

# cinema

## The importance of being an Aamir Khan production ...

**A**amir Khan can do no wrong. At least, as far as the Film Federation of India is concerned. *Peepli [Live]*, produced by Khan, written and directed by first-timer Anusha Rizvi and starring Omkar Das Manikpuri, Raghuvir Yadav and Naseeruddin Shah, is India's choice for the Oscar race in the Best Foreign Language Film category.

This is the third time that Khan's work has been picked to represent a nation that makes 1,200-odd movies every 12 months in many, many languages. His *Taare Zameen Par*, helmed and produced by him (and where he essayed a school teacher discovering dyslexia in a boy), was sent up to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 2007 for possible short listing in the foreign section. It failed to make it to the Oscars shortlist of five films.

In 2001, Khan was luckier: his *Lagaan* — which he produced and where he played a farmer pitted against the Raj might on a cricket pitch — was one of the five contenders for the Oscar. It, however, lost out to an undoubtedly far superior Bosnian picture, *No Man's Land*.

This time, a 15-member panel, chaired by K S Sethumadhavan, was selected by the Federation to pick an Indian movie. The committee, which included film directors, music directors, script/story writers, a sound recordist as well as a costume designer, but surprisingly no cinema critic, watched 27 movies (what a shame that the number was so tiny) and zeroed in on *Peepli [Live]*.

Works like *Singam*, *Madharasapattinam*, *Raavanam*, *Angadi Theru* (all Tamil), *Pazhassiraja* (Malayalam), *Paa*, *Raajneeti*, *My Name is Khan* and *3 Idiots* (all Hindi) were among Sethumadhavan panel's favourites. As one member of the team said, he was also immensely moved by Aparna Sen's *The Japanese Wife*, Rituparno Ghosh's *Abhimaan* (Bengali) and Shyam Benegal's *Well Done Abba* (Hindi). But I suppose, they lost out to Khan's *Peepli [Live]*.

Unfortunately, *Peepli [Live]*, set in a village with the same name in Madhya Pradesh, has all along been carrying a misleading tag line. It really is not about farmers' suicides, a tragic and growing problem in India, where tillers, suffocated by crippling debts and perennial

... is that it will end up being sent as India's foreign language film nominee for the Oscar awards by an arbitrary selection process, writes **Gautaman Bhaskaran**



✱ Omkar Das Manikpuri gets ready for his ceremonial suicide in *Peepli [Live]*, an Aamir Khan production that is India's entry for the upcoming Oscar awards.

monsoon/crop failures, have been ending their lives.

The suicide in *Peepli [Live]* is incidental to the plot. Anyone who has seen it will agree that if at all it has to do with the men on the fields it is about their massive migration to towns and cities. In the past decade, millions of them have left their home and hearth, and gone away to urban areas in search of an alternative livelihood.

More importantly, as the title itself indicates, *Peepli [Live]* is all about television channels and popularity ratings that have turned perfect journalists into imperfect paparazzi. Only that in this case, the tribe of key punchers chases two poor, downtrodden farmers (portrayed by Manikpuri and Yadav), not glamorous celebrities.

The ryots are brothers, who live in harrowing poverty, degrading debt and traumatic humiliation. When they hear of a government scheme compensating the family

of a farmer who has committed suicide, they decide that one of them will sacrifice his life. The brother with a wife and children is preferred to the other, who is a bachelor.

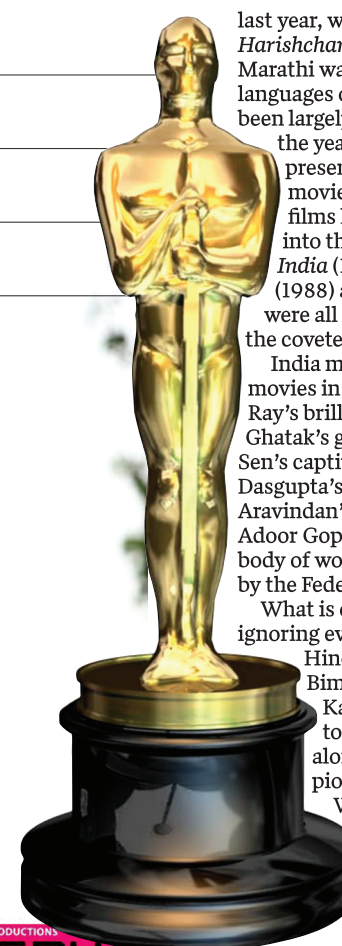
As the news of the impending suicide spreads, television channels, desperate to up their ratings, descend on *Peepli*, set up their camps and wait for the man to hang himself. In the process, they trample on the farmer's and his family's privacy, often going to ridiculous lengths to get their exclusive shots.

The movie is, at best, an exaggerated drama, sometimes preposterous, sometimes phony. Also, the story, which is mostly about the fierce one-upmanship in the world of television, is not peculiar to India. It can and does happen all over the world. Mind you, in the foreign section, the Academy is only interested in a cinema that captures the local

flavour and essence.

Leslie Carvalho, who made a delightfully sweet Indian National Award-winning film, *The Outhouse*, some years ago, told me over the telephone from Bengaluru that Satish Manwar's debut feature *Gabhricha Paus* (Marathi), for instance, could have been a far better choice for the Oscars. This was truly about a farmer's suicide. Leslie, who was on the jury to select the Indian Panorama movies last year, averred: "Tracing the prayers of his small family for the rains to quench the thirst of their farmland, Manwar scripts how the young wife skillfully ropes in their six-year-old son to keep an eye on her husband, whose irregular behaviour has all the trappings of a suicidal tendency."

The Federation and the committee that it handpicks year after year are also seemingly Hindi- (read Bollywood) centric. Barring a few occasions, including



last year, when Paresh Mokashi's *Harishchandrachi Factory* in Marathi was selected, cinema in languages other than Hindi has been largely overlooked. Since 1956, the year the Academy began presenting Oscars for foreign movies, merely three Indian films have managed to squeeze into the list of five: *Mother India* (1957), *Salaam Bombay* (1988) and *Lagaan* (2001). They were all in Hindi, and none won the coveted statuette.

India made some exceptional movies in this period. Satyajit Ray's brilliant classics, Ritwick Ghatak's gripping works, Mrinal Sen's captivating fare, Buddhadeb Dasgupta's poetic cinema, Aravindan's touching films and Adoor Gopalakrishnan's excellent body of work were never considered by the Federation.

What is even worse, it has been ignoring even the better of the Hindi cinema. Guru Dutt, Bimal Roy and early Raj Kapoor are examples. So too, Shyam Benegal, who along with some others, pioneered the New Indian Wave that began with Sen's *Bhuvan Shome* in 1969. Why, Benegal's, *Well Done Abba*, a remarkable satire on India's bureaucratic and political systems

told through a naïve car driver (Boman Irani, and what a riveting performance), could have been a far better pick.

Or, even *The Japanese Wife*, that lyrically narrates the story of a school-teacher (engagingly played by Rahul Bose), living in a remote part of the Sundarbans in West Bengal, who marries a Japanese woman pen-pal through the letters they exchange. They never meet for 15 years. Yet, their unconsummated marital life remains intact, and they stay faithful to each other. The story may look a trifle unreal in today's times, but given the teacher's laidback life and the region that he lives, Sen's work has a certain magic about it that endears. Besides, she captures the rural Bengal and its simple folk in their authentic tang.

But, obviously, Sethumadhavan and his team were not impressed.

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