

India and South Korea: Cultural ties between two liberal nations

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South Korea, officially the Republic of Korea (ROK), has emerged as one of the world's major economies since the partition of the Korean peninsula in 1945. In the four decades following the signing of the 1953 Armistice, South Korea underwent a historic transformation from an agrarian society into an industrial leader and an affluent nation. Parallel to the growing economic relations between India and South Korea, including trade and investment, there has been an unusual surge in cultural ties and people-to-people connections.

Reflective of this, South Korean First Lady Kim Jung-sook visited Ayodhya as the chief guest of the Uttar Pradesh government during Deepotsva (lighting of lamps) celebrations in November 2018. As per the popular legends in South Korea, Ayodhya, the birthplace of Lord Ram, has a century-old connection with the island nation dating back to 48 AD, roughly 2000 years ago. The founding Queen of the Karak dynasty in the South Korean city of Kimhae, Huh Hwang-ok, was originally from Ayodhya, and her Indian name was Suriratna. According to ancient Korean text, *Samgyuk Yusa*, also known as *Samgyuk Saki*, the Ayodhya princess, travelled by boat to South Korea and founded the Karak dynasty after her marriage to the local ruler, King Kim-Suro. Interestingly, a large number of Koreans trace their ancestry to the legendary Queen, the Indian princess Suriratna.

As the Indian connection gained popularity, the mayor of Kimhae took the initiative to develop Ayodhya and Kimhae as the two sister cities and set up a memorial for Queen Huh Hwang-ok in Ayodhya. The unveiling of the Queen's Memorial in 2001 was attended by over 100 academicians and government representatives. South Koreans who claim the Karak lineage visit the site in Ayodhya every year to pay homage to the Queen in her motherland.

Apart from the popular South Korean legends, the travelogue of a young Korean Buddhist monk named Hyecho, who visited India in 724, also provides a rich description of Indian culture, society, politics, and history. Likewise, Rabindranath Tagore had a significant impact on building cultural relations between two civilizations. Through his writings, he not only tried to define how Indian (Asian) understanding of 'nationhood' was different from the West but also inspired the Korean youths to fight against the 'cultural annihilation' by the coloniser.

Topping them all, the growing popularity of 'K-culture' viz., K-pop (*BTS & Blackpink*), K-drama (*Squid Games*), food, drinks, and skincare has resulted in the soft emergence of a new marketplace without state intervention. In Delhi, *Majnu ka Tila* is the place for 'K-Culture'; cafes, food joints, drinks, and K-products are metaphorically recreating the love story between two civilizations, akin to the legendary Princess Suriratna and King Kim Suro.

In the past years, the Indian Cultural Centre's (ICC) has been actively engaged in organising the International Day of Yoga, celebrating Tagore Jayanti, Gandhi Jayanti, and many other festivals in

India in its efforts to foster people-to-people connections. Besides, it has also been conducting classical and Bollywood dance classes for Korean students to popularise Indian culture. Moreover, POSCO Asia Fellowships and KGSP have been instrumental in promoting and sponsoring Indian students to study and do research in Korea. The Korean Cultural Centre, while reciprocating similar sentiments, has been regularly conducting language classes, academic conferences, and cultural activities (*kimchi* making, movie screenings, *Hangeul* Day) to deepen bilateral ties.

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