

Global success of *RRR* signals breakthrough for Tollywood

By Jake Coyle
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — India's film industry is one of the most vast and varied in the world — it's really not one but many separate industries, including Bollywood, Tollywood, and others — yet few of the country's roughly 2,000 annually produced movies ever make much of a dent with western audiences.

"We have a long tradition of storytelling in India. We have probably the oldest and most colorful stories," says director S.S. Rajamouli. "Not being able to travel across borders has been a disappointment."

That has changed emphatically with Rajamouli's *RRR*, a three-hour Telugu-language action epic that has not only become one of India's biggest hits ever but climbed U.S. box-office charts before finding an even wider audience on Netflix. For nine straight weeks, *RRR* has ranked among the top 10 non-English language films on the streaming service. Dubbed in Hindi and subtitled in 15 different languages, *RRR* is the most popular film from India ever on Netflix, charting among the top 10 films in 62 different countries.

For many, *RRR*, based on Hindu mythology and the freedom fighters that fought British colonialism, is their first encounter with Tollywood, the Telugu movie industry, or Indian films, at all. What many have seen is a movie filled to the brim with over-the-top action sequences and sprawling dance numbers, and an energy that today's Hollywood blockbusters seldom match. Motorbikes are juggled. Tigers are thrown. Suspenders prove a surprisingly pliable dancing prop.

"There is never enough for me," Rajamouli said in a recent interview from Hyderabad in India. "The only thing too much is my producer coming in and saying, 'We're crossing our budget. You need to stop somewhere.' That is the only thing that will stop me. If given a chance, I will go even bigger and wilder, no doubt about it."

"To the brink, and nothing less."

That go-for-broke style has earned the



endorsements of some of Hollywood's blockbuster filmmakers. James Gunn and Scott Derrickson, who have each helmed Marvel movies, have heaped their praise on *RRR* since it began streaming.

The *RRR* success has come while Netflix is reeling from subscriber loss and a stock decline, a downturn that has thrown its movie model into debate. But one less disputable aspect of Netflix's platform is its ability to foster non-English global hits. *RRR* comes in the wake of global series hits like the Korean "Squid Game" and France's "Lupin." Theatrical-first movies like the South Korean best-picture-winning *Parasite* have already toppled what director Bong Joon Ho has called "the one-inch barrier" of subtitles.

"Frankly, I didn't expect this kind of reception from the west," says Rajamouli. "In the country and across the Indian diaspora all over the world is what we expected. But the reception from the west was a complete surprise for me. I always thought that western sensibilities are different from my kind of films. I mostly cater to eastern or Indian sensibilities."

But while *RRR* has certain effects-heavy Hollywood characteristics that make it not so dissimilar from a superhero movie, it's deeply engrained in Indian myth and present-day circumstance. "RRR" stands for "Rise Roar Revolt," but it also refers to Rajamouli and his two stars, N.T. Rama Rao Jr. and Ram Charan. They're each from movie-star dynasties that have previously been more like rivals. This is

Charan and Rao's first film together, which is a little like a meeting of Al Pacino and Robert De Niro, if they were also the sons of Marlon Brando and James Dean.

They play real-life Indian revolutionaries Alluri Sitarama Raju (Charan) and Komaram Bheem (Rao) who team up in 1920s British-controlled India. In returning to the origins of modern-day India, *RRR* inevitably relates to today's India, where, like in many other countries in recent years, nationalism has been on the rise. Since being elected in 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has emboldened India's Hindu majority, sometimes at the expense of its Muslim minority.

Rajamouli, 48, has risen as one of the country's biggest name directors over the same time period. He launched his two-part *Baahubali* epic in 2015. Its 2017 sequel ranks as the country's biggest box-office smash. (Both are also streaming on Netflix.) But the political subtext of those films some have found troubling.

"In *Baahubali*, even though it seems to have no connection with the political present, what it foregrounds is a muscular form of Hinduism, which is the worst manifestation of the right-wing nationalism," says Rini Bhattacharya Mehta, a University of Illinois professor who has written several books on Indian cinema. "Jingoist, nationalistic Hindu machismo. In the story, it's projected into the mythological past."

Baahubali was a Telugu triumph that signalled that Tollywood in India's South

TOLLYWOOD TRIUMPH. This image released by Netflix shows Ram Charan and N.T. Rama Rao Jr. in a scene from *RRR*. India's film industry is one of the most vast and varied in the world — it's really not one but many separate industries, including Bollywood, Tollywood, and others — yet few of the country's roughly 2,000 annually produced movies ever make much of a dent with western audiences. (Netflix via AP)

had perhaps surpassed Bollywood as the country's top movie factory. In *RRR*, the most expensive Telugu film ever made with a budget of \$72 million, Rajamouli is juggling both Telugu traditions and Bollywood song-and-dance aesthetics in what Mehta considers a Pan-Indian movie. Muslim characters appear, although not in primary roles.

RRR in this way may not be so different from American blockbusters. This summer's top film in the U.S., *Top Gun: Maverick*, also doesn't skimp on muscular jingoism. Rajamouli has heard the critics but disagrees with their interpretations.

"I understand that point of view. Sometimes, I feel they're just being blind," he says. "Personally, I'm an atheist. I don't believe in god. I don't believe in any religion. But I understand the power of spiritualism. For me, spiritualism is an emotion. And I write stories filled with emotions."

Surely, many of the cultural references and connections in *RRR* will sail right over the heads of most western viewers. But the sheer verve of its filmmaking isn't getting lost in translation — and that may mean more cultural-crossovers for Tollywood and India to come.

"India cinema has had a different life and cycle of its own. If we keep an open mind, we can see this as the arrival of something," says Mehta. "Only time can tell. We'll have to see if this is actually a new trend and there will be more films like this made. Indian or Telugu cinema might keep it up, or this might be a one-shot thing."

Rajamouli, meanwhile, is prepping his next highly anticipated film. He's now often asked about whether he'd ever want to make a Hollywood movie or a Marvel one. *RRR*, though, hints more at western

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