

Interview with Atsushi Matsuo, President & Kenji Yoshii, Director of TEM Co., Ltd. (Ramayana World Cultural Contribution Committee)

# Where Indian Cinema Meets Asia: Culture, Connection, & Creativity (April 7, 2026)

By Japan SPOTLIGHT

**JS:** You were the executive producer of *Ramayana: The Legend of Prince Rama*. To begin, could you introduce yourselves and tell us how you came to be involved in the project?

**Yoshii:** In 1983, producer Yugo Sako, formerly of NHK, launched a project to create the world's first feature-length animated adaptation of the *Ramayana*, one of India's two great epics. He spent years visiting Japanese companies operating in India and approaching major animation studios in Japan, but despite his efforts, the project struggled to gain traction.

At that point, India's top animator, Ram Mohan (1931-2019), who is widely recognized as the father of Indian animation, joined the project as director, while TEM President Atsushi Matsuo – known for his commitment to cultural exchanges in Asia – took on the role of executive producer. They were soon joined by skilled animators with experience on Hayao Miyazaki's films, setting the stage for an unprecedented cross-border collaboration.

This project had been put on hold because of funding and production problems, but meeting Mr. Matsuo changed that. His conviction that this could become a culturally significant project for all of Asia – and his willingness to support it – finally made it possible to bring the story to life on screen. Back then, India still didn't have widespread access to fax machines, and of course none of today's digital communication tools existed. All negotiations, artwork exchanges, and production discussions had to be carried out through a mix of airmail and telex. Despite these limitations, the teams in Japan and India pushed forward, coordinating an enormous amount of artwork and countless meetings across borders.

After nearly nine years, involving a staff of 450 and a total production budget of 800 million yen, the film was finally completed in December 1992. Although it received limited theatrical screenings in India, it never achieved full nationwide release, and for many years



Atsushi Matsuo



Kenji Yoshii

its recognition remained modest. That changed in January 2025, when – amid renewed interest in strengthening cultural ties between Japan and India – the film was released across India, drawing significant attention. During this time, I served as assistant producer, involved in every stage of the project, from planning and production to distribution.

**Matsuo:** My connection with Asia began with my mentor, Prof. Yoshiaki Sagae, one of Yamagata Prefecture's "Five Wise Men" and a driving force behind the creation of the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers. He taught me the importance of building human relationships that transcend national borders, and his influence sparked my deep interest in cultural exchanges across Asia. Later, as a secretary to a member of the National Diet, I came to understand that ties between nations are shaped not only by politics and economics but also by culture. When I learned about the plan to create an animated film based on the *Ramayana*, I immediately felt it was a remarkable opportunity to strengthen the bond between Japan and India. The story carries timeless moral themes and is regarded as one of India's great cultural treasures. First composed as an epic poem in the 3rd or 4th century BC, the *Ramayana* eventually became known throughout the world.

I have long believed that politicians and government officials should pay more attention to cultural exchanges. Culture has the power to ease tensions and deepen mutual understanding, and projects like this film are exactly the kind of initiatives that should be actively promoted.

In addition to my role with TEM, I am also the head of the International Economic Research Institute, which I founded in 2003. Through our "International Strategy Seminar", now held more than 200 times, I have had the opportunity to hear from experts on global issues and to advocate for the importance of engagement with Asia. I have also been involved in direct exchanges with China, including

visits at the invitation of current Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Experiences like these have reinforced my belief that culture forms the foundation of trust between nations. For me, this film is more than just a creative project – it is a cultural bridge that connects people and countries.

### **JS: What first led you to take a particular interest in India?**

**Matsuo:** As the international situation has grown increasingly tense, I have long felt that Japan must show leadership and contribute to global stability. It was in that context that I had the opportunity to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he visited Japan for the Quad summit. During our conversation, when he asked what had sparked my interest in India, I explained that it stemmed from something my mother told me as a child – that Buddhism traveled from India to China, and from there to Japan.

I learned that after the war, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru played a major role in laying the foundations of friendship between Japan and India. That made me feel even more strongly that India holds a special significance for Japan. Later, when I met Prof. Sagae and encountered his ideas firsthand, I felt a renewed conviction that we needed to nurture and preserve this animated film, created through Japan-India cooperation.

I also studied in China around the time the country was transitioning in the years following the Tiananmen Square bloodshed. Japan, after rising from the devastation of the postwar period, upheld pacifism and, with American support, became the world's second-largest economy. In a similar way, young Japanese volunteers sent through JICA went to China, joined local community

*Photo: em Co., Ltd.*



*With Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his visit to Japan to attend the 2022 Quad Summit.*

efforts, and contributed to the country's development. Today, China has become the world's second-largest economy. Now, I believe it is time for Japan and India to act together in pursuit of global peace.

### **JS: By adapting an Indian myth like the *Ramayana* into animation using Japanese expertise and sharing it with audiences around the world, are you in effect supporting India and helping to expand its soft power?**

**Matsuo:** In effect, yes. Japan invested everything it could to bring this film to completion, believing it could be an important opportunity for cultural exchange. Looking back, I feel we managed to achieve that goal.

### **JS: Japanese animation is loved around the world, and especially in Asia it functions as a major source of Japan's soft power. With that in mind, did you feel that animating the story would help it reach an even wider audience?**

**Matsuo:** I felt that animation would be the ideal medium for sharing India's remarkable story with people around the world.

### **JS: India certainly has enormous growth potential. While China has begun to slow down, India is now in a phase where it needs to accelerate infrastructure development.**

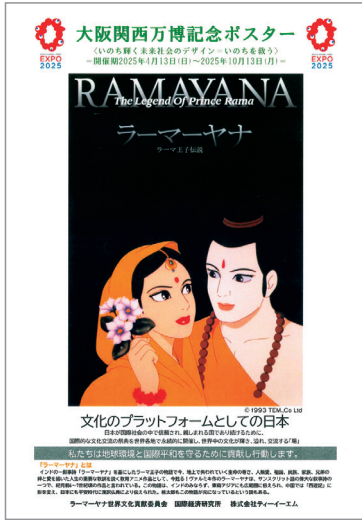
## **Indian Mythology Catching On**

**JS: A few years ago, there was a Kabuki performance of the *Mahabharata*, the other great Indian epic, and it drew a lot of attention. Why do you think stories like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* – myths that Indians have cherished for centuries – resonate strongly with Japanese audiences?**

**Yoshii:** If you look at recent Indian cinema, major hits like RRR and Baahubali come to mind. RRR clearly draws inspiration from the *Ramayana*, while Baahubali is said to take cues from the *Mahabharata*. Both films are shaped by the deep influence of India's ancient myths.

The *Ramayana* itself follows Prince Rama, who is exiled from his kingdom for 14 years due to palace intrigue, and whose wife Sita is later abducted. It's a classic tale of good versus evil, with a clear narrative arc and a heroic quest at its center – elements that make it exceptionally well-suited for animation. And because the story carries echoes of Buddhist values and even aspects reminiscent of *bushidō*, it naturally aligns with sensibilities familiar to Japanese audiences.

Photo: Tem Co., Ltd.



Osaka Kansai Expo 2025 poster

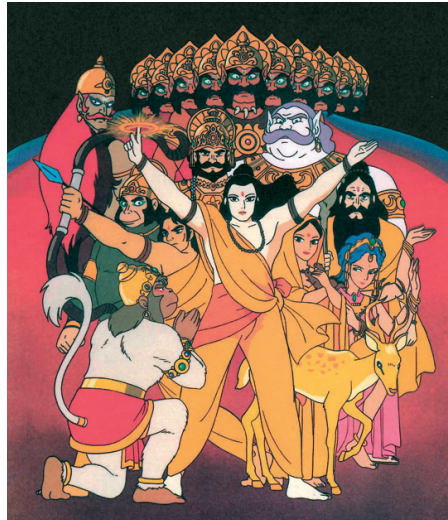
**Matsuo:** The *Ramayana* may be a story that dates back three or four millennia, but at its core are themes that feel timeless: family bonds, loyalty, friendship, the pursuit of peace. These are the very foundations of international exchange, and I felt they could play a meaningful role in deepening connections across Asia today.

**Yoshii:** It is the story's wide range of themes – ones that people across cultures can relate to – that helped the *Ramayana* become firmly rooted throughout the region. Its themes – the interplay of gods, humans, and animals; the struggle between good and evil; devotion, trust, family love, friendship, trials, and growth – have been translated and reinterpreted repeatedly across Southeast Asia. Each region has adapted the story in its own way, weaving it into local culture until it became part of its own narrative heritage.

Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* exist in multiple versions across India, each with its own nuances and interpretations. For this film, we chose the most widely recognized version, the Valmiki text, which many Indians regard as the template for the epic. These stories have never been confined to the written word – they've been expressed through dance, shadow puppetry, theater, literature, and more, evolving across places and eras. It's no surprise that people often draw parallels to figures like Sun Wukong in China or Momotarō in Japan.

Japan, in particular, has long felt a certain affinity with Indian thought through Buddhist culture – ideas like karmic cause and effect resonate deeply here. One concern our director, Koichi Sasaki, wrestled with was how Indians would react to a foreign team of Japanese creators adapting a story so central to their cultural identity. It's a bit like imagining a foreign studio animating Japan's *Kojiki*, ancient Japanese myth. Resistance would have been understandable. But in the end, the film was warmly received in

Photo: TEM Co., Ltd.



From a movie pamphlet with Ramayana characters

India.

Another factor that gave us confidence was the involvement of animation director Kazuyuki Kobayashi, who had been part of Topcraft, the studio behind early Hayao Miyazaki films. With his experience, we felt the characters would resonate not only across Asia but with audiences worldwide.

**Matsuo:** I think audiences respond to the warmth of the hand-drawn animation. Having completed this film, I'd love to take on the *Mahabharata* next and share it with the world as another cornerstone of Japan-India cultural exchange.

**Yoshii:** We couldn't color all 120,000 cels in Japan, so part of the production was outsourced to studios in Indonesia and other

Asian countries. What struck me was how grateful many of the artists were to us. They told us how meaningful it felt to be involved in a film featuring deities like Rama, Sita, and Hanuman. For them, it wasn't just a job; it was participation in something sacred.

**JS: So Indian viewers felt moved by it – perhaps they even had a sense of connection?**

**Matsuo:** Yes, everyone who has seen it, including Prime Minister Modi, has told us they were deeply moved and really liked it.

**JS: Our magazine, Japan SPOTLIGHT, is built on the idea that Asia's soft powers can collaborate to create a more cooperative, peaceful, and prosperous region. The Ramayana feels like a perfect example: an Indian epic brought to life by some of Japan's most respected animators. It really is a collaboration between the soft powers of both countries.**

**Matsuo:** I completely agree with your magazine's vision. This film is, in every sense, a fusion of Indian and Japanese soft power. And because it explores themes that are essential to all of us – friendship, family bonds, the values that shape our lives – I believe it could even be used in schools as an educational resource.

## Diversity of Indian Cinema

**JS: Indian cinema spans everything from action to sci-fi. If you had to sum up what makes it so appealing in a single word, what would it be?**

**Yoshii:** If I had to choose just one, it would be “diversity”. Filmmakers and audiences in India grow up surrounded by people of different religions, languages, and socioeconomic backgrounds, from people of great wealth to those with modest means. That mix naturally shapes the stories they tell, giving Indian films a remarkable range of themes and perspectives. That, I believe, is their greatest strength.

Our animated *Ramayana* was released nationwide in India between January and May 2025, showing on up to 621 screens. To reach audiences across the country, we dubbed it into English, Hindi, Telugu, and Tamil.

Indian films are known for their length and for weaving songs and dance into the narrative – a unique style all their own. But what really resonates across borders is the emotional clarity: joy, sorrow, anger, love – everything is expressed with a directness that audiences everywhere can connect with. We included four musical sequences in this film, and every one of them, composed by the legendary Vanraj Bhatia, has been embraced by Indian viewers.

Another major draw today is how rapidly Indian cinema has advanced on the technical front. In visual effects, cinematography, and direction, many productions now rival the best films being created anywhere in the world.

### **JS: With this kind of collaboration, do you think Japanese animation techniques might influence Indian creators and help shape the future of Indian animation?**

**Matsuo:** When I studied in China more than 30 years ago, Japanese animations like *Ikkyū-san* were just starting to spread there, and you could feel animation culture taking root. Even back then, I remember thinking that China’s own history and epics would make wonderful, animated films.

**Yoshii:** Japanese studios were so busy that much of the process was outsourced to South Korea and China, and through that process local artists naturally learned Japanese animation techniques. India, however, was different. Its industry had been shaped far more by the Disney style and had almost no connection to Japanese animation. That’s why this film is significant – it’s the first time India and Japan have truly collaborated on a project that draws directly on Japanese animation craftsmanship.

### **JS: Since it wasn’t purely a Japanese production, that probably made it easier for Indian audiences to accept.**

**Yoshii:** Exactly. Because production was divided between the two countries, many people in India simply assumed it was an Indian film. India led the conceptual side – shaping the worldview and

cultural grounding of the *Ramayana*, which was less familiar to Japanese artists – while Japan handled technical animation, an area where India was still developing its skills.

### **JS: And that collaboration ended up sparking growth in India’s animation scene.**

**Yoshii:** It did. After seeing this film, some young people decided to pursue animation, new classes were established, and Japanese animators even traveled to India through programs run by the Japan Foundation and JICA to provide training.

### **JS: Does Bollywood also produce a significant amount of animation?**

**Yoshii:** Not really. Animation hasn’t taken off in Bollywood in the same way.

### **JS: Are there anime events in India as well?**

**Yoshii:** Two years ago, the Japanese Embassy organized a large-scale event, and our film was screened there. The response was tremendous. Across the country, there are groups that function almost like Japanese anime fan clubs, and these communities take the lead in running various events.

### **JS: Indian cinema is hugely popular in Japan too. Would you say it has become a significant form of soft power?**

**Yoshii:** Absolutely. India’s film industry is highly developed – more than 2,000 films are produced each year. For comparison, the United States makes around 700 annually, so India produces roughly three times as many. There’s a deep reservoir of technical skills, and the film industry continues to grow. When we localized this film for India, the picture and music were upgraded as well. If we could create a Japanese version based on that enhanced cut and release it here, it would open the door to a new phase of collaboration between the two countries.

### **JS: Even though it’s an Indian film created by Japanese filmmakers, it still promotes Indian culture to young people in Japan and has a meaningful impact, doesn’t it?**

**Matsuo:** Exactly. After all, it’s being introduced to the world from Japan.

### **JS: So Indian cinema isn’t just spreading across Asia, it’s making inroads in Africa, the Middle East, Europe,**

and the US as well?

**Yoshii:** Bollywood, in particular, is one of India's most powerful forms of soft power. It goes far beyond entertainment – it has the potential to connect people and even countries. Indian films circulate widely, not only within India but across South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and further into Europe, the US, and Japan. Audiences often respond to the strong storytelling and music that are characteristic of Indian cinema. And through film festivals, co-productions, distribution partnerships, and high-profile releases, new cultural points of contact are beginning to emerge between India and countries around the world, including Japan.

### Potential of Indian Cinema

**JS:** Based on what you've said, India's large population and growing global influence suggest that there is considerable potential for further expansion.

**Yoshii:** I believe the growth potential of Indian cinema is extremely high. In fact, my impression is that the industry is only now entering a full-fledged phase of expansion. India's huge population, along with the rapid rise of the middle class and younger generations, is steadily enlarging the domestic film market. At the same time, production and distribution technologies have advanced significantly. Streaming platforms have become widespread, especially among younger audiences, adding a new layer to what used to be a theater-centered business. We're now seeing films with budgets exceeding 10 billion yen being produced one after another. The pace of development is remarkable.

**Matsuo:** One challenge, however, is that awareness of copyright is still relatively low. When intellectual property issues became a major concern in China, we co-hosted a Japan-China seminar on IP with the Tokyo Institute of Technology, which helped move the conversation forward. I think India needs a similar initiative. Without a solid understanding of IP, it's difficult to gain international trust, and that makes global expansion difficult. For India to build that trust, both the government and the film industry need to actively promote awareness of IP rights across the country.

**JS:** When it comes to advances in production and distribution technology, India's IT sector is extremely strong. Would it be fair to say that India has substantial capacity to spread film content even outside traditional theaters?

**Yoshii:** Absolutely. That's precisely why the potential is so great.

### Japan & India: Soft-Power Collaboration

**JS:** How do you view the possibilities for collaboration between Indian cinema and Japan's pop-culture soft power?

**Yoshii:** As I mentioned earlier, the collaboration between the Indian film industry and Japanese pop culture has already shown its potential through the animated adaptation of the *Ramayana*. That project demonstrated, right from the start, what such a partnership could achieve. It's remarkable that this cultural exchange happened in the 1980s – long before social media or even widespread fax use – and yet India and Japan were able to connect through animation. The film was created not as an "Indian film" but aimed for global release: the original language was English, while the musical sequences used Vasant Dev's elevated Sanskrit lyrics. From the outset, Japan and India were working together with the world market in mind.

Because the film was broadcast frequently on Indian television throughout the 1990s, many viewers there later said they had assumed it was an Indian production. Despite being made in Japan, it was embraced so deeply by local audiences that it became a rare example of cross-cultural acceptance.

There is still enormous room for growth, especially in animation. At events like *Mela Mela Anime Japan*, held in Delhi in the summer of 2024, the enthusiasm for Japanese anime was unmistakable. Cosplay, streaming, anime viewing, education, character licensing: these are all areas that could develop into multilayered business opportunities. When President Matsuo and I recently met with

Photo: Tem Co., Ltd.



At a courtesy call with Ambassador Nagma Mohamed Mallick of India

Ambassador Nagma Mohamed Mallick, the very first question she asked was: “How were you able to depict the Indian epic *Ramayana* in a way that feels completely natural even to Indian viewers?” That question points to another defining feature of the project: from the beginning, the creators were deeply mindful of religious and political sensitivities. This approach, grounded in respect and genuine understanding of the partner country, helped build trust and ultimately enabled long-term cultural exchanges.

**Matsuo:** I believe this project also helped foster a sense of respect and understanding for Indian culture among Japanese audiences. And now, more than ever, I feel it is time for Japan to show leadership in working with the Global South. By promoting this film, which we deliberately produced in English, my hope is to send a message to people around the world.

## Potential for Indian Films in the Japanese Market

**JS:** I'd like to hear your thoughts on the future of Indian films in the Japanese market.

**Yoshii:** Japanese audiences are not necessarily closed off; just as they have embraced talent from around the world, including not only Hollywood films but also Korean and Iranian cinema, they have a cultural environment in which compelling content is appreciated regardless of nationality. In recent years, several Indian films have gained attention, and the genre is gradually moving from a niche presence to having a recognizable fan base.

There are still challenges. The long running times and the use of song-and-dance sequences – elements that are characteristic of Indian cinema – can feel unfamiliar to general Japanese audiences. So rather than simply importing films, we need to broaden the points of entry. Promotions that connect with interests already familiar in Japan, such as yoga, vegetarian cuisine, travel, food culture, sports, or the arts, can help open up new ways for people to engage with Indian films.

## Policies to Support Japan's Cultural Industries

**JS:** Lastly, we would appreciate your thoughts on policies that could help strengthen Japan's cultural industries, including film.

**Yoshii:** Film and other cultural industries are not directly tied to basic survival, so in times of conflict or crisis, their budgets are often the first to be cut. Yet these industries are central to Japan's soft power. They allow people to feel the value of peace, and they enrich the country. For that reason, we need policies that help build

international connections and support global development from the start.

One important area is the promotion of international co-productions, something this film helped bring attention to. Working with partners overseas, including India, allows both sides to share markets and risks while creating new films together. To support this, Japan needs an environment that encourages co-production, including tax incentives, grant programs, and legal frameworks that make collaboration easier.

Another priority is developing talent and improving labor conditions in the animation industry. Japanese animation is highly appreciated worldwide, but challenges such as labor conditions and staffing shortages are often pointed out. For sustainable growth, creators need an environment where they can focus on production with confidence, and we need to cultivate the next generation of talent. Through the production of *Ramayana*, I was reminded of the importance of balancing culture and business. Policies should aim to support both commercial viability and cultural value.

**Matsuo:** Looking ahead, we hope to introduce this film into schools through local boards of education, and also to promote it through community centers, cultural halls, and nonprofit organizations. This would allow the film to reach audiences in ways that are not driven solely by commercial interests. I hope that people of many different generations will have the chance to experience this film and that it will contribute to a deeper understanding of culture.

Finally, the fact that *Ramayana* – a story that is part of India's cultural heritage – was produced as an animated film by Japanese creators and yet was warmly received across Indian society shows that the project played a meaningful role in cultural exchange between our two countries. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to the creation and distribution of this film.

**JS:** Thank you very much for sharing this inspiring initiative. JS

Written and translated by Naoyuki Haraoka, editor-in-chief of *Japan SPOTLIGHT*, with the cooperation of Tape Rewrite Co.