

## RRR (Rise, Roar, Revolt)

DIRECTED BY S. S. RAJAMOULI

PRODUCED BY D.V.V. ENTERTAINMENT

RUNTIME: 3 HOURS, 7 MINUTES; COLOR, 2022

LANGUAGE: TELUGU WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES

AVAILABLE ON NETFLIX

Reviewed by Jessica Johnson

Most Westerners are perhaps familiar with the Mumbai-based, Hindi-language “Bollywood” and may assume that Bollywood represents the entire Indian film industry, but it’s much more complex. Mumbai’s Bollywood has a rival of sorts in southern Hyderabad and its own Telugu-language (like Hindi, one of the many formally recognized official Indian languages—Telugu is the most-spoken language in India’s southern Hyderabad region) film industry known as “Tollywood.” Lesser known and typically less successful than its Mumbai counterpart, Hyderabad’s financial success and international renown is beginning to catch up, especially with its most recent success story *RRR*.

Directed by acclaimed filmmaker S.S. Rajamouli, known for his well-reviewed *Baahubali* film series whose films often take an anticolonial theme, *RRR* is an extravagant, three-hour, often “over-the-top” blockbuster epic featuring highly choreographed action sequences and visual effects that rival even the US Marvel Studios’ best (like the frequently used slow motion effect of “bullet time” for dramatic effect). *RRR* takes place during the pre-Independence era of India, primarily in Delhi during the 1920s, very loosely inspired by real historical events and figures: the two early twentieth-century freedom fighters, Alluri Sitarama Raju and Komaram Bheem, who join forces to fight against oppressive British colonial rule.



Statue of Alluri Sitarama Raju at the Tank Bund Road, Secunderabad, Hyderabad, India. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/bdd965y6>.



Statue of Komaram Bheem at the Tank Bund Road, Secunderabad, Hyderabad, India. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/25hej64r>. by Praveen Kumar Myakala.

One of the most expensive films ever produced from India, *RRR* (which in English stands for Rise, Roar, Revolt) is one of Indian cinema’s greatest success stories. The 2022 film is the highest-grossing Indian movie of that year and eventually went on to become the third-highest grossing Indian film of all time (and second-highest Telugu language film). It is the third film to receive nominations for the Golden Globe Awards (2023), including a nomination for Best Foreign Film, and the first Indian film to win the Best Original Song category for its featured soundtrack entry “Naatu Naatu” at the Ninety-Fifth Academy Awards. *RRR* won the Best Foreign Film Award at the Twenty-Eighth Critic Choice Awards.

*RRR* is a fictionalized story based on real individuals and real events. As important historical context on the two protagonists for the film, Alluri Sitarama Raju (born in either 1897 or 1898 in what is now present-day Andhra Pradesh, and an indigeneous tribal member) was a leading *Adivasi* revolutionary against the Madras Forest Act, passed in 1882 by the British, that restricted the movement of the Adivasi people and their ability to perform a method of slash and burn agriculture known as *podu*. The British took control of the forest area under the act for mostly commercial purposes, such as building railways and ships and without regard for the needs of the Adivasi of the region. The British banned *podu* leading to Adivasi starvation. The Adivasi had long felt that *zamindars* (estate landowners) and merchants of the plains areas were favored by the legal system, which had also resulted in an earlier 1879 rebellion. They now also objected to the raj’s laws they felt crippled their economic livelihoods, as it forced them to seek undesirable alternative work, toiling as coolies.

In 1922, Raju led a rebellion against the British known as the Rampa Rebellion—Rampa is the name of the then-administrative area of Andhra Pradesh state. A charismatic figure believed by many tribal people to possess magical powers with an almost-messianic status, he saw the overthrow of colonial rule in as a “millenarian event” (a transformative event often of divine prophecy). Raj’s rebellion, while initially successful with guerilla tactics and the Adivasi’s resistance to diseases, ultimately ended with his capture and shooting in May 1924.

A revolutionary leader of the Gondi tribes of Hyderabad state, Komaram Bheem was born in 1901. He led a rebellion against the feudal Nizams of Hyderabad in the eastern part of the princely state during the 1930s. In the 1900s, there was expansion of mining activities and strengthening of state authority in the Gondi region, and regulations were created and enforced that hampered the subsistence activities of the Gondi people. Zamindars were granted lands in their regions, and they imposed taxes on Gondi *podu* farming activities, with noncompliance often leading to severe punishments, including forced amputations. Gondis began migrating out of their traditional villages, and the situation led to retaliation and protests. Bheem’s father was killed by British forest officials during one incident.

As an adult, Bheem engaged in armed revolution. He formed clandestine associations with the banned Communist Party of India and started mobilizing the tribal population, eventually calling a council of tribal leaders from the twelve traditional districts. The council decided to form a guerilla army to protect their lands, and Bheem also proposed they declare themselves an independent Gondi kingdom. Over the course of a decade, Bheem fought for the regional autonomy of the Gondi and eviction of British forest officials and zamindars. He was eventually killed in an encounter with armed police in 1940—his efforts lionized in tribal folk songs.

While Alluri Sitarama Raju and Komaram Bheem never crossed paths in real life and Raju died years before Bheem, *RRR* makes them the dual protagonists of its fictional story in 1920 Delhi. Bheem is a heroic defender of the Gondi with great martial skills who seeks to rescue an abducted Gondi girl, the artistically talented Malli, from the film's antagonists, the cartoonishly evil duo of fictional British Delhi Governor Scott Buxton and his wife, Catherine, stirring a rebellion in the city against the two in the process. Alluri Sitarama Raju is a skilled revolutionary with an agenda of his own—to acquire weapons for his village for its own separate uprising (a promise he makes to his dying revolutionary father). To this end, Raju enlists as an officer in Delhi's Indian Imperial Police and quickly rises in the ranks while keeping his true intentions a secret. Bheem and Raju meet during a chance encounter where they rescue a young boy from a train accident and begin to develop a friendship. However, Raju is soon ordered by Catherine to get close to Bheem in order to put down his looming rebellion, forcing him to make difficult choices as he struggles to protect his own mission with his sympathy for Bheem. After plenty of fight sequences, “over-the-top” moments involving motorcycles and animals, romance plots, and even a musical dance—a staple of Indian cinema—Bheem and Raju eventually unite against the British, leading to the film's exhilarating climax.

Students are sure to love *RRR*, as will anyone who enjoys good cinema and entertainment. But those who cannot ignore historical inaccuracies or liberties are sure to be bothered. For East Asianists, think *The Last Samurai*. Subjectively (at least for this reviewer), it is an entertaining



**The saga begins when the British governor and his wife abduct Malli, an artistically talented girl from Bheem's Gondi forest tribe.**

Source: Screen capture from the film. © 2022 DVV Entertainment.

movie, but one that also takes much creative liberty with its subject matter and is rife with cliché. To use that film as an example, comparing and contrasting reality with the film's fiction can be a basis for class lessons. Take Hollywood depictions of samurai versus historical reality, for example. Similarly, *RRR* can inspire similar discussions on Tollywood or Bollywood portrayals of history versus reality and spark plenty of conversation. (discussing the anticolonial nature of many of these films, the lionization of Indian revolutionary figures, the often-cartoonish villainy of the British, etc.).



**Bheem, holding the First (1906) Nationalist flag of India, and Raju first meet when they team up to save a boy from certain death.**

Source: Screen capture from the film. © 2022 DVV Entertainment.

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Rama, the descendant of Raghu lineage

United in their superhuman powers, Raju and Bheem take on the governor and his army.



Bheema, the lion of the Komuram clan...

Source: Screen captures from the film. © 2022 DVV Entertainment.

RRR should be required viewing regardless of educator intent—it is the rare occasion that an Indian movie garners this much interest, critical praise, and noteworthy awards from Western outlets that often overlook India's best.

**Bollywood vs. Tollywood vs. Kollywood**

Indian film is often erroneously simplified as just Bollywood, when it is predominately three different regional film industries (though other smaller regional cinema industries exist).

Hindi cinema, known as Bollywood, is the Mumbai-based film industry engaged in the production of motion pictures in Hindi language and the largest film industry in India, representing nearly half of all Indian box office revenue. The most popular commercial genre in Hindi cinema since the 1970s has been the *masala* film, which freely mixes different genres including action, comedy, romance, drama, and melodrama along with musical numbers.

Telugu cinema, also known as Tollywood (the term can also refer to Bengali cinema), is the segment of Indian cinema dedicated to the production of motion pictures in the Telugu language, widely spoken in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Telugu cinema is based in the neighborhood of Film Nagar, Hyderabad, and home to Ramoji Film City,



Sing, my friend  
In a way that the earth shakes

The song and dance finale pays tribute to eight of India's revered freedom fighters.



These embers are revolution  
The Kittur embers

Kittur Chennamma (1778–1829). Representing the southwestern region of Karnataka.



Pure embers  
The Palay embers

Pazhassi Raja (1753–1805). Known as the "Lion of Kerala." Representing Kerala.



Smiling embers, the Gujarat embers

Sardar Vallabhai Patel (1875–1950). Representing Gujarat.



The hardworking embers  
The Calcutta embers

Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–1945). Representing Bengal, Odisha and East India.

Others, not shown here, are Shivaji I, (1630–1580), representing Western, Southern and Central India; V.O. Chidambaram Pillai (1872–1936), representing Tamil Nadu; Tanguturi Prakasam Pantulu (1872–1957), representing Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, and Bhagat Singh (1907–1931), representing Punjab and North Regions.

Source: ReleasingNow website at <https://tinyurl.com/33x2zn5r>. All images, © 2022 DVV Entertainment.

certified by the Guinness World Records as the largest film studio complex in the world, measuring over 1,666 acres. Action films have come to dominate in Tollywood, and the technical crafts of Telugu cinema, especially visual effects and cinematography, are considered some of the most advanced in Indian cinema.

Tamil cinema is a part of Indian cinema that produces motion pictures in the Tamil language, and is based out of the Kodambakkam neighborhood in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Smaller than Bollywood and Tollywood, Kollywood has still managed to establish a global presence. While enjoying strong box office collections in the Tamil-speaking nations of Singapore, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia, Tamil films are also distributed throughout the Middle East, Oceania, Europe, North America, parts of Africa, and Japan. The industry also inspired independent filmmaking among Tamil diaspora populations in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, and the West.

Source: *Cinema Blend*, "Bollywood, Pollywood, Tollywood, and More - Film Industry Nicknames Around The World." ♦

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## The Languages of India

**T**elugu is the language spoken in *RRR*, but the topic of India's language is complex and fascinating. Jessica Chandra's "Multilingualism in India" is an excellent overview of the topic. Some excerpts from her article:

*India is home to many native languages, and it is also common that people speak and understand more than one language or dialect, which can entail the use of different scripts as well. India's 2011 census documents that 121 languages are spoken as mother tongues, which is defined as the first language a person learns and uses. Of these languages, the Constitution of India recognizes twenty-two of them as official or "scheduled" languages. Articles 344(1) and 351 of the Constitution of India, titled the Eighth Schedule, recognizes the following languages as official languages of states of India: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Nepali, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santhali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu.*

*Six languages also hold the title of classical languages (Kannada, Malayalam, Odia, Sanskrit, Tamil, and Telugu), which are determined to have a history of recorded use for more than 1,500 years and a rich body of literature. Furthermore, for a contemporary language to also be a classical language, it must be an original language and cannot be a variety, such as a dialect, stemming from another language. Just as there are many people who wish for their mother tongues to be recognized as official, scheduled languages, there are also efforts to add Indian languages to the list of classical languages. Once a language has the official status of a classical language, the Ministry of Education organizes international awards for scholars of those languages, sets up language studies centers, and grants funding to universities to promote the study of the language. Interestingly, the Constitution of India lists no national language for the country as a whole.*

*Of the official, scheduled languages, Modern Standard Hindi—as an umbrella term for a family of languages—has the most mother tongue speakers, with around 528 million speakers, or 44 percent of India's population, followed by Bengali with around 97 million speakers, or 8 percent of the population. Marathi has around 83 million speakers, or 7 percent of the population, and Telugu speakers number around 81 million, or almost 6 percent of the population. Speakers who list the remaining official languages as their mother tongues also number between 2 and 4 percent of the population, as recorded in the 2011 census. It is interesting to note that due to India's large population, native speakers of these regional Indian languages often outnumber native speakers of other major world languages such as Korean—with 77.2 million native speakers—and Italian—with 67 million native speakers—as of 2020.*

Source: Jessica Chandra, "Multiculturalism in India," *Education About Asia* 25, no. 3 (2020): 38–45, <https://tinyurl.com/mr2ekusv>.



Source: Original map at Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y422o2ac>. Modifications by Willa Davis.

**Under Article 343 of the Constitution of India, English gets the status of an associate official language, the official language being Hindi. However, the higher legal system, federal legislative processes, and the bulk of higher education are all still carried out in English.**

Source: *The Oxford English Dictionary*.