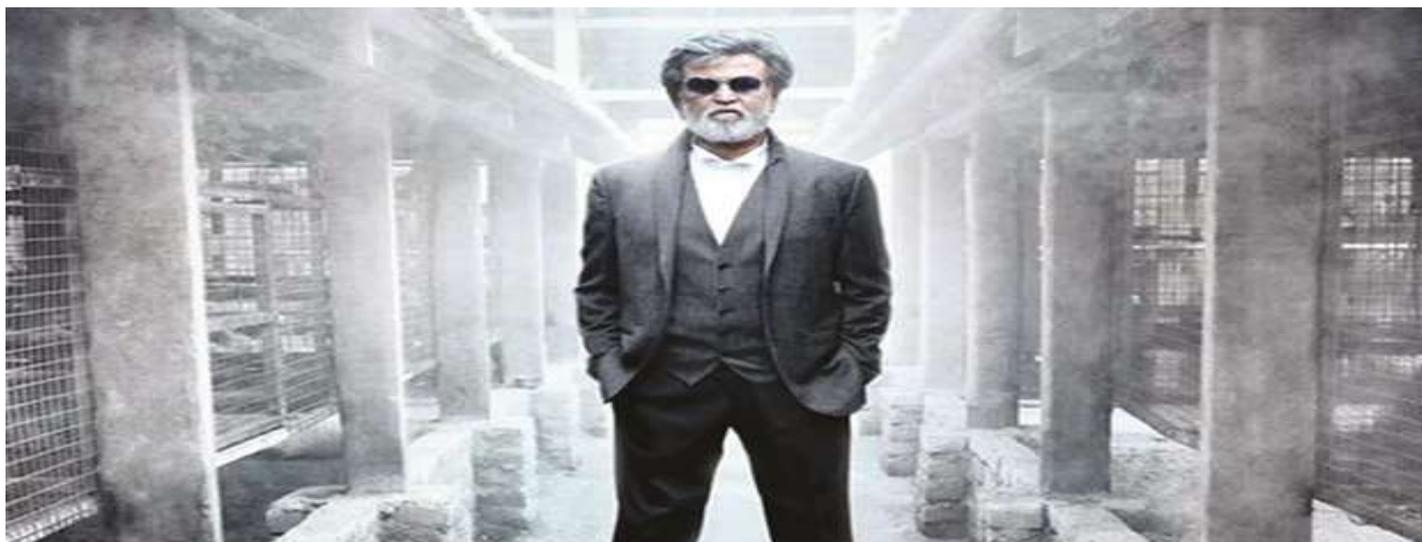


After the viewer, can Rajinikanth woo the voter?

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Rajinikanth in Kabaali. Political parties have been reportedly wooing the superstar in the hope that he would be able to swing votes in a region where he can do no wrong.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Every now and then, Tamil superstar Rajinikanth becomes a media sensation. As he is now. And not surprisingly so, given the political and even administrative vacuum that Tamil Nadu has been experiencing since the death in December of the Chief Minister, Jayalalithaa, who headed the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK).

In a State like Tamil Nadu – which is like none other in India – where film stars are revered like the very deities, Rajinikanth may even be labelled a super deity. I really do not think that any other star has attracted this kind of fan following as Rajinikanth. Amitabh Bachchan would be left way behind in this race. Every time Rajinikanth's movie hits the theatres, huge cutouts of his are anointed with milk and honey and sandalwood paste. And, finally garlanded with jasmine and roses.

So, it only seems plausible that in the kind of vacuum which Tamil Nadu finds itself today, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress have been trying to worm their way into the Tamil Nadu political arena. While the Congress lost its power and even a cursory presence many, many years ago, when the Dravidian parties – Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and later the AIADMK – won elections, the BJP has had a very insignificant presence in the State.

Therefore, the idea of a new matinee idol being roped into the political game is uppermost in the minds of the BJP and the Congress, and the man for the job seems to be Rajinikanth.

Undoubtedly, Rajinikanth is an unimaginable force in Tamil Nadu – having risen from a very lowly rank as a son of poor parents in Karnataka who had to drop out of school and later become a bus conductor in Bengaluru, the star is literally worshipped by the Tamil masses.

So what, if he has reduced himself to a being a mere showman, who uses gimmicks (flicking the cigarette in the air and catching it between his lips and so on) to get footfalls into theatres and the box-office ringing. Admittedly, some of his last films have crashed, leading to huge losses for investors. But his latest, Kabaali, has done reasonably well, though not quite hitting the skies.

With Rajinikanth now shooting for Kaala in Mumbai, political parties, including the breakaway AIADMK group, led by O P Paneerselvam, have been reportedly wooing the superstar in the hope that he would be able to swing votes in a region where he can do no wrong and where people feel almost enslaved by his aura.

Interestingly, Tamil Nadu politics has been intrinsically linked to cinema. In the late 1960s, the Dravidian parties under the leadership of Annadurai, M K Karunanidhi and M G Ramachandran (all three have been Chief Ministers of the State) literally took the wind out of the Congress Party's sails to start an uninterrupted political reign – with the DMK and AIADMK taking turns to rule the State.

The Congress disappeared out of the voter's psyche, and today, with the kind of uneasy political situation in the State – with Jayalalithaa gone and Karunanidhi too old and too sick to take control – the party, not to forget the BJP, must be looking for an opportunity. Yes, we have Karunanidhi's son, Stalin, but in a State where movies swing votes and hearts, he may be a poor match for a man like Rajinikanth.

One must not forget that both the DMK and the AIADMK clinched their first electoral victories through the silver screen. They used cinema – much like Mussolini and Hitler – to spread their political ideology, their Dravidian political supremacy.

While Annadurai penned socially hard-hitting stories, Karunanidhi created film scripts out of them, infusing them with extraordinarily powerful dialogues that effectively propagated the Dravidian political ideology. And Ramachandran became the voice and image in these movies, which seemingly appeared to be love stories, but actually carried thought-provoking socio-political messages. His films were satirical, but at the same time, endeared to the man on the street – who saw Ramachandran as some kind of demigod out to save the State and its people.

Although Rajinikanth may not have been so political in his choice of movie roles, nobody can deny that his hold over the masses is

unimaginable. Actors like Kamal Haasan are nowhere here, despite the fact that he is a wonderful performer. Rajinikanth is not, at least not today. His best days as an artist are long over with his very early films with directors like K Balachander and J Mahendran. Rajinikanth was brilliant then.

But who cares? Not the people in any case. For them, Rajinikanth is to be adulated, worshipped and placed on a pedestal high above the ground. And for the BJP and the Congress – one keen on getting a hold in Tamil Nadu and the other trying to regain its lost power and glory – Rajinikanth looks like the best bet.

Best bet, indeed. For we all know that Jayalalithaa – who was a Chief Minister for many years – was once a hugely popular star, whose on-screen association with Ramachandran ultimately got her the gaddi. It is of course another thing that she transformed herself from a movie actress to Ramachandran's political protegee to a reasonably able administrator.

The moot point now is, will Rajinikanth be able to do a Jayalalithaa or a Ramachandra? And will he get on to the BJP or the Congress bandwagon? Or, will he form his own party? Or, will he at all jump into the political field?

Whatever it be, Rajinikanth does have the magic to move the masses. Of course cinematically. But, who knows, the voters too!

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writing on Indian and world cinema for close to four decades, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com

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