

Let the Games begin: Netflix releases first Indian series

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"Sacred Games", a Netflix adaptation of Vikram Chandra's 2006 novel of the same name, releases Friday

Netflix's first original Indian series premieres on Friday as the US streaming giant battles with Amazon Prime for a slice of the country's

fast growing on-demand video market.

"Sacred Games", an adaptation of Vikram Chandra's 2006 novel of the same name, stars Bollywood stalwarts Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Saif Ali Khan and Radhika Apte.

Analysts say the gritty underworld thriller sets a new benchmark for Indian-produced internet shows as providers seek to capitalise on the country's burgeoning number of smartphone users.

"'Sacred Games' is probably the most high-profile content that has been made. Others have not been on the same scale," Girish Menon, who tracks media and entertainment for KPMG, told AFP.

Revenues from India's entertainment streaming industry are expected to be \$823 million by 2022, up from \$297 million in 2017, according to a PricewaterhouseCoopers report released this month.

Netflix, which is blocked in China, is investing millions in the world's second-most populous country to attract young consumers with access to cheap mobile data and an appetite for something different.

"India is seeing the biggest and fastest investment in content for any country we have launched in," said Erik Barmack, vice-president of international originals at Netflix.

"Sacred Games" is also a punt that high-quality Indian content will prove popular overseas and forms part of Netflix's worldwide drive to produce programmes in many different languages, including Spanish and German.

The eight-part series—filmed mainly in Hindi—centres on the attempts of police officer Sartaj Singh, played by Khan, to capture mafia boss

Ganesh Gaitonde (Siddiqui).

'Lust Stories'

"Sacred Games" is the first release of eight Indian series that Netflix has commissioned.

Last week the company announced it would adapt Salman Rushdie's multiple-award winning novel "Midnight's Children".

"Selection Day", based on Aravind Adiga's novel about cricket and corruption, is also in the works.

"Sacred Games" follows Hindi-language movie "Love per Square Foot" and "Lust Stories", a collection of four short films, which both came out on Netflix this year.



Indian commuters walk below a poster of "Sacred Games", the Indian series on Netflix, in Mumbai

Amazon has also released a host of original Indian content, including crime drama "Breathe" and several successful stand-up comedy shows.

Experts say producing high-quality programmes in Hindi and regional Indian languages is essential if Netflix and Amazon are to make up ground on market leader Hotstar.

"One needs to have local content. It's a given," Frank D'Souza, a media and entertainment analyst with PwC in Mumbai, told AFP.

Hotstar dominates India's streaming landscape owing to its huge catalogue of entertainment and movie channels owned by Star India, many of which are free to view.

It also streams live cricket and English Premier League football. A yearly subscription for all content costs 999 rupees (\$14.55), the same as an Amazon Prime membership.

Netflix's India subscriptions start at 500 rupees a month, something that experts say currently restricts its appeal to well-off Indians.

"A challenge for Netflix is that their price points are significantly more expensive than anybody out there. That means their user size is very small at the moment," said Menon.

Free from censorship

India's mobile entertainment market is a crowded one—other players

include Eros Now, Jio TV and ALTBalaji. Turning a profit is difficult with many platforms offering the same stock of movies and TV shows.

Netflix and Amazon have signed deals with Bollywood megastars Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan respectively to secure the rights to their films, setting themselves apart from their competitors somewhat.

Industry watchers also expect the US duo to try to snap up subscribers by producing bolder content.

India's over-the-top (OTT) media providers, as streaming sites are known, are not subject to the country's notoriously stuffy censor boards which regularly cut scenes from films at the cinema and on TV.

"The content that appears on television is very homogenous. It's typically soap operas aimed at women. We can expect slightly edgier, differentiated new-age type content on OTT platforms," said KPMG's Menon.

Netflix, which has 125 million subscribers in 190 countries, will be hoping that "Sacred Games" and its other Indian dramas will become global hits like blockbuster shows "Narcos" and "Stranger Things".

"Netflix is trying to create original [content](#) which can travel across the world," Menon said.

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