



Above, Saif Ali Khan, left, and Kalki Koechlin in Season 2 of Netflix's "Sacred Games," a popular crime thriller. Below left, Sobhita Dhulipala in Amazon's "Made in Heaven," and right, Vineet Kumar Singh in "Bard of Blood," also on Netflix.

ISHIKA MOHAN MOTWANE/NETFLIX

Netflix and Amazon set their sights on India

With TV's streaming wars ever more global, 2019 had a new contested front

BY PRIYA ARORA

With companies like Netflix and Amazon seeking ever larger international customer bases, one thing that distinguishes the streaming wars from previous TV conflicts is the global scale. And in 2019, India became one of the most hotly contested fronts.

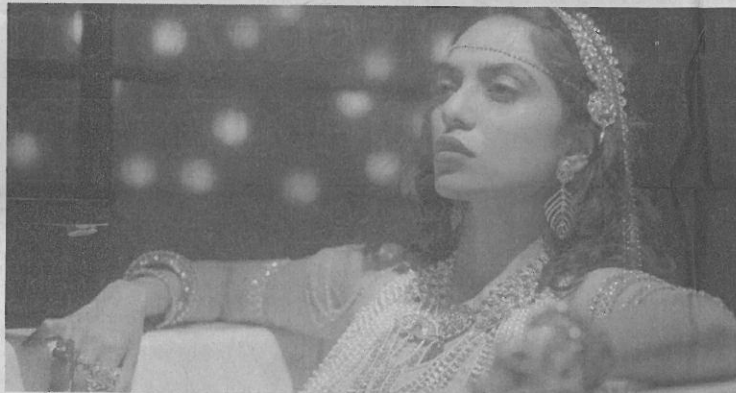
American streamers began dipping their toes in the Indian market in 2017, when Amazon Prime Video released the cricket drama "Inside Edge," its first original series from India. Netflix followed in 2018 with the crime thriller "Sacred Games."

But both companies dramatically increased their investment in Indian shows in 2019. They also struck partnerships with some of Bollywood's most beloved actors, writers and producers.

Last year, Netflix released five original series and eight original films produced in India. Among the most high-profile was the series "Bard of Blood," produced by Red Chillies Entertainment, the production house owned by the Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan and his wife, Gauri Khan.

In September, the platform also announced a multiyear collaboration deal with the Indian producer and director Karan Johar's streaming production house, Dharmatic Entertainment. Johar's first production with Netflix, "Drive," was released in November. New projects slated for 2020 include debuts for the Bollywood actress Kajol and the fashion designer Masaba Gupta.

Amazon released 10 original Indian shows in 2019, including the spy series "Family Man," starring the veteran Bollywood actor Manoj Bajpayee, which was the company's first original series from India to be dubbed into English. (Previous original offerings, like "Inside



AMAZON PRIME VIDEO INDIA

Edge" and "Made in Heaven," used a mix of Hindi and English and have been dubbed in other regional languages.) Amazon, too, is pulling in star power: In addition to Bajpayee, his fellow Bollywood leads Akshay Kumar and Anushka Sharma have Amazon projects in the works.

It's easy to see why Netflix and Amazon would want to expand their presence in India, and not just because it is home to 1.3 billion people. As in much of the viewing world, streaming has exploded in the country — at least 30 companies now offer video streaming services there, up from nine in 2012.

What sets the American streamers apart is a focus on original programming and an ability to market series for a global audience.

Hotstar, which controls an estimated 75 percent of India's streaming market, carries critically acclaimed HBO shows like "Succession" and a Hindi version of "The Office" alongside plenty of existing programming from its parent company, Star India. (Like much of the entertainment world, Star is a subsidiary of the Walt Disney Company.) Indian streamers that do carry originals, like Zee5 and Eros Now, have had trouble cracking international markets.

"We look for stories that not only res-

onate with our Indian members but can also travel globally," a Netflix spokeswoman said. For example, two out of three "Sacred Games" viewers were from outside India.

The upshot is that a global audience has more access than ever to an array of great South Asian series. Here's a look at some of the year's best original streaming shows from the region.

ON NETFLIX "SACRED GAMES," SEASON 2

The first season of "Sacred Games" earned critical acclaim, as well as an International Emmy nomination. Starring the Bollywood actors Saif Ali Khan and Nawazuddin Siddiqui, the second season was Netflix's most popular release in India and continues the same cop-and-robber plotline. While the second season has a slower pace than the first, its deep dive into the past of its lead character, Sartaj Singh (Khan), is thrilling.

"DELHI CRIME"
Created as a true-crime anthology series that will follow a different crime investigation each season, "Delhi Crime" focuses in its first season on the aftermath of the horrific rape and death of a young woman in New Delhi in 2012. Starring the Bollywood actress Shefali



ADITYA KAPOOR/NETFLIX

Shah, the procedural series — a genre that, unlike in America, is rare on Indian television — covers the six days between the attack and the arrests of the perpetrators. Though the outcome of the case is known to many, the details remain gripping, and the show also explores the sense of unity that came after the attack in a country that still struggles with violence against women.

"LEILA"
Set in a dystopian future and based on a book of the same name, "Leila" follows Shalini, a mother played by the Bollywood actress Huma Qureshi, who is searching for her missing daughter, Leila. Arrested and struggling to survive under a totalitarian regime with segregated communities (recalling divisions over religion and caste), Shalini endures grueling conditions as she uncovers the truth about what happened to her daughter. Striking visuals by the acclaimed director Deepa Mehta and clear references to contemporary Indian politics make the series even more chilling.

"SELECTION DAY," SEASON 2
In India, you can't go wrong with cricket. "Selection Day," based on the 2016 novel, follows two brothers with a father who is hyperfocused on training them to be the best cricketers in the country. Conflict arises as the young

men cope differently with their father's intensity, as well as with their own professional aspirations and desires.

ON AMAZON "MADE IN HEAVEN"

Amazon made a big splash last year with "Made in Heaven," a series about two friends who run a wedding planning company. Unlike some of Netflix's most popular Indian series, "Made in Heaven" didn't just enlist big names from Bollywood, opting instead for some new faces alongside seasoned actors like Kalki Koechlin. It received critical acclaim for its nuanced handling of topical cultural issues like homophobia.

"INSIDE EDGE," SEASON 2
The second season of Amazon's debut Indian drama was noticeably weaker than its first. But with star power like Richa Chadha, Angad Bedi and Vivek Oberoi, this remains one of Amazon's flagship shows.

"COMICSTAAN," SEASON 2
This reality show, which highlights young Indian comics, is Amazon's biggest entrant in a genre that Netflix has typically dominated internationally: stand-up comedy. (In October, Netflix announced a slate of upcoming specials that will feature eight Indian comedians.)

"THE FAMILY MAN"

"The Family Man," starring Bajpayee, is the story of Srikant Tiwari, an average middle-class father who's trying to balance his family duties with, well, saving the country. His family remains blissfully unaware that he's a spy, and he tries (and often almost fails) to keep up the ruse that he is a humble government employee with a boring desk job.

What sets apart "The Family Man," by the writers and directors Raj Nidimoru and Krishna D. K., is its clever way of fictionalizing current events. "The way we saw it was that when you open a newspaper and you see various new stories in front of you, we wanted to put those stories onscreen," Nidimoru said in a recent interview.

For Bajpayee, though, it was the uniqueness of Srikant, and the relatable quality of his predicaments, that drew him to the project, he told The New York Times. "I look at him as a very open-minded modern man trying to understand each and every point of view and still trying to do his job," he said.

"LAAKHON MEIN EK," SEASON 2
This show by the comedian Biswa Kalyan Rath (also one of the judges in "Comicstaan") tackles social issues from the perspective of India's youth. The second season focused on rural health care and the politically motivated black market for generic medicine and starred Shweta Tripathi, a familiar face to South Asian audiences.

ON HOTSTAR "THE OFFICE"

The Indian streaming service Hotstar lacks the international profile of Netflix and Amazon, but it offers a deep archive of South Asian series and films. One worth checking out is the Hindi version of "The Office." While superficially very different from its British and American predecessors, the sitcom adapts well to new cultural norms while suggesting that warm (and sometimes awkward) workplace friendships, petty office politics and obnoxious bosses are universal.