



The film follows the story of Savita, far right

DHUN PRODUCTIONS

Indian film takes a hard look at 'objectifying' bridal viewings

Sthal (A Match) has won acclaim at home and abroad by exploring the ritual of young women being sized up by suitors and their families

[Amrit Dhillon](#), Delhi

Wednesday March 12 2025, 2.40pm GMT, The Times

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As a young boy, the film director Jayant Digambar Somalkar watched his two sisters and five cousins endure the ritual of being sized up by prospective suitors — and their families.

The boy and his relatives would arrive to meet Somalkar's parents while the girl in question served tea and snacks. In

return, the guests scrutinised her skin colour, body shape, height, weight, gait, mannerisms and domestic skills.

It was this first-hand experience of bride viewings which served as the inspiration for Somalkar's first feature film. It has taken India by storm, hoovering up awards both national and international, including the title of best Asia Pacific film at the 48th Toronto International Film Festival.

Sthal | स्थळ | Official Trailer | Sachin Pilgaonkar | Ja...



“Our problem in India is that we don't question tradition enough, we just go along with it,” Somalkar said. “This ritual objectifies women and treats them as a commodity and everyone accepts it.”

Sthal (A Match) satirises what Somalkar sees as an outdated and cruel custom whose time should have been up long ago.

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The film addresses how arranged marriages are still standard in [India](#). Somalkar shot it in the village of Dongargaon in Maharashtra, where he grew up, with locals in the cast.

He said: “In rural areas, little has changed. Girls have hardly any rights, but in the cities change is happening, slowly.”



Jayant Digambar Somalkar

The marriage custom has evolved, Somalkar told *The Times* — but to a place where the potential suitor is allowed to join his parents in asking questions about a girl's education and domestic skills, to collect more data for the calculus. Decades ago, the boy and girl did not even meet. At best, photographs would be exchanged before the nuptials.

Days after a meeting, the girl's family will hear if the decision is a yes or no. If no, the ritual is replayed many times with other prospective grooms over months, or even years, until one accepts her as a bride.

In *Sthal*, one ironic scene juxtaposes a teacher telling his female pupils about women's empowerment and how it means being able to make important decisions. The camera keeps cutting to a scene where a rural girl — the protagonist, Savita — is undergoing the ordeal, after which the boy and his relatives can be heard muttering outside her house: "She's a bit dark. She had make-up on her face, but did you see her elbow? That is her real colour. Her height is also an issue."

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Among more educated and affluent families, boys and girls are given more leeway. They are allowed to meet outside, unchaperoned, for a coffee. Sometimes, a second or third meeting is allowed if the first goes well.



Savita

Although the girl can, in theory, say no if she doesn't like the boy, in reality the odds are all weighted in favour of the male, just as a dowry flows in only one direction.

Shilpi Singh, the director of Bhoomika Vihar, a not-for-profit organisation, said: "Twelve years ago, I was 'exhibited' by my parents several times. It doesn't matter if the girl is an engineer or a PhD. She is judged only on her looks and complexion."

Daughters in India, she added, were "born only for marriage, they have no life outside marriage".

The women's activist Priya Varadarajan hopes *Sthal* triggers a debate that makes Indians understand how the process debases

a girl. "Not only is it humiliating, it is ingenious," she said. "By making the girl go round serving tea, they make sure she isn't concealing a limp or disability. By asking her questions, it's a way of making sure she doesn't stammer. And this affront happens every day, even in the most privileged families."

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The film opens with Savita and her female relatives lined up on a sofa and interrogating a nervous young man sitting in front of them. He serves them soft drinks and then proceeds to give bumbling answers, which make the woman scoff.

With a jolt, Savita wakes up. It was a dream. Reality crashes in when her mother walks in, telling her to hurry up and get ready for a bride viewing.

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RK Singh



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Dhana Toulson



12 MARCH, 2025

It happens in the UK as well - the majority of my cousins were paraded to prospective suitors, and, to my 10 year old eyes, I couldn't understand, even at that age, why these beautiful, educated, born in the UK women were waiting for a boy's family's to say 'yea or nay'..... however, it started cha...

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D Deepak Puri

12 MARCH, 2025

My parents tried it on with me when I came back for a weekend during my final year. I had no idea.

The young woman and I went for a walk and had an honest chat about us both having partners and how she was going through the motions until her parents became bored. This was 40 years ago.

Gave my par...

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M M Durrani

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This happens in Pakistan too and the quote from the trailer "what is the point of education? you have to get married", I heard others say to their daughters. One girl in my school was taken out of education at the age of 15 because she had a "boyfriend" and apparently was going "astray". I never sa...

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Ran out of space: I really recommend 'Unorthodox' on Netflix about a girl who escapes an arranged marriage to live life on her own terms. It's based on a book and it's such a powerful movie. Even though it's about a girl from an Orthodox Jewish family, I think it's a universal story and many will r...

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B Bharat Thakker

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I am glad India is waking up. If the women in India were to catch up with their counterparts in the West and worked with equal rights then India's GDP would double. There are many dynamic Indian women in US and Europe at the top of their professions and India does not have even a fraction of that....

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Should only take a couple of hundred years. MrD

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I did an Indian Speed Dating event some years ago. My parents talked to her parents for ten minutes...

Sorry.

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R Raj Singh ...

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Haha !

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Any documentary about cousin marriage in the UK?

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I vaguely remember one a few years ago. That politician standing up in the HoC defending it and saying it 'strengthened family ties' was one of my moments of the year.

I've worked with many families with kids with congenital birthday defects - it's a horrible practice that needs to stop. Of all the...

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T T Morrow ...

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Wow. Like purchasing livestock.

Is it really a shock that women are shunning marriage?

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The women subjected to this ritual have no option of shunning marriage.

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C'mon India. Keep on moving forwards.

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Read the marriage ads in the Times of India. Hair-raising

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If you're a short bloke then hair raising is good :)

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I was surprised by one economist's statement that India cannot become a truly rich country without empowering women. I believe they should undergo this cultural shift to unlock India's full potential.

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As of 2023, India's female labor force participation rate (FLFPR) has experienced a notable incre...

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This saying is for all countries. Ironically there are now more women living in slavery than ever before.

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Lindsay Hart

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Thought dowries were not legal for many years anymore!!

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R Kularatne

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It's the sort of thing that's impossible to police. How can you prevent property or a sum of money being discussed as a "gentlemen's agreement" between the fathers, for example?

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