

Holiday in parts of India as fans revel in Rajinikanth film

By Aijaz Rahi
The Associated Press

CHENNAI, India — Private companies declared a holiday and parents kept children out of school as an air of celebration swept southern India for the premiere of Indian superstar Rajinikanth's latest film.

Hundreds of thousands of Rajinikanth fans thronged cinemas across Tamil-language India and Malaysia to catch the pre-dawn showing of *Kabali*, a gangster movie that left patrons jumping from their seats and dancing in the aisles at the sight of their hero.

Crowds waited outside theaters all night before the first showing, and in Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu state, Rajinikanth enthusiasts burst firecrackers and distributed sweets outside cinemas.

Inside the Woodlands theater, one of the city's oldest, fans rose to their feet, danced, and sang along as the superstar made his first appearance. When Rajinikanth landed punches on the villain in the two-hour-long film, he was egged on with cheers and whistles.

Huge cutouts of the star and gigantic posters loomed large in the street outside the theater. In several places, fans poured big cans of milk over the cutouts in a Hindu ritual to bless the star and wish him a long life.

Sixty-five-year-old Rajinikanth is one of India's most popular stars and counts millions of fans who speak the Tamil language and even those who don't. The film, also starring Taiwanese actor Winston Chao, was shot in Malaysia and southern India.

Kabali was released on more than 12,000 screens across India, as well as in the U.K. and Malaysia, which has a sizeable Tamil-speaking population and millions of Rajinikanth fans. It also premiered in 400 U.S. theaters. Rajinikanth and fans attended a special screening in San Francisco.

The action star has a huge following in Japan too, where his subtitled films are big box-office earners.

For Aalandur P. Sridhar, an insurance company employee, the long wait for his hero's new film is over.

"I've been waiting since two years for this film," said Sridhar, who came to watch the film in a group of 30 fans, all dressed in identical white t-shirts with Rajinikanth's picture



FAN FAVORITE. Fans of Indian superstar Rajinikanth stand in front of his poster outside a cinema hall to celebrate the screening of *Kabali* in Chennai, India. Hundreds of thousands of fans of Rajinikanth thronged cinemas across India and Malaysia for the premiere of his latest film — a gangster flick — jumping from their seats and dancing in the aisles as their hero fought enemies. (AP Photo/Aijaz Rahi)

on the chest. The group, mostly employees of private companies and the government, was enthusiastically taking pictures with a selfie-stick near a poster of their favorite star.

"He's a terrific actor. But what I love about him is: He may be India's biggest star, but he remains a simple man at heart. He hasn't changed one bit," said Sridhar, referring to Rajinikanth's humble beginnings.

Born Shivaji Rao Gaekwad, the megastar worked as a bus conductor for three years in Bangalore before he joined an acting school in Chennai. Starting out playing small roles as a villain in Tamil cinema, he worked his way up, landing roles even in Bollywood, India's Hindi language film industry based in the country's entertainment hub of Mumbai. Since his debut in 1975, Rajinikanth has acted in more than 150 films, many of which have broken box-office records.

"This film is a celebration. This day is a celebration," said Sridhar, as he rearranged the group for yet another selfie outside Chennai's historic Albert Theater.

Sandhya Ramani, a graduate student at the University of Colorado, Denver, said she had timed her vacation to be in Chennai for the film's release.

"It's something that can't be explained in words. It's just Rajinikanth. He's mind blowing," Ramani said, as she came out from the theater with friends.

Shubhra Gupta, one of India's leading film critics, said the Rajinikanth phenomenon was not easy to explain.

"There is no logic to how and why Rajinikanth has become the superstar of superstars," Gupta said. But she referred to his impoverished background as appealing to the masses.

"People see themselves in Rajinikanth and the fact that he has made it so big.

There's an aspirational connect that people make with him," Gupta said.

Several private companies gave their employees the day off to enable them to catch the film on its first day.

Fyndus, a Chennai-based data-processing company, gave away free tickets to employees and said it decided to declare a holiday Friday to "avoid piled-up leave requests to its human-resources department."

The Malaysia-based AirAsia budget carrier organized a special round-trip flight from the southern city of Bangalore to Chennai for the movie premiere. An AirAsia plane dedicated to Rajinikanth and painted with his picture was flying to 10 destinations in India.

The opening scenes from the film show a grey-bearded Rajinikanth being released from a prison, swearing to avenge his enemies. In his search for revenge, he is reunited with his family and rains destruction on his foes.

Rajinikanth merchandise sold briskly outside theaters in Tamil Nadu. T-shirts and jackets sporting the superhero's face and his trademark dark glasses were hot favorites. One finance company in southern India also minted special silver coins with Rajinikanth's visage and priced the five-gram coin at \$5.30 each.

Associated Press writer Nirmala George in New Delhi contributed to this report. To learn more, visit <www.kabalifilm.com>.

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