

Rajinikanth & The Twilight of Superstardom: Where Goes Cinematic Superstardom From Here?

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By: [Rahul Jayaram](#) Updated: 9 January 2021



A worker garlands a 30 feet cut-out of actor Rajinikanth in Bangalore. (File Photo/ AFP)

A week ago, Tamil cinema superstar Rajinikanth announced he was not going to join politics. For many years he dilly-dallied and hemmed and hawed and then delivered a denouement after his hospitalisation saying God had sent him a message through his recent health scare. He cited his age and medical factors as reasons to withdraw even before commencing his political innings. In many ways, it was an extension of his on-screen theatrics and ended up as a long-winded damp squib. The cinematic superstar underscored - after such a long brewing build up and throwing in the towel - that he too was mortal and human.

The commentariat spoke of how the whole episode and its ending boded well for his acting future and Tamil Nadu's politics. More than one superstar actor, who segued from the film screen to the polling booth, knew how vastly different both experiences were, and how much harder politics was than doing cinema – even when things were going one's way. N T Rama Rao and M G Balachandran heralded in some ways the cinema-to-politics transformation and pioneered its conversion into political power. But they too mentioned the transformation as demanding, grinding, and challenging one's patience and that they weren't equipped to handle them at the outset when they envisioned becoming politicians coming from the cinematic cosmos.

As citizens of twenty-first century India, we must not forget that they were phenomena that happened at a particular moment in the history of Indian society within a certain situation. That India, which existed when the likes of Rajinikanth and Kamal Hasan started their acting careers, has long ceased to exist. Indeed, both Rajinikanth and Kamal Hasan (to some degree Chiranjeevi in his later years as Telugu superstar), through their on-screen roles captured some moments on the journey of that change in south Indian society.

If MGR or NTR succeeded, it was due the societies they lived in, stimuli they responded to, and impulses that made them who they are. Be it caste/lower caste assertion against the Reddy dominated Andhra Congress of the 1960s and 1970s or Dravidian assertion in Tamil Nadu. Those were hungrier, more unequal, more difficult societies, especially for the castes and communities that voted for these two stars. The most basic difference between that time and this one is the social, political, economic change Indian society, particularly south Indian society, has undergone since.

And that has meant it has also transformed the meaning of stardom and superstardom. Strong leaders as M Karunanidhi or Jayalalithaa Jayaram have passed away. But Tamil Nadu still displays a strong, powerful, grassroots base for both the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the AIADMK. Those took decades to build. No matter how much fun has been made of Edapadi Palaniswami or O Paneerselvam or M K Stalin, they and those belonging to their parties in key positions have enormous state-level political clout, electoral acumen, validity and local legitimacy. All these factors blanked Modi-Shah in all the Tamil Nadu seats in the Lok Sabha poll of 2019 where they annihilated most other opponents across India.

Brush aside the pandemic for the moment and put yourselves in Rajinikanth's shoes: The fact that the electorally redoubtable Modi-Shah combo came a cropper in Tamil Nadu in May 2019 may in itself have put the skids on Rajinikanth's political adventurism. It must have also tested his nous and nerves. If Modi-Shah could not make a dent in the absence of established stalwarts, in a state seeming to have a political vacuum with the passing away of two entrenched rivals, what chance did a reigning superstar have? Indeed, was the vacuum a vacuum at all?

By contrast, Kamal Hasan has understood there will be no shortcuts in politics – not in the Tamil Nadu of the twenty first century – and not without a wide and deep grassroots presence. And not without trying and failing - not once, but many times - in a politically saturated environment. Any new politician, even if they are superstars commanding legions of fans cannot expect success at the hustings just because they are superstars. Those days are long over.

It's ironic. The voting audience is very different from the film cheering audience in the cinema, though they may constitute the same people. In many ways, we are seeing the uselessness of cinematic fame if one tries to convert that to political power. With his actions and jumping into the cauldron of politics Kamal Hasan has continued to display more dedication and better temperament for the world of the stump, the minefield of the caucus and the legislature.

In some basic ways, Rajinikanth's call indicates to us the probable end of the idea of cinematic superstardom as it existed in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in India. When superstars sell soap and endorse educational online products every other second on the telly and mobile media, what mysteries will they retain to surprise us every other day? There is no 'hero' when they're demystified. The days of any superstar are over as the traditional cinema/theatre medium itself may find itself on its last legs, with the spread of entertainment choices and platforms. Rajinikanth's withdrawal tells you how much India, particularly south India, has transformed. The masses may throng the cinema halls for their films, but if they enter politics, each vote will have to be earned - even by superstars.

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