the Department of Liberal Arts, Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad, is a record of bonafide research work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance. The results embodied in the thesis have not been submitted to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree or diploma.

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CONTENTS

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I would like to state that any errors in this thesis are because of me.

Abstract

Films may be regarded as a powerful medium of expression that convey information on the history, civilization, philosophy, politics, education and religion of a given culture. Over decades, societal and environmental factors have been a major source of creative inspiration for filmmakers in India. Accordingly, contemporary Indian films have incorporated themes relevant to today's times such as individual conflicts, societal hierarchy, corrupt bureaucracy, commercialization of religion, politics, educational systems, mental disorders, and terrorism among others. A powerful example of this is obtained in the film *Peepli [Live]* (2010) which is believed to have been produced as a response to a spate of farmer suicides that took place in India since the 1990s. It is the story of a farmer who considers committing suicide so that his family can benefit from the compensation offered by the government. The film also raises other related issues such as the general apathy of political leaders and the insensitivity of the media towards impoverished farmers. *Peepli [Live]* uses black humor to introduce these issues and leaves the audience with pertinent questions about current socio-political systems and the uncertainties about the nation's future. Accordingly, the present study is devoted towards examining *Peepli [Live]* which remains significantly under-researched by scholars of Indian cinema. This thesis focuses on the description of three themes that have been presented in the film, namely, black humor, media and sensationalism; and gender subversion. This is achieved by drawing attention to particular elements in the film such as the background, storyline, characters, and conflicts. It is expected that this will help understand how the film was successful in highlighting rural India's lived reality and why it has garnered tremendous national and international acclaim.

Synopsis

The history of films in India is more than a century old. Over the years, mainstream Hindi films have largely dominated the Indian film industry. However, regional and parallel films have also been wholeheartedly accepted and appreciated by the audiences and critics from time to time. Every decade has witnessed a number of outstanding films in terms of story, technique, and acting. Films may thus be regarded as a powerful medium of expression that convey useful information on history, civilization, philosophy, politics, education and religion.

In recent times, perhaps more than ever before, Indian filmmakers have experimented with unique themes. These reflect the socio-cultural changes that have taken place in the country at specific times. Over the decades, societal and environmental factors have provided creative inspiration to filmmakers in India. Accordingly, contemporary Indian films have incorporated themes related to social and interpersonal processes relevant to today's times. In attempting to do so, they have worked on a wide variety of topics such as child labor, polygamy, adultery, individual conflicts, alternative sexuality, rural upliftment, prostitution, societal hierarchy, corrupt bureaucracy, commercialization of religion, migration, nationalist politics, educational system, mental disorders, and terrorism among others. Many filmmakers committed to the cause of portraying socially relevant issues in a realistic manner have created films that have become immensely popular. This also makes an interesting topic of study for research scholars who are interested in examining the current trends and issues in the area. These new age films not only provide entertainment to the audience by providing stories they can relate to, but also contribute to society by spreading awareness among the masses about problematics that may have otherwise been limited to discussions amongst politicians and educationists. This trend has been

observed mostly in films releasing after 2000 which not only introduced new topics but were also being made using newer technology and were therefore visually more attractive.

Peepli [Live] may be described as an extremely avant-garde film, produced at time when the Indian film industry was experimenting with compelling and socially relevant scripts. The story emerges from a complex background and has a strong local as well as national relevance. The film depicts a number of critical issues faced by farmers, the current system of local and national politics, and the media in India. *Peepli [Live]* uses black humor to introduce these issues and leaves the audience with pertinent questions about the current system and the uncertainties about future. While the film is essentially the story of a farmer who considers committing suicide so that his family can benefit from the compensation offered by the government, it also highlights other related issues such as the general apathy of political leaders and the insensitivity of the media towards impoverished farmers. *Peepli [Live]* was released at a time when the issue of farmer suicides was a burning topic of discussion in the political, media and academic circles. Although the events that are shown in the film are fictitious, the theme is believed to have emerged from a spate of farmer suicides in India that took place since the 1990s. Evidence on this issue is found in scholarly writings that highlight the distress of farmers and helps one understand why this resulted in the farmers ending their lives. Notably, *Peepli [Live]* has received much critical as well commercial acclaim. The filmmaker's attempt to make people aware of issues underlying various systems and structures in society did manage to strike a chord with the audience. Moreover, the depiction of issues in a realistic and comic manner was successful in conveying a strong message about the condition of current politics and media in India. Given this background on films in general and *Peepli [Live]* in particular, this study is

specifically devoted towards examining *Peepli [Live]* which remains significantly under-researched by scholars of Indian cinema. It begins with a general overview on Indian films and contextualizes *Peepli [Live]* in the first chapter titled "Cinema, Contemporary India, and *Peepli [Live]*." This study then offers a close reading of the said film by focusing on the depiction of three themes, namely, black humor, media and sensationalism; and gender subversion. The objective of this work is to explore in-depth these three themes in *Peepli [Live]*, and to discuss the serious social and political issues vis-à-vis contemporary India that the film addresses using a satirical undertone.

The first thematic chapter titled "Black Humor in *Peepli [Live]*" elaborates how black humor is used in *Peepli [Live]* in order to address a whole host of serious events. The film is a satire on contemporary India that in turn is plagued by social and political corruption. This chapter, therefore, presents the textual composition of humorous material and visual art in *Peepli [Live]*. It begins with a broad overview on the psychological and sociological function of humor. It defines humor according to twentieth century and contemporary theorists and attempts to inform its readers about the close association between humor and laughter. A broad overview of available literature through some scholarly essays is provided which discuss black humor as a corrosive form of comedy, and the development of comedy in works of art. The chapter also offers an analytical understanding of humor and its use in literature, theatre and film. This corrosive form of humor has often been employed by artists, filmmakers and writers in their attempt to highlight the malignancies plaguing society. The use of black humor in comedy films, paintings or in literature which is essentially a twentieth century European phenomenon has been found to convey extremely serious issues in a non-serious manner. In other words, black humor

may be considered a powerful method of dealing with serious issues in a manner that sounds amusing instead of tragic. Notably, the function of black humor is two-fold: it creates spontaneous laughter, while leading to a greater understanding of serious issues.

Black humor in films is a device that gains approval by depicting a reality that is being ridiculed. Many films employ dark themes such as death and destruction as an important factor around which the plot is woven. However creating comedy out of tragedy is less popular. By the use of dark humor in films, the film maker attempts to present society's fears and uncertainties to the viewer. Comical situations, eccentric characters, and peculiar stories are used as ingredients in the hope that this incongruity may convey the message that may not be sometimes possible through direct storytelling. The protagonists in black comedy are somewhat different from other films owing to the bleakness of storytelling that defines the genre. Instead of sympathizing with their plight, the audience is encouraged to laugh. For these reasons, many filmmakers sought to move beyond seriousness and developed a unique way to explore parody in films in the form of black humor. Viewers also embraced this new vision as they found that conventional values could be questioned without the risk of being criticized. This chapter analyzes instances from *Peepli [Live]* where the effective use of black humor has managed to present grave issues such as death, destruction, and hopelessness in a manner which neither trivializes not exaggerates these concerns but successfully conveys the message to the audience. Some instances that have been discussed are related to Hori Mahato's death, the village's concern about Natha's impending suicide, and the reckless behavior of the media. In this manner, the chapter aims to understand the intelligent use of black humor to narrate the story of the film.

The second thematic chapter titled "Media and Sensationalism in *Peepli [Live]*" explores the depiction of contemporary Indian media and its machinations in the film. It seeks to establish an understanding on the growth of media, both print and visual, in India over the years and its role in shaping and influencing modern India. To contextualize Indian media, this chapter examines several concepts that have been put forth by researchers working in the field of media studies which in turn demonstrate how the media has grown over time and fashioned the Indian society. This section particularly sheds the light on the history and growth in terms of ethical role of Indian Press, Prasar Bharati, All India Radio, Doordarshan and private channels in India. The launch of television media made a huge difference to the style of presentation as they started covering news instantly as it happened. Television became one of the most powerful medium of mass communication by imparting education, information and entertainment at the same time. Reality television shows and news channels gained popularity among the Indian audience with their novel style of presentation. Not surprisingly, the flavor of emotional drama through reality shows and live telecast of news channels became more influential as they reached the audience. However, the private channel owners became more and more tuned toward commercializing their programs through sensational reporting and live telecasts. Some scholarly essays have been referred to in order to understand several related aspects of faulty news reporting including sensationalism and selective or biased presentations in news channels. Furthermore, this chapter focuses on the media's propagandist discourses and the media boom in India and; discusses empowerment of the media in India which can discover new methods of highlighting existing issues in challenging and dynamic ways. This chapter makes references to instances from *Peepli [Live]* in which the issues highlighted in this chapter are depicted. These include the media's attempts at making a reality show out of Natha's plight, the media's apathy towards people like

Hori Mahato, honest attempts such as that of Rakesh's go in vain and the cut throat competition between news channels due to which young professionals such as Nandita are caught in a vicious cycle of deceit, greed, and immorality.

The final thematic chapter, "Subversion of Gender Stereotypes in *Peepli [Live]*," addresses the depiction of gender stereotypes in the film *Peepli [Live]* and argues that this film systematically satirizes and subverts some of the most common stereotypes associated with the masculine and the feminine gender. In order to contextualize the problematic of gender, this chapter offers an introduction to research on gender from major theoretical perspectives which is followed by a section on gender stereotypes in the Indian cultural context focusing on films that have addressed the issue of gender roles. The concept of gender may be considered a popular topic of research with a wide range of applicability and has attracted the interest of researchers from a variety of disciplines such as humanities, social sciences and medicine. Characteristics such as patriarchy, matriarchy, femininity, and masculinity are used to identify roles of individuals. The use of such terms makes individuals conscious about their gender and reinforces stereotypical behavior that in turn shows them the way to fulfill a specific role and responsibility as a social being. Gender thus not only differentiates between men and women and later explains what men and women can do, but it may be considered as a systematic way of understanding men and women socially and culturally and the relationships between them. This chapter outlines gender as a cultural construction particularly in relation to the issues of subjectivity of males and females. It then explores select Hindi films from 1950s till date, over each decade, which is attempted to subvert gender roles in India. Finally, the depiction of gender roles in *Peepli [Live]*

is examined in an attempt to understand how this film produces an unconventional take on cultural stereotypes regarding men and women in India.

Thus the main objective of this work is to analyze the film *Peepli [Live]* through the three themes discussed above. This is achieved by drawing attention to particular elements in the film such as background, storyline, characters, and conflicts. It is expected that this will help to understand how the film was successful in highlighting many real life issues, as well as the contribution of these elements to the film's tremendous success.

Introduction

The history of films in India is more than a century old. Over the years, mainstream Hindi films have largely dominated the Indian film industry. However, regional and 'parallel' films have also been wholeheartedly accepted and appreciated by the audiences and critics from time to time. Every decade has witnessed a number of outstanding films in terms of story, technique, and acting. In recent times, perhaps more than ever before, filmmakers have experimented with unique themes. These reflect the socio-cultural changes that have taken place in the country at specific times. Films may thus be regarded as a powerful medium of expression that convey useful information on history, civilization, philosophy, politics, education and religion in India. This is reflected in the writing of Priya Jaikumar who in her essay "Bollywood Spectacular" (2003) appropriately states that "film in India is a prolific and inundating medium" (24). According to Jaikumar, "typically, a Hindi film refuses to play by western norms of realism. If Hollywood has techniques that permit its fictional world to appear internally coherent and invisibly put together, Indian films are orchestrated by another sensibility of coherence and reality" (27). The essay "Real and Imagined Audiences: *Lagaan* and the Hindi film after the 1990s" (2002) by Rachel Dwyer, presents rich information about Hindi films in India after the 1990s. In this context, Dwyer makes an interesting observation that "two of 2001's biggest hits were not romances but historical films about subalterns" (177). The *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* (1999) by Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen explores the history of Indian cinema in which the authors have attempted to explain several aspects of the Hindi film industry such as the appeal of the popular or 'masala' films.

Over the decades, societal and environmental factors have been a major source of creative inspiration for Indian filmmakers**.** Accordingly, Indian films have recurrently incorporated themes related to social and interpersonal processes relevant to the viewers. In attempting to do so, they have worked on a wide variety of topics such as child labor, polygamy, adultery, individual conflicts, alternative sexuality, rural upliftment, prostitution, societal hierarchy, corrupt bureaucracy, commercialization of religion, migration, nationalist politics, educational system, mental disorders, terrorism and so on. Many filmmakers committed to the cause of portraying socially relevant issues in a realistic manner have created films that have become immensely popular. This is because the contemporary Indian audience is more appreciative and accepting of films being made on unique subjects than before. Thus, depiction of lived realities in films such as *Peepli [Live]*, *I am Kalam*, *Well Done Abba*, *Udaan* are becoming increasingly popular amongst filmmakers. These new age films not only provide entertainment to the audience by providing stories they can relate to, but also contribute to society by spreading awareness among the masses about problematics that may have otherwise been limited to discussions amongst politicians and educationists. This trend has been observed mostly in films releasing after 2000 which not only introduced new topics but were also made using newer technology and were therefore visually more attractive. Many of these films became immensely successfully and some are now referred to as path-breaking films.

Perhaps the precursor to this new age Indian cinema was *Dil Chahta Hai* directed by Farhan Akhtar in 2001 which won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Hindi. The story offered insight into the city-oriented life style largely

portraying the contemporary Indian youth in their cosmopolitan ways. Another film *Lagaan* (2001), directed by Ashutosh Gowarikar, received wide recognition for its interesting portrayal of a cricket match between the British and the rural Indians set in an Indian village during pre-independence era. Likewise, a notable film *Munna Bhai MBBS* was released in 2003 and won the National Award in 2004 for Best Popular Film. It narrates the comic story of a criminal attending medical school to fulfill his father's dream. Several other films made during this decade covered a wide variety of topics such as *Gangajaal* (2003) directed by Prakash Jha which portrayed an honest police officer and his struggle against the 'gundaraaj', *Black Friday* (2004) directed by Anurag Kashyap which narrated the true story of the Mumbai bomb blast in 1993, *Swadesh* (2004) directed by Ashutosh Gowarikar which depicted a young NRI NASA project manager's return to his village, *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) that tells the story of a dyslexic child; and subsequently won the National Film Award for Best Film on Family Welfare. These films have received strong critical acclaim due to their realistic renditions of pressing socio-cultural issues. Other than these, several low budget films became unexpectedly successful due to the touching stories they narrated. Some of these include *Iqbal* (2005) which was about a boy's obsession with cricket and his struggle to play the game despite physical challenges, *Dor* (2006) which explores the story of two women fighting against all odds, *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008) that describes rural India, *Udaan* (2010) which narrates the story of a child's struggles during his growing up years. Several other niche films such as *Peepli [Live]*, *No One Killed Jessica*, *Well Done Abba*, *Dhobi Ghat*, *I am Kalam*– all released in 2010 and 2011 have re-emphasized the importance of content-driven films. *Dhobi Ghat* (2010)

portrays the lives of four individuals as well as the city of Mumbai. Likewise, *Well Done Abba* (2009) is a political satire that won the 2009 National Film Award for Best Film on Social issues. The more recent *PK* (2014) presents the current concepts of religion and religious practices through the perception of an alien who visits Earth. The interest of filmmakers in making films on such varied topics has contributed tremendously to the cultural and social scenario in India. Audiences have accepted these unique and unusual stories and this has in turn inspired film directors and producers to experiment more with new themes. For instance, films like *3 Idiots* (2009), *Oh my God* (2012), and *PK* (2014) have not only attracted the attention of critics but have also influenced the general audience. While *3 Idiots* is a social commentary on the educational system and tracks the lives of three friends in an engineering institute, *Oh My God* may be considered as a film with a strong social message on the commercialization of religion in India. The films discussed above have successfully demonstrated the complexity of human emotions and persuasively presented issues related to religion, philosophy, education and human relationships.

Peepli [Live] may be described as an extremely avant-garde film, produced at time when the Indian film industry was experimenting with compelling and socially relevant scripts. The story emerges from a complex background and has a strong local as well as national relevance. The film depicts a number of critical issues faced by farmers, the current system of local and national politics, and the media in India. *Peepli [Live]* uses black humor to introduce these issues and leaves the audience with pertinent questions about the current system and the uncertainties about the future. While the film is essentially the story of a farmer who considers committing suicide so

that his family can benefit from the compensation offered by the government, it also highlights other related issues such as the general apathy of political leaders and the insensitivity of the media towards impoverished farmers. *Peepli [Live]* was released at a time when the issue of farmer suicides was a burning topic of discussion in the political, media and academic circles. Although the events that are shown in the film are fictitious, the theme is believed to have emerged from a spate of farmer suicides in India that took place since the 1990s. Evidence on this issue is found in scholarly writings that highlight the distress of farmers and helps one understand why this resulted in the farmers ending their lives. Notably, *Peepli [Live]* has received much critical as well commercial acclaim. The filmmaker's attempt to make people aware of issues underlying various systems and structures in society did manage to strike a chord with the audience. Moreover, the depiction of issues in a realistic and comic manner was successful in conveying a strong message about the condition of current politics and media in India. Given this background on films in general and *Peepli [Live]* in particular, this study is specifically devoted towards examining *Peepli [Live]* which remains significantly under-researched by scholars of Indian cinema. It begins with a general overview on Indian films and contextualizes *Peepli [Live]* in the first chapter titled "Cinema, Contemporary India, and *Peepli [Live].*" This study then offers a close reading of the said film by focusing on the depiction of three themes, namely, black humor, media and sensationalism; and gender subversion. The objective of this work is to explore in-depth these three themes in *Peepli [Live]*, and to discuss the serious social and political issues vis-à-vis contemporary India that the film addresses using a satirical undertone.

The first thematic chapter titled "Black Humor in *Peepli [Live]*" elaborates how dark humor is used in *Peepli [Live]* in order to address a whole host of serious events. The film is a satire on contemporary India that in turn is plagued by social and political corruption. This chapter, therefore, examines the textual composition of humorous material and visual art in *Peepli [Live]*. It begins with a broad overview on the psychological and sociological function of humor. It defines humor according to twentieth century and contemporary theorists and attempts to inform its readers about the close association between humor and laughter. A broad overview of available literature through some scholarly essays is provided which discuss black humor as a corrosive form of comedy, which is followed by the development of comedy in works of art. The chapter also offers an analytical understanding of humor and its use in literature, theatre and film. It asserts that black humor has often been employed by artists, filmmakers and writers in their attempt to highlight the malignancies plaguing society. This chapter examines how the use of black humor in comedy films, paintings and in literature, which is essentially a twentieth century European phenomenon, has been found to convey extremely serious issues in a non-serious manner. Robert Mckee in his book *Story*, mentions that contemporary comedy is dictated by subject, setting, role, event and values and the subgenres of parody, satire, sitcom, romantic, screwball, farce and black comedy are all differentiated by their focus on comic attack such as bureaucratic folly, upper-class manners, teenage courtship etc. and the degree of ridicule which can be gentle, caustic or lethal. In other words, black humor may be considered a powerful method of dealing with serious issues in a manner that sounds

amusing instead of tragic. Notably, the function of black humor is two-fold: it creates spontaneous laughter, while leading to a greater understanding of serious issues.

Accordingly, this chapter analyzes the close association between black humor and the theatre of the absurd. Black humor has been found in the theatre of the absurd, specifically in the major works of modern playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov and Eugene Ionesco. Themes including absence, emptiness, nothingness, and unresolved mysteries are central features in many absurdist plays comprising the theatre of the absurd. The characters hardly display individuality and appear to be caught in a nexus of forces they can barely fathom. As a result, it is often unclear whether their actions are meant to represent real happenings or a surreal world of nightmares. Absurd plays are meant to represent greater social awareness about dislocation, bewilderment, ambiguous situations, replacement and complete obscurity. The chapter further claims the projection of black humor in 20th century British and American theatre necessarily draws the reader's attention towards the manifestation of black humor in Anglo American films. The book titled *20th Century British Drama* (2001) presents a cogent overview of the major theatrical movements and dramatic genres in prevalent during the 20th century which depicted traces of dark comedy. It discusses how the criticism of British theatre and its social, political and historical contexts owe much to three critics named Brecht, Brook and Edgar. It further depicts the importance of Edwardian theatre, and Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw's works. While *Ghosts* and *A Doll's House* by Ibsen are brilliant masterpieces of familial angst, *Pygmalion* (1914) addresses controversial subject matter such as prostitution, philandering and profiteering, and all of it through the use of dark

comedy. It also notes that famous American playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee also used dark comedy to express the alienation and existential crisis faced by the modern human self.

Black humor in films is a device that depicts painful reality through the lens of ridicule and burlesque. Many films employ dark themes such as death and destruction as an important factor around which the plot is woven. However, creating comedy out of tragedy is less popular. By the use of dark humor in films, the film maker attempts to present society's fears and uncertainties to the viewer. Comical situations, eccentric characters, and complex story-lines are used as ingredients in the hope that this incongruity may convey the message that is otherwise impossible to project through direct storytelling. A straightforward narration may not help the viewer get a novel perspective on the situation. The dark subject matter in such films indicates the protagonist's helplessness, fearfulness and indecisiveness. However, the comic expression of the same character or the observation of a situation through humor can be more effective in conveying life's absurdities. It may, therefore, be asserted that this genre in films makes it possible for the audience to re-evaluate individual failures, distorted thinking and life's misfortunes, all of which make up human existence. The element of black humor employed in films is an effective method of conveying all of these factors in a less serious manner than it really is. This encourages the audience to question certain situations and the behavior of characters. The protagonists in black comedy are somewhat different from other films owing to the bleakness of storytelling that defines the genre. Instead of sympathizing with their plight, the audience feels encouraged to laugh. For these reasons, many filmmakers seek to move beyond

seriousness and develop a unique way to explore parody in films in the form of black humor. Viewers also embrace this new vision as they find that conventional values can be questioned without the risk of being criticized.

This chapter also provides an overview of the theories of humor in Indian dramaturgy, specifically the depiction of black humor in contemporary Indian literature and Hindi films. The tradition of humor in India can be traced to ancient Sanskrit dramaturgy. Bharata Muni's *Natyasastra* defines humor as *hasya rasa* that is one of the *nava rasas*, which in turn, may be interpreted as emotional responses. *Hasya rasa* or humor is found in Indian culture, literature, art and theatre; and has been represented in various forms and guises over centuries. One of the best examples of humor in Indian folklore and mythology are the interactions between Akbar and Birbal which are enjoyed by children and adults alike. In theatre, humor is conveyed to the audience through their understanding of bhavas (the imitation of emotions that the actors perform). The element of black humor has been explored by a number of contemporary playwrights in India. Theatre in India has had a strong influence on the Indian cinematic world and other forms of creative art. The history of satire and black comedy in Indian theatre has explored social, political, cultural and feminist concepts that shape India. It must be noted that Indian theatre today is also strongly influenced by 20th century British and American playwrights. Black humor has been employed by playwrights including Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani. Badal Sircar's work in the 1960's such as *Evam Indrajit* (And Indrajit) (1963) was based on the themes of meaninglessness, identity crisis, and social conformity. Black humor has gained much acceptance and prominence amongst Indian writers and

filmmakers in recent times. Works by Upamanyu Chatterjee, Arun Kolatkar, Kundan Shah, Anurag Kashyap, Vishal Bharadwaj, Abhishek Chaubey, and Raj Kumar Hirani have regularly incorporated serious themes in non-serious ways. This has helped in delivering powerful messages to the target audience in an indirect manner; thereby allowing them to examine a serious subject from newer perspectives. Upamanyu Chatterjee in his novel *English, August* uses black humor to exhibit certain personality characteristics in his protagonist Agastya Sen who is city born, highly qualified, and disinterested in his job. Similarly, Arun Kolatkar's poems use black humor in describing a number of everyday situations. This is evident in his work including *Kala Ghoda* and *Jejuri*. Kolatkar's early poetry was radically experimental and displayed European influences. There were instances depicting surrealism, expressionism, existentialism and beat generation poetry. His poems may be best described as whimsical, dark, sinister and at times, exceedingly funny.

Like in literature, so in mainstream Indian films, black humor has often been used as a powerful tool for social correction. Directors such as Kundan Shah, Anurag Kashyap, Vishal Bharadwaj, Abhishek Chaubey and Raj Kumar Hirani have also frequently come forth with themes of drug and alcohol abuse, teenage angst, extreme rage and frustration, political conflicts, self-destruction and revenge in their films in a direct but non-serious manner. Earlier, films such as *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* (1983), *Munna Bhai MBBS* (2004), and more recently, *3 Idiots* (2009), *Oh My God* (2012) and *PK* (2014) question the contemporary social institutions and their numerous lacunae that persistently trouble the Indian society. Finally, this chapter analyzes instances from *Peepli [Live]* where the effective use of black humor has managed to present

grave issues such as death, destruction, and hopelessness in a manner which neither trivializes not exaggerates these concerns but successfully conveys the message to the audience. Some instances that have been discussed are related to Hori Mahato's death, the village's concern about Natha's impending suicide, and the reckless behavior of the media. In this manner, this chapter aims to understand the intelligent use of black humor that the film employs for narrativizing.

The second thematic chapter titled "Media and Sensationalism in *Peepli [Live]*" explores the depiction of contemporary Indian media and its machinations in the film. It seeks to establish an understanding on the growth of media, both print and visual, in India over the years and its role in shaping and influencing modern India. To contextualize Indian media, this chapter examines several concepts that have been put forth by researchers working in the field of media studies which in turn demonstrate how the media has grown over time and fashioned the Indian society. This section sheds light on the history and growth of the ethical role of Indian Press, Prasar Bharati, All India Radio, Doordarshan and private channels in India. To historicize Indian media, the chapter employs the views of Inder Malhotra, a prominent political commentator and an Indian journalist, from the magazine *Media Mimansa: Media Critique* where he states that "there was no such thing as the media in India. Indian press was born in 1780 with the publication of Hickey's Gazette" (67). Malhotra adds that the press at that time was dominated by a handful of major English language newspapers which were published from the four metropolitan cities- *The Statesman* from Calcutta and Delhi, *The Times of India* from Bombay, *Hindustan Times* from Delhi and *The Hindu* from Madras. In addition to these newspapers, Hickey's Gazette

targeted a readership among the East India Company nabobs. It was observed that the press had begun intervening for causes such as social welfare and public awareness soon after India's independence. This led to the press being viewed as a responsible social structure and therefore a respectable body in society. It was also noticed that the style of writing in Indian press was Victorian, to begin with, and its contents were always serious and thought-provoking. *Blitz* and *Current*, were two popular tabloids published from Bombay during this period and were considered exceptional for their interpretations of socio-cultural issues. At this point, there was also a rise in the production of newspapers in Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, Marathi, and other regional languages. The total circulation of English language newspapers continued to be higher than of Hindi ones up to the 1980s despite the fact that most Indians did not follow English. In fact, Malhotra cites that "only two per cent Indians understood English against 40 per cent Indians who spoke Hindi" (67). Nevertheless, the popularity of the English newspaper remained as a part of the colonial legacy. The former subsidiary of *Reuters* appeared in a new avatar known as the *Press Trust of India* and later on the *United Press of India* which were developed as the two main news agencies across India. Eventually, these two sources converged into one that was known as the *United News of India*. The report of Sam Pitroda Expert Committee on Prasar Bharati summarizes that while radio broadcasting started in India in the 1920s, the name Akashvani was adopted in 1956. Also, television broadcasting began in Delhi from 1959 and was given a separate identity as Doordarshan (DD) in 1976" (Sam Pitroda Expert Committee on Prasar Bharati, 2014). Doordarshan appeared in India in the late twentieth century and early broadcasts were all in black and white.

The launch of television media made a huge difference to the style of presentation as they started covering news instantly as it happened. Television became one of the most powerful medium of mass communication by imparting education, information and entertainment at the same time. NDTV's report, *Public Broadcasting in India,* by Kunal Srivastava, cites that television broadcast started in India under the AIR. Early programs were generally educational programs, many of them targeted at school children and farmers. A number of community television sets were set up in Delhi's rural areas as well as schools around Delhi for the Indian audience. Television centers were inaugurated in other parts of the country and Doordarshan, which was the arm of AIR before, became a separate body. Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) was an important step taken by government of India to use television for better communication. Most of the programs were produced by Doordarshan and were telecasted twice daily. In the history of Indian television, a major event was the coverage the ninth Asian Games. After that, the government of India sanctioned a huge expansion of Doordarshan and at the same time several transmitters were set up throughout the country. Programs like *Humlog*, *Buniyaad* and *Nukkad* were immensely popular in during the eighties. According to the report by the Sam Pitroda Expert Committee on Prasar Bharati, the "Prasar Bharati act in 1990 came into force" (Sam Pitroda Expert Committee on Prasar Bharati, 2014), and soon Doordarshan along with AIR, was converted into Government Corporation under Prasar Bharati. With a humble beginning as a part of AIR, Doordarshan grew into a major television broadcaster. Regional Language Satellite channels, State Networks, International channels and All India channels like DD National, DD News, DD Sports, DD

Gyandarshan, DD Bharati, Loksabha channel and DD Urdu appeared on screen. Eventually satellite channels too appeared in competence to Doordarshan with the purpose of disseminating education and entertainment. In vision and goal, the statement is found from the Sam Pitroda Expert Committee on Prasar Bharati that "a living and vibrant archive is the backbone of any media organization" (Sam Pitroda Expert Committee on Prasar Bharati, 2014).

With globalization satellite television was launched in India, and Star TV, Aaj Tak, NDTV, Zee were introduced which soon became popular among Indian viewers. The plain truth was that the audience of Indian television was waiting for a shift from the didacticism and seriousness of Doordarshan programs. Soon a number of private channels emerged and the so called new media reached out to greater segments of viewers. As a result, reality television shows and news channels gained popularity among the Indian audience with their novel style of presentation. Not surprisingly, the flavor of emotional drama through reality shows and live telecast of news channels became more influential as they reached the audience. However the private channel owners became more and more tuned toward commercializing their programs through sensational reporting and live telecasts. Some scholarly essays have been referred to in order to understand several related aspects of faulty news reporting including sensationalism and selective or biased presentations in news channels.

Having provided a detailed overview of Indian media, this chapter focuses on media's propagandist discourses and its boom in India; and discusses empowerment of the media in India that is required to address issues in challenging and dynamic ways. This chapter makes references to instances from *Peepli [Live]* in which the corruption,

the apathy and the futility of India media are highlighted. These include the media's attempts at making a reality show out of Natha's plight, the media's indifference towards people's plight and the cut throat competition between news channels due to which young professionals are caught in a vicious cycle of deceit, greed, and immorality.

The third and final thematic chapter, "Subversion of Gender Stereotypes in *Peepli [Live]*," addresses how gender stereotypes are debunked in the film *Peepli [Live]* and argues that this film systematically satirizes and subverts some of the most common stereotypes associated with the masculine and the feminine gender. In order to contextualize the problematic of gender, this chapter offers an introduction into research on gender from major theoretical perspectives which is followed by a section on gender stereotypes in the Indian cultural context focusing on films that have addressed the issue of gender roles. The concept of gender may be considered a popular topic of research with a wide range of applicability. This broad field of inquiry has attracted the interest of researchers from a variety of disciplines such as humanities, social sciences and medicine. Gender refers to attitudes, behaviors, and feelings which often emerge from cultural associations with a person's biological sex. These associations when compatible with cultural expectations are known to be gender normative while behavior which is incompatible with these expectations is known to be unconventional. The role of gender is evident in interpersonal relationships as well as in social institutions. Characteristics such as patriarchy, matriarchy, femininity, and masculinity are used to identify roles of individuals. The use of such terms makes individuals conscious about their gender and reinforces stereotypical behavior that in

turn shows them the way to fulfill a specific role and responsibility as a social being. Judith Butler's theorization of gender introduces the notion of 'performativity' in the *Gender Trouble* (1990). Here, the author presents the idea that gender is involuntarily 'performed' within dominant social discourses. Notably, the reason why a substantial shift in women's and men's lives since 1960s has happened in the west may be explained using Butler's ideas. Women's and men's role and their performances have changed drastically over the past few decades. This has added new dimensions to the discussions presented by prominent gender critics and theorists. In 2006, Sara Salih stated in *On Judith Butler and Performativity* that, "gender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a 'doing' rather than a 'being'" (55). Sara Salih cites Butler, who in exploring the idea of gender in *Gender Trouble,* states that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender" (55). With time, the term gender came to be popularly used in social discourses, mostly in feminist writings. Gender thus not only differentiates between men and women and later explains what men and women can do, but it may be considered as a systematic way of understanding men and women socially and culturally and the relationships between them. Biologically, both men and women can take on masculine as well as feminine roles; however they are socialized to think and

to act in certain ways. This is reflected in Simone de Beauvior's declaration in *The Second Sex*, 1989 that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (vii).

To further the analysis of the theoretical underpinnings of gender it is worth taking into consideration the 10th edition of *Gender trouble*: *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2006) by Routledge Classics which, according to Judith Butler, produced "as a part of the cultural life of a collective struggle that has had, and will continue to have" in every concept related to gender. In *Gender trouble*: *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* Butler theorizes sex as natural and posits that it comes first while gender is perceived as a secondary construct which imposes itself over this natural distinction. Thus while gender does not draw political precursors, it is observed that politicization of gender often occurs. In the context of gender politicization, the body has an important role to play. The ideas and methods that portray the masculine and feminine body may create serious conflict. Further, this chapter outlines gender as a cultural construction particularly in relation to the issues of subjectivity of males and females. It then explores select Hindi films from 1950s till date, over each decade, which is attempted to subvert gender roles in India. Finally, the depiction of gender roles in *Peepli [Live]* is too examined in an attempt to understand how this film produces an unconventional take on cultural stereotypes regarding men and women in India.

Thus the main objective of this study is to analyze the film *Peepli [Live]* through the three themes discussed above. This is achieved by drawing attention to particular elements in the film such as background, storyline, characters, and conflicts. It is expected that this will help to understand how the film was successful in

highlighting many real life issues, as well as the contribution of these elements to the

film's tremendous success.

Chapter I

Cinema, Contemporary India, and *Peepli [Live]*

According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, "The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance." Like other forms of art, film making is the process of presenting stories with an aim to convey a message to the audience. The depiction of certain behaviors and outcomes in films often encourages the audience to think and understand the purpose of the characters. In other words, films may be considered a powerful tool for education as well as entertainment. Films, due to easy accessibility and high entertainment value, have always been a popular form of art. In 2010, Shyam Benegal in his essay "Talkies, Movies, Cinema" mentions that "film-makers are not necessarily serious thinkers; they are essentially story-tellers. The content for their stories may be drawn from any number of sources: observation of life; their own experience of it; combined with their flights of imagination and the imagining of others. In telling their stories through film, they create cultural works that are largely meant to entertain. These may, on occasion, succeed in providing insights into life and society" (12). For a long time, literature and films have been closely associated and both function as sources of inspiration to filmmakers who observe societal experience that they depict in their films. A film not only offers a narrative similar to literature, it also impacts sensory perception through the audio-visual medium resulting in an overall enriching experience.

In India, films of different genres, languages, and topics are made by numerous filmmakers all over India. The reactions to these films may differ from region to region as well. Therefore, film producers in India often consider audience responses in their decisions about making films. Not surprisingly, there is a group of filmmakers who have focused largely on entertaining the audience. However, films based on issues relevant to a particular community or group such as those who survived mental illness or were affected by partition, have also received attention from time to time. The awareness about Indian cinema which is often referred to as being larger than life has spread across the globe. In recent years, Hindi films have especially gained tremendously in terms of viewership. In an attempt to reach out to the global audience, film makers have added new aspects to their stories such as the non-resident Indian characters and the struggles of the elite class, among others.

The Growth of Hindi Films through Decades

Since the first silent feature film in India *Raja Harishchandra* (1913) was made by Dadasaheb Phalke, filmmaking as a profession grew rapidly and every decade witnessed some remarkable works. In the international platform India's first entry to the Oscars was the famous *Mother India* in 1957. In the meantime, Hindi as well as regional filmmakers had begun to explore a variety of themes mostly related to relationships, war, and on mythological stories from Indian great epics such as Mahabharata and Ramayana. From late 1940s to 1960s, pioneers such as Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Bimal Roy, Mrinal Sen, Tapan Sinha, Khwaja Ahmad Abaas, Buddhadeb Dasgupta, Chetan Anand, Guru Dutt, and Shyam Benegal began to make

films which later came to be considered as the milestones of Indian cinema. The silent film *Sawkari Pash* (Indian Shylock) 1925 by Baburao Painter is remembered for its heart-wrenching treatment of the subject matter, while films such as *Aurat* and *Allam Ara* created a sensation by depicting the lifestyle of women in that decade. In 1956, Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* was recommended for an Oscar submission but was finally not selected. However, the film won eleven international prizes including the Best Human Document at the 1956 Cannes Film Festival. Ray was an exceptional filmmaker whose works have been described as films that sensitively portray human conditions. *Mother India* directed by Mehboob Khan and released in 1957 brought global recognition to Indian cinema when it became the first Oscar nomination from India. After *Mother India*, there was a gap of many years until the next Oscar nomination *Salaam Bombay!* was released. *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) was directed by Mira Nair and was submitted for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language film. This was again followed by a gap of many years until *Lagaan* (2001) was nominated for the Academy Awards. This brought about worldwide popularity for the film. It is interesting to note that all these films were based on rural India and depicted issues such as poverty and exploitation of certain groups of individuals. These are themes that have inspired other filmmakers as well.

Films like *Neecha Nagar* (1946) *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953), *Pyaasa* (1957), *Uski Roti* (1970), *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* (1971), and *Ankur* (1974) were all based on similar issues and have gathered critical appreciation from India as well as international recognition. These films successfully depicted the stereotypical Indian psyche, miserable conditions of everyday life including poverty, injustice and vulnerability.

The 1970s also witnessed the emergence of 'Parallel Cinema' which is described as more realistic than mainstream Bollywood films that are dominated by songs and dances, and stories of romance and revenge. Parallel films on the other hand narrate stories of the common man and woman devoid of larger than life portrayals and glamour. Some common themes of such films include the struggles of a young educated man in finding employment, challenges in establishing an identity amidst struggles, and the resolution of a misunderstanding that disrupts an otherwise simple love story. Filmmakers such as Basu Bhattacharya, Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Mrinal Sen and Shyam Benegal and actors such as Amol Palekar, Farooq Shaikh, Om Puri, Naseeruddin Shah, Shabana Azmi, Deepti Naval, among many others are often mentioned among those associated with this new wave. The 1980s and 1990s were largely dominated by mainstream films made on a variety of topics starring famous actors and a storyline that caters to the masses and is commercially viable. Due to such characteristics, these films were often referred to as formula films.

Films releasing after 2000 not only introduced new topics but were also being made using newer technology and were therefore visually more attractive. Many of these films became immensely successfully and some are now referred to as path-breaking films. Of the unique films that were released in the beginning of this decade, *Dil Chahta Hai* directed by Farhan Akhtar in 2001 won National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Hindi. The story offered insight into the city-oriented life style largely portraying the contemporary Indian youth in their cosmopolitan ways. Another film, *Lagaan* (2001) directed by Ashutosh Gowarikar received wide recognition for its interesting portrayal of a cricket match between the British and the rural Indians set in

an Indian village during pre-independence era. Another notable film *Munna Bhai MBBS* released in 2003 won the National Award in 2004 for Best Popular Film. It narrates the story of a criminal attending medical school to fulfill his father's dream. The film is a comedy and became popular among people of all age groups. Several other films made during this decade covered a wide variety of topics such as *Gangajaal* (2003) directed by Prakash Jha was about a honest police officer and his struggle against the gundaraaj, *Black Friday* (2004*)* directed by Anurag Kashyap, narrated the true story of the Mumbai bomb blast in 1993, *Swadesh* (2004) directed by Ashutosh Gowarikar was about a young NRI NASA project manager's return to his village, *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) tells the story of a dyslexic child and won the National Film Award for Best Film on Family Welfare. These films have received strong critical acclaim due to their realistic depiction of events. Other than these, several low budget films became unexpectedly successful due to the touching stories they narrated. Some of these include *Iqbal* (2005) which was about a boy's obsession with cricket and his struggle to play it despite physical difficulties, *Dor* (2006) which explores the story of two women fighting against all odds, *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008) about rural India, *Uddan* (2010) which narrates the story of a child's struggles during his growing up years. Several other niche films such as *Peepli [Live]*, *No One Killed Jessica*, *Well Done Abba*, *Dhobi Ghat*, *I am Kalam* – all released in 2010 and 2011 have re-emphasized the importance of content-driven films. *Dhobi Ghat* (2010) portrays the lives of four individuals as well as the city of Mumbai. Likewise, *Well Done Abba* (2009) is a political satire that won the 2009 National Film Award for Best Film on Social issues. The more recent *PK* (2014) presents the current concepts of

religion and religious practices through the perception of an alien who visits Earth. The interest of filmmakers in making films on such varied topics has contributed tremendously to the cultural and social scenario in India. Audiences have accepted these unique and unusual stories and this has in turn inspired film directors and producers to experiment with new stories, For instance, films like *3 Idiots* in 2009, *Oh my God* in 2012, and *PK* in 2014 have not only attracted the attention of critics but have influenced the general audience as well. While *3 Idiots* is a social commentary on the educational system and tracks the lives of three friends in an engineering institute, *Oh My God,* may be considered as a film with a strong social message on the commercialization of religion in India. This is presented sarcastically and reaches out to the audience in a more convincing way than a serious film on the same topic could have. Thus these films have successfully demonstrated the complexity of human emotions and presented issues related to religion, philosophy, education and relationships in an indirect but strong manner.

Research on Indian Films

The Indian film industry may be considered as an important research domain for scholars belonging to the areas of cultural studies, film theories, sociology and anthropology. The contribution of Indian cinema in conveying important messages to audiences worldwide has been discussed by researchers. This has shaped Indian society in myriad ways and thus films have become a significant part of India's cultural transformation through the years. The significant role that films play in the lives of people and its influences on society has attracted the attention of academic

researchers. Anirudh Deshpande in 2007, in his scholarly article titled "Indian Cinema and the Bourgeois Nation State" mentions that "literature on cinema began to proliferate in India quite early although the academic research on films began after 1947" (95). Deshpande acknowledges that the credit for pioneering film studies in India goes to the sociology department of the Bombay University where Professor G. S. Ghurye encouraged students to study cinema after India's independence (95). Another eminent scholar of Indian cinema, as Anirudh Deshpande insights in his same paper that Panna Shah, was the first doctorate in this area and has made substantial scholarly contribution toward examining the role of cinema in India. While his submissions may appear dated today, his well-researched contention that "cinema shapes viewer psychology" (95) remains relevant. According to Deshpande, Panna Shah observes that "cinema is an immense force which by the subtlety of its nature molds the opinion of millions in the course of its apparently superficial business of merely providing entertainment" (95). Researchers have also been interested in studying specific kinds of films such as parallel or art films. A review by Sharmistha Gooptu in 2002 titled "Celluloid Chronicles, the Cinemas of India" is based on Yves Thoraval's *Cinemas of India (1896-2000)* which in turn illustrates the trends of new age of Indian cinema like auteur films and parallel films. She writes that "Yves Thoraval looks at the rise of a parallel trend of 'auteur' or 'art' cinema in Hindi often referred to as the 'New Indian Cinema" (3024).

Thus, research in the area has summarized not only the kinds of films being made but also how a film, apart from being a source of enjoyment can also be instrumental in impacting Indian society psychologically and socially. In other words,

an understanding of Indian films also introduces the audience to the cultural aspects of Indian society. For instance *Peepli [Live]*, (2010) the topic of this dissertation is closely related to national issues including rural India, media, politics and gender subversion. This objective of this work to critically examine these aspects that is, media, politics and rural India.

Peepli [Live]: The Film

     Peepli [Live] may be described as a film with a compelling narrative. The story emerges from a complex background and has strong local and national relevance. The film depicts a number of critical issues faced by farmers, the current system of local and national politics and media in India. *Peepli [Live]* uses black humor to introduce these issues and leaves the audience with some questions about the current system and the uncertainties about the future. While the film is essentially the story of a farmer who considers committing suicide so that his family can benefit from the compensation offered by the government, it also raises other related issues such as the general apathy of political leaders and the insensitivity of a section of the media towards the impoverished condition of farmers. This study aims to identify vital themes presented in the film and examine them in the light of available literature.

Background of *Peepli [Live]*

     Peepli [Live] was released at a time when the issue of farmer suicides was a topic of major discussion in the political, media and academic circles. Although the events that are shown in the film are fictitious; the theme is believed to have emerged

from a spate of farmer suicides that took place around the same time. Evidence on this issue is found in scholarly writing that highlights the distress of farmers and helps to understand why this resulted in the farmers ending their lives. Articles such as "Farmers' Suicides in Maharashtra," by Siddhartha Mitra and Sangeeta Shroff in 2007 focus on the importance of cotton farming in the agricultural economy of a region. The authors mention previous surveys that have been conducted to explore the major causes of farmer suicides in the cotton growing regions of Indian states. According to many researchers, the state governments attribute these self-inflicted deaths mainly to crop failure while the media highlights factors such as the rising cost of cultivation and indebtedness in agricultural marketing. ("*Farmers' Suicides in Maharashtra*"). Likewise, N. Manu Kulkarni's article "Saving Farmers' Lives" underlines the tragedy of farmers suicides in the state of Karnataka, which recorded the highest number of suicides as compared to any other region in India. Kulkarni argues that the government policies are not adequate and therefore farmers are unable to enhance farm productivity, and the farm's well-being. Additionally, the interference of the informal village institutions has become ineffective and neglected. Another significant study on this issue is the 2006 essay by A. Narayanmoorthy titled "Relief Package for Farmers: Can It Stop Suicides?" which indirectly substantiates the basic portfolio of a farmer's economy where he argues that farmers' suicides are the result of the agrarian crisis, which cannot be solved only with firefighting techniques such as providing relief packages to farmers. This article focuses on a well thought concerted strategy for both short and long term measures. In the short run Narayanmoorthy suggests that the government should first of all, immediately announce remunerative prices for different

crops and restart the scheme of cotton procurement. The long term measures should focus mainly on developing rural infrastructures such as irrigation, watershed development, roads, markets, schools, credit institutions and the extension network. In this regard many researchers suggest that the present agrarian crisis can be mitigated by doubling institutional credit to agriculture ("Relief Package for Farmers: Can It Stop Suicides").

In addition to this, other articles on this issue have made attempts to uncover the causes behind the suicides. For instance, G. Parthasarthy and Shameem's 1998 article titled "Suicides of Cotton Farmers in Andhra Pradesh: An Exploratory Study" attempts to examine the alleged causes of farmer suicide. They cite the following factors: adverse rainfall and low yields, adverse prices, rise in cost of cotton cultivation, indiscriminate use of pesticides, poor cooperation from agencies and commercial banks, growing power of moneylenders, traders and landlords, growth of lease holding in cotton. This article on examination of each of these causes concludes that the main reason for the stress faced by the cotton peasant is the growing indebtedness to the agriculturist to moneylender-cum-trader; however this does not entirely explain the suicides. The authors recommend that "one has here to understand the social milieu in which an individual gets alienated from the family and the society."

E. Revathi's essay "Farmers' Suicide: Missing Issues" in 1998 is an exploratory paper that analyzes reasons pointed out by Parthasarthy and Shameem. According to Revathi, problems related to irrigation and sources of credit as being important causes for farmer suicide. Revathi adds that while irrigation does not seem

to be a major issue on the surface, it actually has been a major problem for farmers. The essay cites information from a case study on 50 deceased farmers in Warangal district. The study shows that while wells were the largest source of irrigation for about three-fourths of the farmers, only about one-third of the wells were dug under the different subsidy schemes of the government. In the remaining cases farmers themselves have had to bear the expenses for digging of wells. The second issue raised by Revathi is related to credit. The sources of credit available to the farmers besides the institutional ones are commission agents, dealers and subdealers, and private sources. In most cases, it is either the commission agents or the pesticide dealer network that finances the credit needs of the farmers. These dealers start collecting their dues from the farmers from the second and third pickings of cotton generally charging a 15 per cent to 20 per cent higher price over the normal price. Farmers are also exploited by the commission agents who are the second major source of credit to the farmers. Circumstances are made worse by pesticide dealers who low quality products to the farmers. The other major problem is tenancy. Since a third of the deceased farmers were tenants who are not qualified to receive any institutional credit, dependence on the above sources became inevitable. All these issues, according to Revathi are responsible for the sad state of affairs. Thus the essay in reference to Parthasarthy and Shameem's findings recommends that more than "sociological reasons like alienation of individual from family and society, it is the politics and economics of neglect of a region for decades that is the cause of the suicide deaths" (1207) and therefore apolitical way of dealing with the issue does not throw, in fact, much light on the problem.

Many of the issues discussed above are highlighted in *Peepli [Live]* through different incidents which involve characters such as Natha, Budhia, Rakesh, Hori Mahato, and other villagers. The day to day struggle of the villagers is depicted through characters such as Hori Mahato who is living a life of extreme poverty and instead of harvesting crops, and having to sell soil at a nominal price to earn his living. The central character in the story is Natha, a farmer who is on the verge of losing his land to the bank. He along with his brother Budhia approaches a political leader in his village hoping to borrow some money from him that can help them overcome the situation. Salim Kidwai who is the Minister for Agriculture and can take powerful decisions takes no initiative in providing a resolution. Similar attitude is displayed by the other powerful men in the situation such as the Chief Minister and District Collector. Although the leader does not help the two brothers, he sarcastically suggests that committing suicide might help them as the government offers compensation money to suicide victims. While Natha appears confused and indecisive mostly, his brother Budhia is a shrewd character who manages to convince Natha to commit suicide so that their family can benefit from the compensation money. The people of Peepli appear misinformed and troubled by the incidents in the village mostly stemming from poverty and illiteracy. Despite introduction of various initiatives by the government such as Gramin Rojgar Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Sadak Yojana, Aanganwadis, Gramya Bank, Indira Avaas Yojana, schools, and dispensaries implemented through the governing Panchayats, there has been little benefit for rural India. While the schemes are in place as depicted in *Peepli [Live]*, the villagers are provided wrong guidance by those in power. A policy such as providing a

compensation of one lakh rupees to the family of farmers who commit suicide cannot strengthens the will power of farmers. This may mislead farmers into opting for suicide as it presented as a lucrative option for those living miserable lives as depicted in the film. Budhia and Natha's discussion on the suicide issue gives an insight into the helplessness of the farmers who are convinced that this is the only way to overcome the situation. The film presents the tragic situation of Budhia convincing his brother to commit suicide through the powerful medium of humor. This is made more comical by the involvement of the media and political leaders – all interested in benefiting from of the situation. This is depicted in *Peepli [Live]* through characters such as Bhai Thakur and Pappu. These political leaders misled villagers purposefully and concealed important information from them. While the illiterate and misinformed villagers continued to suffer, government officers remained indifferent until the media intervened; after which they introduce ineffective ways of handling the situation. In the meantime, the government tried to dissuade Natha by presenting him with a hand pump under the Lal Bahadur scheme, media persons followed him closely to build on the story. The bureaucrats are instructed by the suave politicians to pass on an Indira Awas, or a Jawahar Rozgar, or an Annapurna in an attempt to control the damage caused. The Jawahar, Indira, or Lal Bahadur are presented as the most lucrative gift vouchers for farmers especially during the time of election. This is a satirical way of revealing the political integrity of democratic India. The contribution of *Peepli [Live]* in Indian cinema is to present these scenarios in contemporary rural India along with the issues.

Prior to *Peepli [Live]* very few documentaries, regional and Hindi films had been made on farmers' suicide in India. These include films such as *Summer (*2007) directed by Suhail Tatari, which narrates the story of five medical students who visit a village in Maharashtra village for their internship. The film reveals the plight of those hit by the agrarian crisis and how the medical students help them. Another recent film that was based on the issue of farmer suicides is *Kissan* (2009) directed by Puneet Sire. This film exposes the exploitation of farmers by the influential zamindars. India's position in the world as an agriculture-based country has always been a matter of great pride. This is reflected in Lal Bahadur Shastri's famous slogan 'Jai Jawan Jai Kisan' as well as through numerous government policies and initiatives introduced by all political parties that have come into power since independence. It is sad that the agricultural scenario today is under threat. Such attempts by filmmakers have drawn attention to farmers' conditions as well as related issues such as poverty, exploitation, and illiteracy as well.

While India is rapidly developing into an industrialized economy, at the same time radical changes are being observed in rural India. While many new initiatives have been proposed to benefit the rural population, villages are still observed to be plagued by issues such as low literacy rate, unemployment, less adequate health care and poor agricultural facilities. It is worthwhile to mention here that the role of politics in villages in India is responsible for this in some ways. Although rural development has been the primary agenda of all major political parties in India; however many schemes and programs introduced by them have been ineffective due to various reasons.

While India had been experiencing farmers' suicide through the 1990s as per the researches discussed earlier, *Peepli [Live]* in 2010 was one of the few films that have highlighted the issue and uncovered relevant facts involving Indian politics and administration. The film fetched high ratings and positive reviews. For instance, the IMDb rating for the film was 7.5. In reviewing *Peepli [Live] Hindustan Times'* film critic, Mayank Shekhar aptly mentions that this film "is 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." Cath Clarke in *The Guardian, 2010* comments that "there is a deadly serious message about India's rural/urban divide in first-timer director Anusha Rizvi's satirical gem."

The Team of *Peepli [Live]*

The story of the film has often been appreciated; however the team of *Peepli [Live]* though not very famous may also be considered as one of the crucial reasons for its success. The team comprises of a talented group of actors and a first time director. Before venturing into film direction, Anusha Rizvi was a former Indian journalist with NDTV and is therefore an insider who is aware of how certain forces work in the system. This work experience with the media must have been instrumental in helping her to write an exceptional script. The flavor of satire that Rizvi brings in is perhaps the main ingredient of the story. The clever decision to build the story around a village which falls under a constituency up for a by-election helps to build a background that the audience can easily connect with. The characterization of Natha as a farmer who appears lazy, defenseless and silly and dumb, is brilliant. The opening as well as

closing scenes of the film includes songs which fit in perfectly with the mood. The opening scene shows Natha travelling from the city to village looking for a solution to the problem; while the closing scene shows that Natha has travelled from the village to city and found a solution. This also represents in a subtle manner, the migration of farmers from village to city, who take up different jobs such as working as laborers on construction sites. Many of the situations presented are intended to evoke laughter; however it also helps the audience to recognizing the dark truths projected through humor. Rizvi's sincere attempt at highlighting certain grave issues about the farmers struggling in India may be considered as a successful one. It makes one deliberate on why farmers are forced to take such critical steps like committing suicide, migrating to metro cities as working laborers and question how the system can be improved.

Of the other people involved in the film, Omkar Das Manikpuri who plays the character of Natha is from Habib Tanvir's Naya theatre in Bhopal. His brilliant acting steals the show in *Peepli [Live]*. He belongs to Brindanagar village of Chhatisgarh and is an established stage and film actor who has had many years of experience in folk theatre. Vacant expressions, few dialogues and the negative body language displayed by him helps to successfully portray the behavior of a man who has admitted defeat. In an interview, Manikpuri states in an interview titled "Aamir Khan wanted to play Natha" (*The Times of India*, Aug 13, 2010) that despite being interested in playing the role Aamir Khan stepped aside after he saw Manikpuri's audition. Manikpuri was earlier being considered for a different role but was asked to play Natha as he impressed all with his acting. Manikpuri says, "Aamirji and Anushaji saw my audition and he told me, 'Omkarji I was planning to play Natha but I am impressed with your

audition. Only you can play Natha" (*The Times of India*, Aug 2010). Raghubir Yadav who plays Budhia, is a well-known theatre actor, who is also a singer and music composer. He debuted with the film *Massey Sahib* in 1985 and won the International Award as the Best Actor. He played the role of Chillum in *Salaam Bombay!* (1998) and was seen in *Lagaan*, *Water*, and *Dear Friend Hitler*. Farrukh Jaffer who plays Amma in *Peepli [Live]*, started her career as a radio announcer at Akashvani Lucknow and has participated in a number of radio programs, plays and a few films. She has played in many award winning mainstream Hindi films like *Swades, Chakravyuh*, and the more recent *Tanu weds Manu*. Nawazuddin Siddiqui who has now established himself as an actor was not very well-known when *Peepli [Live]* was released. The roles he played in *Gangs of Wasseypur*-Part 1 and Part 2, *Kahani*, *Talaash* and *Black Friday* brought him stardom and respect in the film industry. Malaika Shenoy plays the role of Nandita, the news reporter. She has been a part of theatre, and has worked in a few films and advertisements as well. The character of Dhaniya was played by Shalini Vatsa in *Peepli [Live]*. She has worked with various acclaimed Indian theatre directors such as Habib Tanvir, and Barry John. She is also a member of Habib Tanvir's Naya Theatre in New Delhi. Naseeruddin Shah as Salim Kidwai, is probably the only well-known face in the movie. He has received numerous recognitions such as the Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan for his impressive body of work. It is interesting to note that all the actors have experiences in theatre. It is probably this training that has resulted in brilliant performances in *Peepli [Live]*.

The music of *Peepli [Live]* fits in well with the story. The music has been composed by a number of composers including Ram Sampath, Nagin Tanvir of Naya

theatre, and the band Indian Ocean. The songs are mostly folk-oriented and the lyrics match the scenes aptly. In fact, the lyrics take the story forward as events unfold in the film. The film begins with the song *Des Mera* which is about the highs and lows of life. The second song *Mehengaai Dayain,* composed by Ram Sampath and sung by Raghubir Yadav attracted some controversy when the film was released. It presents the reality of inflating prices and the effect it has on the common household. The song appears just after the government offers a of Lal Bahadur to Natha as a means of damage control and roughly translated to English means, "Friend, my husband earns good money, but inflation, that witch eats it all away, every month petrol leaps, diesel is on a roll, sugar forever soars, rice too flies out of reach." The scenes in the song represents a typical evening in rural India where villagers get together to sing folk tunes. The song *Zindagi Se Darte Ho* composed by Indian Ocean questions the thought committing suicide and is an inspiration to fight against adverse times. Finally, *Chola Maati Ke* composed by Nagin Tanvir the lyrics of which liken to the body to a robe which is made of clay. The film ends with this song in which the media leaves the village after Natha is presumed to be dead and Natha is shown working in a construction site. This leaves the audience with many questions to think over. The lyrics and placement of the songs in the movie are very carefully thought out. The music, like the film is different from that of a mainstream Hindi film.

Compared to many films released that year and in recent years, this film was made on a low budget. Thus although the filmmakers did not follow the formula for a blockbuster hit, in terms of the storyline or casting, the film turned out to be one of the most successful movies in 2010. While India is rapidly developing into an

industrialized economy, radical changes are being observed in rural India as well. While many new initiatives have been proposed to benefit the rural population, villages are still suffering from many issues. It has been suggested that the role of politics in villages in India is responsible for this in some ways. In summary, it may be worthwhile to mention that films like *Peepli [Live]* have contributed substantially towards drawing public attention towards the issues faced by rural India such as such as low literacy rate, unemployment, less adequate health care and poor agricultural facilities.

Chapter II

Black Humor in *Peepli [Live]*

This chapter focuses on the representation of black humor in the film *Peepli [Live]*. It begins with a section outlining existing multi-disciplinary scholarly research on humor. Next, the use of black humor in art is presented in an attempt to track the progress made in this area overtime. Finally, the portrayal of black humor in *Peepli [Live]* is discussed keeping in mind the various themes and sequences that make the film as a caustic satire.

It goes without saying that humor and laughter are fascinating aspects of human life. In the article, *Beyond a Joke: Types of Conversational Humour, 2009* Marta Dynel observes that humor has been the "focus of scholarly studies conducted from philosophical, psychological, sociological, anthropological and linguistic perspectives" (1284). Researchers from varied backgrounds have sought to understand different features related to humor and laughter from different perspectives. While researchers in literature and linguistics have elaborated on humorous communication and the textual composition of humorous material and visual art, social scientists have attempted to investigate the psychological and sociological functions of humor. More recently, neuroscientists have presented the neurological mechanism behind humor and laughter. These assortments of different features make humor an interesting but highly complex topic of research. However, scholarly research on humor was not always popular. In trying to understand the reason behind the lack of research on humor, Rod Martin in his book *Psychology of Humor, 2007* writes that, since humor is an enjoyable and playful activity and also familiar to all, many think they already

understand it and do not need research to explain it. Martin restates the popular myth that the academic study of humor is not considered very funny in itself and it is commonly believed that "nothing kills a joke like analyzing it" (1). Martin further notes that journalists reporting on the annual conferences of The *International* Society for *Humor Studies* often take delight in pointing out the "apparent irony of scholars presenting very weighty and unfunny research papers on the subject of humor" (1).

Twentieth century and contemporary theorists have offered several explanations in attempting to understand humor. According to Wilibald Ruch's book *The Sense of Humor: Explorations of a Personality Characteristic,* (1998) around the 16th century, humor was used to denote "fluids primarily, blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile" (3) found commonly in medical language. This concept was used to explain temperament and behavior in individuals. Ruch notes that in the 1680's "the meaning of humor was expanded to include behavior deviating from social norms, or abnormality in general, and thus provided the basis for the term's entrance into the field of the comic" (8). Other theorists such as Rod Martin in examining the characteristics and purpose of humor claim that: "The philosophical conception of laughter as essentially a form of aggression can be traced to Aristotle, who believed that it was always a response to ugliness or deformity in another person, although he thought it would not occur if the object of laughter aroused other strong emotions such as pity or anger. Following in the long tradition of Aristotle, the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes saw laughter as being based on a feeling of superiority, or 'sudden glory,' resulting from some perception of inferiority in another person" (21). In their article "The First Joke: Exploring the Evolutionary Origins of

Humor" published in 2006 Joseph Polimeni and Jeffrey R. Reiss cite G. Weisfeld's essay "The Adaptive Value of Humor and Laughter" (1993) in which the latter suggests that "Laughter is a pleasant social signal that prompts the humorist to persist in providing this edifying stimulation. In response to true wit, laughter conveys appreciation and gratitude—an intention to reciprocate for having received a stimulating idea. Thus, humor benefits both humorist and laughter" (351). Polimeni and Reiss further add that "humor and laughter are closely related; however, they are not synonymous. Humor is the underlying cognitive process that frequently, but not necessarily, leads to laughter. Laughter is a seizure-like activity that can be elicited by experiencing a humorous cognitive stimulus but also other stimuli such as tickling. Thus, one can laugh without a humorous stimulus and similarly one can experience humor without laughter" (347).

While discussing critical theorists' take on humor, it is worth mentioning Adrian Bardon's essay "The Philosophy of Humor" in which he presents a detailed overview of the historical and contemporary theories on humor including those by Aristotle, Plato and Kant. Bardon refers to Aristotle's dissertation on drama, the *Poetics*, in which comedy has been described as an imitation of people who often represent the grotesque. Aristotle writes that the ridiculous portrayed in comedy "is a kind of ugliness at which we laugh derisively" (3). Bardon asserts that: "Like Plato, Aristotle thinks of the amusement of comedy as essentially derisive: when enjoying comedy, we laugh at ugliness (if that ugliness is not painful or destructive to us in the given context). But his assessment of such amusement appears to be similar to Plato's: amusement is the malicious or derisive enjoyment of others' shortcomings" (3). In this

context, Brandon also refers to Kant's writings on humor. According to Kant, "we laugh at absurdities not because the intellect itself finds pleasure in that which frustrates it, but because the intellect's attempt to reconcile an absurd conjunction of ideas causes a physical response that we find pleasant" (7). He also notes Kant's observations on humor and states that the philosopher focused on jests as to explain humor. Further, he observes how Kant defined jests as instances capable of causing momentary deception which over jolted people into a keener understanding of reality.

Given these readings, it is not surprising that a phenomenon as complex and pleasurable as humor has been studied from different perspectives by many theorists, including the ones discussed above, who have proposed and revised their ideas over the years in an attempt to explain humor. However, one proposition that has remains unchanged over time is the use of humor is a coping mechanism. Furthermore, the use of aggressive forms of humor in coping with tragedy has often been referred to as black humor.

Existing Scholarship on Black Humor

Humor researcher Rod Martin in his book *Psychology of Humor* (2007) posits that black humor refers to "aggressive forms of humor with a grotesque or macabre character, used as a means of maintaining one's sanity in seemingly hopeless or extremely harrowing situations" (49). He refers to the term "gallows humor" (49) as a form of joking used by people in oppressive regimes such as Nazi-occupied nations during World War II. Martin adds, "by poking fun at the ineptness and stupidity of oppressors, gallows humor can be a subversive activity that allows one to gain a sense

of freedom from their power, a refusal to be completely subjugated by them, despite their apparent domination" (49). Another interesting take on this issue is obtained in Antonin J. Obrdlik's essay titled "Gallows Humor - A Sociological Phenomenon" (1942) describes it as humor which arises in connection with a precarious or dangerous situations. He observes that gallows humor was typical in the nations oppressed by their invaders. This is because gallows humor is "full of invectives and irony, is their psychological escape" (712), according to Obrdlik. Additionally, Obrdlik states that this method of psychological compensation has an enormous social influence as well. This statement may be further understood through R. Martin's take on Freud's description of condemned prisoners who made lighthearted jokes on their way to the gallows (e.g., the prisoner who, when offered a last cigarette before his execution, says, "No thanks, I'm trying to quit") (49). Another instance from March, 1939 when the "Nazis took over all that remained of Czechoslovakia" (712) is mentioned by Obrdlik. He states that individuals going through situations of such extreme insecurity brought about by tragedy sometimes "collect[ed] jokes just like a philatelist would collect stamps" (712). Obrdlik mentions a young man who "was very proud of having a collection of more than two hundred pieces which he kept safe in a jar interred in the corner of his father's garden" (712).

Understandably, this corrosive form of humor has often been employed by artists, filmmakers and writers in their attempt to highlight the malignancies plaguing society. The use of black humor in comedy films, paintings or in literature which is essentially a twentieth century European phenomenon has been found to convey extremely serious issues in a non-serious manner. Robert Mckee in his book *Story*,

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mentions that contemporary comedy is dictated by subject, setting, role, event and values and the subgenres of parody, satire, sitcom, romantic, screwball, farce and black comedy are all differentiated by their focus on comic attack such as bureaucratic folly, upper-class manners, teenage courtship etc. and the degree of ridicule such as gentle caustic or lethal. In other words, black humor may be considered a powerful method of dealing with serious issues in a manner that sounds amusing instead of tragic. Notably, the function of black humor is two-fold: it creates spontaneous laughter, while leading to a greater understanding of serious issues.

In discussing black humor further, Obrdlik observes that "People who live in absolute uncertainty as to their lives and property find a refuge in inventing, repeating, and spreading through the channels of whispering counterpropaganda, anecdotes and jokes about their oppressors. This is gallows humor at its best because it originates and functions among people who literally face death at any moment" (712).

Development of Black Humor in Comedy

Black humor in comedy can be traced to an anonymous play of Arden of Faversham (c1588-91). This was followed by the literary works of Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), Herman Melville (1819-1891) and Mark Twain (1835-1910). Alan Pratt in his book, *Black Humor, Critical Essays* (1993) describes absurdity as "a defining characteristic of black humor" that brings to fore ". . . a world gone wrong irreversibly wrong, where the logical is illogical, where madness is standard condition" (323). Likewise, Max F. Schulz, a renowned critic and the author of *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* (1973), while discussing the origins and

development of dark comedy states that "black humor appeared in America during the period of disillusionment and the decline of traditional values" (272). Schulz characterizes black humor as a response to 'cosmic labyrinth' not as a constant mode of apprehending experience but as the product of a specific cultural context. Schulz also adds that an existential assertion of self is mainly seen in the works of Saul Bellow. According to Schulz, Bellow's operative term 'multiple possibilities' can be a chief characteristic of dark humor which fosters solipsism that itself becomes the object of its own ironic scrutiny, viewing reality as a constantly shifting series of masks or disguises (120). Stevanovic Lada in his article "Ridiculed Death and the Dead: Black Humor" writes that as a modern phenomenon, theoreticians describe black humor as a culmination of literary modernism or as the beginning of the post-modernism" (194). Further Lada states that "Andre Breton who coined the phrase humor noir in the 1930s has characterized black humor as rebellious, iconoclastic and aimed at re-questioning social norms" (194).

Black Humor and the Theatre of the Absurd

Black humor has been found in the theatre of the absurd, specifically in the major works of modern playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov and Eugene Ionesco. Themes including absence, emptiness, nothingness, and unresolved mysteries are central features in many absurdist plays comprising the theatre of the absurd. The characters hardly display individuality and they tend to change their very nature immediately. As a result, it is often unclear whether their actions are meant to represent real happenings or a dream world of nightmares. Absurd plays are meant to represent greater social awareness about dislocation, bewilderment and ambiguous

situations, about replacement and complete obscurity. Martin Esslin's landmark essay titled "The Theatre of the Absurd" published in 1960 appropriately points out that "the theatre of the absurd shows the world as an incomprehensible place" (5). It is observed that the main interest of the playwright is not to expose the problems of a society directly but to reveal facts by creating comical scenarios aided by appropriate songs and stage lighting, all geared towards highlighting the pathos of a given situation. Responding to the socio-cultural dynamics of the post sixties western world, the theatre of the absurd through the use of mock spectacles and dark comedy represent the need for social correction instead of being overtly preachy or didactic. It is worth noting that the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines absurd as "against reason or common sense; clearly false or foolish; funny because clearly unsuitable or impossible." A similar understanding is obtained in Esslin's essay in which he writes that 'absurd' may simply mean 'ridiculous,' but this is not the sense in which Camus used the term, and in which it is used when we speak of the theatre of the absurd. In an essay on Kafka, Ionesco defined his understanding of the term as follows: "'Absurd' is that whose purpose, cut off from his religious, 'metaphysical' is devoid of and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (17).

Interpretations of Black Humor in 20th Century British and American Theatre

The book titled *20th Century British Drama* (2001) presents a cogent overview of the major theatrical movements and dramatic genres in prevalent during the 20th century. It discusses how the criticism of British Theatre and its social, political and

historical contexts owe much to three critics named Brecht, Brook and Edgar. It further depicts the importance of Edwardian theatre, and Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw's works. While *Ghosts* and *A Doll's House* by Ibsen are brilliant masterpieces of familial angst, *Pygmalion* (1914) addresses unpleasant subject matters like prostitution, philandering and profiteering, and all of through the use of dark comedy. Famous American playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee are also major names that used dark comedy to express the alienation and existential crisis faced by the modern human self.

Black Humor and Anglo-American Films

Black humor in films is a device that gains approval by depicting a reality that is being ridiculed. Many films employ dark themes such as death and destruction as an important factor around which the plot is woven. However creating comedy out of tragedy is less popular. By the use of dark humor in films, the film maker attempts to present society's fears and uncertainties to the viewer. Comical situations, eccentric characters, and peculiar stories are used as ingredients in the hope that this incongruity may convey the message that may not be sometimes possible through direct storytelling. A straightforward narration may not help the viewer get a novel perspective on the situation. The dark subject matter in films indicates the protagonist's helplessness, fearfulness and indecisiveness. However, the comic expression of the same character or the observation of a situation in a cynical manner can be more effective in conveying life's absurdities.

It may, therefore, be asserted that this genre in films makes it possible for the audience to re-evaluate individual failures, distorted thinking and life's misfortunes, all of which make up the human existence. The element of black humor employed in films is an effective method of conveying all of these factors in a less serious manner than it really is. This encourages the audience to question certain situations and the behavior of characters. The protagonists in defined as black comedy are somewhat different from other films owing to the bleakness of storytelling that defines the genre. Instead of sympathizing with their plight, the audience feels encouraged to laugh. For these reasons, many filmmakers sought to move beyond seriousness and developed a unique way to explore parody in films in the form of black humor. Viewers also embraced this new vision as they found that conventional values could be questioned without the risk of being criticized. Some films which have portrayed such situations include *A Bucket of Blood* (1959), *I'm All Right Jack* (1959), *The Little Shop of Horrors* (1960), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), *The President's Analyst* (1967), *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963), *The Old Dark House* (1963), *Love a Duck* (1966), *The Loved One* (1965), *Bed dazzled* (1967), and *The Rise and Rise of Michael Rimmer* (1970). These films have powerfully and tellingly depicted dark themes including war, sex, death, the workplace, national politics and family issues while retaining comic undertones and managing to convey the underlying serious issues successfully. More often than not, the major characters in such films are transgressive and their attempt is to question the status quo of society and culture.

Theories of Humor and Indian Aesthetics

The tradition of humor in India can be traced to ancient Sanskrit dramaturgy. Bharata Muni's *Natyasastra* defines humor as *hasya rasa* that is, one of the *nava rasas*, which in turn may be interpreted as emotional responses when translated to English. The *hasya rasa* or humor is found in Indian culture, literature, art and theatre and has been represented in various forms and guises over centuries. One of the best examples of humor in Indian folklore and mythology are the interactions between Akbar and Birbal which are enjoyed by children and adults alike. In theatre, humor is conveyed to the audience through their understanding of bhavas (the imitation of emotions that the actors perform). Notably, in the present times the use of humor in political propaganda is gaining popularity as well. Humor is an integral part of Indian culture and entertainment too. The purpose of producing humor is that it not only transcends comic parameters but at the same time reforms certain conventions and enlightens the common masses against ills and fallacies. Although the primary objective of humor is enjoyment, the act of perceiving and recognizing the incongruities through humor is also mentally stimulating, and helps to relive stress. Humor depicted through various forms of art in India may also help to bring to limelight the errors in society that need to be overcome.

Black Humor in Contemporary Indian Dramaturgy

The element of black humor has been explored by a number of contemporary playwrights in India. Theatre in India has had a strong influence on the Indian cinematic world and other forms of creative art. The history of satire and black comedy in Indian theatre has explored social, political, cultural and feminist concepts

that shape India. It must be noted that Indian theatre today is strongly influenced by 20ᵗʰ century British and American playwrights. At the same time, folk theatre has a strong background, performed as Jatra, Tamasha etc. These forms are enjoyed by the audiences mostly in different parts of rural and semi urban India. Dark themes such as nothingness, emptiness, hopelessness and solitude are used in theatre as a form of entertainment. This has attracted the attention of the audiences as well as that of academicians. It is important to add here that theatre artists and contemporary playwrights have been brave and experimental in including such themes in their work. This gives them the liberty to criticize notions such as religious ideology or traditional rituals and present novel ways of interpreting related situations. This flexibility in perception of circumstances may be used as a powerful tool to create awareness about many practices in Indian society. Thus the possibility of creating a stir that may cause some change is higher when the attempt is light-hearted and less threatening to societal structure and rigid rules.

Black humor has been employed by playwrights including Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani. Badal Sircar's work in the 1960's such as *Evam Indrajit* (And Indrajit) (1963) was based on the themes of meaninglessness, identity crisis, and social conformity. It portrayed perturbed personalities belonging to the urban middle class amidst increasing violence and inhumanity; and gained wide attention from the audience. Sircar's play *There is no End* is about the life of a middle-class man whose irregularities present him as detached from the rest of society. As the story unfolds, it reveals a person who lacks the strength and courage required to rise above life's tragedies. Likewise, Girish Karnad, another prominent playwright and

actor is known for plays that are thought-provoking, moving and occasionally throw in elements of black humor. His work has contributed immensely to Indian theatre. For instance, the inner conflicts of the protagonist and the disconnection between the body and the mind are brilliantly portrayed in *Hayavadana.* Additionally, Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani's plays occasionally interweave black themes into the storyline. Both Tendulkar and Dattani's plays explore controversial subjects in a humorous manner in an attempt to address social concerns.

Depiction of Black Humor in Contemporary Indian Literature and Hindi Films

Black humor has gained much acceptance and prominence amongst Indian writers and filmmakers in recent times. Works by Upamanyu Chatterjee, Arun Kolatkar, Kundan Shah, Anurag Kashyap, Vishal Bharadwaj, Abhishek Chaubey, and Raj Kumar Hirani have regularly incorporated serious themes in non-serious ways. This has helped in delivering powerful messages to the target audience in an indirect manner; thereby allowing them to examine a serious subject from newer perspectives. Upamanyu Chatterjee in his novel *English, August* uses black humor to exhibit certain personality characteristics in his protagonist Agastya Sen who is city born, highly qualified, and disinterested in his job. Similarly, Arun Kolatkar's poems use black humor in describing a number of everyday situations. This is evident in his work including *Kala Ghoda* and *Jejuri.* Kolatkar's early poetry was radically experimental and displayed European influences. There were instances depicting surrealism, expressionism, existentialism and beat generation poetry. His poems may be best described as whimsical, dark, sinister and at times, exceedingly funny.

Like in literature, so in mainstream Indian films black humor has often been used as a powerful tool for social correction. Directors such as Kundan Shah, Anurag Kashyap, Vishal Bharadwaj, Abhishek Chaubey and Raj Kumar Hirani have also frequently come forth with themes of drug and alcohol abuse, teenage angst, extreme rage and frustration, political conflicts, self-destruction and revenge in their films in a direct but non-serious manner. Earlier, films such as *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* (1983), *Munna Bhai MBBS* (2004), and more recently, *3 Idiots* (2009), *Oh My God* (2012) and *PK* (2014) question the contemporary social institutions and their numerous lacunae that persistently trouble the Indian society.

Black Humor in *Peepli [Live]*

The film *Peepli [Live]* employs black humor to expose several ambiguities related to the sociological, psychological, political, and economic contexts in India. The plot intensifies as the story unfolds with each of the subplots interacting increasingly with each other. The main protagonist Natha is a poor villager who is portrayed as a helpless person in very tragic circumstances and is presented in a comic light throughout the film. The film begins with Natha and his brother worrying about their financial condition and their futile attempts to find a solution for it. Natha's family comprises of his brother Budhia, his wife Dhaniya, his mother, and his two children. His brother Budhia is depicted as a shrewd individual who has no intentions of looking for a feasible answer to their problem; instead he accepts a bizarre solution to overcome poverty that they happen to stumble upon. It all begins as the two brothers approach a callous and corrupt politician who sarcastically suggests that

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committing suicide could help solve their financial woes since the government was offering monetary compensation to the families of farmers who commit suicide. Sometime later, Budhia and Natha begin considering this preposterous idea and eventually decide to plan the execution of it. No matter how bizarre it seems to the audience, for the two brothers the compensation amount appears to be the only way to improve their financial condition. In behavior and appearance, Natha is depicted as a simpleton while Budhia is clearly cleverer and convinces his brother to commit suicide. Natha's wife Dhaniya is not in favor of the decision and is angry with Budhia and Natha for their penury and for their insane plans. She is also annoyed with her mother-in-law as she believes that the latter's illness has caused them a lot of monetary loss. The helplessness in the situation caused by a multitude of factors including poverty and made worse by societal and governmental systems. However, the absurdity and the poignancy of the situation is powerfully captured with the help of dark humor since an issue as grave as suicide may perhaps be addressed successfully only through this device. As the story unfolds, new situations arise which add further chaos to their already chaotic world. The story finally ends with Natha having avoided the imminent threat of forced suicide in an unexpected manner.

The Significance of Black Humor in *Peepli [Live]*

The use of black humor in *Peepli [Live]* may be considered as a refreshing approach to depict the bleak issues presented in the film. In the past, numerous films have been made on themes that make up the story of *Peepli [Live]* rural poverty, family dynamics, socio-political apathy and the plight of farmers. However, most

filmmakers have dealt with these issues in a serious manner, mostly avoiding humor. Contrarily, *Peepli [Live]* presents facts in a realistic manner but at the same time employs dark comedy for the treatment of issues that were common in earlier films on similar topics. *Peepli [Live]* incorporates black humor through its characters, settings, music and dialogues. The film employs tragicomedy for its affinity with dark humor to reflect both tragedy and comedy while retaining a certain gravity of diction. This film can, therefore, be considered as a tragicomedy for the message it conveys.

In depicting the family of the main protagonist, the filmmaker uses humor to show how Natha despite being the major breadwinner in his family is completely voiceless and is disregarded by one and all. His wife Dhaniya asks him to leave the house in the midst of an argument, his brother manipulates him into thinking that his death will be beneficial for the family, and his children unaware of the gravity of the situation innocently ask when he will die. Even his bed-ridden mother is abusive every time she addresses him. The use of black humor to depict the family situation brings about a fresh perspective wherein the film does not turn out to be a sentimental drama that arouses pity but is able to convey factual evidences in an effective manner and without exaggeration.

The reaction of the politicians in the village is also presented through humor. It begins when the politicians make a mockery of Natha and Budhia's plight and suggest that they commit suicide to help their families out of the situation. Later, the powerful policymakers send a television set and a "Lal Bahadur" (hand pump) hoping to make amends for their earlier reactions. In all probability, both gifts are never used because electricity and water are scarce or missing from most Indian villages. Another

important area of focus in the film is the media's role in the situation. The hysteria with which the media reacts when they discover the story is presented as a powerful satire. This enables the film to criticize the political scenario in India at local as well as national levels and also the current status of media's role in society. It indirectly criticizes these systems by focusing on how the powerful strata of society exploit their less powerful counterparts with little or no regard for ethical and moral values.

The use of black humor and in *Peepli [Live]* invokes an extensive array of emotions and the audience often experiences both humor and grief in the same scenes. The plot of *Peepli [Live]*, especially the part in which suicide is considered as a solution for Natha's miseries, borders on the absurd. However, the real life circumstances on which this film is based makes the story believable. The use of black humor in portraying extremely serious issues in media and politics in India has contributed effectively towards generating a sense of consciousness among viewers. The viewers are conveyed important messages about civic roles and what circumstances may be created if power continues to be misused rampantly. This cautionary tale is not a typical traditional narrative with a moral message and yet manages to reach out to the audience effectively. The tone of black comedy may have been responsible for its critical and commercial success worldwide.

Major Instances of Black Humor in *Peepli [Live]*

The main characteristics explored in the film *Peepli [Live]* include chaos, anarchy, and deception. Despite the subject matter being unpleasant, painful, serious

and at times shocking, these disturbing elements have managed to attract the audience's attention due to the element of humor being included in them.

Natha comes across as a confused and helpless farmer who has no control over his decisions and most importantly, his life. His cunning brother skillfully manipulates him to the extent that he agrees to die so that his family may live. The two brothers arrive at this unusual arrangement as a result of a suggestion made in jest by the village politicians. Bhai Thakur, Gudda and some other local politicians make fun of their plight when the two brothers approach them to discuss their problem. Thakur says to Budhia and Natha that "the government too likes a fair give and take, there's at least one thing you can give to the government, that is, your life so that the government will pay you back." Instead of providing monetary support to Natha's family, the politicians inadvertently suggest that they should commit suicide so that the family will be provided the government's compensatory aid given to the family of suicide victims. The characterization of Budhia and Natha in *Peepli [Live]* has a very close relationship with Beckett's characters Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* who exist in a similar dreamlike vacuum and attempt to communicate nothing. Natha and Budhia's relationship seems co-dependent in the beginning; however Budhia is cleverer of the two and influences his brother's decision regarding suicide. Budhia says to Natha that "it takes only two minutes, since you won't let me die, you do it; it is the same thing."

Despite being in a very grave situation, Natha's sadness does not last long. In the beginning of the film, he is shown singing a love song, which is perhaps inappropriate under the given circumstances. Such behavior may be considered

abnormal and foolish and provides some insight into his personality quite early on in the film. In a particular scene while the two brothers are discussing their plight with the politicians, Natha's attention is not entirely focused on the conversation. Natha participates little in the conversation and instead stares attentively at the food being served to the politicians. This scene is presented in a lighthearted manner made especially funny by Natha's candid expressions and his hungry eyes glued to the rich food placed before the ministers; but conveys the stark reality that many families in similar circumstances in India are unable to afford enough food. For Natha's family of six living in poverty, a proper meal is perhaps a luxury, which explains why his gaze is fixed on the food.

At home too, Natha is continually beaten around by one and all. His wife is not the typical docile and domesticated woman depicted in most films based in rural India. Her manner of expressing anger towards her husband, brother-in-law, mother-in-law and children is completely unrestrained. Natha endures the verbal abuse silently; never displaying signs of anger in his behavior towards Dhaniya. Striken by poverty the entire family appears cranky and agitated and Natha often become the target of their anger and frustrations. Budhia replies Amma and says "don't get worked up, you'll have a fit." Amma gets angry and shouts at Budhia: "curse your tongue. You want to kill me? Why don't you get a fit?" Just after that when she is hurt by Budhia, she curses Dhaniya and kicks Natha violently telling him: "why are you sitting like a zombie?" The whole scene reflects Amma's dominating, sarcastic and dark personality. Dhaniya's character is depicted as that of a fearless woman who does not hesitate to abuse anyone. This is her way of releasing her anger and frustration. She is

headstrong, violent and screams at Amma, Natha, Budhia and at her children in the process.

Natha's mother referred to as Amma in the film is an old and ailing woman. However, despite her physical weakness, she is very vocal in expression. She is apparently unable to move around by herself and throughout the movie is shown confined to her bed. Occasionally Amma wishes to spend some time in the pleasant winter sun and calls out to her sons who transport her along with the bed to the courtyard. When Budhia and Natha return home after meeting the politician with no solution for their problem, Amma wants them to place her bed in the courtyard. She shouts at Budhia, "Aren't you listening? Put my bed under the sun. Budhia shouts back at his Amma, saying ". . . I have spent half my life dragging you in and out of the sun, we are losing our own land and all you care for is sunshine." Amma impatiently screams at Budhia saying "and smoking pot all day is sure to save the land, right? You said you had no money!" Thus, scene after scene the madness and pathos in the lives of the villagers of Peepli is depicted powerfully but with an undercurrent of caustic humor.

In another scene, she hits Natha on his back while lying helplessly on a bed unable to move her body. The scene is made hilarious by an element of surprise in the situation. The old and seemingly helpless woman despite being physically dependent on others catches Natha as well as the audience by surprise. Natha appears stunned but remains unresponsive, otherwise. Similarly, in another scene when Natha's son, like many others around him is waiting for the live suicide to take place, asks Natha when he will die. A child's question may be considered innocent under most circumstances,

however this query is tragic as it represents the general mood of the village. Scenes such as these that depict the mistreatment Natha is subjected to, may have humored the audience but at the same time created sympathy for Natha. The use of black humor draws the audience's attention to the situation in a non-serious yet impactful way. Natha's physicality, his style of expression, mannerisms and tone once again recall Samuel Beckett's characters Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett's idea of the 'suffering of being' is viewed as fundamentally existentialist in 20th century world phenomena and likewise in *Peepli [Live]*, everybody seems to be suffering endlessly.

The film also focuses on the upper class including the administrators and media personnel who are not struggling the way the poor villagers are, but are suffering nonetheless. They are a part of a vicious cycle that refuses to end. The portrayal of dishonest politicians whose objective is to gain power and not serve the country is effectively demonstrated when they make fun of the villagers' plight instead of helping them. At the end of the movie, there is a discussion on the launch of a new program 'Natha Card' to help farmers. This is yet another attempt by the powerful individuals in authority to compensate for the responsibilities that they did not fulfill. The people of Peepli are perhaps no longer hopeful about any transformation for the better. Past experiences have resulted in this kind of cynicism. When Rakesh is summoned by his boss to visit Tyagi ji in *Peepli*, he claims that "nothing is changed in *Peepli* over sixty years" and Rakesh is so sure when he states that "no change will happen in *Peepli* after visiting Tyagi or after election."

The media persons also find themselves participating in a similar system run by powerful people. In Nandita's conversation with her boss who insists that she finds a story that can increase the TRP's significantly, no matter what it takes. Nandita sarcastically comments that perhaps she should kill someone then to get such a story. Her tone here not only indicates Nandita's vulnerability but also provides an understanding of why she pursues Natha's story the way she does. The immense power that the media possesses can influence people in a very positive way; however that does not happen and the media turns a live suicide into a spectacle. Nandita and Deepak represent many young and well qualified professionals today who choose to ignore their conscience when faced with tempting choices. This, they probably believe is the easier to move ahead in their career. Quick success reinforces their behavior and the cycle of dishonesty continues. Similarly, other instances are presented through humor in order to expose the shallowness of other individuals who are a part of this system including Kidwai, Ram Yadav, Bhai Thakur and Pappu Lal, all struggling for position and power. This situation may be understood in reference to Max F. Schulz's *Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties* which in turn refers to Barth, Vonnegut, Bruce J. Friedman, Leonard Cohen, Thomas Berger and Robert Coover as they identify a "disintegrating world, unredeemed by a coherent order and consequently able to sustain only discontinuous states of being, in short an absurd universe" (119).

Two of the most significant tragedies in *Peepli [Live]* are the deaths of Hori Mahato, a helpless, poverty-stricken farmer who digs a plot of land every day and sells the soil obtained from it; and that of Rakesh, the local reporter who dies an unfortunate death while pursuing Natha's case. A considerable part of the film revolves around

the possible suicide of Natha. On his visit to Peepli to gather information, Rakesh finds Hori Mahato digging a plot of land. He asks Mahato the direction towards Peepli but does not receive any reply. Mahato seems completely absorbed in his work. Rakesh shouts at him, calling him "deaf" and comments that he must be looking for gold. Later, Rakesh gets to know of the suffering Hori Mahato endures every day to obtain a handful of rice. According to Rakesh, Mahato's death is not accidental but a final destiny.

Rakesh, the Jan Morcha reporter is first seen sitting with his colleagues at the local newspaper office near *Peepli*. He seems honest with his work and is extremely fascinated by the English speaking and charismatic ITVN reporter, Nandita. His style of presenting his comments on the current situation is humorous. Reciting in English, he says to his friends: "Cloth is aplenty, but the shirt is tight, clouds are aplenty, but such little rain, drought. Cars are aplenty, but barely enough oil. Try driving! That's why on Iraq bombs were dropped!" He fails to convince Nandita that Hori Mahato's death is also important and it is the media's duty to draw attention to such cases. Rakesh pursues Natha's case honestly and for a while it seems that he could be the hero who will turn things around. However, he dies accidentally when he follows Natha's captors to the warehouse which later catches fire. Rakesh's remains are charred beyond recognition and everyone concludes that it is the body of Natha. The audience however is able to know that this is actually Rakesh when the camera focuses on the wrist of the skeletal remains as it is being carried out of the warehouse. On the wrist is a bracelet of a blue colored stone, a replica of the bracelet worn by the famous

hero Salman Khan who probably was Rakesh's idol. Black humor in this scene is used to mark the fall of the aspiring hero, Rakesh.

Peepli [Live] presents a powerful satire on contemporary India and this concept is perhaps powerfully summed up in the song: 'Des mera rang rasiya babu' which roughly translates to: 'A river of colors paints this land, with a trick in the dye at every bend, a mystery in every speck and bubble, shallow to look at, but deep within, India, you see, is a clever mix. The lyrics of this song refer to the different colors and hues that make up India. These differences are evident in Indian festivals, cultures, people, politics, and religion. The song describes the hardships and uncertainties that people are faced with; adding that people are large hearted but have no means to help others. This is a song of despair and helplessness highlighting the multitude of possibilities along with the lack of enterprise to achieve them.

The surprise at the end of *Peepli [Live]* is probably the high point of the film. When the warehouse in which Natha is held captive catches fire, Rakesh's charred remains are mistakenly assumed to be Natha's. In this confusion, Natha manages to escape. The last scene reveals that Natha is working as a laborer at a construction site in the city. He seems to have accidentally found a way out of his troubles and has more control over his life circumstances than he earlier had. The fate of Natha's family, however, remains unchanged since his is an accidental death which does not fetch the compensation his family had expected all through. The poor in India, represented by Natha's family, are therefore shown to be a hapless lot surrounded by struggles and misery.

Conclusion

The filmmaker employs black humor to tell the story of a village and particularly a family facing straitened circumstances. Many dark themes related to death and disintegration have been highlighted in a non-serious manner by incorporating humor. The outcome is funny and yet the film has a deep impact on the audience which in turn has resulted in considerable commercial and critical success. The use of black humor makes it possible to question many situations and structures in society without creating much controversy. However, this does not result in trivializing issues and instead it highlights how serious issues have not been dealt with seriousness so far.

Chapter III

Media and Sensationalism in *Peepli [Live]*

This chapter discusses the depiction of the contemporary Indian media and its machinations in the movie *Peepli [Live]*. It begins with a focus on the growth of the media, both print and visual, over the years and attempts to understand its role in shaping and influencing modern India. To contextualize Indian media, this section examines several concepts that have been put forth by researchers working in the field of media studies which in turn demonstrate how the media has grown over time to influence and fashion the Indian society.

The history and the potential of Indian media in the context discussed above find a very complex and satirical rendition in the film *Peepli [Live]*. The film, revolving around the debates generated by the spate of farmer's suicides in rural India in the latter half of the twentieth century, mounts a powerful attack on the commercialization and the corruption prevalent in the Indian media. When Natha Das Manekpuri in *Peepli [Live]* announces his intention to commit suicide, the media covers it almost like a reality show in *Peepli*, the fictional village where elections are about to take place. ITVN, once again a fictional and prominent news channel, in this movie gets involved in this coverage just before the opinion poll predicts results in favor of Mukhya Pradesh's Chief Minister, Ram Yadav. Ram Yadav on the other hand, suggests Deepak, a news reporter from Prime Time which is ITVN's rival channel to cover 15 stories before the elections are held in his constituency *Peepli*. In this way, several political and social controversies factor in to create a TRP generating agenda for the news channels to focus on in *Peepli [Live]*.

Accordingly, this section begins by presenting a summary of some of the most significant scholarship in Indian media studies. One of the most significant recent works that deserves mention in this context is Sharmila Mitra Deb and M. Manisha's book, *Indian Democracy: Problem and Prospects,* 2009 that discusses how there exists a powerful association between the media and democracy and asserts that "democracy without powerful and constructive media is an impossibility" (xxvii). A similar argument is found in the chapter titled "Restyling Democracy? Mainstream Media and Public Space" by Dipankar Sinha in the same book which highlights the dynamics of media and its responsibility in the Indian democracy. Sinha argues that "media in general and television in particular are powerful media that have a crucial role in the making of the public agenda" (xxvi). It may be argued that the media does not consciously create its agenda; rather, it generates certain dominant ideologies that are circulated through public views and opinions. In other words, the motives of profit, propaganda and influence are formulated subtly but strongly though the complex strategies employed by the media. In recent times, the media has been often criticized for moving away from its original motive, that is, to create information, education, and integration. Noting this, Inder Malhotra, a prominent political commentator and an Indian journalist, in the magazine *Media Mimansa: Media Critique* states: "there was no such thing as the media in India. Indian press was born in 1780 with the publication of Hickey's Gazette" (67). Malhotra adds that the press at that time, was dominated by a handful of major English language newspapers which were published from the four metropolitan cities- *The Statesman* from Calcutta and Delhi, *The Times of India* from Bombay, *Hindustan Times* from Delhi and *The Hindu* from Madras. In addition to

these newspapers, Hickey's Gazette targeted a readership among the East India Company nabobs. It was observed that the press had begun intervening for causes such as social welfare and public awareness soon after India's independence. This led to the press being viewed as responsible social structure and therefore a respectable body in society. It was also noticed that the style of writing in Indian press was Victorian, to begin with, and its contents were always serious and thought-provoking. *Blitz* and *Current*, were two popular tabloids published from Bombay during this period and were considered exceptional for their interpretations of socio-cultural issues. At this point, there was also a rise in the production of newspapers in Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, Marathi, and other regional languages. The total circulation of English language newspapers continued to be higher than of Hindi ones up to the 1980s despite the fact that most Indians did not follow English. In fact, Malhotra cites that "only two per cent Indians understood English against 40 per cent Indians who spoke Hindi" (67). Nevertheless, the popularity of the English newspaper remained as a part of the colonial legacy. The former subsidiary of *Reuters* appeared in a new avatar known as the *Press Trust of India* and later on the *United Press of India* which were developed as the two main news agencies across India. Eventually, these two sources converged into one that was known as the *United News of India*.

Inder Malhotra points out that "impartial observers of the Indian Press including prominent members of the profession divided the sixty years since 1947 into three phases in relation to the press" (69). According to Malhotra, the first decade also known as Nehru era, was broadly considered as the age of consensus. The first government comprised of towering leaders of the freedom movement who were

frequently covered by the print media. Indian press supported all the towering leaders from that era including Azad, Patel, Nehru, Rajaji, and Bose. The media was dedicated towards presenting the truth and spreading awareness among the Indian population. Thus the policies and the objectives of the first government received support from the Indian press. The second phase, after the sixties, is also referred to as "the age of criticism" (Inder Malhotra, 69). The Congress spilt in the year of Mahatma's centenary leading to the development of a disorganized alliance. The press of India introduced the slogan-Indira Hatao. "Precisely, the opposite happened as a resurgence body in Indian Polity. Like the polity, the press too got polarized into pro-Indira and anti-Indira factions" (Inder Malhotra, 69). All this while, the All India Radio (AIR) had been an important means of mass communication because it was wholly owned and controlled by government. The report of Sam Pitroda Expert Committee on Prasar Bharati summarizes that while radio broadcasting started in India in the 1920s, the name Akashvani was adopted in 1956. Also, television broadcasting began in Delhi from 1959 and was given a separate identity as Doordarshan (DD) in 1976" (Sam Pitroda Expert Committee on Prasar Bharati, 2014). Doordarshan appeared in India in the late twentieth century and early broadcasts were all in black and white. The launch of television media made a huge difference to the style of presentation as they started covering news instantly as it happened. Television became one of the most powerful medium of mass communication by imparting education, information and entertainment at the same time. NDTV's report, *Public Broadcasting in India,* by Kunal Srivastava, cites that television broadcast started in India under the AIR. Early programs were generally educational programs, many of them targeted at school

children and farmers. A number of community television sets were set up in Delhi's rural areas as well as schools around Delhi for the Indian audience. Television centers were inaugurated in other parts of the country and Doordarshan, which was the arm of AIR before, became a separate body. Satellite Instructional Television Experiment (SITE) was an important step taken by government of India to use television for better communication. Most of the programs were produced by Doordarshan and were telecasted twice daily. In the history of Indian television, a major event was the coverage the ninth Asian Games. After that, the government of India sanctioned a huge expansion of Doordarshan and at the same time several transmitters were set up throughout the country. Programs like *Humlog*, *Buniyaad* and *Nukkad* were immensely popular in during the eighties. According to the report by the Sam Pitroda Expert Committee on Prasar Bharati, the "Prasar Bharati act in 1990 came into force" (Sam Pitroda Expert Committee on Prasar Bharati, 2014), and soon Doordarshan along with AIR, was converted into Government Corporation under Prasar Bharati. With a humble beginning as a part of AIR, Doordarshan grew into a major television broadcaster. Regional Language Satellite channels, State Networks, International channels and All India channels like DD National, DD News, DD Sports, DD Gyandarshan, DD Bharati, Loksabha channel and DD Urdu appeared on screen. Eventually satellite channels too appeared in competence to Doordarshan with the purpose of disseminating education and entertainment. In vision and goal, the statement is found from the Sam Pitroda Expert Committee on Prasar Bharati that "a living and vibrant archive is the backbone of any media organization" (Sam Pitroda Expert Committee on Prasar Bharati, 2014). The purpose of introducing satellite

channels in India was for advanced research centers in communication and application. Star TV, Aaj Tak, NDTV, Zee and others came into existence and soon became popular among Indian viewers. This change happened with the arrival of satellite television in India. The plain truth was that the audience of Indian television was waiting for a shift from the didacticism and seriousness of Doordarshan programs. Soon a number of private channels emerged and the so called new media reached out to greater segments of viewers. As a result, reality television shows and news channels gained popularity among the Indian audience with their novel style of presentation. Not surprisingly, the flavor of emotional drama through reality shows and live telecast of news channels became more influential as they reached the audience. However the private channel owners became more and more tuned toward commercializing their programs through sensational reporting and live telecasts.

Notably, while there has been much criticism against the commercial proclivity of private television channels in India, Doordarshan, too, for its pro-government self-righteousness has often been condemned by scholars of media studies. Daya Kishan Thussu's article titled "The 'Murdochization' of News? The Case of Star TV in India" for instance, mentions that "in India, the liberalization of the television market and new communication technologies in the 1990s transformed the television landscape, with an exponential growth in the number of television channels" (593). Thussu writes that "until 1991, India had just one television channel, Doordarshan, a notoriously monotonous and unimaginative state monopoly which was uncharitably labeled as being a mouthpiece of the government of the day" (593). The advent of satellite television broadened the definition of viewership in India. Hence, over time, media in

India changed gradually into an industry in response to the big economic gains associated with it and started influencing and satisfying the expectation of its audience.

Notably, the more recent trends in Indian media have received much flak from intellectuals and critical thinkers. This is exemplified in Justice Markandaya Katju's article in *Hindu* which claims that in India "most of the media channels have started creating, manipulating news and burying the real news" (*Hindu*, 5/11/2011). Katju's statement highlights many instances where the media today does not report the real events honestly and instead focuses more on presenting information in a manner that is sensational and dramatic so as to attract the attention of audiences. Television news channels are run by private organizations that are driven by profit maximization and by Television Rating Point or TRP. In trying to achieve maximum profits, very often evidence is misrepresented, situations are manipulated and work ethics are compromised. Douglas Kellner's book, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern,* (1995) presents an attempt to understand the hegemonic ideologies in current political struggles of political groups and their projection through media. This book emphasizes distortions, mystifications and falsifications whose origins lie in the nexus between media and politics. Kellner argues that given the development of media, cultural studies may help to understand how media culture transcends the positions within existing political struggles. Further, in the introduction to the text, he asserts: "it provides representations which mobilize consent to specific political positions through images, spectacles, discourse, narrative and the other forms of media culture" (2). Douglas's study is relevant in the context of

Peepli [Live] where the discourse of farmer suicides becomes a live spectacle that is exploited by the media for its own self-aggrandizing purposes. The film, therefore, makes a powerful comment on the fact that if the media attempts to fulfill its responsibility sincerely; it can contribute significantly towards the success of a nation by highlighting the areas of growth that may lead to policy implementation.

Highlighting the social responsibility of media, many other scholars of this field have argued for the necessity of knowledge and information based media. Paul Starr, for example, writes in his scholarly article "An Unexpected Crisis: The News Media in Postindustrial Democracies" that "beginning in the 1970s, theories of post-industrial society projected a flourishing and happy future for the fields associated with the production of knowledge and information" (234). Likewise, Jean Pierre Dupuy in "Myths of Informational Society" writes that "information age is an age of paradoxes. It comes with the promise of liberation and the threat of oppression; it opens up the possibility of greater freedom but not without the chances of greater control; it promotes integration but at the same stroke can lead to disintegration; it leads to 'knowledge explosion' but it also ensures 'knowledge gaps'; it seeks to unravel 'truth' which by spin-off effect might turn out to be mythical" (3). Keeping in mind these scholarly ideas, it may be examined how the politics of knowledge and information production shaped the Indian media industry after 90s.

After globalization, the media industry gained authority and status in society and began influencing Indian public imagination. It created public awareness over socio-cultural issues and enabled considerable transparency in communication. It inevitably framed an open networked channel through print media, news broadcast and

radio and at the same time it strengthened the democratic values and practices in India. Social theorists of India became more confident and optimistic when the Indian media industry was widening and expanding its sphere. Due to media industry in India, the last decades of the twentieth century society advanced economically and strengthened politically. However, with this unexpected growth, time and again, the media industry in India slowly gained the notorious label of propagating farce owing to its exaggerated news and entertainment. It did not follow the true orientation towards the nation's exponential growth as it was doing before. It lost its true identity for its less oriented work ethics. A professor of Political Science in the University of Calcutta, Dipankar Sinha in his article "Info-Age and Indian Intellectuals: An Unfashionable Poser" discusses "the pervasive reach of the information age" (4188). Sinha rightly points out that the "information age has put the Indian Intellectuals at crossroads." He adds that "the power of information- its politics, economics, ethics and culture- calls for an organic worldview and commitment" (4193). According to Sinha "if the information age, with its images, ideas, significations and representations of the 'reality' has an Indian context of theorizing, it cannot just be a mechanistic superimposition of ideas which have genetic roots in an alien environment" (4192).

In the initial years, the Press Information Bureau of India was considered to be full of potential and was found to have a tremendous impact on country's economy. According to the FICCI-KPMG report, "India's Media and Entertainment (M&E) industry reaches 161 million TV households; 94,067 newspapers; about 2000 multiplexes; and 214 million internet users, of which 130 million accesses the internet on their mobile phones"(Entertainment Sector Report, 2014). Thus it may be

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suggested that viewers today engage actively with valid information produced by media industry. The M&E industry is growing steadily with each passing day and continues to contribute significantly to increase in awareness on many issues. This is understood to have a significant impact on the Indian population. Inder Malhotra mentions that "sensationalism, trivialization and titillation are becoming the order of the day, on the specious pretext that this is what the reader or the viewer wants" (*Media Mimansa: Media Critique*, 67). Thus the Indian media currently is faced with the challenge of presenting news in a manner that contributes towards national development. In other words, this refers to the media's factual presentation of political, economic and social issues of a country. The media's honest input is expected to have an influence in areas of democracy and good governance, create transparency in politics and policies on human rights. Such intervention can lead to positive outcomes at the state or village level leading to overall national development. In this context, it may be mentioned that there have been specific instances where intervention by the media has helped in national development. For example, responsible reporting by the media may help to highlight ongoing issues of cultural integration of a given community or society. The media can also assist in empowerment of disadvantaged groups by focusing on their conditions, introducing measures that have been successful in helping similar groups in other societies and accordingly suggesting remedial procedures. In sum: the media by reporting accurate information and highlighting issues that require attention can be actively involved in social and economic development of a nation.

Einar Ostgaard in his article "Factors Influencing the Flow of News" explores the aspects of modern news dissemination and how it makes the readers understand the factors influencing news flow. According to Einar Ostgaard, "every minute of the day, thousands of men and women are at work, gathering, transmitting and presenting news to the public. The decisions they make, when discarding most of the material available, when choosing what is to be presented and when presenting it in the way they consider best, will have be called the processing of news" (39). Ostgaard's argument explains how news flow occurs and may help in understanding how news channels get benefited through viewership. The Indian media has attracted a lot of controversy in recent times and its role has often been subjected to a lot of criticism. Critics have opined that the way the media operates in the present times may have disadvantageous consequences for national development. Several factors which influence controversial decisions and actions of the media have been discussed by researchers working in the area. Some issues which have been highlighted in this regard are sensationalism, selective and biased presentations, and propaganda.

Sensationalism and the Indian Media Industry

Dr. B. K. Ravi in his article "Media and Social Responsibility: A Critical Perspective with Special Reference to Television" cites that "for healthy, meaningful, harmless, non-interfering and contributive functioning with maximized benefits, every media theory has reiterated that the intricacies of media practices should essentially be compatible with the social structure, cultural ethos and psycho-social ramifications of the land and the region" (2). Communication is a dynamic and a powerful tool with a

strong influence on realities. The media's use of communication to circulate information among the masses may result in either positive or negative outcomes. Thus it is expected that the media is careful in its communication and fulfill its social responsibility by focusing on providing accurate information along with entertainment. This claim is endorsed by D. Ransohoff and R. Ransohoff in their article "Sensationalism in the Media: When Scientists and Journalists May be Complicit Collaborators" in which the duo assert that "news sensationalism shows that, what public watch or read casually may indeed have very significant impact within the views of reality" (186). This unrestrained sensationalism can lead to detrimental consequences which decreases the credibility of the media. It is important at this point, to examine the reasons behind the media's coverage of unnecessary information and presentation of sensational bytes. Also, whether it is the media that is solely accountable for such representations or are viewers also partially responsible for watching such sensational news is a matter of debate. While news channels have been criticized for supplying the public with thrill and at times, scandalous reports, it is also true that the viewer's demand for sensational news has led to its popularity overtime. This demand and supply cycle now continues as it leads to quick gains in terms of increase in popularity as well as economic benefits. This cycle is difficult to break despite predictions that the long term consequence of such reporting may prove to be unfavorable.

Some sections of the media have been accused of resorting to unfair methods in reporting. These include suppression and distortion of facts, and exaggeration and over-simplification resulting in ideological differences among different systems within

the societal structure. *Peepli [Live]* is an example of the conflict that arises in Peepli after the arrival of media. The media persons manipulate Natha and his family to achieve their TRP targets, and the entire Peepli village soon turns into an entertainment arcade for the public.

Selective and Biased Presentations

The media has often been blamed for selective and biased coverage of news items. Such attitude affects the overall effectiveness of the media in contributing to a nation's prosperity. It is often seen that the professionals in news media demand media freedom, so that they can fearlessly bring issues to the notice of one and all. It is true that freedom of media is the cornerstone of any democracy, and does introduce issues aimed at the welfare of a community thereby creating a prosperous nation. However, media at times remains voiceless and powerless in some situations. This problem is demonstrated powerfully in the film *Peepli [Live]* when Rakesh, the local reporter realizes that Natha's live suicide is not as important as another occurrence. He attempts to convey to Nandita, a young and ambitious reporter at ITVN channel that the plight of another farmer, Hori Mahato deserves more attention than the live coverage of Natha's suicide. What Nandita explains to Rakesh provides the audience with reasons as to how the media chooses to highlight some issues and ignore others. In this case, Hori Mahato, a poor farmer resorts to selling soil for survival. He is shown digging a pit for this purpose and eventually dies in the process. This incident though tragic is ignored in comparison with Natha's case since the latter has greater potential to create a sensational piece of news item as opposed to a poverty stricken farmer's unfortunate death.

Hence it is worth noting that although the media must have the freedom to express itself, at the same time it needs to exercise control over what is communicated and how. There are several independent factors in such situations that influence and at times control the media's decisions and actions. Thus it is important for the media to show restraint in its actions. In *Peepli [Live]*, the people who appear to have influenced the media include Rakesh, the local reporter, Pappu Lal, Bhai Thakur, the local politicians and the bureaucrats on duty. The report on live suicide becomes an important piece of news item for these individuals as it seems to benefit them in one way or the other. The involvement of these individuals and their agenda automatically creates a larger agenda which the media realizes can help them achieve their goals as well. Publicizing this event results in the creation of conflict among different sub-groups of villagers inhabiting Peepli. This chain of events and its subsequent outcome portrays the immense power and potential that the Indian media possesses today. *Peepli [Live]* also demonstrates that such power and potential is not always used with the right intentions to contribute the society's growth and development. Without the free expression of ideas and opinions in mass media and communication, the betterment of society cannot be expected. However, it must be acknowledged that freedom is as important as responsibility, and work and ethics must go hand in hand for the growth and development of a society.

Media and Propagandist Discourses

Henry T. Conserva in his work *Propaganda Techniques* mentions that "Propaganda is a purposive effort to push ideas among people for manipulation.

Propagandists influence rational thought by agitating emotions, designing agendas, exploiting insecurities and bending the rules of logic in their own manipulative structures" (Henry T. Conserva, 2003). When Rakesh, the local news reporter of the daily Janmorcha in Peepli reports that a farmer in the village intends to commit suicide due to poverty, the news channels begin cashing in on this story. The issue of farmer suicide is left unaddressed and the entire media community chooses to focus on the spectacle of suicide that is expected to take place in Peepli. This is because their purpose is to cover news that helps them to increase their channels' popularity. In order to achieve this goal, some of the common techniques used by news media are word games like name calling, propagating false connection and misappropriating special appeals. Name-calling is a common technique used by the media in which attention-grabbing words or phrases are coined to refer to specific events. For example in *Peepli [Live]*, the media invents interesting phrases that serve as headlines for sensational events including the alleged romantic affair of a popular actress with an international celebrity. The use of attractive headlines not only helps to get public attention but also successfully conveys information in a magnified and exaggerated manner in print media. Likewise, in audio visual media, television is the most powerful tool for propaganda and is often used to exaggerate, misrepresent or distort important issues. In *Peepli [Live]*, news channels resort to many falsified interpretations as these help them in gaining popularity and hence, high viewer ratings. Such instances from the movie provide us with a clear understanding of propaganda in media and journalism in contemporary India.

The Media Boom in India

Ruchi Jaggi and Pallavi Majumdar in their essay "Popularity vs. Credibility: An Analysis of Public Perception of Sensationalism in Indian Television News" rightly point out that "from the non-glamorous days of Doordarshan in India to the more dynamic Zee News in 90s, there has been a noticeable tilt towards sensationalism in Indian news media with the advent of a new Hindi news channel India TV" (171-179). There is no doubt that multiple and dense networks of social communication have now come to exist in India. Establishing a healthy and enriching relationship between audience and news channel is a part of social communication but the recurrent disasters about the influx of worthless information is a crisis in reporting, and seems to have become the norm in Indian media. The concept of 'breaking news' and the resultant high ratings are new to reporting and journalism in India. It is also observed that over one or two decades in India, popularity of disciplines such as mass communication and journalism has led to the creation of more private channels which are based on samples on popularity index. Jaggi and Majumdar further assert that "the boom in India TV news channels is no short of a revolution. The way the context and presentation have diversified in the last decade speaks volumes about how television news has carved a niche in the audience lifestyle and mind space" (171-179). However, the breaking news concept does not necessarily serve its purpose; and although it results in high viewership and popularity in the short run, it eventually does get criticized by the audience for whom it is intended. Unfortunately, with such systems in place, the public psyche has already been affected through the inflow of unnecessary and sometimes inaccurate information; and thus the incorrect news

continue to circulate among the public. This situation is demonstrated well in *Peepli [Live]* and draws attention to the need for more discussions on the effect of the media boom in India in recent times.

Empowering and Liberating Indian Media

Without doubt the modern Indian society needs liberation from communalism, economic drawbacks and political instability. And much of this liberation is possible only with the active engagement of the media and political bodies. In *Peepli [Live]*, however, it is observed that India lacks true leaders in sectors like journalism and politics. India needs the young men like Rakesh in *Peepli [Live]*, whose conscience is shaken up by the tragic death of Hori Mahato and who corrects himself from his tendency towards sensationalist reporting. Young individuals like Rakesh are perhaps the hope for the nation since they can initiate new methods of highlighting existing issues in challenging and dynamic ways.

Contemporary India, however, is unfortunately is still driven by caste and corruption and continues to struggle for becoming a developed country in the world. Its citizens see its failed state through media and the news channels and owing to irrelevant entertainment and lack of right information, an all-pervasive cynicism often mars the possibility of progressive nation building. Contemporary media, more often than not, instead of strengthening and empowering the poor and the middle classes, appears to be abetting many of its age old prejudices and regressive attitudes. Barring a few instances, the media rarely covers the harsh realities of the Indian farmers or of rural India at large who often suffer under unjust policies and indifferent governance.

Media rarely works towards strengthening the common citizen's aspirations. One of the issues that *Peepli [Live]* perhaps seeks to highlight the role of media and its immediate challenge which is to make judicious use of the right to freedom of expression. By exposing how news channels maximize profit and lose credibility when they show breaking news headlines in a controversial or in a sensational manner, the film powerfully challenges the recent trends in news making in India. Though dark and grim, the film also posits the possibility that perhaps in future the public may awaken from their stupor and critically examine social issues that find a persuasive rendition through the fictionalized lives of the inhabitants of Peepli.

The News Media in India vis-à-vis *Peepli [Live]*

The channel ITVN is introduced in *Peepli [Live]* as an intellectualized and sophisticated forum that refrains from using local languages and is constantly in touch with the big political leaders of the country. Ironically, this channel is one of the first to cash in on the tragic events looming large over the village *Peepli* and rushes to the spot to capture Natha's suicide. The swanky newsroom of the channel is introduced just after Natha and Budhia's discussion on a possible suicide to obtain the compensation money from the government. Vivek and Nandita, the two reporters of ITVN, appear to read out the news headlines followed by an interview with Mr. Salim Kidwai, the union agricultural minister. Tellingly, the headlines include stories such as Shilpa Shetty's Denial, Opinion Polls' Predictions, Farmers Suicides that continue unabated, a Comfortable Victory for Mukhya Pradesh's Chief Minister Ram Yadav and Union Minister Salim Kidwai's interview on farmers' suicide. The scene in the

news room of ITVN provides an understanding of the off-camera politics of both the media and the news channels. Vivek informs Nandita about Kidwai's arrival whom he describes as a fan of the vivacious Nandita. Demonstrating the hand in glove relationship between the corrupt media persons and the politicians, Nandita and Kidwai glibly but laughingly discuss the issue of farmer suicides thereby trivializing the grave implication of these tragic events. While the common populace continues in ignorance, the top political leaders and the famous newsroom faces make hay while the sun shines for them. Once on air, Nandita's first query to Mr. Salim Kidwai is: "In every eight hours a farmer in the country has been committing suicide which brings us to the unthinkable number of one lakh seventy thousand since 1998" and asks whether the "government be called indifferent?" To this the shrewd Kidwai's replies like a veteran politician stating that the "media should check its facts before reporting" and adds that "a number of these so-called suicides are actually natural deaths." In an interesting duel of words, the news anchor and the politician argue trying to pull each other down but in actuality leave the real crisis unaddressed. While in conclusion, Nandita attacks the apathy of politicians, Kidwai indirectly points out that media is purposefully employing unimportant facts to attract both credit and viewership.

Just after the interview of Mr. Salim Kidwai at NDTV, the Prime Time channel appears on screen. Deepak is introduced as the smart news reporter of Prime Time who comments that the Kidwai went to ITVN first (Deepak to Mr. Salim Kidwai). Soon after, another responsible news reporter at Prime Time channel who appears to be their team leader, directs Deepak and other reporters to run the corporate scam story on Kidwai's brother round the clock, to make Kidwai fall in line.

The team leader seems agonized and states:

"When does ITVN's election programming begin?"

"It's already on. They had chief minister Ram Yadav yesterday." Deepak adds.

Such sequences expose the unendurable but still rampant corruption that has come to characterize Indian media and the dissemination of news. The role of news channels in India as depicted by ITVN and Prime Time are factual examples that highlight how news channels concoct smart cover stories, such as *Peepli [Live]*, to gain high TRP's. Simultaneously, the lesser known channels such as Prime channel, are shown to be telecasting sensational stories such "The Sacred Pumpkin Story" to woo the semi-educated viewership in India. The owner of the Prime channel is Lalaji who appears happy with "The Sacred Pumpkin Story" and one of the reporters is quick to boastfully state how the "The Sacred Pumpkin Story" is topping the charts. This is how the media that is crazy for viewership forgets its responsibility and runs programs that includes bytes of celebrities to attract their audience. *Peepli [Live]* comes across as a powerful example of the how media has degraded itself to gain popularity at any cost. A telling example is obtained in *Peepli [Live]* in a scene in which a reporter at Prime Time states:

"Sir, I've got a great lead."

"When Saif Ali Khan was in class eight, he kissed a girl. The girl is still in love with him."

"Will she appear on TV?"(The Team Leader asked the reporter).

"Yes Sir, I've spoken to her."

The conversation mentioned above indicates how the media could choose to give importance to irrelevant and unimportant incidents that they believe would help in attracting their audience by creating controversy. Deepak plans to get the girl to appear on television to relate her story while assuming that the actor will deny the fact. To add more excitement to the situation, Deepak instructs the reporter to get a reaction from the wife of the actor who happens to be an actor. In addition to this, the team leader suggests getting the school teacher of that girl on television as well. This they believe can help them build a highly complex situation which will make it possible for them to keep the story running throughout the week. The team leader then immediately asks the reporter to find some romantic footage of Saif Ali Khan from the film *Yeh Dillagi,* which will help to exaggerate the story further. Finally, he chooses a headline for the story which is scandalous, thus increasing the possibility of the story gaining popularity. Instances such as these pose powerful attack on the Indian news media and portrays effectively the lack of ethics and morals therein.

Faulty News Reporting and *Peepli [Live]*

Mark Tully in his article "The Business of Broadcasting" rightly affirms that "India was at the heart of two of the great revolutions in communications. Technology is never without its disadvantages and dangers and this is certainly true for the satellite revolution in communications. It was a focal point in the British Empire's telegraph and cable system. All the necessary talent was readily available, so why did India lag behind? There was one reason: the dead hand of the government" (254-255).Tully's article fits in the context of *Peepli [Live]* where everything associated with the

creation and dissemination of news is completely chaotic. The bureaucracy is defunct in *Peepli [Live]* and works like a watchdog for the ruling government. Avinash Nimade, the district collector comes across as a puppet in the hands of the ruling government. Like an obedient servant of the chief minister, he sanctions a Lal Bahadur or a hand pump to Natha; a gadget that is of no use to the latter's family. The danger associated with the real development in media in India, according to Mark Tully, is that "editors in news channels are not aware of the danger of overusing satellite communications. One danger is, of course, there is all that chatter between presenters and reporters. Another danger is uncontrolled, or inadequately controlled, live coverage" (258). One of the important scenes in *Peepli [Live]* is the conversation happening between Nandita and Aunin, the owner of ITVN before the arrival of news channels in *Peepli*. It seems that Nandita is encouraged by Aunin to get the eyeball for ITVN sponsorship no matter what it takes.

These events in *Peepli [Live]* may be examined with the help of Sumanta Banerjee's article "Media: Bashed from Outside and Flawed from Within" where he mentions that "the 'vibrant' Indian media is under siege on all sides. Powerful politicians use mobs to browbeat independent outlets; the state manipulates the media to plant information through journalists innocent of the basic norms of reporting and media owners prioritize their commercial interests over everything else" (10). Nandita, Deepak, Rakesh and the other media personnel in *Peepli [Live]* are encouraged to work for certain powerful and influential politicians like CM Ram Yadav or like Salim Kidwai in *Peepli [Live]*. Consequently, the state manipulates media to serve its own selfish motives.

Most importantly, the Live Suicide Broadcasting which becomes the exclusive scene in *Peepli [Live]* where everyone waits for Natha to commit suicide before the camera, is as poignant as it is comical. It is believed that the deceased Natha will become a source for covering story after story and the news channels will benefit from the windfall brought about by this incident. Not only does Natha become the victim alone, his family, his villagers and his village is become a playground for the media and *Peepli* itself is brought live to the entire nation awaiting a new reality show. The unpredictable situations covered by all news channels are exposed and caught on camera. Accordingly, the dysfunctional media by misusing the right to freedom of expression comes out with a dark message in *Peepli [Live]*.

The most pathetic of all characters, the protagonist of the film, Natha, is voiceless, confused, frustrated, fearful and indecisive before the camera in *Peepli [Live]*. While the media tries to picture him as a martyr and a hero, the poor and illiterate Natha feels nothing but complete bewilderment in the face of the frenzy created by the news channels. When Nandita asks Natha, "what is your name" on-camera, he becomes speechless and nervous like a caged animal. As the camera tries to capture his every move, Natha turns alienated, anxious, pressurized and even non-communicative. The news channels and the reporters in *Peepli [Live]* who struggle to get the eyeball or highest viewership are unable to understand Natha's reality and his unwillingness to commit suicide in the film. The media personnel are incapable of communicating with Natha and his grave situation. Apart from the camera, the severe pain that Natha undergoes is noticed by none.

Many media persons in the film seem helpless considering that they are mere puppets in the hands of powerful people. They cope with their situations by choosing to justify their wrong actions and ignoring the genuine cases that need to be highlighted. While Rakesh is presented as the scapegoat here, Nandita successfully wraps up the story and will perhaps quickly move on to other more interesting and sensational topics with little or no guilt about her behavior. In *Peepli [Live]*, the only media person who reacts with sensitivity towards the issue instead of sensationalizing it, is the local reporter Rakesh. He unsuccessfully attempts to put across to Nandita why the media should be focusing on Hori Mahato's death instead. But Rakesh's idealistic beliefs are not considered practical by Nandita. Finally, Rakesh loses his life in trying to solve the mystery of Natha's disappearance which yet again makes a mockery of the situation. The filmmaker draws attention to the satirical theme in the title of the film itself. [Live] in the title indicates that Natha's story in the village of Peepli has been turned into a live show. In recent times there has been a sudden rise in the popularity of live shows and reality shows. These shows that claim to track the activities of target individuals is real time manage to gather quite a lot of irrelevant information as well. Following this, the media often tends to overlook the intended objective and creates false impressions in order to make use of the ample information collected which is exactly how the media behaves in attempting to provide live coverage of the events in Peepli. This leads to insensitive portrayal of situations that reflects the apathy of the media and the nation as well.

Conclusion

With reference to Sharmila Mitra Deb and M. Manisha's book *Indian Democracy: Problems and Prospects*, cited earlier, it may be emphasized that the Indian media has indeed come a long way "from the pre-liberalization period where television served as a medium of political indoctrination. Such indoctrination was not always without political leanings. It was morally tinged with ideas of national integration and consensus building" (xxvii). This argument can be appropriated for an analysis of sensational and biased reporting presented in *Peepli [Live]* which is just a representative sample of the Indian media and their work. While the film focuses mostly on the media's lack of social responsibility, it may be important to mention that the media in India has at times been associated with behavior that has resulted in positive outcomes. In the past, the media has unearthed various instances of corruption such as the Bofors Scam, Cash for vote Scam and Commonwealth Game scam, among others. While these may be considered as the high points of the Indian media, the present situation is more often than not one of extreme moral depravity. It needs to be reinforced that in a democratic country like India, the media has a serious and powerful role to play and all forms of media need to step in to challenge the evils of our society. This will be helpful in strengthening democracy by highlighting corruption, crime and various national scam issues. While the media's freedom of expression is very important, it is also crucial that this freedom be rightly used to enlighten and impart awareness to the public sphere; or else the consequences may go terribly wrong. Media in *Peepli [Live]* is a tool to deconstruct certain negative portfolios channelized through unethical inversions such as the negative aspect of politics and media. The film has presented a story that may enable its viewers to

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reconstruct strategies that empower the media while keeping the best interests of the larger community in mind.

Chapter IV

Subversion of Gender Stereotypes in *Peepli [Live]*

This chapter assesses the depiction of gender stereotypes in the film *Peepli [Live]*. It argues that the film systematically satirizes and subverts some of the most common stereotypes associated with the masculine and the feminine gender. In order to contextualize the problematic of gender, this chapter begins with an introduction to research on gender from major theoretical perspectives. This is followed by a section on gender stereotypes in the Indian cultural context focusing on films which have addressed the issues of gender roles. Further, this chapter outlines gender as a cultural construction particularly in relation to the issues of subjectivity of males and females. It then explores select Hindi films from 1950s till date, over each decade, which have attempted to subvert gender roles in India. Finally, the depiction of gender roles in *Peepli [Live]* is examined in an attempt to understand how this film produces an unconventional take on cultural stereotypes regarding men and women in India.

The Theoretical Background to Gender Studies

The concept of gender may be considered a popular topic of research with a wide range of applicability. This broad field of inquiry has attracted the interest of researchers from a variety of disciplines such as humanities, social sciences and medicine. Gender refers to attitudes, behaviors, and feelings which often emerge from cultural associations with a person's biological sex. These associations when compatible with cultural expectations are known to be gender normative while behavior which is incompatible with these expectations is known to be

unconventional. The role of gender is evident in interpersonal relationships as well as in social institutions. Characteristics such as patriarchy, matriarchy, femininity, and masculinity are used to identify roles of individuals. The use of such terms makes individuals conscious about their gender and reinforces stereotypical behavior that in turn shows them the way to fulfil a specific role and responsibility as a social being.

Judith Butler's theorization of gender introduces the notion of 'performativity' in the *Gender Trouble* (1990). Here, the author presents the idea that gender is involuntarily 'performed' within dominant social discourses. Notably, the reason why a substantial shift in women's and men's lives since 1960s has happened in the west may be explained using Butler's ideas. Women's and men's role and their performances have changed drastically over the past few decades. This has added new dimensions to the discussions presented by prominent gender critics and theorists. In 2006, Sara Salih stated in *On Judith Butler and Performativity* that, "gender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a 'doing' rather than a 'being'" (55). Sara Salih cites Butler, who in exploring the idea of gender in *Gender Trouble,* states that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender" (55). With time, the term gender came to be popularly used in social discourses, mostly in feminist writings. Gender

thus not only differentiates between men and women and later explains what men and women can do, but it may be considered as a systematic way of understanding men and women socially and culturally and the relationships between them. Biologically, both men and women can take on masculine as well as feminine roles; however they are socialized to think and to act in certain ways. This is reflected in Simone de Beauvior's declaration in *The Second Sex*, 1989 that "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (vii).

To further the analysis of the theoretical underpinnings of gender it is worth taking into consideration the 10th edition of *Gender trouble*: *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2006) by Routledge Classics which, according to Judith Butler, produced "as a part of the cultural life of a collective struggle that has had, and will continue to have" in every concept related to gender. In *Gender trouble*: *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* Butler theorizes sex as natural and posits that it comes first while gender is perceived as a secondary construct which imposes itself over this natural distinction. Thus while gender does not draw political precursors, it is observed that politicization of gender often occurs. In the context of gender politicization, the body has an important role to play. The ideas and methods that portray the masculine and feminine body may create serious conflict.

Femininity and *Masculinity*: Existing Scholarship on G*ender* Identity

Theories on feminism emerged in the West after activist movements which resulted out of women's demands for education, right to property and right to vote. These theories have been the subject of much debate and criticism over the years in

which research on these topics has developed considerably. While the works of Judith Butler, Dorothy E. Smith, Patricia Hill Collins and others may be credited for being strong influences, many core ideas came to be presented in later years as well. The sociology of gender studies in 1950s and the theories of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan closely examined the social constructs of femininity and masculinity to present cultural trends. More recently, Connell and Messerschmidt's article "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the concept" 2005, asserts the view that gender relations were historical and so gender hierarchies were subject to change. The authors trace the expansion in writing about "the male role" (831) in the 1970's resulting in research on a variety of topics such as local gender hierarchies and local cultures of masculinity in schools, in male-dominated workplaces and in village communities. In presenting other work on this, mention may be made of Chris Otter's review "Masculinity in the Modern West: Gender, Civilization and the Body" (2010) in which the author cites Christopher E. Forth who states that modern masculinity is structurally unstable, dynamic and contradictory. In other words, masculinity may not be considered as a fixed entity. Masculinity is perhaps understood as embedded in the body or in personality traits of the individuals. However, masculinity is also probably a configuration that develops from certain practices. These practices can differ in particular social settings. Connell and Messerschmidt in their paper, recommend the need of reformulation of the concept of hegemonic masculinity in four main areas: the nature of gender hierarchy, the geography of masculine configurations, the process of social embodiment, and the dynamics of masculinities. In conclusion, the authors mention that with more research, the concept was observed to have acquired new

meanings and efforts were made to study its application in "fields ranging from education and psychotherapy to violence prevention and international relations" (853).

Gender Roles in Indian Society

In U. A. Rajadhyaksha and Sofiya Velgach's paper titled "Gender, Gender Role Ideology and Work Family Conflict in India" 2001, the authors cite S. L. Bem's "Gender Schema Theory: A cognitive account of sex typing." Rajadhyaksha and Velgach elaborate on Bem's understanding of gender where the latter opines that "gender is actually a multidimensional phenomenon" (14). The researchers examined gender, gender role ideology, work family conflict --both work-interfering-with-family and family-interfering-with-work on a sample of 405 working men and women in Mumbai and Bengaluru. Although no significant difference was reported in the levels of work-interfering-with-family between men and women, family-interfering-with-work was significantly higher for women as compared to men. The authors refer to gender roles in the Indian society in explaining this finding. They summarize that families in India are usually patriarchal in nature with the eldest male member being the head of the household. This is also evident in the religious beliefs practiced in society. For instance, *Sudhir Kakar* in his book *The Inner World*: *A Psychoanalytical Study of Childhood and Society in India,* (1978) points out among other facts, that women are encouraged to bear (male) children to carry the lineage forward and also because Hindu religion requires that funeral rites be performed be a male relative of the deceased so that the soul attains salvation. Similarly, there are many other evidences that reflect the gender based hierarchy that exists in society. Thus from the

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sociological and traditional point of view, men enjoy a higher status and more power than women in a traditional Indian family. Any attempt to break away from these stereotypes results in stigmatization. Despite this, such attempts have been observed in schools, universities, workplaces and families. Thus a stay-at-home husband who chooses to look after his children over being the primary breadwinner, a woman who works as a priest or drives a taxi and a man who does not display his aggressive side during a heated argument may be happier as individuals because they choose to express who they are instead of succumbing to societal pressures of living up to a certain stereotype. However they may also report being the topic of discussion among the traditional and more confirmative groups; and in some cases may be ostracized as they may be perceived as being a bad influence on others. It is due to such reasons that many individuals in such societies function in accordance with the roles that tradition has prescribed. Thus the unique strengths and subjective experiences of individuals may be suppressed over the entire duration of their lives.

In examining the present scenario of the status of women in India specifically after independence, scholarly work from many disciplines including cultural studies, gender studies, theatre studies, film theory and literary theory appear to be extremely informative. Notably, feminism in India did not have an academic/theoretical inception as it did in the West. Naturally, it was not recorded as one coherent movement in history but examined variously by researchers who have focused on specific cultural epochs and moments to define Indian feminism. Describing the reaction to this journey in India, Suma Chitnis in her essay "Alphabet of Lust" in 1951, writes that "the most distinctive features of this movement was that it initiated

by man, it was only towards the end of the century the women joined the fray" (5). Likewise, Jasbir Jain's *Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency* (2011) may be regarded as an important contribution in this regard. This work addresses feminism as an ideology which is invariably linked to culture and presents how it works with both the body and the consciousness. This book also explores the historical sources across India's composite culture highlighting the roots of feminism in India. Indian society has always been considered hierarchical; and the representation of feminism in India is quite dissimilar as compared to the western ideas of feminism.

The ideas discussed above have been portrayed time and again in the works of leading Indian women novelists specifically in the last couple of decades. These include Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Anita Nair Manju Kapoor, Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy. For an understanding of feminism in India, it is necessary to trace the history of feminist activities in the country. Maitree Chaudhury's *Feminism in India* (2005) brings to fore the theoretical foundations of feminism in India where she mentions that "the status of women in colonial and independent India challenges Indian feminism" (7). Feminism in India aimed at defining and defending equal political, economic and social rights of Indian women. The 2013 article "Feminism as a Literary Movement in India" by Anjali Hans insights growing awareness among women in twentieth century India. These women, according to the author are more aware of their desires, sexuality, self-definition, existence and destiny as compared to other generations. The argument in this essay attempts to explore contemporary Indian writers who through their writing strive to

liberate women by encountering socio-cultural constraints and oppressive customs. Anjali Hans rightly asserts that in post-independent India, where education of women had already commenced, "the New Woman" is the new phenomenon (762). Furthermore, she observes that education brought about the "the feminist trend in Indian literature" (1762) and consequently women have come into conflict with the double standards of social law and conventional moral codes prevalent through ages.

The cultural construction of a specific gender in every society can be understood as per the given gender stereotypes. Psychologist Jayanti Basu in her paper "Development of the Indian Gender Role Identity Scale" 2010 comments that gender role identity constructs operate in interaction with sex and culture in various domains in life including mental health, academic achievement and job preference. Broadly speaking, these are evident in observations in in rural and urban families and workplaces and households in India. Historically, politically and culturally it is observed that in Indian settings the male voice is heard and the female voice is generally silenced. It is important to point out here that on rare occasions, an unusual demonstration of gender roles is observed in society, for instance in a film like *Peepli [Live]* that uses satire to present these unconventional characters in a light-hearted manner.

Hindi Films since 1950s: Representation of Gender Roles

Films in India have generally used stereotypical portrayals when focusing on men and women. This is especially true for mainstream Hindi films that have the largest audience in India. However, there have been characters in each decade that

have defied the gender stereotype. Some of these have attained critical and commercial success as well. In this context, the example of the landmark film *Mother India,* 1957 may be cited. The female lead in the film attempted to challenge earlier traditional notions related to the role of a woman. The film narrates the story of a poverty stricken village woman, Radha, who has to face many struggles in raising her children. Radha's husband Shamu is no longer able to work for a living after an accident, following which he leaves them. Shamu's character represents a weak and powerless individual who has succumbed to his vulnerability. This role of subordination is not associated with masculine characteristics. Similarly, Radha's role in the film requires her to fulfil the primary breadwinner's responsibility, a position that was generally solely occupied by the man in the family. The famous poster of Mother India in which a plough is balanced on Radha's shoulders depicts a mother carrying the responsibilities of her family. This is unique as well as unusual, especially considering the fact that the film was released at a time when most stories were woven around men from who were the main source of income for their family, no matter what their backgrounds were. Indian film scholars K. Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayeke in their text *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change* (2004) states that "the character of Mother India represents the changing role of the mother in Indian cinema and society in that the mother is not always subservient or dependent on her husband, refining the male gender or patriarchal social structures" (44). According to Eshun 1999, "Radha transforms from a submissive wife to an independent mother, thereby breaking female stereotypes in Hindi films" (*The New Internationalist*) (44).

Another film in which one of the main characters was a strong woman was *Teesri Kasam* (The Third Vow) which was released in 1966. This film exposes the gross exploitation of a woman Hirabai, who has a career in performing arts. Hiraman is a rural man who by occupation is a bullock cart driver. He is traditional and displays patriarchal values in his interaction with the dancer Hirabai. He is emotional, protective and caring towards her. In the film, Hirabai on her way to another village travels in Hiraman's bullock cart. The interaction between them on the way builds a simple relationship in which Hirabai discovers how the dancer is perceived by the villagers and at the end of the film asks her to move away from her profession to build a life that will be considered respectable by society. In this film, the woman is portrayed as a career woman struggling to build her life despite the wrongs committed by society against her. On the other hand, while the man is depicted as a conservative rural Indian man, he has a sensitive side to his personality. Thus in some ways, the film does challenge stereotypical notions. *Abhimaan* in 1973 displays the fragility of the male ego when a husband Subir is unable to handle the jealousy that he experiences due to his wife Uma's success as a singer. Uma's compliance to patriarchy and her effort to fit into the situation and Subir's inability to realize and accept the reasons for this discomfort reflects the lives of many women and men of that generation. Finally, Uma's patience and humility and Subir's acceptance of his mistakes brings the story to a happy end where the couple reunite.

On another note, it may be pointed that the characterization of roles here were unlike many other films that were being made in the 1970's. For instance, roles of female characters who had strong minds, thriving careers and clear opinions. In this

context, examples may be cited from *Trishul,* 1978 and *Arth,* 1982. In Trishul, Hema Malini plays the role of a general manager of a company, Raakhee works as a company secretary and Waheeda Rehman chooses to be an unwed mother despite unfavorable circumstances. Although the film's story is one of revenge and hatred and revolves around male characters, these women's decisions and actions stand out against the practices of stereotypical norms. Around that time, urban India was experiencing transformations in different sectors including women's roles at home and in the outside world. Women's participation in all areas including the occupational domain was being encouraged through different sources such as education and politics. However, strong notions of patriarchy were still existent in these very domains. In *Arth*, the filmmaker revealed the mental anguish experienced by a woman Pooja whose husband Inder was involved in an extra marital affair. Her initial attempts at making the marriage work and later efforts towards building an independent life was captured beautifully through meaningful dialogues and songs, and a complex description of characters. This film ushered in a new acceptance to Indian society for exercising an equal material and emotional rights for women. Two other women in the story, an actress and a maid have their own struggles of finding love, identity and peace. While the women take powerful decisions that they believe will be good for them, Inder is unable to handle stressful situations in his life and is finally rejected by both women. Despite the portrayal of masculine features initially, Inder ultimately crumbles under pressure. The film ends with Pooja walking away with her maid's daughter to build a happy life. This story in many ways opposed cultural notions of male and female roles in society. Despite several conflicts, individuals make choices

that they believe in instead of unquestioningly accepting the roles that society expects them to fulfill.

After several such films through the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's, the next decade witnessed the release of films in which patriarchal values were dominant. Most of these films portrayed the ideal woman as a submissive and coy who readily surrenders to customs. The focus was more on building togetherness and relationships rather than creating opportunities for personal and professional growth and pursuing them. The independent woman was clearly not the theme for the 1990's. Thus many films would not show women as individually empowered for instance financially or professionally. Many characters that were sketched following stereotypical ideas became very popular. Films like *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun* (1994), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), *Hum Saath Saath Hai* (1999), *and Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001) have propagated the idea of women being caring and nurturing while men were dominating and protective towards them. In these films, the female characters were often seen to make huge sacrifices for the well-being of others. Some common themes from films with gentle women characters who performed such sacrifices included carrying out of rituals such as karwa chauth for husbands, giving in to pressures from in-laws, giving up careers to look after the family, blind obedience towards parents, in-laws, husband or community elders and tolerance of immense suffering without protest. In return, these women are showered with praise and their sacrifices are celebrated giving rise to the impression that such positions are to be respected. Occasionally a film like *Beta,* 1992 would present a different picture of a woman who does not fit the mold of a sacrificing and subservient individual. While gender bias in Hindi films is common

and often the subject of much debate, these films fail to provide an elaborate rationale to understand the causes that give birth to such characters such as power structures and male supremacy.

With the dawn of the new millennium, a sea change occurred in the way films were made and stories were written. Some filmmakers active in this decade made conscious efforts in order to challenge gender and other hegemonic stereotypes. Subjects that were considered taboo so far, including like sexuality, divorce, alternate sexuality, adultery, infidelity, surrogacy, live-in relationships were explored. These subjects exposed the audiences to realistic situations that give rise to conflicts faced by men and women in modern India. Such stories show women making successful attempts towards progress, excelling in different fields and men accepting these changes through negotiations by viewing these non-traditional situations in a positive light. Many instances of such phenomena depicted through new age contexts may be found in films like *Astitva* (2000), *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* (2002), *Chameli* (2003), *Page 3* (2005), *Cheeni Kum* (2007), *Life in a Metro* (2007), *Fashion* (2011), and *Lunch Box* (2013). All these films have attempted to present realistic and regular situations from different areas of life where the resolution to a conflict is unconventional and hence unexpected at times. For instance, in *Astitva* (2000) the unconventional woman who has long been neglected by her husband finally walks out of the marriage after a confrontation with her husband over the paternity of her son. This film ends with a question on identity of the individual in society within the realm of patriarchy. Thus, women in such realistic Hindi films are depicted as brave and ready to fight their circumstances. Films such as *Black Friday* (2004), *Udaan* (2010) and *Akrosh* (2010)

while portraying men and women present realistic issues to the audience while analyzing the character's subjective experiences.

Notably, the depiction of men has changed over the years as well but probably in less radical ways than the depiction of women. Occasionally, filmmakers use lighthearted, quick humor to bring forth the gender subversion in Indian society. For example, films like *Dil to Bacha Hai Ji* (2011) and *Partner* (2007) use jest to demolish the conventionality of patriarchy and promote matriarchy. Anurag Kashyap's and Rajkumar Hirani's films often explore the individual's personal experience which may not necessarily conform to societal norms, in an unbiased manner. In doing so, their films avoid presenting strong judgements on gender issues such as gender supremacy. *Barfi* directed by Anurag Basu in 2012 may be considered as a fine example in depicting gender subversion without presenting any verdict on male and female supremacy. Furthermore, mention may be made of Madhur Bhandarkar's films which often include a powerful and sometimes rebellious career woman in urban India who despite everyday struggles finally achieves success and happiness. Along the way, she may mistakes but ultimately reaches her goal and establishes her professional and personal identity. Such characterization of women is much more realistic than those portrayed in the films of earlier decades, especially considering women's lives in contemporary urban India.

Indian films that are made on new age issues and bring in perspectives that were missing earlier may not still be entirely removed from the traditional notions such as those related to family, men and women's roles. This is because such ideas are very deeply rooted in the Indian psyche and may be unconsciously presented in

creative expression despite conscious attempts to treat the subject with a fresh perspective. Kakar in his book, *A Psychoanalytic Study of Hindu Childhood and Society* (1978) mentions that "Indian families are indulged toward aged and children, patriarchal in nature with the eldest male member being head of the household" (7). However, in the same context, *Peepli [Live]* presents a curious reworking of the normative gender codes. It is worthwhile to examine how the film attests to a number of gender issues relevant to contemporary India and the everyday issues in Indian families.

Gender Stereotypes and *Peepli [Live]*

Peepli [Live] presents a model that disrupts the gender stereotype that is common in Hindi films, through the use of satire. The central character Natha in *Peepli [Live]* is a villager who is expected to display masculine features in his decisions and actions. On the other hand, his wife Dhaniya and mother Amma display aggressive behavior in reaction to stressful situations with the aggression being directed towards the men in the family in both cases. Circumstances indicate that there is lack of education and poverty which result in struggles that the family has to face every day. Amma, is bedridden but vocally abusive towards her sons and Dhaniya, while Dhaniya does not hesitate to drive the men away from the house when she learns that they have been unable to find a solution to their problem. These abusive reactions result from anger and frustration. However women, stereotypically, are not expected to react to negative emotions by being abusive. Expressions of femininity are missing

largely except for scenes where Dhaniya is shown playing the role of a nurturer taking care of family responsibilities. Physical aggression and ruthlessness specifically, are traditionally not associated with women in such circumstances. Interestingly, the men do not retaliate as one would expect them to. Another prominent character, Nandita Mullick, is a highly qualified woman who works as a news reader in a famous television channel and appears equally, if not more, ambitious and competitive as compared to the men at her workplace. In an environment driven by cut-throat competition, Nandita has had to take on masculine roles to survive. The interesting manner in which the women in *Peepli [Live]* have been presented may be analyzed in the context of discussions on feminism in India presently. The women are depicted as being aware of their rights, goals and existence. They act in fearless ways to get what they believe is right for them. At times, the women appear exploitative while they fight with their circumstances to achieve what they want. For example, Nandita does not hesitate to manipulate others on her way towards her goal. This is strongly against conventional patriarchal ideologies. In other words, such expressions may be considered more masculine than feminine but in the end help these women to fit into the situation which would not have been possible to this extent had they held on to their strongly feminine selves.

Patriarchy has been a popular concept in gender studies. The presence of patriarchal values is generally portrayed strongly in films on traditional Indian families. However in *Peepli [Live]*, the case is presented very differently. The roles of men and women and the relationship between them are presented through the use of satire in the film. It might be worthwhile to examine the reasons for presenting the

story in this manner. The filmmaker may have wanted to draw attention to how these characters in coping with stress brought about by extreme circumstances have reacted unusually to the situation. Secondly, this may be a representation of the recent social transformation against the rigid, stereotypical culture prevalent over many decades. Rajadhyaksha and Velgach cite R. Pruthi, R. Devi and R. Pruthi's edited book titled *Indian Women: Present Status and Future Prospects* (2003). The authors observe that the "status of women in India has seen many changes over its long history" (15). As a result, they conclude things are changing rapidly, helped by advancement in the areas of modernization and industrialization.

Masculinity in Crisis in *Peepli [Live]*

In *Peepli [Live]*, Natha's experience as a male member of his community may have contributed to his personality in which an individual develops set ways in dealing with situations including those of conflict. However, when he encounters situations in which there are multiple constraints and he must act to overcome them, he appears utterly confused and incapable of behaving as expected. His brother Budhia, having had undergone a similar socialization steps in to help the family, and in doing so influences Natha to such an extent that the latter agrees to die so that his family may live. Unable to handle the situational constraints, Natha became powerless and unable to demonstrate his abilities as a strong member of the community. Natha is presented as the object of ridicule to the audience when his faeces was being examined by over-enthusiastic media persons, in order to detect his emotional state. Natha was fearful of Dhaniya and Amma as well and this fear was shown to increase with increased

exposure to abuse. He represents 'the male in crisis' who cannot decide whether to act or to escape. Blank expressions, inactivity, negative body language and resignation to circumstances display lack of masculine traits. In *Peepli [Live]*, Natha's mind-body dualism creates conflict within him. While his mind is disconnected from reality, his body may be regarded as a prison of his soul. The negative construction of Natha's body is reflected in his actions that stem from frustration, isolation and lack of authenticity. Natha's body and mind is programmed and controlled by people around him. Such an expression of masculinity is understood to stem from man's inability to handle social and emotional pressures. The concept of masculinity may be expected to change with changing times; however it appears to have been haunted by the past when men were expected to be robust and enduring under all circumstances. The dynamic aspect of masculinity may be understood in regard to the pressures of modern life. For example, *Peepli [Live]* shows it structurally unstable and contradictory. Another perspective on 'masculinity in crisis' is presented in *Peepli [Live]* through the dominance of women over men. In the beginning of the film, Dhaniya in dominating over the two men Natha and Budhia, expresses her anger and frustration. But as a result of such behavior, her superiority over Natha is displayed bringing in the issue of the crisis between male-female relationships that emerges out of masculinity in crisis in the film.

On another note, the male characters in the urban setting such as Salim Kidwai, Aunin and Rakesh also present virtues which are not entirely masculine in nature. They are caught in a dismal cycle of deceit and dishonesty from where they have been unable to escape. This may be understood in relation to John Maclnnes' comment in

The End of Masculinity: The Confusion of Sexual Genesis and Sexual Difference in Modern Society (1998) that "crisis arises from fundamental incompatibility" (11). In addition to this, John Beynon's observation of masculinity in crisis in 2002 led him to write that "masculinity and men are often confused and conflated so that it remains unclear whether masculinity, men, or both are supposed to be in crisis" (76).

The hegemonic masculinity somehow is ineffective in this film to place the stabilization of gender relations in post-gendered society in India. The new model of masculinity in *Peepli [Live]* seems to be in crisis on the surface but a deeper analysis shows how the film exposes oppressive stereotypes. Thus, while the men in the story do not fit in with the stereotype of the rural Indian farmer, Budhia's relationship with Natha does reflect the former's ability to take the lead and find a solution by hook or crook that will serve his purpose. Thus he emerges as the household head who suggests a solution to the problem, however he also does not fulfil any other criteria that are associated with the stereotypical Indian man. It may be thus suggested that while Natha has been portrayed as a male with feminine features, Dhaniya is a female with masculine traits.

Femininity and Empowerment in *Peepli [Live]*

The women characters in *Peepli [Live]* are placed in very real settings and they are depicted in the roles of mother, wife, and a young media professional. Despite such regular roles, their behavior in the film is unique and unexpected. While the rural women are for obvious reasons, depicted in a different way than the urban woman, there are striking commonalities as well. Dhaniya and Amma are dependent on the

male members of the family largely while it may be assumed that Nandita is more independent in many ways. However, at her workplace Nandita finds herself in a situation where she is unable to take independent decisions and has to behave in accordance with the demands of the system. Despite being in different situations and having very different lives, both Dhaniya and Nandita are depicted as individuals who display masculine characteristics in coping with the situation at hand. Otherwise, they are regular women who are dedicated to certain responsibilities and aim to fulfil it to the best of their ability. On many occasions, both Dhaniya and Nandita come across as more authoritative, informative, and dominating as compared to their male counterparts.

Many crucial situations in the film are effectively controlled by Nandita, Amma and Dhaniya. Their behavior in such scenes is loud, and dominating. Amma's behavior especially is amusing as despite being physically helpless and ill, she is vocally abusive and curses her sons and daughter-in-law numerous times throughout the film. Dhaniya too attracts the attention of the audience with her boisterous behavior that is far removed from the behavior associated with a traditional woman from rural India. Instead of presenting herself as a victim of circumstances, she attempts to use all possible methods to cope with the situation. While Nandita's background is quite different from Amma and Dhaniya's, she also does not come across as a victim but as an empowered woman who makes certain choices in accordance with her judgement of situations. In getting her objectives met, Nandita manipulates both Rakesh and Kidwai who ultimately accept her arguments. Her self-confidence leads her to engineer certain situations as the story unfolds in the village of

Peepli. Thus, in some ways, this breaks the ideas of male supremacy in similar situations. This is quite against the portrayal of women being made vulnerable in extreme crisis situations.

Gender and Non-conformity in *Peepli [Live]*

On the surface, Nandita's character is that of a regular young professional in a highly competitive work setting and could be representative of any Indian working woman. However, in the specific situation that she finds herself, it may not be surprising to find women behaving likewise. Non conformity to gender roles is adequately displayed in Nandita's behavior when she becomes fiercely ambitious and pursues the story that is expected to contribute significantly to her professional life. The defenselessness that men feel around her is portrayed through the characters of Deepak and Rakesh. While Deepak feels jealous and insecure of Nandita dominating the news scenario, Rakesh appears to feel a sense of attraction towards her. However these reactions from the men around do not affect her in any manner and she continues to create one story after another with an aim to grab the attention of viewers. She uses smart methods to control people such as Aunin and Kidwai and the idea that women cannot work in such situations is proven wrong by her efficiency. When a woman works in this fashion that is, using a problem focused, rather than emotion focused approach to work resulting in remarkable outcomes, she may be sometimes perceived as either demonic or magical. Nandita displays traits associated with both and uses skills that are generally associated with masculinity to navigate through very difficult

professional situations. Thus non conformity to gender helps her survive in an atmosphere that would have otherwise been more stressful.

Dhaniya's aggressive attitude is the most striking feature about her in the context of gender non-conformity. While she is probably uneducated and completely unaware of women's rights and movements, she still practices the same ideas. She is in no way similar to the docile and fainthearted rural Indian woman that is the prevalent stereotype and maintains her claim over Natha's home and family in a powerful manner. She experiences no fear in questioning her husband and brother-in-law regarding matters that are many a times not understood to be the prerogative of women folk in rural India. Despite the threat to her future, she does not appear submissive and is never subjugated by anyone. Her feminine traits are displayed when she takes care of the family members including her children. She works hard to provide the best to them and despite Budhia and Natha not involving her in their decisions, she finds out everything about matters that concern her family. Amma's is in many ways similar to Dhaniya. Both women, despite not being directly involved in the situation, keep track of all events and admonish the two brothers whenever they behave in ways that irritate her. For instance, Amma remarks that wasting time and smoking pot will not resolve any problems when Budhia complains about moving Amma's bed to the courtyard. Thus the loud and dominating nature displayed by these women largely do not fit in with cultural notions of gender roles.

Budhia occupies a superior position in the family and displays certain behavior which is expected of the male members in a rural household. However, he is unable to play the role of the protector and does not take any action that will bring about an end

to their hardship. He is able to manipulate Natha because the latter is unable to put up a tough fight and is easily persuaded due to emotional reasons. However, his masculinity fails to speak for him when he is confronted by stronger individuals such as Amma and Dhaniya. In such situations, he appears submissive and vulnerable, like his brother.

Gender Roles in Contemporary India

The strongest influences of the socialization processes in an individual's life can be traced to the early years at home and in school. Infants are exposed to men's and women's roles directly and indirectly from the time they are born. As children grow, they pick up information consciously and subconsciously about the different ways in which significant figures in their lives behave. Thus it is common for children to assume in most typical Indian households that decision making regarding important family matters is the responsibility of men while bringing up children is the responsibility of women. Even men's and women's preferences related to food, clothing, entertainment and sports are displayed in everyday conversations. This approach towards men and women is introduced through our institutions, actions, beliefs, and desires such that as the individual attains adulthood, these specific roles come to be perceived as natural. Sometimes, the occurrence of certain events questions our most fundamental beliefs about these assumptions. The role of researches in this area is to look beyond gender roles and find new perspectives. Kate Bornstein, a trans-woman in her book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and Rest of Us* (1995) finds the concept of gender deeply problematic, in this context. It has been commonly argued

that physiology and behavior of an individual seems pertinent in understanding the differences between capability and disposition which leads towards gender dichotomies. However, in *Peepli [Live]* a new perspective is found to have emerged from the presentation of gender roles in a new sociological frame without over-exaggeration of the gender roles. This presentation provides an opportunity to re-analyze cultural and behavioral stereotypes. Thus understanding a completely new sociology of gender may be made possible through attempts like this film.

Social Message in *Peepli [Live]*

  Peepli [Live] is a tool that initiates a discourse on sexuality, socialization, and liberation. The male and female characters in this film behave in non-traditional ways and some finally find alternative solutions in the process of being liberated. Radical behaviors of male and female characters in *Peepli [Live]* are satirically presented in order to communicate these new possibilities to the audience. Women appear independent, liberated, decisive and find their own solutions while men are confused, isolated, powerless and indecisive. At this juncture, mention may be made of Judith Butler's *Gender trouble*: *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* which particularly addresses cultural prejudices and provides a critical genealogy of naturalization of sex. This orientation is drawn out clearly in *Peepli [Live]*.

  To conclude: One of the most important aspects of the film *Peepli [Live]* is the depiction gender roles. The characters have been designed purposefully so as to be able to display the deviations in societal roles according to changing times. Furthermore, the presentation of gender subversion in Indian society is a remarkable

attempt to understand gender equity as a whole. This may be instrumental in promoting ideas against gender bias that may contribute to societal culture. This approach is essential in contemporary India considering the influences of mainstream films. The significance of depicting gender in this manner in *Peepli [Live]* may be understood in the context of theories and the background of mainstream films discussed in this chapter.

Conclusion

This thesis offers a close reading of the film *Peepli [Live]* examined through themes namely, black humor, media and sensationalism; and subversion of gender. This analysis reveals several concerns related to the sociological, psychological, political, and economic issues defining contemporary India; and hopes to develop research interest in various domains such as gender studies, media studies, cultural and film studies, sociological and anthropological studies. Films have shaped Indian society in myriad ways and thus have become a significant part of India's cultural transformation through the years. Research in the area has summarized not only the kinds of films being made but also how a film, apart from being a source of enjoyment can also be instrumental in impacting Indian society. In other words, an understanding of Indian films also introduces the audience to the cultural nuances of the Indian society. The contribution of Indian cinema in conveying important messages to audiences worldwide is, therefore, discussed in this study.

The film *Peepli [Live]* is based on the issue of farmer suicides and narrates the story of Natha who is encouraged to die so that his family can benefit from the government's compensation money provided to the family of suicide victims. The events that follow in the village such as the governmental apathy, the media's insensitivity and the disorder in Natha's family are illustrated in a very engaging fashion. The surprise at the end of *Peepli [Live]* is probably the high point of the film. When the warehouse in which Natha is held captive catches fire, Rakesh's charred remains are mistakenly assumed to be Natha's. In this confusion, Natha manages to escape. The last scene reveals that Natha is working as a laborer at a construction site

in the city. He seems to have accidentally found a way out of his troubles and has more control over his life circumstances than he earlier had. The fate of Natha's family, however, remains unchanged since his is an accidental death which does not fetch the compensation his family had expected all through. The poor in India, represented by Natha's family, are therefore shown to be a hapless lot surrounded by struggles and misery.

One of the most interesting aspects of the film is the film makers' use of black humor in presenting grave situations. Many dark themes related to death and disintegration has been highlighted in a non-serious manner by incorporating humor. This manner of presentation is an effective way of depicting themes such as nothingness, emptiness, hopelessness and solitude, as entertainment. This attempt easily attracts the attention of audiences as well as that of academicians. It is important to add here that while theatre artists and contemporary playwrights have been brave and experimental in including such themes in their work, this is comparatively uncommon in mainstream Hindi films. This method of using humor to convey serious issues in *Peepli [Live]* has provided the filmmaker with the liberty to criticize notions such as traditions, governmental systems, family structure and masculinity and interpret them in a novel manner. This flexibility in perception of circumstances has been used as a powerful tool to create awareness about many practices in Indian society. Thus the possibility of creating a stir that may cause some change is higher because the attempt has been light-hearted and less threatening to societal structure and rigid rules. In other words, despite the outcome being funny, the film has had a deep impact on the audience. This is one of the reasons for the considerable

commercial and critical success that it has achieved inspite of competition from mainstream formula films that were released in the same year. Thus the use of black humor has made it possible to question many situations and structures in society without creating much controversy. However, this has not result in trivializing issues and instead it has highlighted how serious issues have not been dealt with seriousness so far.

The second observation pertains to media and sensationalism. Arguments presented here have referred to available literature on the topic such as Sharmila Mitra Deb and M. Manisha's book *Indian Democracy: Problems and Prospect,* Dipankar Sinha's chapter titled "Restyling Democracy? Mainstream Media and Public Space" and Paul Starr's article "An Unexpected Crisis: The News Media in Postindustrial Democracies." Several aspects that make up the Indian media such as sensational and biased reporting and selective reporting are discussed in this thesis. The instances depicted in *Peepli [Live]* may be considered just as a representative sample of the Indian media. While this particular film focuses mostly on the media's lack of social and moral responsibility, it may be important to mention that the media in India has many a times been associated with behavior that has resulted in positive outcomes. In the past, the media has unearthed various instances of corruption such as the Bofors Scam, Cash for vote scam and Commonwealth Games scam, among others. While these may be considered as the high points of the Indian media, the present situation is more often than not one of extreme moral depravity. It needs to be reinforced that in a democratic country like India, the media has a serious and powerful role to play and all forms of media need to step in to challenge the evils of our society. Media will be

helpful in strengthening democracy by highlighting corruption, crime and various national scam issues. While the media's freedom of expression is very important, it is also crucial that this freedom be rightly used to enlighten and impart awareness to the public sphere; or else the consequences may go terribly wrong. Media in *Peepli [Live]* is a tool to deconstruct certain negative portfolios channelized through unethical inversions such as the negative aspect of politics and media. The film has presented a story that may enable its viewers to reconstruct strategies that empower the media while keeping the best interests of the larger community in mind.

The third observation in analysis of the film *Peepli [Live]* was focus on sexuality, socialization, and liberation. The male and female characters in this film behave in non-traditional ways and some finally find alternative solutions in the process of being liberated. Radical behaviors of male and female characters in *Peepli [Live]* have been satirically presented in order to communicate these new possibilities to the audience. The rural women appear independent, liberated, and decisive and find their own solutions while their male counterparts are confused, isolated, powerless and indecisive. One of the most important aspects of the film *Peepli [Live]* is the new style of depiction of gender roles. The characters have been designed purposefully so as to be able to display the deviations in societal roles according to changing times. Furthermore, the presentation of gender subversion in Indian society is a remarkable attempt to understand gender equity as a whole. This provides an opportunity to re-analyze cultural and behavioral stereotypes. This may be instrumental in promoting ideas against gender bias that is expected to contribute to societal culture in a meaningful way. This approach is essential in contemporary India considering the

influences of mainstream films. The significance of depicting gender in this manner in *Peepli [Live]* has been analyzed in the context of theories and the background of mainstream films discussed in this work. Thus, a new perspective is found to have emerged from the presentation of gender roles in a new sociological frame without over-exaggeration of the gender roles. Thus understanding a completely new sociology of gender may be made possible through attempts like this film.

Films like *Peepli [Live]* can be of interest to scholars from varied disciplines like history, literature, media and the other social sciences on one hand, and cinema and performance practitioners on the other hand. While the powerful and innovative presentation of socially relevant topics fulfills the curiosity of scholars, at the same time it inspires the audiences through the extraordinary display of the cultural setting of contemporary India. This work recognizes the dominant themes of social forces in India that translates beautifully into art. In this regard, *Peepli [Live]* is a significant piece of work as it may be regarded as both an academic as well as a mainstream film. Compared to many films released in 2010 and in recent years, this film was made on a low budget. Thus although the filmmakers did not follow the formula for a blockbuster hit, in terms of the storyline or casting, the film turned out to be one of the most successful movies in 2010.While India is rapidly developing into an industrialized economy, radical changes are being observed in rural India as well. While many new initiatives have been proposed to benefit the rural population, villages are still suffering from many issues. It has been suggested that the role of politics in villages in India is responsible for this in some ways. In summary, it may be worthwhile to mention that films like *Peepli [Live]* have contributed substantially towards drawing

public attention towards the issues faced by rural India such as such as low literacy rate, unemployment, less adequate health care and poor agricultural facilities.

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Thus *Peepli [Live]* may be regarded as a radical film of national significance with several important social messages. Using satire, it reveals ambiguities in the social and political spheres and raises serious questions of immense relevance for contemporary India.

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