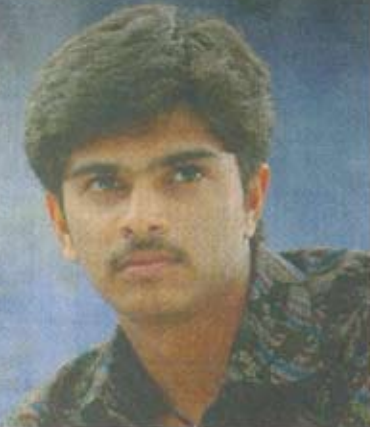


A must watch film, despite the few raw edges

With a few fine touches from the director, *Varnam* illustrates the life of a troubled adolescent



It is a coming of age story, but with a difference. It centres around a carefree adolescent, who finds his perception of life and people around him undergo a drastic transformation, after certain events cloud his life. The film, more in the genre of a thriller, was an official entry at a couple of international film festivals before its release here. The story is narrated by Mani (debutant Giri), a 17-year-old. Through it, unravels the story of his life and the people and incidents that have influenced him, bringing him to his present state.

We learn of the murder of his father a decade ago in a caste clash, the boy vowing to take revenge on the unknown killer. The scenes where Mani constantly sketches his father's face to keep alive his thirst for vendetta alive is a fine touch by the director. A rebel in his teens, his mother sends him

to live with his uncle Durai, (Sampath) who owns a coffee estate. Mani joins the local school run by his uncle, who happens to be a very caste-conscious man. Durai's high-handed ways and his enormous clout in the area, impress Mani. The film is very real in texture and tone, with eye-catching locations, the director creating the perfect ambience of a caste-ridden society.

Giri is just right for the role of Mani, the raw edges lending a natural feel to his performance. The characters are colourful and etched beautifully. The actors fit their roles suitably, the performances uniformly impressive. Monica as Kavita Teacher breathes life into her character, with her encouragement of Mani's drawing skills.

Kavitha gradually earns Mani's respect, though he resents her in some of the earlier scenes because of

her instruction that he take help from his classmate Thangam (Ashwatha, who is an apt choice), who is from a lower caste. The thawing in their relationship is brought out in subtle natural ways. The scene at the exam hall where the entire class connives in hoodwinking the supervisor, and indulges in blatant cheating, is a fun sequence.

Disturbing and haunting is the scene where Durai humiliates Nanda (Vijay), a small player in the coffee plantation, in the most demeaning and inhuman way. Debutant director Raju has a strong grip on his narration, maintaining the pace throughout, albeit a tad leisurely at times.

The haunted temple in the woods is like a character in the film. The legend of Muniyandi (Karate Raja) has been depicted engagingly through a song sequence. Mani, in an inebriated state, ventures into the temple one day, the shocking sight haunting him for days. The director's twist in the tale here is appreciable. As Mani battles with his inner demons and tries to grapple with the changing equation in his relationships, the story spirals to a climax, thrilling

and poignant. Meticulously crafted, deftly narrated and intriguing, *Varnam* is a definite watch.

—Malini Mannath

Film: Varnam

Director: S M Raju

Cast: Giri, Adhish, Monica, Ashwatha, Sampath, Vijay Sethupathi, Muthukumar, Karate Raja.

