

Match point

A Marathi debut feature set to premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival this week examines deep-rooted social evils through the lens of match-making traditions in rural Maharashtra

SUCHETA CHAKRABORTY

IT'S called a 'kanda-poha' programme in Marathi," Jayant Digambar Somalkar tells us over a video call, referring to the "match-making" ritual where potential suitors come to gauge young girls for prospective marriages. The popular Maharashtra snack, which is typically served in such situations, has come to stand for such formal meetings for arranged marriages. It is this repeated ritual that a young girl is put through in a village in Maharashtra, throwing up deep-rooted issues of colourism and patriarchal prejudices in our society, that forms the subject matter of Sthal (A Match), Somalkar's writing and direction debut set to premiere at the 48th Toronto International Film Festival starting this week. Sthal is the only Indian film selected in the festival's Discovery Programme this year.

Somalkar, who shot the film in his native village of Dongargaon in

the Chandrapur district of Maharashtra, explains that as the youngest in the family with two sisters, he has witnessed several such match-making programmes growing up. It was at one such event, that he attended with a cousin, that the idea for the film first came to him. "I started thinking about what the girl must be feeling, while surrounded by a group of men asking her questions. I have an engineering background and am familiar with rituals of ragging, and this felt just like that," he says.

Somalkar, who has in recent years co-written the Amazon Prime Video show Guilty Minds, calls the film a passion project filled with personal connections and memories. Produced by Dhun, the production house run by Somalkar, his wife and fellow director Shefali Bhushan, Karan Grover and Riga Malhotra, Sthal features locations from the director's own childhood as well



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Shefali Bhushan

↑ Jayant Digambar Somalkar who shot Sthal in his native village of Dongargaon in the Chandrapur district of Maharashtra cast family members and villagers to retain the authenticity and rawness of the place



SHEFALI BHUSHAN

as members of his village and extended family. "I was born in the house where we shot and studied at the college that our protagonist, Savita, attends. I still remember taking an exam sitting on the third bench in the same classroom where we shot scenes for the film," Somalkar recalls.

The film includes a cast of all non-actors, hailing from his native village. The people of Dongargaon speak a dialect of Marathi known as Varhadi, and he explains that he wanted the characters of his film to be able to speak it fluently. "I wanted to work with non-actors

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Sthal (A Match), which premieres at the Toronto International Film Festival this month, delves into the deep-rooted evils of colourism and patriarchal prejudices in Indian society that come to the fore during arranged marriages

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because I wanted the film to bear a real and authentic look. The character of the girl's father, for instance, is played by an old friend while her mother is played by a cousin who runs a flour mill in the village. I noticed the nuances and mannerisms they had and wanted them to retain those in the film. I didn't have to direct them to get into the skin of a character as they already were those people in real life. There is a lot of talent there, it was just a question of discovering it. I felt that if I could come to Mumbai and accomplish something, they could too," he says.

But, he adds, since these individuals had never faced a film camera, they had to be familiarised with the technicalities. "They managed the wide-angle shots but for the close-ups, we had to guide them as to where to look, as they would get too conscious."

For Shefali Bhushan, working with a shoestring budget and being the producer on set in charge of ensuring that the film was completed within the resources that they had pooled, not to mention the unpredictable circumstances of working in a village where no film had been shot before, and where no replacement crew could be arranged for in case of a problem, proved a major challenge. "My director doesn't like to say cut. He just goes on rolling and rolling," she laughs. "So I was the one having to worry about the fact that the hard drives might run out of space and that it would take very long for another set of hard drives to arrive from Mumbai. These are things I've never worried about earlier." It was also important not to interfere with the director's vision, she adds, which was yet another challenge for a fellow director like her who was on the sets in the role of a producer.

As Somalkar's wife shooting in his home village, Bhushan's personal and professional roles saw a clash too. "It is my sasuraal in a sense and they've never seen me in my professional avatar. I was dressing, behaving and talking differently. They're not used to seeing women in any sort of position of command, especially like a producer. So, some of his relatives would call me 'Shefali Madam', and it was really awkward for me because I call them tai and dada," she tells us, pointing out that there were other sensitivities to be handled too, because they were shooting in people's houses, many of whom were relatives and acquaintances.

She goes on to narrate how, during the shooting of a scene in the local college, parents of students who were in the scene started showing up in the evening, livid that their children still hadn't returned home. "There was this one parent who was really mad and when I tried to talk to him, he just yelled 'shut up!' There were all kinds of things to be handled, which was a very new challenge for me, because I'd never been on that side of things," she laughs.

JANE BORGES

SCIENCE might not have all the answers, but when it comes to seeking truths about sex, British-American neuroscientist Simon LeVay feels that the "scientific method is the best way forward". LeVay, who has served on the faculties of Harvard Medical School, Boston and the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, California, is best known for his sensational 1991 report that documented a tiny difference in brain structure between homosexual and straight men. His research pointed to how a tiny cell cluster in the brain, known as the third interstitial nucleus of the anterior hypothalamus, or INAH3, which "is deeply involved in regulating male-typical sex behaviour," was bigger in straight men; the gay men's cell clusters were in the same size range as women's. A feature published in the Discover Magazine in 1994, claimed that the study had "catapulted him [LeVay] from his scientific ivory tower into the heated fray of homosexual politics".

Nearly 32 years later, his fame notwithstanding, LeVay remains just as deeply invested and curious about research around sex and human sexuality. His just-released title *Attraction, Love, Sex: The Inside Story* (Bloomsbury India) reveals how, world over, scientists like him are unravelling the secrets of sex and sexuality, and in the process, shattering traditional ideas and prejudices. "Much of the research on sexuality is published in academic papers that are difficult for non-scientists to access or understand," he tells mid-day in an email interview. "Yet buried in this enormous body of research are clues to some important mysteries about sex." With his new book, LeVay says he wanted to describe the progress that is being made in finding the answers.

The central mystery of sex, says LeVay, is why we reproduce sexually. "To investigate this mystery, I reviewed research that is being done in species ranging from single-celled yeast to vertebrates such as lizards." Lizards seem to get along fine without sex. "All these lizards are female and they reproduce by virgin birth [asexual reproduction]. In fact, this could be advantageous in evolutionary terms, because it doesn't require the existence of males. Yet most species do reproduce sexually, either some of the time or [as in our own species] as their only form of reproduction," he says. Sexual reproduction, he explains, involves the mixing of genes from two parents. "The most likely explanation for the existence of sexual reproduction, in my opinion, is that this mixing allows for the removal of harmful mutations in a species' genes—mutations that would otherwise accumulate over the generations. Asexual species may crop up now and then and flourish for many generations, but over a long period of time, they are likely to go extinct."

Over the course of evolution, however, some species have developed functions for sex that have no direct reproductive purpose.

Sex in the lab

Leading neuroscientist Simon LeVay's fascinating new book says sexual orientation could be determined by genes, why lizards get by without sex, and how oxytocin and vasopressin could be key to falling in love



SIMON LEVAY



Research shows that among bonobo or pygmy chimpanzees, who engage in a great deal of sex, such sexual behaviour helps resolve conflicts, which allows natural resources to be shared more efficiently among them

"For example, our close relatives the bonobos engage in a great deal of sex between females and males. I discuss research indicating that these seemingly useless forms of sexual behaviour are in fact advantageous in evolutionary terms. In bonobos, they appear to help resolve conflicts, which allow resources to be shared more efficiently," he says.

In the area of sexual orientation research itself, newer and important benchmarks have been set since his own pioneering work. LeVay, who identifies as gay, alludes to the 2019 scientific report by Italian geneticist Andrea Ganna and his colleagues. "Using genetic data from several hundred thousand individuals, Ganna found that genes account for about one-third of the total causation of a person's sexual orientation. He also identified several locations within the genome where genes influencing sexual orientation [either in males, females, or both sexes] are located. Nevertheless, his work indicates that 'gay genes'—individual genes that act like switches to determine a person's sexuality—must be rare if they exist at all. Rather, numerous

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genes, each having a weak effect, act through complex networks during pre- and postnatal life to establish a person's orientation."

LeVay, who has written/co-written over 12 books in the past, also delves into the science behind relationships, arousal, love and attraction. Exploring the latter, he takes us through studies that point to how it is "closely linked to the stomach, odours, and even facial symmetry". The results, however, are a mixed bag and even LeVay feels should be taken with a pinch of salt.

"Two groups of researchers did this experiment: They showed outlines of female figures varying in fatness to male college students who were either hungry or who had just eaten. In both studies, the hungry students judged the fatter figures more attractive than did the students who were full," shares LeVay, adding, "This finding goes along with a large body of evidence that judgments of attractiveness can be modified depending on the circumstances of the person doing the judging. In contrast, some aspects of facial attractiveness, such as symmetry, seem to be fixed. This suggests that symmetrical faces are indicators of healthy development, so that preferring such faces may be adaptive in evolutionary terms."

According to him, the fact that both research groups got the same result strengthens the believability of the finding. "In other cases, research groups have reported conflicting findings. That's true for some 'sweaty T-shirt' studies: One Swiss research group found that

men rate the odour of T-shirts worn by women most attractive if the women differ in certain genes from those of the raters, while another group at the same university failed to find any relationship between attractiveness and genetic similarity. That's part of the scientific process: One of those studies must be wrong, but we don't know which, and it will take further studies to resolve the conflict." He, however, rues the fact that research has paid very little attention to the opposite of sexual attraction, which is sexual aversion or sexual disgust.

Love—"which is not the same thing as sexual attraction"—that emotion that has confounded mankind since eons, also finds room in the science laboratory. "It is a desire for union with another person, and consists of passion, intimacy, and commitment in variable proportions," LeVay says, adding, "People often use the word 'chemistry' to explain what attracts lovers to each other, and the science bears that out: research in prairie voles—small rodents that form lasting pair bonds—has demonstrated a key role for two brain chemicals, oxytocin and vasopressin, in sexual pair-bonding. Another brain chemical, dopamine, also plays an important role. These chemicals are not released at random within the brain but within complex synaptic networks that are currently being deciphered." Much about love, he says, is still a mystery—but maybe not for much longer.

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