

As Najib guns for Kabali II, one critic asks at what cost

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DAP assemblyman blames Tamil movies promoting 'hip' underworld characters such as 'Kabali' as a likely contributing factor to increased gangsterism in schools.

GEORGE TOWN: When late last month Prime Minister Najib Razak took a selfie of himself with Rajinikanth, he proudly declared that he had invited the Tamil movie star to return to Malaysia to shoot a sequel to Kabali, a 155-minute action-packed gangster movie that took the Indian diaspora by storm last year.

“I asked Rajinikanth to shoot the movie in Malaysia. I said, after all Kabali turned out to be a box-office hit. He is considering it,” said Najib who took time off to visit the actor during a recent visit to India.

Najib’s excitement was not surprising. Rajinikanth is, after all, adored by millions of Indians not only around the world but also in Malaysia. As such, politicians requiring a major slice of the Indian vote bank would waste no time exploiting it, hoping to bring in the much needed numbers.

In the run-up to the 2008 elections, just a year after Rajinikanth’s other gangster-themed box office hit Sivaji, then opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim also took that path, lacing his campaign speeches with sound bytes from the movie.

His party PKR had even erected a larger-than-life effigy of Sivaji, the Robin Hood-like character played by Rajinikanth.

The timing was also apt, when decades-old Indian disenchantment over what was perceived as discriminatory policies culminated into large scale protests in Kuala Lumpur just few months earlier.

Kabali

Ten years later, the streets of Malaysia provided Rajinikanth much of the setting for his other big hit, Kabali, containing all the action and violence that have become a cornerstone of almost every Rajini movie.

But there was also a worry that some part of that underworld fantasy might actually spill over into the real world of the Malaysian Indian community, one that is fraught with poverty and crime, and for which countless government programmes were introduced, only for critics to point out how they were proven right again.

It was this scepticism which accompanied the recently launched Malaysian Indian Blueprint, a 10-year, billion ringgit worth action plan promising solutions to age-old issues of poverty and unemployment.

Just two days before the blueprint was unveiled by Najib, a group of students descended upon the gates of a secondary school in Klang, Selangor last week.

For Penang-based lawyer RSN Rayer, the students were only imitating the gangster culture portrayed in films such as Kabali.

He blames Tamil movies promoting “hip” underworld characters such as “Kabali” as a likely contributing factor to increased gangsterism in schools.

“What happened last week is actually a manifestation of the ‘Kabali’ culture, which is spreading silently like wildfire at an alarming rate, especially among students of Indian descent in secondary schools,” the DAP assemblyman told FMT recently.

Rayer even went on to say that it was now becoming a trend for students to fork out money to join gangs.

“Students pay monthly protection money to these gangs and go through elaborate initiation rituals, including getting their bodies tattooed with the symbols of these gangs,” he said.

He was of course referring to viral video clips of the noisy gathering outside the school in Klang, showing students celebrating a gang called “24”.

It sparked a scare among parents that their children could be targeted for hiring by criminal gangs.

One senior police officer reportedly said what happened in Klang was a common practice among members of Gang 24.

No to sequel

Rayer, a criminal lawyer, is convinced that Kabali, which brought cinemas in Malaysia to a standstill for weeks, had promoted all the negative elements in society, “starting with violence, murder, gangsterism, disunity, drugs and so on”.

But he disagrees with Education Minister Mahdzir Khalid’s solution to expel the students.

“Expelling them from school will only contribute to another vicious cycle of unemployment and an increase in crime as these boys will resort to robbery and drug peddling as their only source of income.

“History and statistics have shown this to be true,” he added.

Rayer's solution is to nip it in the bud, and this includes rethinking the policy of allowing films such as Kabali to be shot in Malaysia.

That includes Kabali II, assuming that will be the title of the film's sequel.

While Najib was excited when he announced his invitation to Rajinikanth last month, Rayer is not thrilled.

"This movie does more harm than good," the DAP leader said.

"The government should instead encourage the local Indian film industry by supporting local Indian directors and artistes to produce local Indian movies.

"This will promote the positive traits and values of Malaysians, such as unity, courtesy, cultural diversity and respect for the elders."

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