

Film Review

Stranded and Struggling: Instinct and Tenacity in a Survival Thriller

Title	:	<i>Manjummel Boys</i>
Director	:	Chidambaram S. Poduval
Production Co.	:	Parava Films
Year of Release	:	2024

In the sprawling landscape of Indian cinema, where genres often intertwine and narratives weave intricate tales, survival thrillers stand as a testament to the indomitable spirit of humanity in the face of adversity. Survival films constitute a genre where protagonists strive to endure physically demanding situations, often set amidst perilous circumstances. These movies delve into life-or-death struggles, unraveling the human will to survive, individual motivations, and deeper desires, inviting audiences to ponder broader facets of humanity and personal values. Balancing realism and believability, they sustain slow-burning suspense, instilling a constant sense of urgency. The survival film genre in Malayalam cinema has seen noteworthy contributions, beginning with the 1991 film *Malootty*, and followed by notable entries like *Take Off* (2017), *Neerali* (2018), *Helen* (2019), and *2018* (2023). The industry has added a fresh perspective to survival narratives with Chidambaram's *Manjummel Boys* (2024).

The film embodies themes of survival and resilience, weaving together elements of friendship, desperation, and hope against the backdrop of a harrowing real-life incident. As we delve deeper into the narrative intricacies, technical brilliance, and stellar performances, the essence of survival and camaraderie shines through, making *Manjummel Boys* a compelling cinematic experience. In *The Survivor's Club* by Sherwood (2009, p.313), twelve survival traits are outlined for assessing an individual's survivor profile. These include adaptability, resilience, hope, faith, tenacity, instinct, purpose, love, empathy, intelligence, ingenuity, and flow. Sherwood observes that survivors draw upon a shared set of psychological strengths. In this exploration, the review focusses on the remarkable instinct and tenacity

displayed by the characters as they fight for survival against insurmountable odds. The reason for focusing on instinct and tenacity highlights the vital roles of intuitive decision-making and relentless determination in navigating unpredictable survival scenarios.

The film is set in the landscapes of Kodaikanal, a hill station in Tamil Nadu. It introduces us to a group of friends from Manjummel, led by Kuttan (Soubin Shahir). The journey was filled with laughter and adventure until the venture takes a turn into the forbidden depths of the Guna Caves, also known as Devil's Kitchen. As the friends venture into the forbidden depths of the Guna Caves, their instinctual reactions guide their decisions amidst the unfolding crisis. Instinct prompts their swift responses to danger and helps them assess risks, enabling them to navigate through the perilous environment with urgency and intuition. The Guna is symbolic of joy, sorrow, and profound introspection. The song "Manithar unarndhukolla ithu manitha kaadhala! Athaiyum than-di punithamanathu..." from the film *Gunaa* (1991) has resonated deeply even before the film's release, initially associated with romantic love. However, in *Manjummel Boys*, its significance transforms to symbolize the profound bond of friendship. This rendition beautifully captures the essence of companionship, portraying a connection that transcends mortal understanding, akin to a sacred bond. In the film, it serves as an anthem for the unbreakable unity and camaraderie shared among the *Manjummel Boys*, illuminating the purity and sanctity of their friendship. Through this reinterpretation, the song evolves into a timeless ode to the enduring power of friendship, resonating with audiences in a new and profound way. It speaks to a connection so deep that it transcends mortal understanding, reflecting a purity that elevates it to a sacred realm. Just as romantic love defies conventional boundaries, so too does true friendship, characterized by loyalty, understanding, and unwavering support. In the context of friendship, these words illuminate the extraordinary nature of such relationships, reminding us that they are divine connections that enrich and sustain us on our journey through life.

Guna's tender emotions find expression, weaving a poignant narrative of love that transcends all barriers, be they of society or circumstance. Its placement within the film serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring power of love to heal wounds, bridge divides, and illuminate even the darkest of paths. Though the film begins as an escapade, it soon transcends into a nerve-wracking survival ordeal, testing the bonds of friendship and resilience. Despite warnings from a local guide named Dominic about the dangers lurking within the caves, the group, fueled by a mix of

excitement and recklessness, ventured into restricted areas, eager to leave their mark on the cave walls. However, their escapade took a harrowing turn when Subhash, one of their own, plummeted into a concealed pit within the cave's depths. Initially dismissed as a prank, the gravity of the situation soon became apparent as Subhash's silence echoed through the cavern, sending shockwaves of panic through his friends. Frantic and desperate, they raced to seek help from locals and authorities, only to be met with skepticism and hostility, accused of trespassing and worse. Undeterred by the mounting obstacles, the friends rallied together, driven by a fierce determination to rescue their fallen comrade.

Amidst the ominous warnings of past tragedies within the cave's depths, they refused to abandon hope, clinging to the belief that Subhash could still be saved. With unwavering resolve, they orchestrated a daring rescue mission, enlisting the aid of the fire department and additional police officers. In a heart-stopping climax, Siju David emerged as a beacon of courage, volunteering to descend into the perilous abyss to save his friend, defying the odds and risking his own life in the process. Against all odds, Siju succeeded in retrieving Subhash from the darkness, symbolizing the triumph of friendship and resilience over adversity. As Subhash began his journey of recovery, grappling with the trauma of his ordeal, the friends vowed to keep the incident a secret, shielding his family from the full extent of the truth. Yet, the tale of their bravery and solidarity could not remain concealed for long, as news of Siju's heroic act spread far and wide, earning him widespread acclaim and recognition for his selfless valor. In the end, the saga of the *Manjummel Boys* stood as a testament to the enduring bonds of friendship, the indomitable spirit of humanity, and the extraordinary courage that emerges in the face of unimaginable adversity.

As Subash (Sreenath Bhasi) plunges into the abyss of the cave, the *Manjummel Boys* are thrust into a heart-pounding race against time, their frantic attempts to rescue him amidst indifference amplifying the sense of desperation and helplessness. Chidambaram skillfully navigates through a labyrinth of emotions, juxtaposing fear, despair, and unwavering determination. Each frame resonates with palpable tension, drawing viewers into the vortex of uncertainty and peril engulfing the characters. Confronting harsh realities, including indifference from authorities and locals, the group's resilience shines through with unwavering determination. Led by Kuttan, portrayed with remarkable poise by Soubin Shahir, they exhibit relentless perseverance in navigating the treacherous caves. Each obstacle encountered fuels their determination further as they tap into their instinctual survival skills to overcome challenges threatening their mission.

In the face of uncertainty and peril, their instinct and tenacity shine, driving them forward with unwavering resolve.

Manjummel Boys transcends mere storytelling with its impeccable technical prowess, spearheaded by a formidable team of artisans. Cinematographer Shyju Khalid's evocative visuals capture the ethereal beauty of Kodaikanal while seamlessly transitioning into the eerie confines of the Guna Caves. His meticulous attention to detail amplifies the film's atmospheric intensity, immersing viewers into the claustrophobic depths of the cave. Composer Sushin Shyam's haunting score serves as a haunting backdrop, mirroring the characters' emotional turmoil and heightening the narrative's suspenseful undertones. One of the film's standout features is its cinematography, which elevates every scene to a new level of visual splendor. Shyju Khalid's skillful manipulation of light and shadow, along with his keen eye for composition, brings each frame to life with a sense of depth and texture. From the verdant landscapes of Kodaikanal to the foreboding darkness of the Guna Caves, every setting is meticulously crafted to enhance the film's atmospheric richness.

Moreover, the use of color in *Manjummel Boys* is masterful, with each hue carefully chosen to evoke mood, symbolism, and thematic resonance. From the vibrant greens of nature to the somber blues of introspection, the film's color palette adds layers of meaning and nuance to the narrative, enriching the viewing experience and inviting deeper reflection on the themes explored. In sum, the technical prowess displayed in *Manjummel Boys*, particularly in its cinematography and use of color, not only enhances the visual appeal of the film but also serves as a powerful storytelling tool, immersing viewers in the world of the story and enriching their emotional connection to the characters and themes.

At the heart of *Manjummel Boys* lies a stellar ensemble cast whose performances elevate the film to soaring heights. Soubin Shahir's portrayal of Kuttan exudes warmth and leadership, anchoring the group amidst chaos and uncertainty with remarkable poise. Sreenath Bhasi delivers a tour de force performance as Subash, skillfully navigating through a spectrum of emotions with nuance and vulnerability. Balu Varghese, Ganapathy, and Jean Paul Lal each bring a unique energy to their roles, infusing the narrative with authenticity and depth. Together, this ensemble cast embodies the essence of friendship and camaraderie, forging a poignant connection with the audience that resonates long after the credits roll.

Moreover, the film ventures beyond the typical confines of a convention-

al survival thriller, embarking on a journey that delves into profound thematic layers, exploring the essence of friendship, resilience, and the unwavering strength of the human spirit. Under Chidambaram's astute direction, the narrative transcends mere survivalist tropes, diving deep into the intricate dynamics of human relationships amidst the throes of adversity. Through poignant moments of introspection and reflection, the film intricately navigates the complexities of the human experience, shedding light on the enduring bonds that unite the characters in their shared struggle for survival.

Chidambaram's directorial prowess infuses the narrative with a rich tapestry of emotions, deftly weaving together moments of tension-filled suspense with heartwarming displays of camaraderie. As the story unfolds, the pacing strikes a delicate balance, drawing viewers deeper into the characters' gripping journeys while steadily building towards a cathartic crescendo. Each scene is meticulously crafted to evoke a visceral response, whether it's the palpable sense of danger lurking in the wilderness or the tender moments of connection shared between lifelong friends. Ultimately, *Manjummel Boys* transcends its genre trappings to deliver a thought-provoking exploration of human resilience and the enduring power of friendship.

In the annals of Indian cinema, *Manjummel Boys* stands as a testament to the power of storytelling, technical craftsmanship, and stellar performances. Through its riveting narrative, the film delves into the depths of human resilience, camaraderie, and the unwavering pursuit of hope amidst despair. As viewers embark on a tumultuous journey alongside the characters, they are confronted with the raw emotions and visceral intensity that define the human experience. The film transcends the label of a mere survival thriller; it emerges as a cinematic tour de force that encapsulates the essence of grit, tenacity, and the enduring bonds of friendship. In an era inundated with cinematic spectacles, this humble tale of survival shines as a beacon of authenticity and emotional resonance, leaving an indelible imprint on the hearts and minds of audiences. In the face of adversity, it is the resilience and tenacity of the human spirit that ultimately prevails, illuminating the path towards hope and redemption.

To sum up, *Manjummel Boys* is not merely a survival thriller but a powerful testament to the resilience and tenacity of the human spirit. Through masterful storytelling and compelling performances, the film captures the raw intensity of the characters' struggle and celebrates the indomitable willpower that propels them forward, resonating with audiences

on a profound and emotional level. As viewers immerse themselves in this tumultuous journey alongside the characters, they are reminded of the inherent strength we all possess to conquer even the most formidable challenges, ensuring the film lingers in their minds well beyond its conclusion. Survival films impart a profound message about the resilience and tenacity of the human spirit, emphasizing perseverance, resourcefulness, and the significance of unity in overcoming adversity. They evoke a deeper appreciation for life and the natural world, urging viewers to reflect on their relationship with both. Ultimately, survival films serve as powerful reminders of the strength and resilience inherent in each individual, inspiring audiences to confront their own obstacles with courage and determination.

Anupama A.P.