'Kaala,' first Indian film in Saudi cinemas, gimmicky at best

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CHENNAI: A film with Tamil actor Rajinikanth is a like a carnival, but unlike a conventional one, there is more reverence here than just fun. The superstar, who is respectfully addressed as "thalaivar," or chief, is not just an icon, but a phenomenon. Last week, Pa Ranjith-helmed, Rajinikanth-starrer "Kaala" became the first Indian film to open in newly re-launched Saudi cinemas — it sees Rajinikanth appear as an underworld don called Karikaalan.

Invariably dressed in a black dhoti and a black shirt, Kaala is not evil personified — as the color is often meant to denote – but goodness glorified. Playing godfather to his tribe of Tamils in Dharavi, the second largest slum in the world after one in Brazil's

Rio de Janeiro, he is provoked into a battle when a huge corporate, headed by a gangster-turned-minister Hari Dada (played by Nana Patekar), tries to demolish Dharavi and evict hundreds of its inhabitants.

In the war that ensues between Karikaalan and Hari, the star's wife, Selvi (played by Eswari Rao) and eldest son, are killed, leaving a heartbroken husband and father, who does not choose a path of revenge, but merely carries on as a good Samaritan.

At 167 minutes, the film could have been liberally trimmed as the story has little novelty on offer. The movie follows a beaten track that is strewn with dead bodies and covered with blood and gore. A confrontation between the protagonist and Hari takes on various hues, but ends up presenting little that can be revelatory or surprising.

Rajinikanth remains a man who has to fall back on gimmicks (earlier it was flicking a cigarette in the air and catching it between his lips, and this time it is playing with his dark glasses) to keep his fans interested.

But, yes, if the film falls rather flat because its lead actor looks tired — he is 67-years-old — and is unable to think of different characters (unlike Bollywood's Amitabh Bachchan and Rishi Kapoor, who have given themselves a complete image makeover). Fine pieces of acting by Patekar infuse sparks of excellence into the narrative, however.

Unless Rajinikanth steps away from the gimmicks to take on more substantial roles, his movies may continue to be less than impressive.