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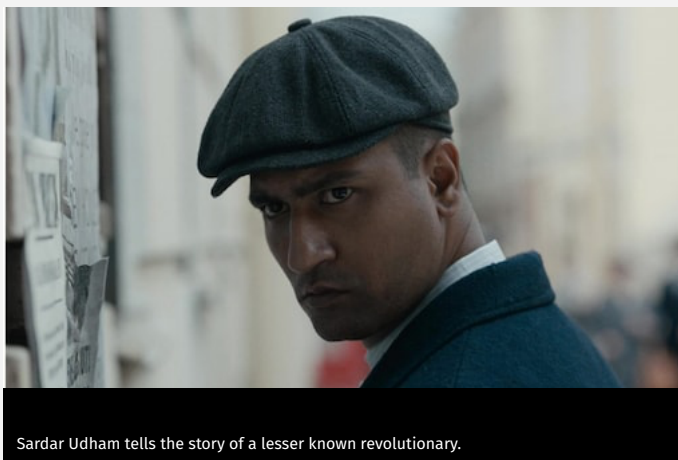
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GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN

Sardar Udham tells the story of a lesser known revolutionary.

Sardar Udham
Director: Shoojit Sircar

Cast: Vicky Kaushal, Shaun Scott, Stephen Hogan, Banita Sandhu, Kirsty Avertton

Sardar Udham is a different game altogether from the films Shoojit Sircar has directed so far. The man is a relatively unknown figure in Indian history – certainly compared with Bhagat Singh or Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, and they – unlike Mahatma Gandhi – believed that the country could free itself of British shackles only through guns and bullets.

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Udham too, but probably he got into it after witnessing the horrific Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Amritsar on April 13, 1919 – when the then Lieutenant-Governor of Punjab, Michael O'Dwyer, ordered his soldiers to fire on a huge gathering of unarmed men, women and children, primarily there to celebrate Baisakhi (New Year). Probably, they also wanted to raise their voices against the demeaning Rowlatt's Act. With shoot to kill orders, hundreds died that evening, hundreds more were wounded or maimed for life, and it turned out to be a blot on

British colonial history in India. Soon after, Dwyer was recalled, but he showed no remorse for his ghastly action, and instead chose to explain it away by saying that he wanted to avoid a re-run of the 1857 revolt or War of Independence.



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Udham, who reached the Bagh later, helped cart dozens of injured people to hospital, and the scene was frighteningly bloody. His girlfriend, Reshma (played Banita Sandhu), was also dead, and all these left a painful memory in Udham, who decided to take revenge in his own style. For him, it was all about defying British misrule and monstrous authority by murdering a man whose savagery was unimaginable. In fact, the soldiers stopped shooting only after they had run out of bullets!

Much of all this is well known, although Udham's role has not been given much importance in our history books. I would not know why, for the man dared to take on the might of the British Empire by shooting down Dwyer in a public meeting at London in 1940 – a full 21 years after Jallianwala Bagh. A footnote says that even after a hundred years, the streets of Amritsar resonate with the fear of the blood bath, which shook the foundations of the British colonial rule, and shocked the world at large.

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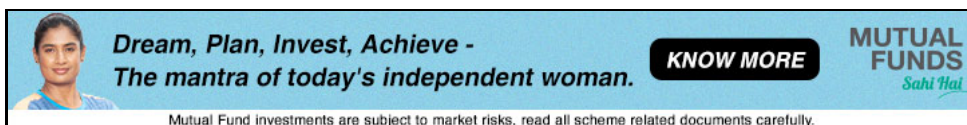
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Sircar, in his stylish non-linear format, takes us to Udham's (Vicky Kaushal) early life, his love for Reshma and later his steadfast determination to take revenge on Dwyer. The mood of vendetta is captured through a series of powerful images highlighted by Kaushal and Eileen Palmer (Kirsty Avertton), who becomes Udham's friend in London. When he is finally sentenced to death after a sham of a trial in which the judge gives little time or space to the defence counsel, Palmer pleads with Udham to seek pardon. "You will live," she implores. He refuses, saying that he is not a killer but a revolutionary. So he would not do that, but choose to hang.

While there has been a host of movies on Bhagat Singh, I do not remember any on Udham, and so Sircar's work scores here. But where it does not is the way he has stretched his narrative to 147 minutes, and there are so many needlessly prolonged scenes which drag the film down, making it a tad difficult to sit through. The massacre part is repetitive and repulsive, and need not have been so long, even if Sircar had meant to highlight the bloody killings at Jallianwala Bagh. Even Udham's struggles on snow-filled Russian terrain were not quite necessary, at least not at that length. To me, all these seemed over cooked, and the handling of the massacre was tasteless. Sircar's control over the medium which he displayed with admirable imagination while writing *Pink*, a courtroom drama with Bachchan at the helm, seems to be lacking in *Sardar Udham*.



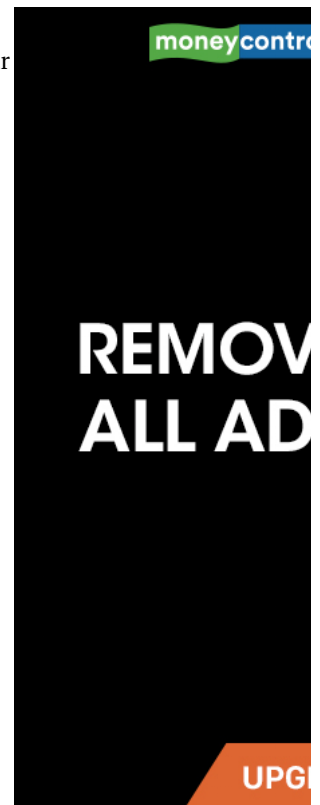
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While Sandhu shines in her brief role as the mute girlfriend of Udham, Kaushal really does not rise to the occasion. He essays Udham so unfeelingly that Sircar's efforts to recreate the actual carnage and repercussions of the black April 13 get diluted.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran is an author, commentator and movie critic covering major festivals like Cannes, Venice, Tokyo and IFFI for three decades)

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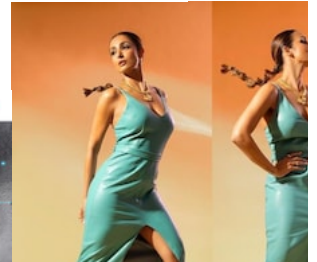


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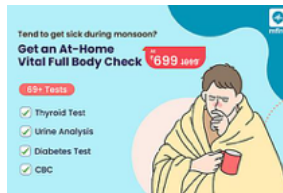
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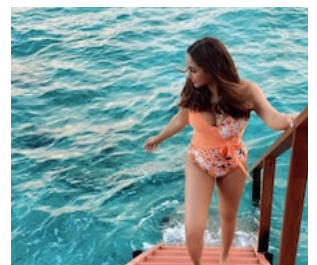
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