

5th Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition for Film Criticism 2024

Certificate of Merit

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**A Leap of Faith: Reimagining Faith, Friendship, and Masculinity in
*Manjummel Boys***

When eleven boisterous young men from the modest town of Manjummel in Kerala, embark upon an excursion to the lush, mist-clad hills of Kodaikanal, their exuberant laughter reverberates across the meandering roads and towering canopies, momentarily dispelling the cruel fate that lies in ambush within the alien caverns of the Guna Caves, or, more aptly, the Devil's Kitchen. However, when one of their own, plunges into these ominous depths, the film pivots sharply from carefree revelry to a taut, visceral struggle for survival. In the 135 minutes of his sophomore directorial venture *Manjummel Boys* (2024), Chidambaram S. Poduval records the precarity of these youths as they confront the abyss—both literal and metaphorical, which puts to test the limits of human endurance and friendships amidst superficialities of youthful camaraderie and the sublime reckoning with mortality. The coming-of-age film is anchored in the 2006 singularmost instance of survival—the only successful escape from the infamous Guna Caves—long immortalized in local lore and cinema—most notably by Kamal Haasan's *Gunaa* (Bharathi, 1991). These treacherous depths, notorious for claiming numerous lives over the years, have yielded barely a body, except for one. What then begins as a light-hearted escapade soon turns into a harrowing meditation on human relationships in extremis, the malleability of

faith, and above all, the indomitable spirit of friendship and teamwork.

Despite its modest budget, *Manjummel Boys* triumphs as a box office marvel in Malayalam cinema, owing much to its deft craftsmanship and technical finesse. Filmed over several months, across multiple locations—including the Guna Caves themselves—the production boasts an ensemble cast blending seasoned actors with fresh talents. Beyond Poduval's visionary direction, a cornerstone of the film's critical acclaim is Ajayan Chalissery's production design, most notably his recreation of the caves' bat-infested chambers and slippery rocks, where much of the narrative transpires—conjuring a claustrophobic verisimilitude. Meanwhile, Shyju Khalid's cinematography forsakes the quintessential romanticization of rural landscapes, in favour of rendering Kodaikanal's wilderness with an almost ethnographic precision, at once alluring yet foreboding, which, when complemented by Sushin Shyam's immersive yet restrained background score, transports the viewer irresistibly into the film's diegesis.

At the outset, the film explores the relationship between the Manjummel boys and the alien yet alluring tourist haven of Kodaikanal—the former navigating these divided spaces touted with uncertainty and curiosity. If Siju David, known affectionately

as Kuttan (Soubin Shahir), represents the steadfast and resolute figure, whose unwavering loyalty anchors the group, then Subhash (Sreenath Bhasi) emerges as the rational cynic, grappling with disbelief which is confronted and reconfigured by his near-death encounter. Departing from the voyeuristic aestheticization of external hazards—whether the unpredictability of nature or human frailty—typical of survival thrillers, the film ontologically opposes such tendencies, layering instead its visual and thematic architectures with a philosophical inquiry into the essence of faith and friendship, elevating it beyond the generic trappings of its genre.

Into the Devil's Kitchen: Anatomy of a Fall

The first thirty minutes establish a warm camaraderie among the friends through a series of vignettes that showcase their everyday lives in Manjummel, flushed with local colour and dialect. Their easy banter accompanies their journey, suggesting that what might appear reckless is, for them, a comfortable routine, which, however, camouflages an underlying current of restlessness—a longing to break free from the constraints of their quotidian small-town existence. The subsequent Kodaikanal expedition, which commences as a lark, is likened to a metaphorical ascent to freedom, with the friends revelling in their temporary escape from the mundane. This is brutally interrupted when, in a tragic turn of events, Subhash plummets into a 900+ meter dreadful chasm—Devil's Kitchen—feared by the locals as a devouring mouth of the earth. However, a humble belt around his waist—taken thoughtlessly from his younger brother

before the trip—becomes a life-saving tether, halting the descent that leaves him dangling precariously between life and its end.

Because Subhash is portrayed as a rationalist atheist, whose worldview is shaped by scepticism rather than spiritual reverence, Subhash's near-death experience in the cave forces him to confront the possibility of a higher power, catalysing what we might term a literal fall from grace, yet simultaneously, a fall into belief or a descent that paradoxically becomes a spiritual ascent. Director Poduval handles this fall with remarkable subtlety, circumventing heavy-handed symbolism to allow his transformation to unfold organically. Through disjointed temporality and hallucinatory imagery, Subhash's experience in the cave evokes a primal rebirth. The cave emerges as more than a setting—it becomes a sentient entity in its own right, a metaphysical space both primeval and sacred, embodying the Jungian archetype of the “collective unconscious” (1969). With its labyrinthine structure and oppressive tenebrosity, the cave mirrors the complexities of the human psyche. Each descent deeper into its recesses parallels a journey into the self. As Subhash observes, the cave, awake and alive, resembles a mother's womb. Its raw-flesh-like walls, glistening with blood-red sheen, wherein his battered and blood-soaked form, naked and vulnerable, lay sprawled, like a newborn smeared in the bodily fluids of creation. The vagina-shaped entrance and the life-saving “rope” symbolize the umbilical cord, through which Subhash must re-emerge into the world. Shijin Hutton and Abhishek Nair's subtle auditory cues further confirm the palpability of claustrophobia by

impersonating the cave’s “breathing” and “gurgling” like a hungry underbelly, and the subterranean rumblings of nature.



Fig. 1. Guna Caves, resembling a vaginal opening, engulfs Subhash in its shadowy depths, as friends, haunted and yearning, await his redemptive return.

Shyju Khalid captures these moments with an unsettling intimacy. The camera lingers on the minute details—torn fabric clinging stubbornly to his groin, trembling debris-caked hands, and the faint quiver of lips as he whispers fragments of childhood memories. The tension is palpable—intensified by chiaroscuro lighting. The camera alternates between tightly framed closeups and disorienting high and low-angle shots, emphasizing the suffocating confines of the cave, juxtaposed with expansive shots of Kodaikanal’s picturesque landscape, that forge a visual dichotomy that mirrors the characters’ psychological turmoil. The viewer, like Subhash himself, is suspended in a state of agonizing uncertainty—pondering whether this fall is to be his end or merely the

beginning of a harrowing journey toward redemption.



Fig. 2. The Caves’ ancient walls like a mother’s womb, drenched in crimson hues, pulse with life—birthing, breathing, bleeding sacred.

In the Sacred Geometry of Faith and Friendship

A refreshing departure from the conventional hypermasculine heroics that pervade mainstream Indian cinema, Poduval’s *Manjummel Boys* reimagines masculinity by eschewing reckless bravado and embracing an acute awareness of mortality and interdependence. Its rather nuanced portrayal of male friendship and vulnerability, allows its characters to express fear, doubt, and affection, atypical of traditional male-centric narratives. Faith, in this light, is liberated from the confines of traditional religious iconography and manifests through bonds of friendship, particularly in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. For instance, in an act of spirited folly, the lads scrawled the words *Manjummel Boys* upon the Guna Caves’ wall, as though to etch their brotherhood into the annals of time; a claim to belonging in a world that, in its vast indifference, might otherwise overlook their peripheral existence. Following Subhash’s fall, his friends form a human chain to prevent rainwater from flooding the ravine where an

unconscious Subhash lay trapped—a raw depiction of homosocial devotion that eloquently projects the sheer physicality of their efforts against nature’s formidable inevitability. When Kuttan, Sudhi (Deepak Parambol), and Sixon (Balu Varghese), drenched in mud and wearied by exhaustion, scream into the gaping void of the pit, “Subhash, nee evidaya da?” (Subhash, where are you?), their desperate call echoes with a haunting familiarity, paralleling Neeta’s implorable cry for life reverberating across the mountains, as it lingers as a spectral memory, refusing to dissolve into silence, in Ghatak’s *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960).

Central to this reimagining is Kuttan, whose unfaltering resolve to rescue Subhash—despite the authorities’ failure and dwindling hope—echoes the selflessness of his childhood act of saving Krishnakumar (Ganapathi) from drowning, a moment vividly resurrected in a fever-dream sequence—underscoring the enduring power of friendship that transcends mere obligation. Though naturally timid, Kuttan takes the lead, while Sudhi’s impassioned declaration, “If you don’t go down, I’ll go down.”, reveals the generosity of the sacrifice these youths are determined to make. Notwithstanding physical harm, legal repercussions, police brutality, and societal scepticism, these young men press forward, driven by a bond stronger than fear. The rescue sequence—where Subhash and Kuttan are hoisted to safety, without reservation—becomes both an emotional and filmic triumph, flagging a performance of alternative masculinity, grounded in vulnerability and mutual care rather than mindless bravado (Gopinath & Sundar, 2020). In a poetic callback to their

earlier defeat in the village tug-of-war competition, the Manjummel Boys, once outmatched by stronger competitors, now unite with newfound strength to win the ultimate game—not for sport, but for survival itself. The rope, taut and strained to its breaking point, becomes a lifeline, securing both Subhash’s physical salvation and the enduring friendships that tether the group together. “For humans to understand, it is not mortal love. It is beyond that”—Ilaiyaraaja’s cathartic cult classic “Kanmani Anbodu Kadhalan” from *Gunaa* (Bharathi, 1991), originally intended to express romantic love, is recontextualized here to speak to the highest form of friendship, that, like faith, transcends the boundaries of the mortal world. The rescue thus, mirrors the mythic motif of resurrection, as Joseph Campbell discusses in his 1949 monomyth where the hero returns from the underworld, transformed. When Subhash emerges from this near-death experience, achieving his spiritual epiphany, the villagers’ recognition of him as a divine manifestation completes his journey from despair to transcendence.



Fig. 3. The rope, like an umbilical lifeline, guides his rebirth, as Kuttan pulls a bruised and bloodied Subhash through the cave’s birth canal into the world anew.

Intertextuality, Memory, and the Play of Symbolism

Besides its intertextual engagement with Tamil cinema—particularly through Kamal Haasan’s auteurship that inspired the boys’ journey to the Guna Caves—*Manjummel Boys* transcends mere homage by marrying off memory to nostalgia, to emphasize the fragility of existence and restoration of faith. Poduval’s deft intercutting of the present with dreamlike sequences—childhood memories, where the boys, unclad and unburdened, swim freely in rivers and frolic carefree through the woods in *Manjummel*—imbues the narrative with surrealist hues. In one poignant scene, old Subhash’s post-fall hallucination shows young Subhash moving from a dark, empty room to a well-lit space where his mother cradles his infant brother—a symbolic transition from shadow to light that signals his impending spiritual awakening. Even Sixon’s T-shirts throughout the film, function as subtle harbingers of events yet to unfold—from a racing car anticipating their imminent journey to a “Titanic” motif foreshadowing peril. From early on, though such subtle visual symbolism, Poduval approaches spirituality; eschewing didacticism. Instead, he juxtaposes Subhash’s initial rejection of faith during a visit to the Murugan Temple with a later moment in the cave, where the beam from Kuttan’s headlamp during the rescue, becomes the metaphysical “light from above” that Prasad (Khalid Rahman) had described earlier as God. The same divine illumination resurfaces in the ethereal glow of the medical scanner at the hospital during Subhash’s treatment, suggesting, the divine

can manifest in forms as much in friendship as in science.



Fig. 4. United by bonds forged through defeat and triumph, the Boys form an unbreakable chain, gripping the rope with the same spirit that once humbled them. But now, in the tug between life and death, they fight for a different prize—life itself.

Like the tortuous depths of the Guna Caves that harbour both terror and revelation, *Manjummel Boys* reclaims and elevates the ordinary moments of friendship into acts of grace and salvation. Stylistically intertwining the personal and the spiritual, the film challenges viewers to reconsider the boundaries between faith and doubt, heroism and vulnerability. While echoing *127 Hours* (Boyle, 2010) in its portrayal of individual isolation and psychological resilience, *Manjummel Boys* broadens its scope to examine collective faith—in oneself, in others, and in something greater. With unflinching honesty, the film transmutes a local tale into a narrative of global resonance, turning its lens on Kerala’s small-town youth whose lives, typically muffled by life’s everyday din, emerge here as raw, unvarnished realities yearning for redemption—socially—if not more so—than aesthetically.

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