



Rajinikanth: Time to become an actor all over again

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Tamil superstar Rajinikanth remains not only evergreen, but perennially popular. At 64, he hides his age with elaborate facial makeup, his bald pate with a stylish wig. His physique is still trim, probably because of a punishing workout. All very well of course.

But I feel that all this is a sheer waste of time and energy, given his undying inclination for showmanship. He has given up acting a long time ago. What we now see of him on the screen is a kind of magician conjuring up tricks to regale his fans. There were scenes in his just released work, KS Ravikumar's *Lingaa*, where he appears in bizarre costumes, taking his brocade jacket off only to put it on again as he dances with tens of young girls in skimpies!

Does Rajinikanth really need to do this at this stage of his career and life? I feel he should step back, pause a while and reflect. Is he doing justice to the marvellous actor in him, that actor I saw in his early films? He could hold you spellbound. Yes, really, he could do that.

He still has audiences riveted, but not through his performance. The aura he creates through sheer gimmickry enslaves men, women and children — who celebrate each movie release of his by firing crackers, garlanding huge wooden cutouts of his and by anointing them with milk and sandal paste. When *Lingaa* opened last Friday, I saw all this in Chennai.

Much as one tries, it is hard to explain this phenomenon called Rajinikanth. It defies logic and rationale. Among India's actors, he has the largest fan following, only next to the late MG Ramachandran — who was also the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu heading a political party whose doctrine he helped spread through the roles he played on the screen. Other Tamil Nadu Chief Ministers, Annadurai and Karunanidhi, wrote the stories and the scripts for these movies.

However, I wonder whether Ramachandran's popularity was as incredible as Rajinikanth's. In Tamil Nadu, he is revered as god, and he is beyond reproach. He is everyone's friend. Every bus conductor or rickshaw driver dreams of becoming a Rajinikanth. The desire to mutate himself into that hero is obsessive to the point of being maniacal. So if Rajinikanth dies at the end of a film, the theatre will not live either. It will be burnt down. So shattering is the blow of seeing the hero pass away.

Off screen, Rajinikanth establishes and cements a bond with the masses through his astonishing simplicity. He appears in public in a dhoti and a shirt. At other times, in a pair of trousers and a T-shirt thrown over. He is bald, but does not cover it with a wig. The contrast between Amitabh Bachchan and Rajinikanth at the recent International Film Festival of India in Panaji, where he was given a Lifetime Achievement Award, was startling. Bachchan was all dressed up, Rajinikanth, well, dressed down. And his humility and mannerism on stage overwhelmed me, as it must have others.

Rajinikanth appeals most strongly to the downtrodden, who see him as a brilliant



SHOWMAN: Rajinikanth no longer gets his audiences riveted through his performance. The aura he creates through sheer gimmickry enslaves men, women and children.

success story. Born Shivaji Rao Gaekwad in Bengaluru to Marathi parents, Rajinikanth lost his mother when he was barely five, and spent much of his youth working as a coolie and later as a bus conductor in that city. A friend and co-worker helped Rajinikanth secure admission in the Madras Film Institute in the early 1970s. He got his first break in 1975 with a K Balachander film, *Apoorva Raagangal*. It was only J Mahendran's 1978 *Mullum Malarum* that gave him the star tag.

But when I saw these two movies again recently, I found his acting ability brilliant. In both, he essays shades of deep grey, and yet there was something captivating about Rajinikanth. *Mullum Malarum* lifted him to the skies all right.

Yet, when P Vasu made *Kuselan* in 2008, which almost seemed like Rajinikanth's own story, it crashed. So too some of his earlier works. But the failures never appeared to diminish the brightness of the halo around him.

A large part of this can be attributed to his showmanship in cinema. The way he flicks a cigarette in the air or dances or even stands, infuses that desire in the conductor or the coolie to succeed. And, who knows, become another Rajinikanth.

However, for the discerning viewer who looks beyond star material, Rajinikanth is all style, and very little substance. Some have

called this clownish. Yes, a clown alright, but perhaps a beloved clown. His actions on the screen can be read as a bunch of tricks, out to grab the attention of the lowest-common denominator. The superb actor in him appears to have been eclipsed.

I would like to conclude by what I began with. I have seen his *Endhiran*, *Ra One*, *Kochadaiiyaan* and now *Lingaa* among others. These have not caught my attention. It is his early works like *Moondru Mudichu* and *Avargal* that hold unbounded fascination for me. Still, and after all these years. Maybe, Rajinikanth should walk away from gimmickry, and awaken that actor in him all over again.

Lingaa

Much like the former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MG Ramachandran, who used cinema to play a do-gooder, propagating Dravidian doctrine, Rajinikanth has often essayed characters with strong political tones. Of course, there is a difference between these two men. While Ramachandran or MGR, as he was popularly known, believed in a certain political ideology and pursued his ambition to become part of a political system, Rajinikanth has no such ambition. At least, he has never spelt it out, though every time a film of his opens, the social saviour he portrays pushes both politicians and his huge,

huge number of fans into a guessing game.

His latest movie *Lingaa*, directed by KS.Ravikumar, which hit theatres last week, is probably the most political of his recent works. Essaying two characters (father and grandson, living in two different periods), who unfortunately look so much alike, Rajinikanth, on the one hand, is a civil engineer (with a British degree), a civil servant as well as a maharaja of a small southern principality — and on the other, a petty thief.

It is 1939, and the British are a harassed lot. The war in Europe and the growing movement for freedom in India under Gandhi are driving them nuts, and social welfare is the last thing on their mind. When the people of a parched land (who stop passing trains to collect water from the steam engines) ask for a dam to harness a river that will end both flooding and famine, the British brush them aside.

But Raja Lingeswaran (Rajinikanth) steps in, and with the help of his own money and expertise as well the labour from the land raise the dam. But like so many good men, Lingeswaran is forced out of the village and the temple he built there locked for all time when a village traitor schemes with the British and fools the people.

Cut to the present day, and we see the Raja's grandson, Lingaa (also Rajinikanth) as a petty thief who picks jewels off people's necks. Contrasting with this degeneration is the little village, which has realised its folly and is bent on getting Lingaa back if only to reopen the temple, whose deity, Shiva Lingam, is worth a fortune. Lingaa arrives all right, but as a thief with an eye on the stone — and at a time when corrupt Indian politicians have replaced the British. One of them wants to destroy the same dam that the Raja had built to last a thousand years, and Lingaa's confrontation with the politician gets us a liberal dose of Rajinikanth's daredevilry.

Although *Lingaa* is one the better films of Rajinikanth in a long time, the actor remains a slave to his trademark mannerisms, which do not allow him to sink into the character. Here he does not flick a cigarette in the air (that will be politically incorrect now, will it not be?), but twirls his hair and moustache. And there is hardly a difference between Raja Lingeswaran and Lingaa.

And both Sonakshi Sinha, who abandons her home and village, to be with the Raja as he is banished, and Anushka Shetty as a television anchor-girlfriend of Lingaa are characters on the periphery. Naturally, with a superstar like Rajinikanth in frame after frame, the others around shrink into inconsequential specks. Though Ravi Kumar appears to have taken pains to ensure that many of Sinha's shots are not close-ups, it will be apparent to any Tamil that her lip sync is far from perfect — the pitfall of doing a movie whose language is absolutely unfamiliar. Santhanam remains the hero's (*Lingaa*) sidekick, portraying the same character for the zillionth time. But, yes, Radha Ravi (whose father, MR, Radha, was a great screen villain) in a small role — as the father of Sinha's Bharathi — caught one's eye.

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