

Critique

**Meena Karnik**

***Sthal* - Heartening and Hopeful**



***Sthal* (Marathi, 104 mins) Dir. Jayant Digambar Somalkar**

It isn't the first time a director or a writer has decided to speak about the nature of matchmaking in India. It is an age-old practice – essentially humiliating for women – that continues even today in all its problematic glory.

Yet, first-time director Jayant Somalkar brings a fresh perspective through his film *Sthal*, or *A Match*. It is about matchmaking, yet it isn't.

In an interview, Somalkar talks about the reasons behind writing this film. "In 2016, I accompanied my cousin when he went to 'see' a girl," he said. "While she was being asked a few questions, I wondered what she might be thinking. Was she stressed? Was she scared? It came across like a fresher being ragged in an engineering college. I imagined myself in her position, and the film was born."

But the film goes beyond the humiliation of a woman she repeatedly undergoes. The anxious wait of her family until they get an answer from the man

and the disappointment of getting a negative answer poignantly come through the film. The director also highlights the aspirations and frustrations of young women from the countryside. Through Savita, the protagonist, we are also acquainted with the agrarian crisis. Somalkar does that very skillfully without wavering from his storytelling.

*Sthal* is based in Dongargaon, a village in Maharashtra's Vidarbha region, which is infamous for farm suicides. It also happens to be Somalkar's birthplace. He was born in the house where he shot the film. All the artists are non-actors and residents of the village. Nandini Chikate (Savita), Sangita Sonekar (Leelabai, Savita's mother), Taranath Khiratkar (Daulatrao, Savita's father), Suyog Dhawas (Mangya, Savita's brother) or Sandeep Somalkar (Kale Guruji) and all the others do not look like the characters from a film but come across as real people. The audience is transported to the village right from

the first frame, becoming a part of the family on screen.

The manner in which a bride is approved is different in Dongergaon than the urban audience is familiar with. Somalkar wants to highlight that.

Even the neighbours, along with the joint family, are part of interrogating and examining the potential bride, from her ability to cook to how she receives her guests. A traditional low seat is placed in the courtyard for the groom to sit. Brand-new soap, sanitisers, and a fresh towel are brought out for the guests.

When the troupe arrives—all men—the groom is identified as a “candidate.” Formal introductions are followed by small talk about the price of cotton. The director has subtly established the fragile economic condition of the bride’s family. Even the power imbalance and patriarchy in the matchmaking process are revealed through the arrogance of the “candidate’s” friends and the woman’s family biting their tongues.

Somalkar doesn’t rush through the process. He emphasises each detail repeatedly, establishing how deep-rooted and matter-of-fact this process is through the questions the bride has to answer.

What is your name?

Savita Wandhare.

Full name?

Savita Daulatrao Wandhare.

Mother's clan?

Dasharath Patil Landage, from Chincholi.

Date of birth?

12th October 2000.

Height?

5 feet 2, no, 5 feet 1 inch.

Have you measured it?

Yes.

Education?

BA final.

Subject?

Sociology.

Hobbies?

Knitting, cooking and reading.

Would you be able to work in the fields?

Yes.

Ok.

Savita goes inside, and the four guests regroup to discuss her “pluses and minuses” like one does while buying a product from a shop.

“The girl looks quite fair”.

“No, that is all make up. Look at her elbows; a sure giveaway”.

Before they return, the bride is handed some money, a ritual quite alien to urban viewers.

For Savita, money is more important than the actual answer. She uses it to buy books for her MPSC studies. By this time, the audience has become aware that Savita has had many rejections and that her parents have started feeling the burden of her marriage.

The family is quite typical. Savita's brother, Mangya, does nothing except occasionally help his father. He dreams of becoming a cricketer, is in love with an intelligent woman (who also loves him), is not bright in his studies, and is eager to get his sister married so that he can push for his own.

But by virtue of being a man, his mother and sister take care of his household chores. In contrast, Savita has to help her mother in the kitchen and her father in the fields, and if time permits, she must study as well. The parents are not insensitive, but that's how they were brought up, forcing Savita to prioritise a visit from a potential groom over her MPSC exams.

“If I don't take the exam, my whole year will go to waste”, argues Savita.

“And if you don't find a good match, your whole life will go to waste”, retorts her mother.

Savita, on the other hand, is not a traditional woman.

She is ambitious and curious about the lessons on women's empowerment. She supports her friend who elopes with her boyfriend and is genuinely happy when another of her friends gets married. Being a sensitive and aware woman, she fully knows the burden on her parents. In that sense, the rejections make her feel guilty. She is even ready to sideline her studies so the parents can be relieved. She isn’t a rebel. All she wants is an opportunity to stand on her feet.

That is precisely the catch-22 situation that the rural woman living in poverty has to contend with, something a woman from an urban setting finds

relatively easy. However, while highlighting the rural-urban gulf, the director also stresses the similarities: the common obsession with smartphones and social media, love stories blossoming via WhatsApp, and heartbreaks.

Then Savita falls in love. Somalkar has handled it with a beautiful combination of sensitivity and humour, which doesn't let *Sthal* become a preachy film. In fact, it does nothing of that sort. It remains realistic, but it doesn't become cynical. It is cinematic yet grounded in its roots. It conveys the

message it wants without spoon-feeding the audience.

*Sthal* is another brick in the wall of filmmakers rising from rural parts of India. They are technically sound, but, more importantly, they want to tell their own stories—stories rooted in their own lived experience, which relate to the 70 per cent of Indians living outside of urban areas. *Sthal* takes that rich, heartening, and hopeful trend forward.

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