

cinema



The puzzle that is Rajnikanth

For the discerning viewer who looks beyond star material, the 60-plus-year old actor is all style, and very little substance. Will *Endhiran* be any different? **By Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The phenomenon called Rajnikanth is hard to explain. It defies logic and rationale. In cinema, he has the biggest fan following in India today, only next to that of the late actor and once Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, M G Ramachandran. It is quite possible that Rajnikanth has more fan clubs and admirers than what MGR had.

When Rajnikanth's latest film, *Endhiran* opened last Friday in over 2,000 screens the world over, 500 or so in Tamil Nadu alone, the celebration was frenzied. Wooden cutouts of the 60-plus-year old star were anointed with milk and honey, and garlanded with fresh flowers. Pujas were performed and

crackers burst in a show of not just joy, but sheer solidarity.

For, in Tamil Nadu, Rajnikanth is revered beyond reproach. He is everyone's friend. Every bus conductor or rickshaw driver dreams of becoming a Rajnikanth. The desire to mutate himself into that hero is obsessive to the point of being maniacal. So if Rajnikanth dies at the end of a movie, the theatre will not live either. It will be burnt down. So shattering is the blow of seeing the hero pass away.

It, therefore, came as no surprise to me when I overheard a rickshaw driver tell another outside a Chennai multiplex screening *Endhiran* that people were grumbling to pay his fare of

Rs 40, while they happily bought a ticket for the Rajnikanth show paying many times over the actual admission rate. Now this driver was merely giving vent to his disappointment. Perhaps he could not get a ticket or saw the chance of himself becoming a Rajnikanth fading away.

The star's popularity is strongest among the downtrodden, who see him as a brilliant success story. Born as Shivaji Rao Gaekwad in Bengaluru to Marathi parents, Rajnikanth 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 Rajnikanth 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.

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

A part of this craze can be attributed to his immense modesty (despite his exceptional rise in life) tempered with remarkable self-assuredness. He is absolutely uncaring about how he looks off screen. (Ask Amitabh Bachchan or Kamal Hassan to do that, and they would wince at this prospect.) He never hides his bald pate under a wig, never tries to greasepaint his dark skin into a lighter shade. Which is quite unlike any other star, who must always be seen as handsome and impeccably turned out. Such unpretentiousness on Rajnikanth's part obviously endears him to the common man, who finds it comfortable to identify with his hero.

Of course, Rajnikanth's on-screen presence and mannerisms (the way he flicks a cigarette in the air or dances or even stands) infuse that desire in the conductor or the coolie to succeed. And, who knows, become another Rajnikanth.

There is another factor at work. While MGR was the face of the Dravidian political ideology (penned by men, such as the present Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, M K Karunanidhi, and an earlier Chief Minister of the State, C N Annadurai), basically created and propagated as a tool against Brahmanism and for the uplift of lower caste Hindus, Rajnikanth is a Superman, disappointed with institutional/ democratic solutions. He seeks remedies outside these.

However, for the discerning viewer who looks beyond star material, Rajnikanth is all style, and very little substance. Some have called this clownish. Yes, a clown alright, but perhaps a beloved clown, who has learnt to a live with very little talent, who has learnt to camouflage his weaknesses through gimmicks. His actions on screen can be read as a bunch of tricks, out to grab the attention of the lowest-common denominator.

Admittedly, Rajnikanth is trying to come out of that grove. In his latest work, S Shankar's *Endhiran* (The Robot), reportedly made at Rs1.5bn (or more?), the costliest ever in Tamil cinema, Rajnikanth, wiser after the crippling losses some of his earlier films like *Baba* suffered, appears, at least partly, without much of his trademark gimmickry, something that made him much less of an actor than what he probably was.

As scientist Vaseegaran — engaged in a decade-long struggle to create an android robot that will not only look exactly like him, but also feel the most basic human emotions, such as love, anger and revenge — Rajnikanth impresses to a degree.

However, when the robot, named Chitti, emerges from the lab, the creature appears more like an excuse for Rajnikanth to unleash on the viewers some of the tricks he is known for. So what we see towards the second half of the film, touted as a science fiction work, is the real Rajnikanth, as Chitti, his old mannerisms more or less intact.

The rather subdued, restrained Rajnikanth, a serious scientist who has no time to shave his beard or meet his girlfriend Sana (Aishwarya Rai) or take her calls, is pushed to the background.

Perhaps not quite content with letting 'Endhiran' remain an ordinary story that you and me could easily identify with, co-writer and helmer Shankar introduces an evil scientist, Bohra (Danny Denzongpa), who plots to turn Chitti from an obedient robot to a brute of a monster that assumes the power to clone hundreds of Chittis. Not just this, it kidnaps a beautiful woman and tries forcing her into marrying him!

As was to be expected, Shankar's work slips into a loud, overdramatic and exaggerated mess, quite akin to what Chitti and his huge army of lookalike goons create in Chennai, causing unimaginable destruction and an awful lot of deaths. Ideas and even visuals seem to have been lifted from some of Hollywood's sci-fi pictures.

Finally, not quite happy with the message (science versus Nature) that the movie was trying hard to drive, the script entrusts Rajnikanth with a courtroom appearance, where he delivers a sermon on how science can be used and misused. A rather naïve thing to do in today's Internet age.

Admittedly, *Endhiran*'s plus point lies in Rajnikanth's sober performance as Vaseegaran, but Rai disappoints yet again — after *Raavan*/*Raavanan* — and hugely so. She is obsessed with looking ravishing even in the most nerve-wracking situations (Ingrid Bergman looked alluring, and so did Grace Kelly, but they performed with a sense of honesty and conviction.) Can Ms Rai never let go her lip-gloss and gorgeous costumes? Can she never make an effort to act, instead of just looking pretty?

Obviously, the producers needed a name like Rai in addition to Rajnikanth's as an added insurance for their whopping investment. Do I see here a slight wearing down of the wonder called Rajnikanth?

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema for over three decades, and may be contacted at gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in)