

Film Review

RRR and Postcolonial Rage

★★★★☆

by James Fleming

Abstract

The film RRR (2022) is a furious work of postcolonial counter-history, action blockbuster and nationalist spectacle, rooted in the traditions of Telugu cinema and animated by moral rage at British colonial rule. This review argues that the film's global appeal lies not only in its technical excess and folkloric heroism but in its emotionally charged reimaging of resistance under empire. The article explores how RRR mobilises fantasy violence to render historical injustice morally legible and viscerally satisfying. The film's affective power is further contextualised by outlining the scale of Britain's economic extraction from India and its material links to settler colonial projects, including Australia. Ultimately, RRR is understood as an act of cinematic catharsis that raises enduring questions about the difference between revenge and justice in popular historical storytelling.

Key words

RRR; Tollywood cinema; India; postcolonial theory; anti-colonial nationalism; colonial violence; counter-history; Telugu folklore; cinematic spectacle; moral philosophy in film; British Empire; economic extraction; historical rage; fantasy and justice; Indian cinema; cultural politics

Introduction

RRR (2022), short for 'Rise, Roar, Revolt', is a fictional action-drama blockbuster and counter-historical epic directed and co-written by S. S. Rajamouli, set in 1920s Raj India about two muscular folk heroes that take on their British rulers. At the time of its release, it was the highest budget Indian film ever made (at AU\$91 million) and the first 'Tollywood' film to achieve global success, making a record AU\$230 million in global box office sales. It is currently available to watch on in Australia on Netflix and Zee5.

While Bollywood, primarily aimed at Hindi language speakers and based in Mumbai, is well-known in the West and famously produces twice as many films as Hollywood, lesser known is that it is but one subindustry in India's mighty film industry. India's constitution recognises 22 languages and these are supported by no less than 11 major commercial film industries. Telugu alone is spoken by some 85 million people (more than the number of people in the world that speak Italian!). Telugu cinema, known colloquially as Tollywood, is based in Film Nagar, Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh and often draws on the cultural tropes of the Telugu-speaking regions of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Like Bollywood cinema, it caters both to local audiences and to the global language diaspora and hence blends local and Western tastes and themes. Consequently, *RRR*, like many Tollywood films, is highly legible to Western audiences.

Mixing Western action-revenge blockbuster with traditional Telugu folklore, the film's full title delivers as promised: it is a furious, counter-historical spectacle of violent revenge where semi-magical folk heroes rise up, like unchained Bengal tigers, to rip their colonial masters to pieces. This article gives an overview and analysis of the film and reflects on the source of the film's emotional core: rage at

Britain's brutal economic crimes against India, crimes which have a disturbing link, as it turns out, to Australia.

Plot

The film begins with the brutal Governor Scott Buxton (played by the late Ray Stevenson) and his wife Lady Catherine Scott (Alison Doody) gatecrashing a small Gondian village in the Adilabad Forest with their entourage. Wary of the soldiers in the Buxtons' company, fearfully obsequious villagers try to entertain Lady Buxton with a traditional song performed by a young girl, Mali (Twinkle Sharma). Rather than responding with gratitude, Lady Buxton rewards the villagers' efforts by asking her husband if she can keep the girl as a 'mantlepiece' or 'plaything'. The Governor protests – "Why would you want a piece of vermin in your house?" but directs a subordinate to toss a coin in payment at the confused mother. When the mother realises what is happening and, in distraught panic, starts to protest, the Governor orders her silenced. A soldier reaches for his gun but the Governor stays his hand: "Don't waste British-made bullets" on "these vermin", and so the soldier beats the mother over the head with a wooden log instead, and the girl is whisked away.

Such is the depiction of British colonial rule in the film: cruel, sadistic, and deeply unjust. This egregious crime against an innocent girl, symbolising Britain's subjugation of an innocent and benevolent India, awakens the spiritual power of Mali's brother, Komaram Bheem (played by Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao Jr 'NTR'). Bheem is called forth to fulfil his supernatural role as the village protector, spurned to free both his sister and India herself from the Raj's clutches. In order to do so, he imbibes the power of that great symbol of Indian pride and masculine strength, the tiger. First, he defeats one in one-on-one combat, and then, filled with supernatural tiger power, he heads to Delhi, disguising himself as a muslim man named Akhtar, to take on India's oppressors.

Bheem's main opponent in this quest is Alluri Sitarama Raju (Ram Charan), a ruthless Indian officer in the Imperial police force who is rising through the ranks by doing the Raj's bidding. Raju is a complex character: part villain, part hero, and laden with the complexities and contradictions of existence under Imperial rule. He is ostensibly an enthusiastic collaborator and embodies the rulers' militaristic values of honour, duty and order, and his story invites reflection on the role of all Indian collaborators under the Raj. Yet, as we later learn, Raju is actually secretly playing a deft long game towards freeing India from its British overlords.

Like Bheem, the character of Raju possesses super-human strength and is partly inspired by Telugu folk heroes, in this case, the real life rebel Manyam Veerudu (Hero of the Jungles), who led the Rampa Rebellion against the British in the 1920s. When Raju is called upon to hunt Bheem down and eliminate him, he accepts the task with gusto, but along the way he strikes up a friendship with Akhtar, not realising he is in fact Bheem, the man he is looking for.

When Bheem happens upon Buxton's kind and attractive niece Jenny (Olivia Morris), who has just arrived in India from Britain and, unlike virtually every other white character in the film, is not a horrifically sadistic racist, he is smitten, and Raju helps him to woo her. Unknown to Raju, Bheem also sees in Jenny a way into the Buxton household to attack the Governor and liberate his sister. This courtship becomes not only an excuse for some great romantic song and dance numbers but, with Jenny as an emblematic sympathetic white character, the film's talisman against charges of overt reverse racism.

When Raju discovers Bheem's true identity, the two men are thrown into violent conflict and we are taken on a wild ride of magnificent stunts and fight scenes that keep us engaged for the film's full 3 hours and 7 minutes in length, not unusually long for a big event Indian film but quite long in Hollywood, even for an action blockbuster. In India, event films like this one are increasingly long

enough to entertain a family for an entire evening, with an intermission structured into the plot, and this is the spirit in which the film is best viewed.

Analysis

The film's cinematic exuberance, with an endless array of technically ambitious stunts, camerawork and effects, is reminiscent of Marvel Studios blockbusters like *Avengers Endgame* (2019), *Iron Man 3* (2013), and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol.3* (2023), but, to be frank, *RRR* makes those films look positively restrained. For example, in one scene, Bheem massacres the guests at a lavish party at the mansion of his British overlords by bursting through the gates with a wagon full of killer beasts. Dismembered heads and limbs fly about as the camera sweeps through in bullet-time slow motion. In another scene, Raju fights a crowd of some 3,000 people with his bare fists – and wins! The flamboyance is almost too much at times, but it makes up for it with enthusiastic charm and it is a great segue for Western action audiences into the magnificent wonders of Indian cinema generally and Tollywood cinema in particular.

The central conflict between the two main characters evokes a moral dilemma that is very common in action genre movies in some form: the clash between *Kantian* (treat every human as ends in themselves and not as a means to an end) and *utilitarian* (maximise the wellbeing of the many) ethics. Raju, the utilitarian on this reading, is willing to sacrifice Indian lives in favour of a greater cause: first to gain British trust, and then to free all of India. Bheem, of course, fights for the value of an individual life, that of his sister, and collectively, the value of all individual Indian human lives. The Utilitarian/Kantian conflict is sharpened when Raju is finally appointed Special Officer and gains access to the Imperial armoury but must choose between capturing a weapons shipment, the culmination of his plan to arm the Indian people for revolution, or saving his friend Bheem. Usually, these moral frames are

set in tension and then resolved by a hero who successfully risks all to achieve both, for example, in *Matrix Reloaded* (2003) where Neo chooses to save Trinity's life instead of returning to the Source to reboot the Matrix, risking the extinction of the entire human race, or Ethan Hunt in *Mission: Impossible – Fallout* (2018) who loses three plutonium cores, threatening the deaths of billions, to save his teammate, Luther Stickell. Without revealing too much about how the dilemma is resolved in this film, the message is clear: only through co-operation and solidarity, will India be free.

As Srinivas argues in *Politics as Performance* (2013), Telugu cinema, since its inception, has always been highly political – "invested in mobilizing the masses for nationalist politics" and even launched many a political career.¹ NTR, who plays Bheem, is from an elite film and political dynasty, named after his grandfather of the same name ('NTR senior'). NTR Senior was one of India's leading film stars in the 1950s and made 300 films before founding the Telugu Desam Party and running successfully for President of Andhra Pradesh. NTR's father was also an actor and serving politician. Like many of his grandfather's roles, Bheem is cloaked in the symbolism of Telugu folklore and held out as a both a representative of the Telugu culture and people and transcendently elite. Time will tell if this nationalistic posturing is translated into political office but already he is a key figure in ideological nation building.

Britain's crimes against India

The metaphor in the film of young and innocent Mali's capture and imprisonment by the cruel British Governor is compelling when we look at the economic realities of British colonial rule. At the time Britain began to take control over India in the 1750s, India had the second-largest economy in the world, only slightly behind China's, producing up to a quarter of global GDP (according to Angus Maddison), and the two countries had vied for first place and been far above other countries for some

¹ Srinivas, S.V. *Politics as Performance: A Social History of the Telugu Cinema*. 2013, p.12.

2000 years. India had a GDP ten times the size of Britain's and only 10% lower per capita, comparable to most of Western Europe. It was a commercially sophisticated society with merchant banking, commercial and contract law, and large urban manufacturing centres. It produced up to 40% of the world's cotton textiles, 20% of the world's silk, and had an overall trade surplus with Europe. Importantly, Europe wanted India's goods more than India wanted Europe's.

By 1870-1913, Britain's GDP had risen to second in the world and by the time Britain ceded control of India in 1947, India's economy was a third-to-half the size of Britain's, ten times poorer per capita and it had lost 80% of its relative global economic weight. India had lost its industrial base and most of its capital stock and was suffering from long term underinvestment. It had, vis-a-vis, Britain experienced one of the most dramatic relative economic reversals between any two countries in history – a relative flip of about 15-20 times – and perhaps the most consequential. This flip re-ordered the global economy and the north-south divide.

Utsa Patnaik estimates that during its control of India in the years between 1750-1938, Britain stole US\$45 trillion dollars from the country, a sum equal to Britain's industrial investment during its industrial revolution.² This was done by a combination of measures. Firstly, heavy direct taxes on India's population. Secondly, and unusually, India paid for its own colonial administration. Thirdly, Britain had a monopoly on Indian exports and charged a premium on them, which it pocketed, or made countries trading directly with India buy its made up special currency which also yielded Britain a tidy profit.

To add insult to injury, all of Britain's own enormous imports from India – think everything from the masses of raw materials that supplied its industrial revolution to fine silks and spices – Britain received for free as they were paid for entirely out of Indian resources. Importantly for contextualising Australian colonisation, India contributed a massive 20-25% of the British treasury's funds, out of which

² See Utsa Patnaik, "Revisiting the 'Drain,' or Transfers from India to Britain in the Context of Global Diffusion of Capitalism," in *Agrarian and Other Histories: Essays for Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri*, ed. Shubhra Chakrabarti and Utsa Patnaik (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2017), 277–317. This calculation was based on taking India's export surplus as the measure of wealth transferred and then compounding at a modest interest rate (approx. 5 %) to the present.

Australia's penal colonies were funded. Britain was heavily indebted and constrained at the time of the First Fleet and without Indian funds could probably not have afforded these overseas projects. In the 1780s, the annual revenue Britain extracted from India (approximately £3–5 million) was comparable to or exceeded the entire cost of establishing the first Australian penal settlements. Perhaps some acknowledgement is long overdue.

Reflections

The moral rage driving *RRR* is understandable and even compelling and historically grounded. In some ways, the film, by re-writing the ending of India's struggle for independence, is reminiscent of Tarantino's excellent *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), a film that re-writes World War II with a fantasy ending where a gang of Jewish soldiers and saboteurs defeat the Nazi regime by burning them alive in an art house cinema. What is the role of these films? Surely, at some level it is to express an emotional truth through violence to make historical injustice morally legible and, in some way, to deal with the wounds in the collective psyche. But at the most basic level, these films also serve to provide a moral justification for the audience themselves to enjoy the sadistic pleasure of extreme violence without guilt. Great stuff, but cooler heads do well to remember in these times of rising shrill nationalism and the ongoing Israeli action in Palestine which has been declared to be genocide by international authorities, that in real life, revenge is not the same thing as justice and revenge in and of itself is never just. Real world justice is long overdue and, in the meantime, the pleasures of cinematic fantasy revenge endings have their place. Highly recommended.

Declaration of interests

Nil.

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