

Santhanam is the new Server Sundaram

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Santhanam will essay the popular Server Sundaram character in the new film.



By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Many, many summers ago, I had watched a fascinating film called Server Sundaram. The title character of Sundaram was played by Nagesh, a Tamil actor who went on to become a riveting comedian. The movie opened in 1964 to critical and commercial acclaim, and, believe it or not, proved to be the breakthrough point for not just Nagesh, but also K Balachander, who also became a legend helming socially hard-hitting cinema – which did not shy away from stripping the society of its hypocrisy and falsities. It was Balachander's theatrical play, Server Sundaram – with Nagesh essaying the lead part – which was later adapted to the screen.

Nagesh was here in the film – a poor young man in search of a role in movies. After initial rebuffs that force him to wait at the tables of a restaurant (there was one amazing scene here of him balancing several "dumara-tumblers" – vessels in which coffee is served), Nagesh's Sundaram eventually attains stardom. But it comes with a tragic price. One day, while in the midst of a shoot, his old mother, whom he dotes on, falls ill and dies for want of medical attention. Sundaram gets the news too late, and that turns out to be a defining moment – when he decides to quit cinema and return to his days as a server.

Server Sundaram was remade in Hindi with Mehmood, and was called Main Sundar Hoon (1971). But Mehmood could never match up to Nagesh's brilliance.

Now, another work by the same name, Server Sundaram, is being made with Santhanam essaying the title role. By and large, Santhanam's picture will be very different from Nagesh's seminal work. But, yes, the movie made Nagesh into a great artist, and the latest Server Sundaram may also make (or break) Santhanam – whose enormous talent had remained under-utilised and unsung for a long time – a time when he played and replayed the hero's sidekick, his dialogues, deliveries and mannerisms boringly similar in film after film.

Till, he felt that enough was enough, and gathered his wits and courage to step out of the shadows of the lead man and into the shoes of the hero himself in Inimey Ippadithan – which aptly translate as Hereafter This Way Alone. But here again, Santhanam – despite his pleasing good looks and impressive screen presence, seemed to dither. As the well-known Tamil stand-up comedian and commentator, Bosskey, once told me that unless Santhanam lets go his comic stance and gets into a serious mode, he will not shine.

Santhanam's Server Sundaram while being all about food, is not a retake on the original. The film, being directed by Anand Balki, has Santhanam portraying a catering student – who finds that he cannot get a suitable job after a degree in engineering. Santhanam said that he was trained by a chef, Paul, who taught him the basics of cooking. At the end of the training, the actor had learnt to make a Tamil dish that dates back 600 years – and emerges from a time when Tamils believed that "unave marundhu" / food is medicine. This is also what the ancient medical science of Ayurveda tells us – that one's health is determined by what one puts into one's mouth.

Server Sundaram, while talking to us about the importance of food and our grandmother's recipes, will include a lot of fun. Otherwise, it may seem like cookery class, Santhanam avers.

The movie will score on novelty. One has not seen many films on food – barring exceptions like Prakash Raj's Un Samayal Arayil and the Om Puri starrer, The Hundred-Foot Journey.

The other highlight of Balki's Server Sundaram will be Bijesh, Nagesh's grandson – who will play a crucial role – which will include reprising the famous "dumara-tumbler" sequence. Incidentally, Bijesh is a carbon copy of his grandfather.

Nagesh, in spite of all his popularity, seemed a lonely man in his last days. This writer remembers seeing him at a club in Chennai one evening – when he sat alone with even the waiters not quite paying attention to his food orders. And this was the actor whose part as a waiter earned him immense fame, drawing him out of the wilderness and propelling him to starry heights.

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The Ghazi Attack

A war film is not exactly common in Indian cinema, and one that focuses completely on a chapter from a conflict without digressing into romance, dreams and dances needs to be lauded, and Sankalp Reddy's Telugu work (also shot in Hindi and dubbed in Tamil), The Ghazi Attack, has the ability to engross. What is more, Reddy has managed to get a really impressive star cast of Om Puri, Nasser (though in

minuscule role), Rana Daggubati, Kay Kay Menon and others.

It was after a very long time that I saw Menon as Navy Captain Ranvijay Singh exhibit his sheer brilliance which I saw in Anurag Kashyap's first movie, Black Friday, where the actor played the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Rakesh Maria, investigating the 1993 Bombay blasts. As Ranvijay Singh, he is the haughty but highly intelligent captain in charge of an Indian submarine, S 21.

The Eastern Naval Command at Visakhapatnam sends Lieutenant-Commander Arjun Varma (Daggubati) along with Singh in order to keep him in check as the ship sails on a secret mission just before the 1971 India-Pakistan war breaks out.

Quite interestingly, Daggubati too is wonderfully restrained – a complete changeover from the kind of parts he has been playing so far. In addition, we also have an excellent performance from Atul Kulkarni, who as the executive officer, Devraj, on board the submarine has the trying task of keeping peace between a brash and ready-to-torpedo the Pakistani submarine (Ghazi) Singh and, Varma, the man told by his bosses to ensure that the Indian captain does not provoke a war.

Shot splendidly inside what looks like a real submarine, Ghazi has been mounted with a fair degree of authenticity and scripted quite impressively. Admittedly, the film may not be comparable to some of Hollywood's unforgettable war classics, like Von Ryan's Express and Battle of the Bulge – just to name two. But given the kind of handicaps Indian cinema faces in terms of budget and special effects, Ghazi is remarkable in the way it presents some of the most tense moments when the Indian submarine hits a landmine planted by the Pakistani vessel.

Severely handicapped by loss of lives and injuries to the men aboard, S 21 finds itself in a desperate corner – when it can only move up or down and not forward or backward. And with Ghazi set to destroy S 21, by shooting several torpedoes, the Indian submarine very cleverly dodges the missiles to a point when the captain of the Pakistani vessel shouts in anger: Is that Indian captain a lift-man going up and down?

Great photography by Mathi, and lovely work by the special effects team propel Ghazi into death defying waters in a drama where fear is clearly etched on the face of each Indian sailor.

Really, an engaging piece of cinema. But what was Taapsee Pannu – as an East Pakistani refugee rescued by Varma from the high seas – doing in the movie? Totally wasted after her performance in Pink. The rather poor dubbing is another minus point. But on the whole, Ghazi is gripping.

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