

Chennai

Echoes from an exile

A performative installation brings back a lesser-known history, of an Indian-Korean connect, at the Lalit Kala Akademi



'Limits of Change' is an ongoing performative exhibition P Ravikumar

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Around 2,000 years ago, Sembavalam, Princess of Ayuta, a Pandian kingdom, embarked on a sea voyage to Korea from Tamil Nadu. The journey aimed at strengthening political and economic ties between the Tamil kingdom and Korean kingdom of Gaya. This sea route was traced once again in 1953. Six thousand Indian Army soldiers from then-Madras arrived at the 38th parallel — the North and South Korean border. The military formed the Custodian Force India (CFI) to manage and repatriate 23,000 North Korean Prisoners of War (POWs) after the Korean War.

The prisoners and the army were in a barbed wire enclosure called Hind Nagar at the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The armed force's role was to safeguard and facilitate the return of POWs to North or South Korea or a third country. History, in its own way, repeated itself. Centuries apart, these Indo-Korean connections, distant yet intertwined histories, are now the focus of a unique performative art installation. The exhibition 'Limits of Change' was commissioned, supported, and presented by the Inko Centre, a nonprofit centre exploring Indian and Korean culture. It seamlessly blended visual, literary, and performing arts, retelling the lives involved in the repatriation process through diary entries written by Major General TNR Nayar, also known as Captain N in the act.

This show was conceptualised by Captain N's daughter Parvathi Nayar, a multidisciplinary visual artiste, and her niece Nayantara Nayar. Parvathi shares, "The show is a slice of forgotten Indo-Korean history, and still seems

relevant to talk about these ideas. It's about looking at the past in a way to understand the present because these issues — finding home and identity, cyclical violence and the importance of forgiveness — keep coming up. These are things which are still so relevant in today's world."

The exhibition sheds light on independent India's first international military expedition showcasing archival photographs, records of strategic discussions among soldiers, and documented meetings with POWs. To get the facts, Parvathi spent six years researching CFI's role in the DMZ, retracing her father's footsteps in the places he once walked. She says, "The tour to DMZ was a little spooky and uncanny. My father actually walked in these places and it's very different now. This was a space where my father was. It felt very close and good to go there."



The exhibition is put together by Parvathi Nayar, a multidisciplinary visual artiste, and her niece Nayantara Nayar P Ravikumar

Artistic resonance

The 'Story Museum' unfolds across nine rooms, featuring intricate artworks — origami birds, tattoo designs, barbed wire installations, and a 3D model contrasting the DMZ's past and present. In the words of Captain N, "A land, which is charred, broken, smoky ruins. The DMZ was the worst in the world. The area was nothing but bare, blasted and broken Earth. Nothing will grow here for many many years, if ever." Today, the 'once broken land' has transformed into a thriving habitat for over 6,000 wildlife species, including the red-crowned crane, Amur leopard, and Siberian tiger.

Each artwork provides an immersive experience, offering a deeper look into the lives of those who lived through these events. "It is a collaborative effort. Parvathi was looking at the artistic expressions and I was looking at the story's dramatisation and working with the actors. We felt the need to make the designs (artworks) community-driven or involving more than one artiste project. And I always love the conversions of multi-arts, where lots of creative strengths come in," says Yog Japee, the project's director.

Hence, the team opened it to individuals, colleges, and business firms to pitch artwork ideas. As a result, the entire barbed wire installation was done by an engineering firm. "The intent was to try and bring you as close to the human experience," says Yog, adding "We want as many senses of yours to experience what happened decades ago at the border. You are watching videos, listening to the actors' lines, and reading the texts on the wall, all at the same time while each input has its potential towards what it does to your span of

while each input has its potential towards what it does to your span of attention and experience."

The storytelling is a blend of fiction and facts. Parvathi believes, "Fiction allows you to explore a very deep and profound truth." While the events mentioned in the narration are factually right, Parvathi says, "It (the act) did not necessarily happen to the same person but all the events did happen in the history."

In his diary, the Major General wrote about change. It reads, "My experience is that changes are eternal and may even be great and far-reaching; but they also have limits. When such limits are transgressed, even benevolent changes are apt to become self-defeating... Those inconsequential changes which merely give a facade of modernity are decisively to be avoided".

On forgiveness, also written in N's diary, Yog shares, "The line 'forgiveness is easier than you think' said by Captain N, takes a while to sink in. It may resonate with you later. To touch another human being is what we are trying to achieve across art forms." More such thought-provoking lines are woven into the performance. The dialogues, setups of each room, and the artworks will leave you with lingering reflections on history and humanity.

'Limits of Change' is on at Lalit Kala Akademi until February 20.

Dates for your Dairy

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The Turtle Trail

InKo Centre with the Academy of Korean Studies, Korea and support from the Korean Cultural Centre, New Delhi, brings together researchers to examine the deep-rooted links between Korea and India, both the ancient trajectories as well as the modern manifestations of what is a significant ongoing intercultural dialogue titled The Turtle Trail – Indo-Korean ties from antiquity to the contemporary: a new perspective, the project aims to include the historical, linguistic, religious, trade, commercial as well as cultural links between India and Korea, with a particular focus on southern South Korea (particularly the Gaya kingdom, the current day Gimhae region) and Southern India (particularly the ancient Ai kingdom, the current day region stretching from Kanyakumari to Trivandrum).

The project aims, through rigorous research, to position the southern sea routes from India to Korea as the genesis of a relationship that starting in circa 48 CE – with the marriage of the legendary Princess Heo Hwang-ok to King Suro of the Gaya kingdom – continued to manifest itself across time and over myriad forms and routes of interaction.

Twelve researchers from Korea, India, Malaysia and Canada will be working on this project and will share their research findings at a workshop in Chennai on February 7–9, 2018. For further information, T: 044-24361224; enquiries@inkocentre.org
