



Research Paper

## Hallyu in India: Exploring the popularity of K-pop

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**ABSTRACT:** Korean pop, popularly referred to as K-pop is a term that has been in use since the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and refers to pop music from South Korea. The availability and the accessibility offered by the internet has provided the industry with a larger audience and fan following. K-pop is making its mark and gaining popularity in India as well. The performances by smaller bands in India and the various K-pop competitions organised across the country are indicative of the steadily rising popularity of K-pop in India. The rising popularity of K-pop through well sought out strategies needs to be engaged with and studied. In my paper, I would like to examine the rising popularity of these K-pop bands in India and the attempts made by the industry to explore the huge market a country like India has to offer.

**KEYWORDS:** K-pop, fandom, music, popular culture, South Korea

Received 23 Jan, 2021; Revised: 04 Feb, 2021; Accepted 07 Feb, 2021 © The author(s) 2021.

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Hallyu or the “Korean Wave” is the term used to explain the popularity South Korean cultural products enjoy across the globe. The focus of this paper is Korean pop, popularly referred to as K-pop. It is a term that has been in use since the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and refers to pop music from South Korea. The availability and the accessibility offered by the internet has provided the industry with a larger audience and fan following. To bring the popularity of K-pop into perspective, I would like to refer to the Twitter war that broke out between the fans of the English-Irish boy band, 1D(One Direction) and the South Korean boy band, BTS(which Romanized, originally is Bangtan Sonyeondan, roughly translated to “Bulletproof Boy Scouts”; which has been shortened to Bangtan Boys) after BTS’ American tour in 2017. BTS performed at the “2017 American Music Awards” and later appeared as guests on The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, The Late Late Show with James Cordon and The Ellen Show. 1D fans were displeased when BTS was referred to as “the most popular band in the world” and “the biggest band in the world” which in turn led to a showdown between 1D fans and the BTS fans who call themselves, the “ARMY” (JasmineK).

In the paper, I will be exploring the growing popularity of the South Korean cultural industry in India with a special focus on South Korean music which has captivated the interests of many in the Indian subcontinent. While India is seen as one of the countries that seemed least affected by the “Korean Wave”, the rapid proliferation and growing interests towards Korean products among young Indians tell a different story and is worth taking into consideration.

South Korean companies like LG, Samsung, Hyundai, Kia and Lotte’s Choco-Pie have made their presence felt in India. And contrary to the popular misconception that South Korean cultural products have not infiltrated India except for the North-Eastern states, these products have been in circulation in India for quite some time now. Puthuyugam TV, a Tamil TV Channel aired the dubbed version of a few popular South Korean dramas for a while, the dramas were aired from Monday to Friday at 7 pm in 2013 (Kannan). In 2017, Zee Zindagi, a Hindi channel aired the dubbed version of Descendants of the Sun, a popular South Korean drama (Gogoi). One can find CDs of popular South Korean series for sale in the makeshift stalls in Majnu Ka Tilla, a Tibetan settlement in Delhi.

The obsessive fan following Korean entertainment enjoys across the world is in no way accidental. The South Korean government has been actively propagating the Korean Cultural products through cultural diplomacy which to put it simply would mean to use culture as an instrument to promote a national brand image and therein furthering the national interest. In 2012, the Korean Cultural Centre (KCC) was established in New Delhi to strengthen diplomatic relations between India and Korea. The ancient Korean text of Samguk Yusa

mentions the marriage of a Korean king to an Indian princess named Suriratna popularly known as Heo Hwang-ok from Ayodhya in 48 CE (Dhawan). South Korea's First Lady, Kim Jung-sook's visited Ayodhya in November 2018 to pay respect at the memorial made by Koreans and dedicated to the mythical queen (Mandhani). This myth has played a huge role in furthering the agenda of cultural diplomacy deployed by the Korean government.

What one needs to understand is that Korean entertainment is an amalgamation of drama, music and variety shows with celebrities crossing over to a different form seamlessly. There are constant media updates and interactions which make the fans feel like they can connect to these celebrities personally. The easy and cheap access to the internet in the urban areas clubbed with the availability of English subtitled versions of popular songs and dramas makes it a commodity that sees a steady rise in the consumption (Gopinathan). As I mentioned earlier the Korean entertainment industry offers flexibility and movement to its celebrities from one medium to the other this trait makes sure that the audience or fans of one medium also get acquainted with the others as well.

During her visit to India, Kim Jung-sook also made an appearance at the grand finale of the 2018 Changwon K-pop World Festival: India which was held at the Siri Fort Auditorium. An article in the Times of India reports:

The vicinity of the Siri Fort auditorium looked like a concert arena at the K-Pop grand finale. It was not just the participants who were seen dancing and singing on the beats of the popular K-Pop singers, but also the fans who may not understand the language but have learnt the lyrics by heart of all the popular artists, like Bangtan Boys, popularly known as BTS. Members of Snuper, a K-Pop boy band, were also judging the competition and performed as well, leaving the audience in awe. (R. Sharma)

JJCC an idol group formed under the Jackie Chan Group Korea, had their first-ever mini-concert/fan meet in India in July 2016. The event was organised in Chennai at Sir Mutha Venkatasubba Rao Concert hall, by Pink Box Events in association with Korean Cultural Centre India. Two members from the group Simba and Eddy were also judges for the grand finale of 5th Edition of "K-pop Contest India" which was held in Chennai (K-POP contest – India 2016).

### **K-pop Fandom in India**

Fandom in a strict sense refers to a subculture which encompasses a group of individuals who bond over a sense of camaraderie and love for a common interest or person. Fans usually invest a significant amount of time, energy and money to be involved with their interest. They are usually part of clubs or networks that keeps them up to date with the developments in the world of their interests. Fandom does not exist in isolation, it is part of a larger collective that interact and associate with each other to generate discussion and further the popularity of their shared interest. Fandom and fan activities often border on obsession and over-indulgence towards the object of their desire.

Fans are a major source of revenue, popularity and support for celebrities and the industry that revolves around it and it is in no way different for the Korean entertainment industry as well. But K-pop fans take fandom to the next level with practices such as: fan chants where the fans shout out specific chants to show support for the groups they adore, light sticks, which are custom made lightsticks with unique shapes and colours for each band.

India, therefore, is a large potential market to sell the product termed Korean entertainment especially music and the Korean government and the entertainment industry have taken note of it and are trying to penetrate the market and tap into the revenues it has to offer as can be observed with the instances I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation. In 2015 a group of K-pop idols from different bands came to India as part of a reality show, News Report Reality: Exciting India. Kyuhyun (Superjunior), Minho (SHINee), Jonghyun (CNBLUE), Sunggyu (Infinite) and Suho (EXO) came to India in an effort to create a report for KBS's 9 o'clock news. Lee Ye-Ji, the producer of the program in a press conference said they chose India as a destination because K-pop's influence seemed weaker than in other countries.

The purpose of the trip was to analyze Indian popular culture and share K-pop with locals in a more interactive way. According to Lee, K-pop stars seemed to be a natural casting choice because they had the most vested interest in finding out why it was so difficult for K-pop to break into the Indian market. She believes this calculation in casting sets the program apart from other travel shows, which feature idol stars simply for their popularity and entertainment value. (Won)

The Northeastern states in India are a huge market for Korean and other East Asian entertainment especially the state of Manipur which has a ban on Hindi films and entertainment issued by Manipur's Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) in 2000. K-pop band MONT performed at the Hornbill festival in Nagaland in 2018. But the fandom enjoyed by K-pop is in no way limited to the Northeast.

At the beginning of the paper, I illustrated the popularity enjoyed by the band BTS through the twitter war that happened between the ARMY and the 1D fans, this, however, is not an isolated incident in a distant

land. Raftaar, a Hindi rapper faced the ARMY's fury when his song titled "Mantoiyat" used camera angles, shots and set design which bore a striking resemblance to BTS' leader RM's solo release "Do You" released in 2015. Raftaar later apologised to the ARMY (Chakraborty). This, however, is not the first time that similar instances have surfaced in 2017 Kannayya a Telugu film faced legal action for plagiarising several tracking from another famous boy band EXO's albums (S. Ambili).

An Economic Times Article also reports the rapid rise of users in the Music streaming app Gaana consuming K-pop. Vh1 India a music channel has dedicated a slot to cater to the needs of K-pop fans in India (Bhatt). These instances are indicative of the growing popularity of the genre within India.

On 18th December 2018 when the news of SHINee band member Kim Jong-hyun's suicide broke out the Indian K-pop fans were equally inconsolable as those across the world. For many Indian fans it was a huge blow because it was the band that initiated many in India to the world of K-pop. The screening of EXO's Exordium was postponed in Kolkata, a Christmas party organised by India Korea Friends Mumbai (IKFM) was cancelled and rescheduled with a prayer service. Prayer services were also held in Chennai, Manipur, Delhi, Bhubaneswar, Bangaluru and Kolkata (Gogoi).

On 2nd February 2019, Burn the Stage: The Movie, a film documenting the behind the scenes and performances of BTS was screened in INOXs and PVRs across India and it was met with enthusiasm by the K-pop fans in India. Hyderabad had seven shows in different theatres on that day and saw fans turn up in considerably large numbers. Even Trissur and Kochi had a screening of the film (C. Sharma).

While I've mentioned boy bands in my paper, there are popular girl bands that enjoy a huge fan following among men, but the fans appear to be more restrained and discreet compared to the fans of the boy bands. I think that given the growing popularity of Korean cultural products within India it is important to critically engage with the industry and its effects that it has in the Indian context. The rising popularity of Korean cultural products needs to be studied within the context of globalisation, the rapid proliferation of the internet and streaming network and also the cultural and social impact it has in a country like India.

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