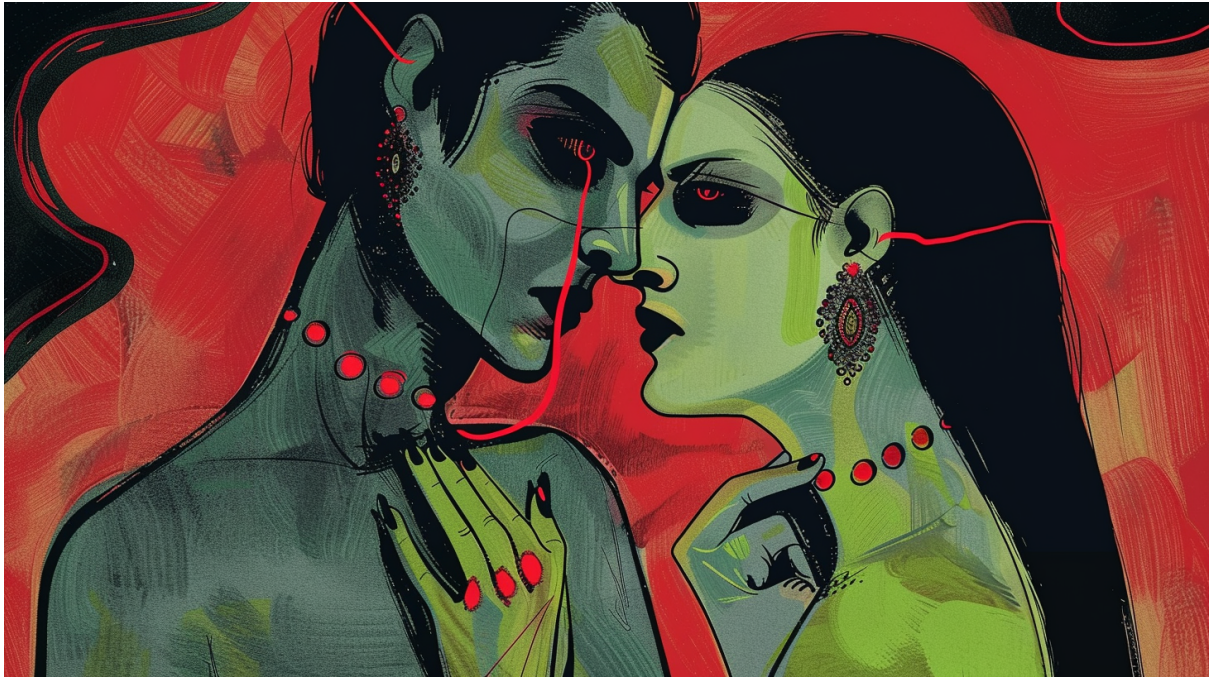




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## PRESS

Pioneer : Vijaywad Edition

### India's first inclusive horror Wench film festival announced

The 3rd edition of Wench Film Festival, India's first Horror Film Festival showcasing films inclusive of BIWOC, LGBTQ+ women, and Non-Binary filmmakers, founded by celebrity hairstylist turned filmmaker Sapna Bhavnani will be held physically for the first time in addition to virtual screenings.

Award-winning Mexican film *Huesera: The Bone Woman*, directed by Michelle Garza Cerver will be the opening film and *The Nightmare*, directed by Alice Wadding will be the Closing film of the festival. Other highlights include a special screening of *Tumbbad* along with panel discussions and music performances. The physical screenings will take place from March 17-20 at Harkat Studio and Veda Factory while the virtual screenings will be held from 10 – 20 March 2023 and the tickets are available at Wench Film Festival. The festival will screen 23 films in the competition out of which 19 will be available to watch online at [wenchff.festivalsaints.com](http://wenchff.festivalsaints.com). The films will be shown under three different categories, *Blood Thirsty* (More than 40 mins), *Dwarves* (10 to 40 mins), and *Elves* (Less than 10 mins).

The jury judging the three different categories will comprise Annick Mahner and Shari Frilot (*Blood Thirsty*), Alexandre Heller-Nicholas (*Dwarves*) and Namrata Joshi (*Elves*). Sapna Bhavnani, Founder of the Wench Film Festival says, "In the process of writing my new film *Bearlike Man*, I realised a palpable lack of female representation in the genre outfit of India. Over the three decades I looked at, 9.9% of directors were women. Horror comes with just 5.9% of directors



being women and Sci-fi 2.8%. I find this statistic offensive. When I found out I was the first Indian woman director to pitch at BIFAN I knew I had to change gears and move the female gaze to the genre space that has eluded it for a long time." She added, "The goal of the Wench Film Festival is to highlight women but also to promote and celebrate the genre space that has been in our blood since birth. India is a country of many religions and each has their own superstitions and rituals and we are amazed that we don't have a festival yet. We are happy to start the conversation and like all things that start first, building the foundation is of utmost importance as well as collaborating with people who have been instrumental in building the genre space. I met Vivek at Film Bazaar last year and he said he also was looking to start a horror festival -



and bam here we are. He took my vision and scaled it. We have no doubt of the success of the festival and already have big plans for our halloween bash. When I hear Indians saying they do not like horror I laugh as we are the land of spirituality which starts with spirit." Vivek Ranghachari, development head of the festival says, "I feel that genre cinema has been vilified and is not given the due that it deserves in our country. Worldwide, it is the most successful brand of cinema that has worked over the years with a dedicated audience. We feel that there is a dedicated audience in our country that is looking for quality cinema in this space, and we want to provide that to them through the Wench Film Festival. Through showcasing the best in the world, we want to lay the foundation for future Film-makers and technicians to embrace and make films in this genre."

**The Hindu** : Chennai Edition



**X**  
Hills with  
from 'Crematorium';  
Below: Sapna  
Bhavnani;  
and the poster  
of March Film  
Festival, 2019  
(AP Photo)

# Sapna Bhavnani's house of horror

The Wench Film Festival, which is among India's few full-blooded horror festivals, is back in Mumbai with a physical edition

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When she was 13 or 14, Sapna Moli Bhavnani watched *Crematorium* (1971), Brian De Palma's elemental horror classic. In the lead-up opening sequence of the film, Steep Spence's socially-awkward schoolgirl gets her first period in the gym shower. A few days after the viewing, Bhavnani got her first period too in school. "It was ironic because I thought I was going to be in the whole school dance," she recalls.

The long lagging of chemical, memory and physiological change forged a lifelong obsession with horror. In 2021, Bhavnani started a strategy that film which started the Wench Film Festival (Wench), meaning 'girl child' or 'country girl', took on a derogatory, sexualised connotations as far back as the Middle Ages. After a largely online edition through the pandemic, Bhavnani has finally brought out Wench in full bloom: the physical edition is screening 23 films till March 13 at Harish Studios and Veda Factory in Mumbai (there are also online screenings till March 28).

Though Wench started out as a spotlight for women directors, Bhavnani has been persistently opening up the work. The latest edition is screening Indian and



international films in the horror, sci-fi and fantasy genres, and is inclusive of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), non-binary and LGBTQ+ women filmmakers. It also includes two men directors. "I am not a feminist," Bhavnani insists.

Beyond film, there is a wealth of horror-themed makers, performances and queer screenings that Bhavnani has whipped up. Last year, she organised a vampire wedding at the end of a screening ("I asked everyone to come dressed as guests"). This time around, there is masterclass by filmmaker Vikram Bhatt and a party act accompanying the film *Shriek* (Wench is the score screening of

*A Thousand Acres* (1992) by author-instrumentalist Sidi Couto).

Later in October, she will be *HILLBHOIR* (a New York-based metal band who also made the 2017 horror film *Abominable*) open *Disco Blood Bath*, Wench's Halloween pop properly. It is a sort of half of what Bhavnani envisioned for the future. "I wish we could 'love the same' out" in Hikes (from an incredible story around in Hikecraft). I did try to arrange it online so it's a safe space but they declined."

Vikram Bhatt, a Bollywood producer and business and development head at Wench, agrees there is a dearth of fantastical genre film festivals in India. The reasons are plenty — a desolate indie scene, limited exhibition space, lack of a sustainable fan culture around homegrown horror.

"Horror festivals are huge in the West," Vikram says. "It's a genre that fetches the highest ROI — American fan-led get horror movie. Bhavnani being a primary example. By contrast, Indian horror is yet to break out of the wild."

Megha Ramesh's *Lolita Singh* (currentist head-splatter) and Arati Kulkarni's *Throatland* (*Heaven*) are the Indian highlights from Wench.

Bhavnani is a film *Abominable* (a sci-fi short starring All Fuzz) are the Indian highlights from Wench. Bhavnani is a film *Abominable* (a sci-fi short starring All Fuzz) are the Indian highlights from Wench. Bhavnani is a film *Abominable* (a sci-fi short starring All Fuzz) are the Indian highlights from Wench.

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