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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Sthal (A Match) satirises what Somalkar sees as an outdated and cruel custom whose time should have been up long ago.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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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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My parents tried it on with me when I came back for a weekend during my final year. I had no idea.

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Gave my par...

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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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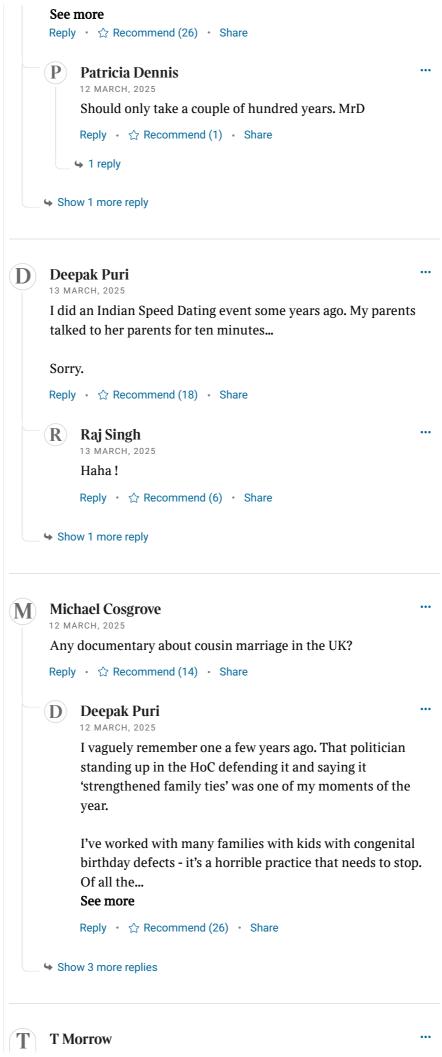
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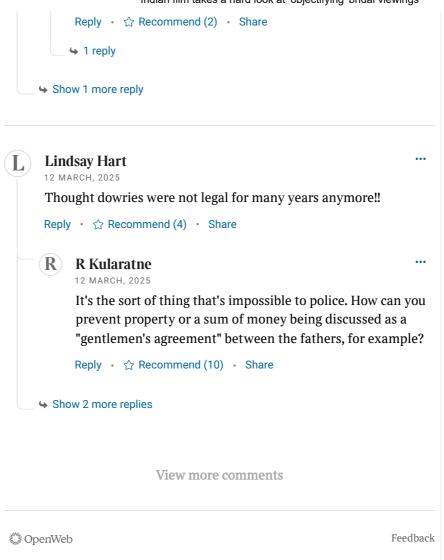
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