

K-Culture In Tamil Nadu: A Very Serious Pursuit



Tamil Nadu is believed to have an ancient connection with Korea; now, many have built careers around Korean language and culture



| Photo: Indira Kumar

Shahina K. K.

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K-culture in Tamil Nadu isn't just a fleeting trend; it's a serious pursuit for many, who have built careers around Korean language and culture. What makes Tamil Nadu even more unique is its ancient, often overlooked, connection to Korea.

For 34-year-old Dr Pavithra Tamizharashu, a single woman and diabetologist from Chennai, K-pop and K-dramas aren't just entertainment—they've redefined her life and reshaped her family's worldview. Her 62-year-old mother, who has also embraced K-dramas with gusto, now fully supports Pavithra's love for Korean culture—even to the point of encouraging an international match for her unmarried daughter. "Recently, Amma told me she wouldn't mind if I married a Korean guy. In fact, she advised me to marry and settle in Korea," Pavithra says with a smile, recalling the surprising transformation in her mother. Once an ordinary homemaker from rural Tamil Nadu, her mother has fully immersed herself in the world of Korean culture, embracing it with unexpected passion.

Pavithra was introduced to K-dramas ten years ago during her final year of MBBS. "It was such a hard time; we had to work as resident doctors, posted for duty day and night. The short intervals we got weren't enough to chill out with friends. Watching a series or a movie was the only escape to the world outside," recalls Pavithra.



Budea jigae, a hotpot dish served at Asseo Korean restaurants in Chennai | Photo: Indira Kumar

She initially enjoyed Japanese anime but soon shifted her focus to Korean dramas. *Boys Over Flowers* was her first favourite series and she recalls the name without hesitation.

"Most girls my age, especially those pursuing professional courses like medicine, were fascinated by K-dramas. It wasn't just entertainment but also a huge stress relief—the emotions, the relationships, the way men treated women—everything felt so different in K-dramas," she explains.

Pavithra's love for K-dramas has since influenced her entire family. Both her mother and father, as well as her sister, are now avid fans. "Watching K-dramas has become our family time. We watch them together. Even with my busy schedule, they patiently wait for me. My mother even calls to promise she won't watch the next episode without me," she shares. For her, K-culture is no longer just about entertainment; it has become an emotional connection that brings her family closer.

Pavithra is one of the 3,000-odd members of K Wave India, a K-club in Chennai that was formally launched in 2014. "The group existed even before that. We initially formed a club of people who loved K-culture called the Dorama Club. In 2014, we rebranded it as K Wave India with support from the Korean government," explains Sanjay Ramjhi, the president of K Wave India. Starting with just 20-30 members, the club has grown into a large collective of K-culture enthusiasts, including students, doctors, engineers, techies, artists and others from all walks of life.



Dolls dressed in traditional Hanbok wedding costumes at Inko gift shop | Photo: Indira Kumar

Sanjay, a Korean interpreter by profession, discovered his love for K-culture in his early 20s. Like Pavithra, he was initially fascinated by Japanese anime before transitioning to Korean drama and music. At that time, he struggled to find others with a similar interest. "I started searching for like-minded people on Orkut and found a few. Together, we formed a group named the Dorama Club," says Sanjay. "Dorama is the Japanese word for drama. It was a club for people who loved Asian culture. People of our tribe could easily connect, which is why I chose that name." But over time, most members shifted from Japanese anime to K-pop and K-dramas, leading to the birth of K Wave India.

Sanjay began learning the Korean language in 2011, though he never intended to make it a career. "I started learning Korean so I could watch K-dramas without subtitles. Eventually, I began working as an interpreter for people coming from Korea," he shares.

Many other members of K Wave India are also fluent in Korean. Take Surekha, an MBA graduate who unexpectedly found herself pursuing a career as a Korean interpreter. A devoted fan of K-pop and K-dramas for over a decade, she started learning Korean while pursuing her chartered accountancy (CA) during the Covid-19 pandemic. "The pandemic changed my destiny...During the lockdown, I suddenly had a lot of free time," she says. She decided to make use of the time and began learning Korean. Initially, it was difficult for her parents to accept her decision to give up her career in CA and Business Management. "As I learned more, I started exploring career prospects, including the scope of working as a Korean translator. Then, opportunities began to come my way," says Surekha. "There are many Korean companies operating in India and they all need translators. The pay is also quite good," she adds. Surekha was one of the winners of the Korean Speech Contest held last year. The winners from India were given the chance to participate in the global contest organised by the Korean government, which included a week-long stay and tour in the mother country. For Surekha, as for many other young people associated with the K-club in Tamil Nadu, the passion for K-culture has become a life-changing experience.

K-food Takes Over Tamil Nadu

Though the members of K Wave India do not have a physical space to meet, a Korean restaurant in Chennai serves as their home. Samchon Bunsik, known for its "authentic Korean street food," is a favourite hangout spot for the city's K-pop lovers. Located in Kamraj Nagar, Samchon Bunsik opened earlier this year and has become a popular destination for Korean food enthusiasts. Twenty-four-year-old Juanita, a graduate in food engineering and an employee at the restaurant, dreams of becoming a popular K-pop singer. Born and raised in West Bengal, Juanita moved to Tamil Nadu to study food engineering. "Like every other Indian student, I chose engineering, but later realised where my true passion lies," says Juanita. She's happy working in a Korean restaurant for obvious reasons. "A country, language, culture and music to my heart—working here brings me closer to my passion of becoming a K-pop singer," she adds.

While many Indian youngsters dream of travelling to Korea to meet their favourite singers, for those in Tamil Nadu, the love for Korea is well-entrenched when it comes to charting career plans too.

"Chennai has a large number of people who love Korean cuisine," says Girish, manager of Aeseo, a Korean restaurant offering authentic Korean food in Chennai. Chennai also has a sizeable population of Korean nationals working in the automobile industry, making Korean cuisine familiar to many in the city. Girish says that the recently opened restaurant has received a positive response from customers.

The Ancient Korean Connection

Tamil Nadu is believed to have an ancient connection with Korea, unlike the rest of the country. According to popular belief, a princess from Tamil Nadu, who lived 2,000 years ago, married the Korean King, Kim Suro. Princess Chembavalam travelled to Korea, where she is said to have established a federation of states with her ministers and royal servants before marrying the king. Dr Narayanan Kannan, a historian who authored the book *Korean Connection*, sheds light on the historical ties between Tamil Nadu and Korea. He explains that the young princess sailed to Korea and established the Kaya Confederation.

Some scholars say that Tamil and Korean languages share striking similarities. Around 500 words in both languages are closely similar in meaning. "We use Amma and Appa to refer to parents. In Korean, they also use the same terms," says Sanjay Ramjhi. He also points out the lack of a memorial or museum in Tamil Nadu dedicated to this ancient connection, which includes political and trade relationships with Korea.

Inko Centre: The Place to Learn Language and Culture

"The Inko Centre was set up in 2006 to promote intercultural dialogue between India and South Korea through the performing and visual arts, language, literature, traditional wellness and information provision," says Dr Rathi Jafer, Director of Inko Centre. She explains that the opening of Hyundai Motor India in Sriperumbudur, about 10 years before the Centre's founding, played a vital role in strengthening ties between India and Korea. At the time, Hyundai's investment was the largest foreign direct investment (FDI) in India. The automobile industry in Tamil Nadu helped fuel the promotion of Korean culture and language. While K-culture enthusiasts in other states operate mainly through WhatsApp groups, establishments like Hyundai Motors and Inko Centre in Tamil Nadu provide substantial support. The Inko Centre promotes cultural exchange by hosting art and music performances and offering Korean language courses. "We are researching the ancient links between South India and Korea, exploring mythology, history, language, Buddhism, maritime connections, trade and commercial links. We hope to publish our findings as a set of critical essays soon," says Dr Jafer.

In Tamil Nadu, the fascination with Korean culture, language and art is no passing trend or fashion statement. K-Club members pursue it with dedication and many aspire to build careers around the Korean language and culture. While many youngsters in India dream of travelling to Korea to meet their favourite singers, for those in Tamil Nadu, the love for Korea appears to be well entrenched when it comes to charting career plans too.

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