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Cultural Relations and People-to-People Diplomacy between India and South Korea

PRACHI GAUTAM¹

ABSTRACT

Cultural diplomacy is increasingly becoming an essential pillar of global relations, not just as an instrument of soft power but as a means of creating long-term personal relationships, reconciling historical narratives, shared values, and contemporary global currents. In the Indian-South Korean relationship, these civilizational and cultural ties have created a richly textured and emotionally nuanced dimension of the bilateral relationship. While both countries have pursued strategic, economic, and technological collaboration, their civilizational and cultural ties existed prior to official diplomatic recognition and continue to enlarge in scope and depth in the 21st century.

This chapter explores the guiding principles, institutions, programs, and impacts of cultural relations and people-to-people diplomacy between South Korea and India. The chapter begins with an analysis of previous cultural relations, progressing through formal diplomatic endeavors, and to education, tourism, and outreach to diaspora, in an attempt to take a broad perspective of how culture supports ongoing development of bilateral cooperation and trust.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural diplomacy is increasingly becoming an essential pillar of global relations, not just as an instrument of soft power but as a means of creating long-term personal relationships, reconciling historical narratives, shared values, and contemporary global currents. In the Indian-South Korean relationship, these civilizational and cultural ties have created a richly textured and emotionally nuanced dimension of the bilateral relationship. While both countries have pursued strategic, economic, and technological collaboration, their civilizational and cultural ties existed prior to official diplomatic recognition and continue to enlarge in scope and depth in the 21st century.

This paper explores the guiding principles, institutions, programs, and impacts of cultural relations and people-to-people diplomacy between South Korea and India. The chapter begins with an analysis of previous cultural relations, progressing through formal diplomatic

¹ Author is a student at Amity Law School, Noida, India.

endeavors, and to education, tourism, and outreach to diaspora, in an attempt to take a broad perspective of how culture supports ongoing development of bilateral cooperation and trust.

Queen Heo Hwang-ok and the Ayodhya–Gimhae Connection

One of the most deep and symbolically dense stories underlying India-South Korea civilizational connections is the legend of Queen Heo Hwang-ok, a figure whose legend continues to influence modern cultural diplomacy. As per the 13th-century Korean Buddhist chronicle *Samguk Yusa* (삼국유사), written by the monk Il-yeon, Queen Heo was a princess of the Ayuta kingdom, which Korean scholars and most Indian historians equate with the ancient Indian city of Ayodhya, in Uttar Pradesh today. The chronicle reports that she traveled overseas in 48 CE to wed King Kim Suro, the founder of the kingdom of Gaya, in what is now South Korea's Gimhae.

While normally classified as a semi-mythical story, this one has gone beyond folklore to become a key point of cultural solidarity between the two countries. Over the past few decades, it has been promoted actively by both the Indian and South Korean states as a representation of the prehistoric kinship and early transnational relations. In a physical expression of this common heritage, a Queen Heo Memorial Park was also built in Ayodhya through the initiative of both governments. The memorial was extensively refurbished and opened during the state visit of the First Lady of the Republic of Korea, Madame Kim Jung-sook, in November 2018.

The significance of this common legend is not solely ritual; it serves as a means of emotional diplomacy. Queen Heo's symbolic influence has resulted in Ayodhya and Gimhae being twinned as sister cities, allowing cultural and educational exchange programs, memorial events, and scholarly collaborations to be carried out in the form of historical research and preservation of cultural heritage.

The story of Queen Heo Hwang-ok remains a cultural touchstone, facilitating both nations to practice diplomacy that is based on shared mythology, familial feeling, and mutual respect for tradition. It may be one of the few examples where a mytho-historical account has been incorporated so harmoniously into official bilateral diplomacy, promoting increased civil society participation alongside diplomatic engagement.²

² Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, "Press Release on First Lady's Visit to India," November 2018. Available at: <https://mea.gov.in>

II. BUDDHISM: THE SACRED CULTURAL LINK

India's ancient reputation as the land of Buddhism's birth has long fascinated Korean monks, scholars, and spiritual travelers. The spread of Buddhism from India to the Korean peninsula through China and Central Asia was not only a religious process but also a deep cultural and intellectual exchange. Among the most notable episodes of history in this transmission is that of the Korean monk Hyecho (慧超), from the Silla Dynasty, who visited India during the early 8th century.

Hyecho's travelogue, *Wang ocheonchukguk jeon* (往五天竺國傳), better known as *Memoirs of Travel to the Five Indian Kingdoms*, is a fascinating account of his four-year stay in the Indian subcontinent, which took place between 723–727 CE. The manuscript, which was found in the Dunhuang manuscripts of western China, is one of the earliest accounts of India in Korean literature. It includes such detailed accounts by Hyecho as those on Buddhist ceremonies, Indian local governance, social usages, geography, and inter-faith dynamics in medieval India in its early phase. The works also contain evidence of the lively monastic networks between India and Central Asia and East Asia during this period³.

Buddhism remains a cultural and spiritual bridge even today. Buddhist sites like Bodh Gaya, where it is believed Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment, and the ruins of Nalanda University, which was one of the world's oldest residential universities, continue to be popular places of pilgrimage and research among Korean tourists.

In addition, institutional backing of Buddhist cultural diplomacy has grown stronger in recent times. Institutions like the Korea Foundation for International Culture Exchange (KOFICE) and India's Ministry of Culture have funded a large number of Buddhist conclaves, academic exchange programs, heritage conservation initiatives, and inter-monastic debates. These interactions not only maintain shared religious practices but also support continuous soft-power diplomacy between the two countries.

Here, Buddhism is not only a question of historical connection but an ongoing, dynamic force behind India–Korea relations deepening mutual appreciation, fostering research in the social sciences, and encouraging peaceful interaction based on mutual philosophical values.

III. INSTITUTIONAL CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) and SVCC Seoul

³ Yang, Han-sung. *Memoirs of Hyecho*, Seoul: Korean Journal of Religious Studies, 1957

Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre (SVCC) in Seoul

The Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre (SVCC) in Seoul, South Korea, was officially inaugurated in 2011 under the auspices of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) — the nodal organization of India's Ministry of External Affairs mandated with the task of promoting cultural diplomacy and people-to-people contacts across the world. The setting up of the SVCC in Korea was a tactical move towards furthering India's soft power in East Asia in consonance with the overall aim of India's Look East (now Act East) Policy.

The SVCC acts as a dynamic platform for presenting India's cultural diversity and civilizational values to the Korean public. Its main activities are routine classes and workshops in yoga, Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Indian classical vocal and instrumental music, Hindi language courses, and Ayurveda awareness. These activities are usually conducted by Indian experts and are accessible to Korean citizens of all ages, leading to a deeper and more genuine appreciation of Indian cultural practices.

More importantly, this Centre plays a pivotal role in organizing **annual cultural festivals** and **commemorative events**, which include:

- **International Day of Yoga (IDY):** Celebrated annually since 2015, SVCC's IDY events welcome scores of Korean yoga enthusiasts and practitioners, sometimes in association with Seoul Metropolitan officials, local universities, and wellness centers. IDY also provides a platform for media interaction and outreach in the diplomatic sphere.
- **Gandhi Jayanti:** Commemorating the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, SVCC organizes lectures, peace marches, and exhibitions on non-violence, truth, and Gandhi's legacy, which resonate deeply with Korea's own Confucian and Buddhist ethical frameworks.
- **Tagore Jayanti:** Commemorating the birthday of Rabindranath Tagore, who has historical ties to Korea by virtue of his 1929 poem "The Lamp of the East," in which he metaphorically addressed Korea as "the light of the East." This celebration involves poetry recitals, musical performances, and seminars, establishing a rare but significant literary-cultural linkage.
- **Festival of India in Korea:** Organized every year with Indian missions and local cultural organizations, this festival across multiple cities includes Indian dance groups, theatre performances, handicrafts exhibitions, and food festivals. It attracts good participation from Korean art schools, dance institutes, and people at large.

By these activities, the SVCC does not simply "broadcast" Indian culture; instead, it and encourages exchange and interactive experience, enabling Korean participants to be immersed in experiential Indian traditions. It is focused on mutual learning and participatory cultural exploration, a departure from traditional cultural exhibitionism to mutual cultural diplomacy.

In addition, the Centre frequently collaborates with Korean universities, including Seoul National University, Yonsei University, and Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, to stage lecture series, film screenings, and academic symposia on Indian philosophy, heritage, and contemporary society. These collaborations aim to bridge the extramural interface of formal diplomacy and academic exchange to create a strong ecosystem for Indo-Korean cultural understanding.

The work of SVCC has helped raise cultural literacy regarding India in Korea, particularly among young people. They have also given Indian diaspora and professionals in Korea a cultural anchor and community. SVCC's activities support ICCR's general mission to "promote and strengthen cultural relations and mutual understanding between India and other countries."⁴

IV. HALLYU: THE KOREAN WAVE IN INDIA

The Korean Wave or Hallyu has emerged as a leading force that is redefining the urban Indian cultural scenario over the last ten years. Once confined to niche groups of enthusiasts, the appeal of Korean dramas (K-dramas), music (K-pop), films, fashion, and food has increased dramatically among Indian youth between the ages of 15 and 35. What was once a fan-driven curiosity has now developed into a mass cultural phenomenon, influencing consumerism, digital media trends, fashion choices, and even language learning options⁵.

The worldwide popularity of K-dramas like *Crash Landing on You*, *Itaewon Class*, *Vincenzo*, and *Goblin* all streaming on platforms like Netflix, Viki, and YouTube has opened the eyes of Indian viewers to the emotional complexity, visual narrative, and cultural references of Korean TV shows. This is not by chance. Korean shows appeal to Indian sensibilities because they focus on family relationships, emotional narrative, moral dilemma, and romantic idealism—techniques that have been the mainstay of Indian television and films for years, too.

Parallely, K-Pop has also become a cultural force in India, with acts such as BTS, BLACKPINK, EXO, and SEVENTEEN developing a sizable and passionate Indian fanbase. Indian fans, themselves frequently self-organized into online groups such as Bangtan India, K-

⁴ Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), "Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre – Seoul," <https://iccr.gov.in>

⁵ Kim, S. (1970) *Hallyu 2.0: Aiming for mainstream status in India and South Asia*, SpringerLink. Available at: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-16-8710-5_2 (Accessed: 30 April 2025).

High India, Indian K-Armies, and Indian Blink Union, aggressively promote Korean music and culture through dance covers, reaction videos, fan meets, and charity drives. For example, on the birthday of BTS member Jimin in 2022, Indian fans conducted a food donation campaign in five cities showing how K-pop fandom goes beyond entertainment and encourages social interaction. The craze of Korean cuisine is widely increasing and gaining popularity among Indians⁶.

According to a **2024 report**, the number of travelers to South Korea **increased** largely driven by curiosity about Hallyu and Korean lifestyle culture. This increase includes students, solo travelers, and K-pop fans seeking to attend concerts, visit K-drama filming locations, and explore authentic Korean cuisine.⁷

Digital Fan Culture and Grassroots Mobilization in India

The rapid growth of Hallyu in India is organic, spearheaded more by digital grassroots communities than by institutional efforts. Social media sites such as Instagram, Twitter (X), YouTube, and Telegram have provided a space for the fans to act as cultural ambassadors to produce and curate content around subtitled videos, memes, tutorials on Korean skincare practices, and guides to Korean honorifics and etiquette. Fan-led events such as:

- **K-pop dance covers**
- **Birthday cafés and cupsleeve events**
- **Online K-drama watch parties**
- **Fan art exhibitions and merchandise swaps**

These are now widespread in metros such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Kolkata, and Pune. These fan clubs, sometimes self-subsidized, have become offline cultural mini-worlds in which Indian youth have a direct, real-time interaction with Korean language, beauty, and ethics. Surprisingly, even many of these fans are taking up Korean language classes or trying their hand at the TOPIK (Test of Proficiency in Korean), reflecting a sustained interest in Korean society above entertainment.

Further, fandoms have shifted towards the socially responsible direction. Initiatives like "One in an ARMY" (Indian Chapter) promote philanthropic giving, blood donation

⁶ *Korean Wave: Made in Korea, gorged and loved in India* (2021) *Hindustan Times*. Available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/lifestyle/art-culture/korean-wave-made-in-korea-gorged-and-loved-in-india-101630670553337.html> (Accessed: 30 April 2025).

⁷ J. (2025) *South Korea: Inbound tourism statistics 2024*, *Statista*. Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/709116/south-korea-inbound-visitors/> (Accessed: 30 April 2025).

campaigns, and eco-cleanup activities. Such a conversion of fandom to being a medium of civic activism is a developing soft power phenomenon and has been cited by the Korean embassy in India as "an example of real cultural diplomacy from the grassroots"⁸.

Academic and Strategic Implications of Hallyu in India

Hallyu's effects have also found their way to academic and policymaking circles in India. Various Indian universities such as JNU, Delhi University, and Amity University have launched Korean Studies with an emphasis on Korea's cultural export approaches, K-dramas as cultural texts, and K-pop's geopolitical effects.

At a strategic level, the popularity of Korean culture in India has favorable implications for South Korea's New Southern Policy, which calls for closer people-to-people exchanges with nations in the Indo-Pacific, specifically India. This overlap of culture and strategy allows the two nations to formalize cultural passion into diplomatic influence, opening up new areas of collaboration in media content, co-branding, and digital learning platforms⁹.

V. INDIAN CULTURAL VISIBILITY IN SOUTH KOREA

India's cultural influence in South Korea has been increasingly increasing, although on a lesser scale than that of other major cultures. Bollywood movies, most notably *3 Idiots* and *Dangal*, have discovered strong fan bases in South Korea, primarily among students of universities. Bollywood movies have not only been embraced due to their entertainment potential but also because they present themes of hope, endurance, and learning, which touch the Korean masses significantly.

Besides, the popularity of Indian food has been increasing steadily, with increasing interest in dishes such as biryani, dosa, and curry. Currently, there are more than 200 Indian restaurants running throughout South Korea, especially in large urban areas such as Seoul, Busan, and Daejeon. The restaurants not only serve the Indian expatriates but also draw local Koreans who are keen to experience various culinary cultures.

Cultural groups like the Indian Students and Researchers in Korea (INSK) and the Friends of India–Korea Network in Seoul have also played a big part in the promotion of Indian culture. They conduct regular celebrations of major Indian festivals like Diwali, Holi, and Onam. These

⁸ Mukherjee, R. (2020) *K-pop boyband BTS' Fanclub Army is raising over rs 3 lakh for a night school in India*, News18. Available at: <https://www.news18.com/news/buzz/k-pop-boyband-bts-fanclub-army-is-raising-over-rs-3-lakh-for-a-night-school-in-india-for-kim-namjoons-birthday-2857773.html> (Accessed: 30 April 2025).

⁹ (No date) *South Korea beyond northeast asia: How Seoul is deepening ties with India and ASEAN | Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/10/south-korea-beyond-northeast-asia-how-seoul-is-deepening-ties-with-india-and-asean?lang=en> (Accessed: 30 April 2025).

festivals, which are attended by both Indian expatriates and interested Koreans, promote Indian tradition, art, music, and cuisine, further enhancing cross-cultural interaction between the two countries.

A. Education and Youth Engagement

Academic Exchange Programs

South Korea has emerged as a favorite among Indian students who wish to pursue higher studies. The Global Korea Scholarship (GKS), which is a highly competitive government-sponsored scholarship, has witnessed more and more Indian students receiving scholarships. These students are mostly studying for degrees in areas such as international trade, engineering, robotics, and Korean studies. Studying in South Korea is extremely sought after because of the technological advancements in the country and its increasing global presence.

Concurrently, South Korea has also emerged as a destination for Indian institutions to foster academic exchange. South Korean universities are increasingly hosting Indian students who want to study culture, particularly in subjects such as Korean language and Korean history, thereby becoming a hub for cross-cultural conversation and academic interaction.

At the same time, one trend worth noticing is the increasing number of Korean students studying at Indian universities. The popularity of courses in Sanskrit, Buddhist philosophy, and yoga studies has been especially high, with Korean students keenly interested in pursuing these ancient Indian subject areas. This increasing exchange of scholars is creating an enhanced understanding of both cultures¹⁰.

King Sejong Institutes and Korean Language in India

India also witnesses a rapid increase in Korean language interest that is actively boosted by King Sejong Institutes. These Korean education institutes, set up to learn Korean, have spread all over the nation. There are currently seven King Sejong Institutes with major centers set up at some of the important institutions such as Jawaharlal Nehru University, and University of Delhi. The institutes provide an orderly setting for Indians to learn Korean and familiarize themselves with Korean culture.

The Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK) also witnessed an exponential rise in applications from India by a whopping 10 times in the period 2015 to 2023. This spurt is testimony to the emerging popularity of the Korean language and culture, in addition to rising numbers of Indian students looking to study or pursue employment in South Korea.

¹⁰ *Study in Korea* – www.studyinkorea.go.kr

B. Diaspora and Local Community Engagement

Indian Diaspora in South Korea

As per the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of India, as of the latest available statistics, there are about 13,236 Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) in South Korea. There are also 349 Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs), making the total Indian diaspora in South Korea 13,585 people. The Indian diaspora in South Korea is heterogeneous and includes students, IT professionals, researchers, entrepreneurs, and their families. Large cities such as Seoul, Busan, and Daejeon have large Indian populations. Groups like the Indian Students and Researchers in Korea (INSK) and the India-Korea Friendship Society are actively involved in cultural and community activities, promoting strong bonds between the Indian diaspora and the Korean community.¹¹

The Indian diaspora in South Korea is extremely active and is involved to a great extent in hosting population. Indian festivals are widely celebrated in major cities, with Diwali being celebrated at Yonsei University, Republic Day celebrations at the Indian Embassy, and other cultural fairs attracting both Indian expatriates and Korean locals. The festivals are a place of intercultural celebration, where Indian and Korean participants alike partake in shared traditions.

Organizations such as the Korea Tamil Sangam and the India-Korea Friendship Society are instrumental in organizing reciprocal cultural events that foster knowledge of both cultures. The events usually consist of classical music and dance performances, food festivals, and education seminars, and they facilitate a sense of community among the diaspora and Koreans.

VI. KOREAN DIASPORA IN INDIA

Parallel to this, there has been a growing presence of the Korean diaspora in India. There are about 12,500 Koreans in India as of 2024. Prominent centers of the Korean diaspora in India are Chennai, where Hyundai Motors and other Korean firms have operations, Delhi NCR, and Bangalore. The growing number of Korean professionals and entrepreneurs in India has also solidified the connection between the two nations.¹²

The InKo Centre in Chennai, a leading cultural center, has been at the forefront of popularizing Korean culture in India. It hosts film festivals, Korean language classes, and exhibitions of traditional Korean art, which introduce Indians to the cultural diversity of Korea. These cultural

¹¹ *Population of overseas indians | ministry of external affair*. Available at: <https://www.mea.gov.in/population-of-overseas-indians.htm> (Accessed: 30 April 2025).

¹² *India-ROK consular relations (no date) emblem*. Available at: <https://indembassyseoul.gov.in/india-rok-consular-relations> (Accessed: 30 April 2025).

activities have popularized Korean arts and culture among the general population in India, leading to increased interaction between the two nations.

Apart from the institutional activities of the Korean Cultural Centre India (KCCI), the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in India actively engages in grassroots cultural diplomacy by way of innovative outreach programs like the Korea–India Dosti Supporters Program. Introduced in 2016, this program empowers Indian youth as digital envoys of Korean culture and asks them to participate in monthly tasks involving content creation, social media promotion, participating in cultural events as volunteers, and reaching out to the public. They are awarded certification and rewards, and are engaged in a bilateral cultural spirit of friendship and respect. Accompanying this effort is the yearly flagship cultural festival Rang De Korea, co-hosted by the Korean Embassy and KCCI. This colorful event is a mix of traditional Korean performances, fusion music, K-pop dance competitions, food tasting sessions, and art exhibitions in major Indian cities. Not only does it reveal Korea's cultural wealth but also offers a participatory space for Indian viewers to engage with Hallyu and Korean traditional aesthetics in equal measure. Combined, these shows represent a model of youth-led, participatory public diplomacy, powerfully enriching the India–Korea cultural relationship at the civil society level.

VII. CONCLUSION

The people-to-people diplomacy and cultural relations between South Korea and India depict a dynamic and progressive friendship based on mutual values, empathy, and shared history. What was initiated centuries ago with the sharing of cultural and spiritual ideas via Buddhism and mythology has grown into a modern-day relationship nurtured by both grassroots energy as well as government efforts.

Today, this relationship flourishes not just in the spheres of policy and diplomacy but also in the daily lives of people—be it through K-pop flash mobs in Mumbai or Diwali festivities in Seoul. This living cultural bridge is no longer symbolic; it is a dynamic and participatory space that encourages greater mutual understanding and respect.

The Indian Korean Wave (Hallyu) is an influential case study of how culture can cross geographical, linguistic, and political lines. Its universal appeal—brought about through emotional narrative, aesthetic refinement, and digital presence—has led to real interest and respect for Korean culture from Indian youth. Anything but a short-lived phenomenon, Hallyu has become an important cultural force with real educational, diplomatic, and economic consequences.

As India and South Korea further deepen their strategic cooperation in the broader Indo-Pacific context, the momentum created by people-to-people exchanges offers a singular and opportune moment. It enables people's diplomacy, with art, media, education, and community building serving as the basis for sustained cooperation and international collaboration.

Finally, this cultural symbiosis is not merely a reflection of friendship, but rather a progressive model of international engagement, based on shared heritage and driven by mutual aspiration.
