

ಬಾಬಿ / ವಿಷಯ : DEPARTMENT / SUBJECT: Award

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## Better late

Rajinikanth fully deserves the Phalke, but the timing of the announcement is suspect

Rajinikanth, the reigning demigod of Tamil film-dom, richly deserves the Dadasaheb Phalke award, Indian cinema's highest recognition, bestowed by the jury this year. The film world has few parallels to his success story. His transition from Shivaji Rao Gaekwad, a Marathi-born struggling bus conductor in Bengaluru, to a worshipped superstar in the Dravidian heartland, was made possible only by his undimmed passion and sustained hard work. From early on, he introduced novelty to his screen characters. He has kept innovating on his unique styles of tossing a cigarette or a mint, twirling his sunglasses and walking with a swagger. While style remains his hallmark, it would be an injustice to dismiss him as just a mass hero. He had excelled as an actor with sensitive portrayals in films such as *Mullum Malarum* and *Aarilirindhu Arubadhu Varai* before getting trapped in superstardom with *Billa* and donning larger than life roles. He is among the rare heroes who handle comedy scenes with ease, his dual roles in *Thillu Mullu* being an example. His charisma has attracted three generations of fans, with a following even in Japan where he is lovingly called 'Odori Maharaja' (The Dancing Maharaja). He is also the only Indian actor to have featured in black and white, colour, 3D and motion capture films.

But despite Rajinikanth's demonstrable body of work, given his active inclination for a foray into "spiritual politics" until last year, inevitable questions are being raised if the award is a calculated choice to influence poll-bound Tamil Nadu. While Rajinikanth lent support during elections to the DMK-TMC (1996, 1998) and AIADMK-BJP (2004), in recent years he has made no secret of his admiration for BJP leaders. Not only did he hail Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah as 'Lord Krishna and Arjuna' - after the scrapping of special status granted to Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 - he targeted Dravidian icon Periyar E.V. Ramasamy while recalling the alleged attacks on Hindu deities during a 1971 anti-superstition rally. He backed the Citizenship Amendment Act. To be fair, since his 'no show' in politics, the actor has remained politically withdrawn, though previously he indirectly targeted the DMK and the AIADMK. He has not responded to appeals from 'neutral' observers to lend his support for "honest, dynasty-free politics". Whether the award's timing would influence the voting choice of his legion of fans is difficult to say as he remains an untested electoral force. However, had the jury put off the announcement of the award by just a week till polling was over, everyone would have unconditionally welcomed the choice. The giver has done the recipient a disservice through the timing of the announcement.