

Filmmaker Sriram Raghavan talks about telling the story of the boy who dismantled Pakistan's pride in the Battle of Basantar, and the challenges of swimming against the tide

A shot at glory

Anuj Kumar
anuj.kumar@thehindu.co.in

Known for reinventing the thriller with his signature blend of suspense, dark humour, and unpredictable twists, filmmaker Sriram Raghavan has always pushed boundaries. He draws inspiration from classic noir to craft narratives that keep audiences on the edge of their seats. However, this week, Sriram steps into bold new territory with the highly anticipated *Ikkis*, a powerful war drama about the heroics of Second Lieutenant Arun Khetarpal, the youngest recipient of the Param Vir Chakra, who made the supreme sacrifice at 21 during the 1971 India-Pakistan war.

Edited excerpts:

Question: From noir to nationalist drama, how did this shift happen?

Answer: It happened by sheer chance. I was in Dino's (producer Dinesh Vijan) office to discuss the script for *Badlapur 2*, which I was not happy with. There was too much serial killing, and it didn't connect with me. I was sitting there wondering what to do when I heard Binny Padda (known for designing film promos) telling Dino the story of Arun Khetarpal. I found it fascinating and asked, 'Who's doing this?' And they said, 'Nobody's attached. Do you want to do it?' I thought for five minutes (laughs), asking myself the same thing that you're asking me. Is it up my alley? I love all kinds of movies; it's just that I have no experience with extensive action, VFX, or shooting tanks. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but somehow I said that I'm interested.

Q: As a storyteller, what pulled you to the sacrifice of Arun Khetarpal and his father's journey?

A: It's set in two timelines. One is 1971, when the battle was fought, and the other is 2001, when Arun's 80-year-old father, who also served the Indian Army during the British period, goes back in time to Pakistan as part of the cultural exchange that the then PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee started, to resolve the conflict after the Kargil War. During this twin-track diplomacy phase, getting visas became easier. When the senior Khetarpal, born in undivided India, received an invitation from his college in Sargodha, he returned to see if his house still stood. In that journey, he meets a certain Pakistani army person who gives him an insight into his son's courage and what happened on the battlefield on December 16, barely two months after he turned 21. Arun didn't even complete his training as a young officer. After one month of rigorous training, he was considered good enough to be in the thick of action. So his story and his father's story connect and make a lot of cinematic sense to me.

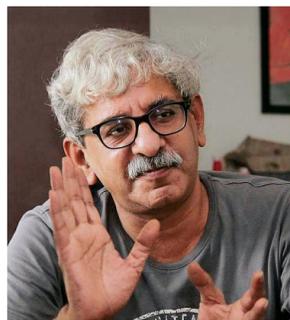
Q: Tell us about the research...

A: I met Mukesh Khetarpal, Arun's younger brother, and through him, I got a whole list of names, particularly two of Arun's tank crew members, Nathu Singh and Prayag Singh, who survived the December 16, 1971, battle (of Basantar). We spent two days with them. They would come in their full uniform. Brimming with pride, they told us about Arun and the times. Then I got to meet a number of his NDA batchmates, and a jigsaw was formed. I didn't want it to be an Amar Chitra Katha kind of story. I don't even like the word biopic. It's not like I'm covering his entire life, though it was a short life anyway. Arun continues to be a great inspiration for young soldiers. In cantonments, you will find his busts, portraits, and grounds named after him.

Q: How did Agastya walk in?

A: As I developed the script, I gradually realised that age is integral to the story. In certain scenes, Arun is shown as 19. The script demanded a fresh face, and Agastya was 21 when he was cast.

We needed an actor who was willing to commit two to three years



to the project. Simply put, it's the story of a boy becoming a man. Young age apart, what Arun did heroically, for which he received the Param Vir Chakra, is something that happened in the last two hours of his life. Till those last hours, he didn't know he was a hero. I wanted Agastya to bring that urge to serve and the innocence about the outcome. I guess Agastya's eyes reflect it.

He comes from an illustrious family, but for me, Agastya was just a boy who had to grow into his character. He spent four months training. First, he attended boot

camp to live the life of a soldier, and then, at the Poona Horse regiment, he gained a sense of what it was like to operate tanks.

Q: How did Dharmendra come into the picture?

A: Ever since we worked together in *Johnny Gaddar*, we have been in touch. At times, he would call me to suggest a story I should take up. Like he would say, *Tuesdays with Morrie* is a good idea, or can I do something like *The Bridges of Madison County*? I promised to find a story for him. When we found one, Dino and I had a long discussion about whether to cast someone in his 80s for the role. In the past, we have seen Sanjeev Kumar and Anupam Kher playing characters much older than their age. I felt we can't do it anymore. With Dharamji, there was no acting. I mean, his walk, his gait, everything is part of the character. He connected deeply with the story. The pain of leaving his home in Punjab had settled in his body over the years. The idea of revisiting home became a very personal experience — he was totally into the character. He had a keen sense of dialogue and valued the economy of words. I gave him the dialogues, but always asked him how he would like to deliver them. He would offer his own improvisation, and I have used many of his lines. We would often discuss his poetry. I wanted him to get his poems published, but he was in no hurry. I requested him to recite one of his compositions for the film, and it was lovely.

Q: The film comes at a time when jingoistic patriotism is gaining currency at the box office. Are you concerned?

A: Not really. When I began in 2019, all I had was the story. Now, in six years, so many things have changed. There'll be good times, there'll be not-so-good times. Of course, I'm conscious of the kinds of movies being made, but there is no wrong time to tell a good story. We also need these kinds of stories. It is a reminder that a soldier's family is braver than the soldier. Recently, we conducted a screening for Army personnel and received a good response. The Chief of Army Staff said it was good that it wasn't jingoistic. He also liked how our soldiers' behaviour towards enemy soldiers is portrayed in line with protocol.

Ikkis is currently running in theatres.

Porcelain in bloom

Drawing from rediscovered palace motifs, Good Earth brings Jaipur's living heritage into today's dining spaces

Geetika Sachdev

As I stepped into the newly launched Good Earth Living at Gurugram's Boulevard Grand View, the scene unfolding in front of me felt like walking into a rose garden. The design house was unveiling Jaipur Rose, a limited-edition tableware collection created in collaboration with The Palace Atelier, the museum store at City Palace, Jaipur.

The range spans tea and dessert plates, cake stands, platters, trays, and demitasse sets crafted in fine porcelain, with table linen. Each piece carries motifs that are ornate yet do not tip into excess.

"Two of my favourite motifs include the *guldasta* (a bouquet) seen in the Chhavi Niwas section of the palace. The other is a motif from the Rose Gate," says Gauravi Kumari of the erstwhile royal family of Jaipur and co-creative director, The Palace Atelier.

There is also a personal story behind the *guldasta*. During the restoration of the City Palace, Gauravi's older brother, Sawai Padmanabh Singh or Pacho as he is also known, rediscovered the motif, a vase brimming with flowers, that had been painted over and almost forgotten. "Little parts of it were still visible," she recalls. "It was a case of lost and found. In a way, we wanted to honour our heritage, and the Good Earth team was keen to use this too."



A royal platter Pieces from Jaipur Rose by Good Earth Living. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

"Our idea was never to change the heritage, but to make it more modern and accessible, especially for younger people."

The collaboration also marks Good Earth's first association with an India-based museum shop, following earlier partnerships with institutions such as The Met and the Smithsonian. For Anita Lal, founder and creative director, Good Earth, collaborations are about shared sensibilities. "For us, colour and detailing matter deeply. A collaboration begins somewhere, and then it takes on a life of its own. The process expands both brands' creative vocabularies."

And this may just be the beginning. Hinting at what is next, Anita shares,

"We plan to extend the Jaipur Rose collection to include dinner plates. We've also created an ambient spray under Jaipur Rose, which will be launching soon."



Jaipur Rose, a limited-edition collection, is now available at Good Earth retail stores.

Fig & Maple has now been rebranded as Trouble Trouble; a pet-friendly restaurant that continues to carry forward the legacy of its forerunner's weekend brunch menu

Worth the trouble

Pallavi Pasricha

"You couldn't really go out and have a cocktail with your dog. Coffee, yes! But now even a cocktail is possible," chef-restaurateur Radhika Khandelwal says smiling as I walk into Trouble Trouble and glance around. The walls are plastered with quirky photos of animals — a cat wearing a leather jacket and dark glasses, a flamingo dressed in a shimmering outfit and adorable neighbourhood dogs.

The wood, rust and amber tones with interspersed mirrors lend warmth to the 1,300-square-foot space that seems slightly familiar yet different. That is because this spot was Radhika's first baby, Fig &

Maple, that served Delhi one of the best brunches for nearly a decade until she decided to revamp it. "I wanted to have fun with food and do something different," she tells me.

Trouble Trouble, which can accommodate 82 people, is now a pet-friendly place that serves global food, but everything here is inventive and comes with a slight twist.

It starts with the cocktail menu, which promises to cover "every mischievous impulse" in eight sections that have off-beat names including In The Mood To Impress, I Am A Cocktail Nerd and I Am Not Drinking This Entire Month.

Kunal Chandra, chief experience officer, Trouble Trouble tells me they have crafted a drink for every



Expansive menu Trouble Trouble's assorted plates. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

tender, yet sharp and zingy, thanks to mustard oil and grapefruit. I could have re-ordered it.

Usually, I would choose chicken dumplings, but I am urged to try the egg dumpling instead. Almost similar to a ravioli, the egg comes wrapped in a beetroot dumpling with parmesan and cream cheese inside. Topped with walnuts and truffle with chilli crisp oil, it has both crunch and sharpness. The egg is not runny but well done. It is worth a try when your palate is craving something experimental.

A dish that takes me by surprise because it fuses two very strong flavours is the chorizo and blue cheese biegnet — they are two dough balls resting on jalapeno mousse. Both being pungent flavours individually, the combination can go wrong if not handled with finesse, but it turns out to be bold and strong.

I opt for the chicken ravioli, not expecting the classic version. Sure enough, six pieces of ravioli shaped like a petal create a beautiful pink rose (thanks to the beetroot) and are served with mustard parmesan sauce. The conchiglie-shaped pasta with lamb ragu is also quite hearty.

When the entire menu has a twist, why should desserts be left behind? Our vote goes for the *crème Brûlée éclair*.

Here you also drink your dessert. I had the affagato — the potency of rum and the sweetness of caramelised popcorn makes it delicious.

Though there is no separate menu for pets, the kitchen does prepare a complimentary meal as per the pet's dietary restrictions. Next time you want your pet to accompany you for a cocktail or a meal, do not think twice about heading here.

Trouble Trouble, located at M-Block Market in Greater Kailash II, is open between noon and 1am from Tuesday to Sunday; a meal (with alcohol) for two costs ₹2,500. For reservations, call 7678665130