

‘NAMASTE HALLYU!’: K-CULTURE AND THE RISE OF BTS - ARMY IN INDIA

Sneha Ganguly

Introduction

The Korean wave or ‘Hallyu’ as coined by the Chinese media refers to the popularity of Korean popular culture that initially dominated China and later spread to East and Southeast Asia in the late 1990s.¹ Since then there have been multiple such waves and South Korea has emerged as a “new center for the production of transnational pop culture, exporting a range of cultural products to neighbouring Asian countries.”² Over the years, its effects were felt across the world. Scholars have tried to understand the reason for its popularity and its effects on international policies in terms of hegemonic structures that exist between countries. This is in the context of post-colonial relationships between West and Asia and the economic crisis that the country saw in the late 1990s. As per the Swaddle – a Health, Gender, and Culture Magazine – podcast titled *Hello Hallyu*, researcher Raghavan explains Hallyu is “popular not just because the public liked it. There was a lot of government support... it started because the government realised that it could be exported — a soft power that could be exported...”³ The export of Korean pop culture and its underlying soft power was possible because of globalization.⁴ Digital access in a globalised world not only allowed one to explore different cultures but also for people across the world to connect and be part of a fandom. Fandom here refers to a state of being where people with common interest enthusiastically come together to form a community. Fandom culture is the compressed form of deepest possible loyalty. The work of Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto in the context of transcultural fandom is of some importance. They argue that “while national identity and transnational historical and socio-political contexts may inform fannish pursuits, this is neither necessarily the case nor the only possible mode of transcultural fan engagement...transcultural fans become fans because of affinities of affect between the fan, in his/her various contexts, and the border-crossing object. In so doing, we eschew the term ‘transnational,’ with its implicit privileging of a national orientation that supersedes other - arguably more salient - subject positions. Rather, we favour the term ‘transcultural,’ which at once is flexible. As will be clear in the subsequent sections, the case study of north-east region of India also allows us to indicate that national orientation plays a limiting role, or in this case, it is the attempt to break free from the perceptions and treatments of the ‘mainlanders’ that informs the affinity towards K-culture.”⁵

Any conversation around fandom in the 21st century would be incomplete without mentioning *Bangtan Sonyeondan* popularly known as BTS, who have emerged as a global cultural phenomenon - and their fandom ARMY (Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth). K-pop’s popularity in the West is examined through the frameworks of immigrant culture and Asian Diasporas but that is not the case in India.⁶

A part of a larger passion project, this paper aims to trace the trajectory of K-culture in the Indian subcontinent and the subsequent transformation especially with the rise of BTS and its fandom, ARMY. This paper is informed by my training in historical research, as well as my subjective fan experience wherein I try to understand the issues of identity and culture through the lens of BTS Army. While scholars have given plethora of reasons for the popularity of BTS, discourses around their music and their fandom is limited and this paper will introduce this issue briefly.⁷ However, before we delve deeper into trying to understand the rise of BTS and the questions related to fandom and the stereotypes around them, it would be important to understand the earliest inroads of 'Hallyu' to India, specifically the north-eastern regions as it is linked to the issue of initial popularity of K-everything.

'Hallyu' and India: The Dawning of a New Era

The 'Korean Wave' first made its presence felt in the north-eastern parts of India, specifically Manipur. Scholars are unanimous in their opinion that globalisation and liberalisation had a huge role to play in the way the two countries interacted and Hallyu in India, before 2010, was in two main phases - distinct but also complementary in nature: economic and cultural.⁸

The onset of liberalisation in the 1990s made the market lucrative for companies like Hyundai, LG, Daewoo, and Samsung. Pohang Iron and Steel Co. Ltd (POSCO), the fifth largest steelmaker in the world, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the government of Odisha in the year 2005.⁹ As part of the economic exchanges between Korea and India, a plan was made to set up a steel plant in Paradip, Jajpur district. It was supposed to be the biggest foreign direct investment (FDI) with its initial investment of \$12 billion in steel plants but due to political unrest, the plan is yet to see the light of the day.¹⁰ The second wave, which was mostly cultural, reached the shores of India slightly later than other Asian countries. It is argued that sometimes economic linkages between countries bring in conflict but it also urges people to get familiar with other cultures for various reasons including better job opportunities.¹¹

Scholars have discussed the implications of the opening of the market and investments by Korean companies and setting up of Korean language centres, which would then attract numerous of language experts as well as tourists and facilitate job opportunities. Further, Chennai, which has the largest overseas plant of Hyundai motors, saw InKo Centre (2006), jointly set up by TVS India Ltd. and Hyundai Motors India Ltd, and act as a Korean Culture Centre, taking up the task of imparting Korean Language and Culture.¹² Therefore, one cannot really separate the economic from the cultural. In 2006, a Korean delegation with the intention to spread 'Hallyu' came to India. As part of that effort, for the first time in its history, Korean dramas were broadcasted on DD1. For instance, the drama titled *Hae-sin* (Sea God) or as known in English - "Emperor of the Sea" aired in 2005-2006 was broadcasted on DD 1 on 23rd July 2006. Another hit drama titled *Dae Jang Geum* or "Jewel in the Palace" set in the historic *Joseon* period and based on the life of Jang-geum; the first female royal physician was again aired on DD1 on 24th September 2006. The series portrayed the traditional culture of Korea and was an attempt to make the audience aware about the cultural richness of the country.¹³ In the context of regions like Tamil Nadu and Hyderabad, which also saw a rise in the popularity of K-content, the setting up of Korean cultural centres and access to cable networks with dubbed Korean dramas made it possible for a wider group of people, albeit located in metropolises, to consume it and further spread the Hallyu wave. In the second episode of the aforementioned Swaddle podcast, there was an interview with Mansi Shrivastav, Senior Vice President of Content Acquisition at MX Player which offers K-drama with subtitles in regional Indian languages. She highlighted that K-drama were being watched by serious consumers, leading them

to provide them in more regional languages, starting with Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, etc. The translation into a regional language led to the popularity of the most unexpected programs.¹⁴

'Hallyu' and north-east India: The Making of a New 'Counter' Culture?

While the rest of the country was experiencing the onset of the Korean wave from 2006 onwards, Manipur and other regions of the north-east had already felt it at the same time as experienced by other Asian countries like China, Hong Kong, Japan, and Taiwan.¹⁵ What made the environment conducive for people to be receptive to Korean content? There were many factors at play, one of the most important reasons being the introduction of cable networks. In Manipur, the rise of insurgency and the call for a separate socialist state had far-reaching effects in the sphere of media consumption. In the year 2000, the underground-armed political group, the Revolutionary People's Front (RPF), the political wing of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), in an attempt to resist forced occupation by the armed forces and restore the freedom in the state, banned the distribution and screening of Hindi satellite channels and movies.¹⁶ Scholars have studied how cinema can be a tool of nation building and an agent of cultural change.¹⁷ Therefore, it is not surprising that in the context of the larger history of the north-east region, attempts to bring Manipuri society closer to mainland India was met with suspicion, especially when some of the communities identify themselves to a greater degree with cultures and traditions of Southeast and East Asia. It is against this background that the locals viewed the Hindi channels and movies with suspicion, which they thought represented the "feudal nature of Indian society," and was undermining the culture of Manipur, colonising the people through means of cultural imperialism. Thus, they were banned.¹⁸

The only exception was the state-run and controlled DD channel, the first Indian cable network to display Korean dramas. The ban of cable networks left a void that was quickly filled by locally produced Manipuri films, ISTV - Manipur's only private channel, and Arirang TV, a Korean satellite channel airing Korean shows. The geographical location of Manipur further allowed for greater interaction with Myanmar that facilitated the circulation of mostly illegal and pirated copies of K-dramas, films and music.¹⁹ While some argued "Manipur (had) *founda* Seoul-mate in Korean culture," others were of the opinion that it led to a different kind of media and cultural imperialism leading to "significant and multiple impacts on the daily lives of Manipuris."²⁰ Like in the previous waves, the role of cable networks, or in the context of the present Hallyu wave, 'over the top' (OTT) platforms is of extreme importance. It helps in familiarising people with the Korean culture, which then facilitates consumption of other types of Korean cultural products including music, cuisine, games, beauty and lifestyle products etc. Netflix reported a 370% increase in the viewership of K-dramas from India in 2020 in comparison to previous year. from the previous year. If we take in the case of New Delhi, India's capital, not only has there been a surge of Korean eateries and cafes but also opening up of enterprises like Tira Beauty, making it accessible for people to purchase a lot of Korean skincare and makeup products. Overall the consumption for K-products have gone up!²¹

In 2021, Swaddle, hosted by two long time K-entertainment fans and journalists C. Sadhana and V. Nirupama,²² had two interviewees, Subra Cakma and Veewon Thokchom, who raised important points regarding cultural proximity, a theme that scholars including Kshetrimayum and Chanu have raised in their own work. They argue that it prepared the ground for the acceptance of K-dramas, movies and even pop culture in the north-east regions. Kshetrimayum and Chanu elaborates that like the Koreans who trace the origins from several of the Mongol tribes that migrated into the Korean Peninsula, the Meitei are ethno-linguistically from Tibeto-Burman family of the Mongoloid stock (sic). Other factors that provide some semblance of cultural proximity include organising of

the society into clan communities, family names coming first just like the Koreans, prevalence of Shamanism, similar cultural traits in folk games etc.²³ The theory of “cultural proximity” is important to understand transnational media consumption although there is a caveat to the discussion. While such a theoretical framework has been rejected in other contexts, and other alternative frameworks like that of “cultural hybridity” and “glocalisation” have been used to study and justify the ‘Hallyu’ wave in the Asian context,²⁴ in the context of north-east’s history, particularly that of Manipur, the framework of “cultural proximity” seems to be a more viable theoretical framework to understand the popularity of Hallyu.²⁵ According to scholars, the appeal of Korean content, especially drama, lies in the fact that while it is made for a global audience and intended for international consumption, their “Koreanness” is why they are so popular. However, they have shown that the localisation in content and format was done to meet the demands of the local market. Further, since there is some similarity in Asian cultures, the audiences in Asia are more receptive as they find a “balanced mix of Asian values and western ideas.” They in turn retain the ideas that they are familiar with but is presented them in a new lens which is global and thus, appealing. While the religious and cultural references in Hindi cinema were often not relatable, the depiction of Buddhist and Christian way of being, similar facial features, customs and other markers cemented the sense of cultural proximity to other cultures, particularly for the people of Manipur.²⁶ The alienation and discrimination faced by the people of north-east including Darjeeling did not help the cause and further heightened a sense of close affinity with other South-east and East Asian cultures.²⁷

All of these factors created grounds for K-drama and movies to not only enter but also thrive, particularly in this region. Soon, K-pop followed in the heels of the drama led ‘Hallyu’ but it was not before PSY’s “Gangnam Style” (2012) that the country and the world experienced this genre fully.

BTS and the Rise of Desimys (Indian BTS-ARMY)

*“ We tell our story in a carefree way,
on behalf of those in their 10s and 20s..”*

‘Intro: 2 Cool 4 Skool’ (BTS Feat. DJ Friz, 2013)

Bangtan Sonyeondan, which roughly translates to Bulletproof Boy Scouts, debuted in 2013 with their debut album “2 Cool 4 Skool” (2013) and the title track “No More Dreams.” The lyrics were not only hard-hitting but also resonated strongly, especially with the youth across the globe wherein BTS emerged as spokespersons of an experience that they also went through. The album raised questions regarding one’s dreams, the pressure on youth, depression and the feelings of being trapped in an oppressive society, a recurring theme throughout their discography.

The authenticity and vulnerability of their music is what made them stand apart. As much as we would like to discuss all of their music to highlight the nuanced way in which they raise very pertinent questions, the space of this article or even a book will not be enough for that. However, it is important to briefly outline the various themes that are visible in BTS’s music. Their music touches upon the mundane emotions of youthful romance as well as the darker side like sadness and anger experienced from not having the feelings reciprocated (“O!RUL8,2?” (2013), “SKOOL LUV AFFAIR” (2014), “DARK&WILD” (2014)). By using the symbol of aggressive masculinity as a desperate plea, they articulate the “dark and wild” self, while also narrating the vulnerability against

the uncontrollable emotion of love and disturbing ability to do anything about it. "The Most Beautiful Moment in Life, Pt. 1" (2015) continues to evoke images of dream, passion, and challenges. "The Most Beautiful Moment in Life, Pt. 2" (2015-2016) moves away from romantic love and focuses on the speculative aspects of youth like dreams and fears. The lyrics become more thoughtful and profound. The inevitable change is due to the self-awareness of the BTS members as professional musicians, during the process of multiple hardships leading to transformations they experienced as a group. "The Most Beautiful Moment in Life: Young Forever," (2016) one of the most important albums of BTS' career, also marks the bittersweet end of youth and the beginning of adulthood. The transition from youth to adulthood is shown through the themes of temptation, sin, decadence, self-doubt along with questions regarding friendships, relationships with parents, memories and meaning of life that is also a testimony to the member's personal journey. ("WINGS", 2016; "WINGS: YOU NEVER WALK ALONE", 2017) BTS, following their depiction of growth and conflict of the tempted youth, and the emphatic words of encouragement and consolation through WINGS and You Never Walk Alone, now embark on a series "Love Yourself" to pioneer the entirely uncharted issue, in their pursuit of more essential questions and answers; the enlightenment of 'self love.' From finding and falling in love ("LOVE YOURSELF: HER", 2017), to tackling disillusionment, self-doubt, success, discordance within the group ("LOVE YOURSELF: TEAR", 2018), to finally understanding and concluding that the answer to finding love and happiness begins from finding, accepting and loving oneself ("LOVE YOURSELF: ANSWER", 2018), "Love Yourself" series started a global conversations on mental health and violence. BTS entered a new era with "Map of the Soul" (MOTS).

This was in 2019, a year before the world stood still due to the pandemic. In "MOTS: PERSONA", BTS explores their vulnerability through Carl Jung's theories of the 'Self'. 'Who am I' and what it means to be a human finds a central place in this work. ARMY, a decisive force in BTS's journey to stardom has always been referred to by the group in their music, most famously "2!3!" which talks about how they were always there with BTS, especially throughout their hardships and darkest times. This theme is explored repeatedly through images of "Home", "Moon", "Mikrokosmos", "Magic Shop" ("MAP OF THE SOUL: PERSONA, 7", 2019-2020) and "Telepathy" ("BE", 2020) and through their Japanese songs. This is of extreme importance as it helped built the intimate relationship between BTS and ARMY. In the case of BTS and ARMY, this relationship goes beyond the framework of the group as an object of sexual fantasy, and unlike other fandom, this relationship is reciprocal. It is built on the notion of sharing one's innermost emotions. In their magnum opus, "MAP OF THE SOUL:7", BTS gives the audience an intimate look into the group's biggest fears ("Black Swan"), relationship with each other, relationship with ARMY and take a deeper look at Jung's theories of the Persona, Ego and Shadow. Their personal works tackle issues of identity crisis and touch upon themes of solemn introspection, personal stories and self-vindication. They narrate events from childhood, trainee days, and their rise to stardom questioning whether what they have is what they wanted in the first place. They admit to their vulnerabilities, weak egos and battles with depression, eventually leading to a stage of self-hatred.

Korean society, like the Indian society, is extremely conservative in nature with much pressure on youth, and to talk about such topics was considered taboo. The oppressive nature of the education system and the pressure of post-school studies and tuition in not just Korea but also other countries have been discussed by scholars.²⁸ From my experience as an 'aca-fan' and also having participated in fandom activities, in the Indian society, young-adults, youths and even those who are now in their 30s, face a constant struggle between notions of traditionalism and modernism between discovering one-self while also having a sense of community which is not centred around the [traditional] family with value-systems that no longer match. While understood as polar

opposites, the concepts of traditionalism and modernism are not monolithic and also extremely complex. The struggle for constant negotiations and the lack of vocabulary to address these issues is perhaps where one could locate BTS's popularity in the Indian context. The sense of community that comes from identifying with similar struggles which is lived in the case of BTS, allows Desimys to come together and raise their voice for causes around which there might be conflict like that of Identity formation including that of gender, Citizenship etc. in their own homes. This attitude is part of the ecosystem that encourages ARMYs to come and raise their voice together. They facilitate waves of change by organising themselves in ways that are exclusive to BTS-ARMY. The roots of this level of cohesion can be traced to when BTS were facing immense hardships in the K-pop industry with no promotion and negative media coverage. The fans acted as promoters for the band - something that all artists desire - and organised themselves where they work at the grass-root level. ONE IN AN ARMY (OIAA) is one such organization. With the motto "Big Fandom, Big Difference", OIAA constantly coordinates donation drives, social work and awareness campaigns in the fandom. Other such groups include the "Disabled ARMY Advocacy and Support Network"; in the recent past, they brought to limelight the lack of information as well as seats and arrangements in SoFi Stadium for the disabled community and forced Los Angeles Department to take notice of what was happening, making them to rethink their policies. Many such subgroups within the ARMY fandom exists who organize themselves to address various issues like providing academic tutoring, reading resources and mentorship to vulnerable categories - Deaf ARMY Education; ARMY Academy; Bangtan Library; ARMY Science; ARMY Social Science; ARMY Math; BTS ARMY Language; BTS ARMY Engineers Union; ARMY CS ARMY Teachers; ARMY Learning Centre; Bangtan Scholars. They also come together to help with resources and form support networks, help during medical crisis and do pro-bono work - BTS ARMY Medical Union; BTS ARMY Health Centre; ARMY Crisis Management; BTS ARMY Bar Association; BTS ARMY Job Board; Interior Design ARMY and also engage in creative activities - BTS ARMY Documentary Team; ARMY Writers Club etc. People from across the world, including India are part of these sub-groups, taking time out to help in whatever way they can.

While scholars have argued that the rise of BTS was due to certain changes that had already started to take place in the early 1990s and 2000s that created the conditions for the band to change the fabric of global pop culture like that of digital revolution,²⁹ the visual nature of K-pop, depiction of "alternative masculinities" and "manufactured" stories, it is important to note that many of these discussions are taking place in the western/global north context. Kim Youngdae points out that the early 1990s was a watershed moment for Korea's popular music industry, spearheaded by Seo Taiji and Boys. In fact, they are instrumental in establishing a prototypical model for Korean idol music. A hip-hop group, they did not rely on an agency-driven production system, they represented the early example of new mainstream K-pop for merging rap and dance, as well as employing on-stage performance and visual elements as major appeals, thus allowing for otherwise antithetical elements of idol and hip-hop to come together in K-pop. In the case of India, depictions of toxic masculinity are the norm and any portrayal of ambiguous masculinity in popular media is caricatured and ridiculed.³⁰ Further, in the Indian context, it leads to systemic misogyny and homophobia. There are many instances reported where men, mostly from the north-eastern parts of India, who emulate soft masculinity and K-pop aesthetics are often targets of harassment, ridicule and even hate crimes for not subscribing visually to the mainstream frameworks.³¹ Further, incidents of fans facing homophobia when displaying K-pop and BTS merchandise have also surfaced. In fact, many South Asian fans have tweeted regarding the homophobia they faced for supporting K-pop idols and K-drama actors in public and perhaps one needs to rethink such discourses in specific contexts.³²

The statistics show that there has been an exponential growth in the BTS fandom in India. In the year 2020, India ranked seventh among the top ten countries that watched BTS on YouTube with 748 million views. In 2021, they ranked second, just after Japan with 1.52 billion views.³³ It is an extremely important feat as the Japanese music industry is the second largest music industry in the world and the first in Asia.³⁴ In 2020, BTS broke many world records with their English debut song “Dynamite” and India had a huge role to play in it. Out of the 101.1 million views, Indian viewers contributed 8.6 million views and ranked #3.³⁵ The Indian Music Industry (IMI) along with IFPI launched its first international music chart, similar to the Billboard chart, on June 21, 2021. BTS’s “Butter” topped the chart for seven consecutive weeks only to be replaced by their next release “Permission to Dance.”³⁶ BTS with multiple entries in Top 20 (“Dynamite,” “Life Goes On,” “My Universe” [Coldplay x BTS]) continues to dominate the IMI. One could say that because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the world in general was consuming Korean media including K-Pop and Drama - a phenomenon that needs a detailed research of its own - and these numbers are reflective of it.³⁷ However, it would be incorrect to attribute the popularity of BTS in India as a recent phenomenon induced by the pandemic, although it did have a role to play in extending its popularity. Along with BTS’s debut in 2013, BangtanIndia, the first Indian BTS ARMY fan-base was established online on 8th August 2013, with regional bases subsequently marking its presence.³⁸ In 2017, when BTS became the first Asian artist to win the coveted “Top Social Artist” Billboard Music Award (BBMA’s), the Indian base got in touch with channels like 9xo, Vh1, and MTV. Thanks to their efforts, on World Music Day that year (21 June 2017), BTS graced the Indian television sets for the very first time.³⁹ Twinkle, one of the admin of BangtanIndia went around the city sticking up posters with a barcode link of their music video “Fire.”⁴⁰ Rolling Stone India also covered them for the very first time that year.⁴¹ In the year 2018, fans based in Hyderabad started a petition to screen the BTS documentary “Burn The Stage” (2018) which was later showcased in over 50 cities.⁴² There were similar responses to screen the BTS documentaries “Love Yourself in Seoul” (2019) and “Break The Silence” (2020) across India. The overwhelming response saw INOX screening their latest documentary “Break The Silence” in various locations across the country, wherever the theatres were operational. INOX had received such an overwhelming response that to celebrate the occasion, they turned their official logo to purple - the colour that is part of the BTS identity - as a tribute to BTS ARMY.⁴³ No other K-pop band had seen this kind of coverage in national and international media before. Spotify one of the most popular audio streaming service worldwide, launched their app in India in 2019, garnering 1 million unique listeners within its first week. Interestingly, BTS made it to their top 10 artists in the first week itself. In 2020 and 2021, they were at #4 in India, and in 2021, they were the #3 most streamed artists on the platform worldwide, and beat Coldplay to being the most streamed group in the history of Spotify.⁴⁴ Their super hit song “Dynamite” topped the Spotify India chart for more than two months consecutively, and their next release “Butter” broke even more records.⁴⁵ Recently, their UN speech (2018) given by their leader RM (Kim Namjoon) was included in the prescribed textbook for BA English in Tamil Nadu.⁴⁶ The BTS phenomenon is reaching even the interiors of the country, attested not only by the presence of regional fan clubs but also by a recent encounter that one of the authors had with a fifth standard student in a small town Katwa, in Purba Bardhaman district, West Bengal.⁴⁷

‘Desimys’ have also organised themselves and participated in social work as part of BTS members’ birthday projects for local level charity events including (not limited to) establishing night school, helping orphanages and old-age homes, cancer patients, providing food, while also doing awareness campaigns on menstrual hygiene, mental health, bullying, gender based violence etc. Recently, they raised huge amounts for the Tamil Nadu floods, Assam floods, Migrant Workers Solidarity Network and Covid-19 relief work.⁴⁸ Although the work is not limited to just charity, these

are major events when the fandom comes together. They have actively worked on the ground to coordinate Covid-19 resources using the regional fan base networks.

Earlier in 2019, Narendra Modi led Indian government had passed the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 (CAA) which “removed barriers for acquiring Indian citizenship for Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians from the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who arrived in India on or before 31 December 2014. While the 1955 Citizenship Act prohibited all undocumented migrants from acquiring Indian citizenship, the 2019 amendment fast-tracks the citizenship pathways for some and provides them legislative protection from deportation and imprisonment with the exception of those living in the tribal areas of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura and the areas under the ‘Inner line’ special permit zones.”⁴⁹ There were widespread protests against the CAA as not only is it extremely discriminatory towards Muslims in particular but groups such as Rohingya Muslims, Sri Lankan Tamils, Bhutanese, Hazaras, Shias and Ahmadiyyas but also legitimises the violence inflicted towards them.⁵⁰ In the context of the complicated Indian history, especially from that of partition time (1947) onwards, when families had to run overnight without carrying documents, this act privileges those who have some kind of ‘proof’ of belonging. In fact, stories from the Indian state of Assam has shown that not only the issue of ‘illegal migrant’ extremely complicated but also spelling errors in the registers by the state has led to devastating consequences.⁵¹ While the protests were ongoing, BTS Desimys had created resource material to make people aware of how discriminating the act was, but soon had to withdraw due to heavy trolling and threats by the Right Wing.⁵² There is a caveat to this discussion; the Palestinian occupation has not received the kind of attention that it should from the fandom across countries.

In the beginning of this section, the issue of identity and belonging tied to complicated negotiations between notions of traditionalism and modernism was raised. While there is dearth of secondary literature that addresses this issue, my experiences, location and positionality from that of being a woman – eldest daughter - academic – BTS Desimy - in an Indian household leads me to postulate that people from various regions, cultural backgrounds, gender, age etc. come together, organise themselves and want to bring in waves of change because perhaps BTS’s music and the group itself allows one to carry with them ideas of modernism while in a traditional setup and fill a void of community that exists in the Indian society where their music and emotions addressed issues that did not find an outlet elsewhere. Further, the band members’ story of personal struggle and growth interwoven with their art helped people from across the spectrum to connect not only with the groups, but also other people in the fandom, in their own way.⁵³

Dr. Sneha Ganguly is Assistant Professor in the Department of History, Janki Devi Memorial College, University of Delhi. She did her Masters, M.Phil and PhD from Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. She specialises in ancient Indian History with an emphasis on socio-religious processes and their interface with state and ideology, and with a further research interest in heritage and pop-culture. She is also the recipient of the *inherit. heritage in transformation* fellowship at the Käte Hamburger Centre for Advanced Study, Humboldt University for the year 2025-26.

¹ *The Korean Wave: A New Pop Cultural Phenomenon*, Korean Culture and Information, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Republic of Korea, 2011.

² Dal Yong Jin, *New Korean Wave: Transnational Cultural Power in the Age of Social Media*, University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 2016; Seok-Kyung Hyong and Dal Yong Jin (eds.) *Transnational Convergence of East Asian Pop Culture*, Routledge, New York, 2021.

³ Yasue Kuwahara (ed.) *The Korean Wave: Korean Popular Culture in Global Context*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014; John Walsh, 'Hallyu as a Government Construct: The Korean Wave in the Context of Economic and Social Development' in *ibid*, pp. 13-31.; Vyjayanti Raghavan, R. Mahalakshmi (ed.) *Colonisation: A Comparative Study of India and Korea*, Academic Foundation, New Delhi, 2015; Swaddle, *Hello Hallyu Podcast*, "Episode 1: What the Hell is Hallyu?" <https://theswaddle.com/podcast/episode-1-what-the-hell-is-hallyu/>, Spotify, 21 July 2021.

⁴ Seok-Kyung Hyong, 'Hallyu beyond Asia: Theoretical Investigations on Global Consumption of Hallyu in Tae-Jin Yoon and Dal Yong Jin (eds.) *The Korean Wave: Evolution, Fandom and Transnationality*, Lexington, Lanham, 2017, pp. 67-86; Lisa Yuk-ming Leung, '#Unrequited Love in Cottage Industry? Managing K-pop (Transnational) Fandom in the Social Media Age' in *ibid*, pp. 87-108; Hyeri Jung, 'Transnational Media Culture and Soft Power of the Korean Wave in the United States' in *ibid*, pp. 225-244.

⁵ Jeeheng Lee, *BTS and ARMY Culture*, Communication Books Inc., Seoul, 2019; See, Bertha Chin, Lori Hitchcock Morimoto, 'Towards a theory of transcultural fandom', *Participations – Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, Vol. 10, Issue 1, May 2013, pp. 92-108.

⁶ P.G. Min, 'Transnational Cultural Events among Korean Immigrants in the New York-New Jersey Area,' *Sociological Perspective*, 60(6), 2017: 1136–59; See also, Anette Ekin, 'Are K-pop and BTS fans a new force for social justice?,' *Aljazeera*, 1 July 2020.

⁷ One of the few works that addresses the role of ARMY in pushing BTS to immense popularity is by Jeeheng Lee, Oul Han (trans.), *BTS and ARMY Culture*.

⁸ Otojit Kshetrimayum, Ningombam Victoria Chanu, 'Mapping Cultural Diffusion: A Case Study of 'Korean Wave' in Northeast India' in Sushila Narsimhan, Do Young Kim (eds.) *India and Korea: Bridging the Gaps*, Manak Publications, New Delhi, 2008; Alokka Dutta, 'India-Korea Economic and Commercial Relations' in *ibid*.

⁹ For a detailed discussion as to how South Korea emerged from the economic crisis of 1997 into one of the leading economies, especially centring around Hallyu, see, Euny Hong, *The Birth of Korean Cool – How one Nation is Conquering the World through Pop Culture*, Picador, New York, 2014.

¹⁰ Netrananda Sahu 'POSCO Deal: A Major Economic Breakthrough for the Government of Orissa' in Sushila Narsimhan, Do Young Kim (eds.) *op. cit.*; Kshetrimayum, Chanu, 'Mapping Cultural Diffusion', p. 185.

¹¹ Dong Hyeon Jong, 'Towards a Borderless World' in Sushila Narsimhan, Do Young Kim (eds.) *op. cit.*, p. xi.

¹² Vyjayanti Raghavan, 'Korean Education and Research Trends in India', 2015 [http://cefia.aks.ac.kr:84/index.php?title=Korean Education and Research Trends in India](http://cefia.aks.ac.kr:84/index.php?title=Korean%20Education%20and%20Research%20Trends%20in%20India)

¹³. See, Kshetrimayum, Chanu, 'Mapping Cultural Diffusion', pp. 185-186.

¹⁴ Swaddle, *Hello Hallyu Podcast*, 'Episode 1: What the Hell is Hallyu?', Spotify 21 July 2021; In the second episode; See, Swaddle *Hello Hallyu Podcast*, 'Episode 2: The K-Drama Secret Ingredient.' Spotify, 23 July 2021.

¹⁵ Kshetrimayum, Chanu, 'Mapping Cultural Diffusion', p. 186.

¹⁶ Simon Laishram, 'Understanding the Ban of Bollywood in Manipur: Objectives, Ramifications and Public Consensus,' (unpublished dissertation) Birmingham City University, UK. See, [https://www.academia.edu/16563834/Understanding the Ban of Bollywood in Manipur Objectives Ramificatio](https://www.academia.edu/16563834/Understanding_the_Ban_of_Bollywood_in_Manipur_Objectives_Ramificatio)

ns and Public Consensus; Jogendra Singh Kshetrimayum, *The Politics of Fixity: A report on the ban of Hindi films in Manipur, Northeast India*, (unpublished dissertation) University of Texas, Austin, 2011. See, <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/ETD-UT-2011-12-4603/KSHETRIMAYUM-MASTERS-REPORT.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

¹⁷ Sudha Tiwari, 'Cinema, State, and Scholarship – A Discussion' in *The State and New Cinema in Contemporary India, 1960–1997*, Routledge, Delhi, 2023; Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947–87*, OUP, Delhi, 1996; Gokulsing, K. Moti, and Wimal Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change*, Trentham Books Limited, Staffordshire, England, 1998; L. B. Pfeleiderer Lutze (eds.) *The Hindi Film: Agent and Re-Agent of Cultural Change*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1985; Ashis Nandy, 'The Popular Hindi Film: Ideology and First Principles', *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1, *Indian Popular Cinema: Myth, Meaning and Metaphor*, March 1981, pp. 89-96.

¹⁸ Subir Bhaumik, 'Rebels ban Hindi films,' BBC News, 18 September 2000; Bijoyeta Das, 'Manipur: A Part of India where Korea Rules,' *Aljazeera*, 17 February 2014.

¹⁹ Kshetrimayum, Chanu, 'Mapping Cultural Diffusion', p. 187.

²⁰ Manipur University had even sent a proposal to the University Grants Commission to set up a Centre for Korean Studies and Language; Esha Roy, 'Manipur finds a Seoul-mate in Korean Culture,' Indian Express (Archive), 6 December, 2011; Akoijam Sunita, 'Chopsticks in Manipur,' *Himal SOUTHASIAN*, 1 September 2009. The youngsters especially have started to emulate their food habits, body language, way of talking, looks and aesthetics. See, Kshetrimayum, Chanu, 'Mapping Cultural Diffusion,' pp. 191-193.

²¹ The Economic Times, 07 October 2021. Available at: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/the-k-magic-is-taking-over-india-people-find-comfort-in-korean-dramas-music-and-food/articleshow/86836620.cms>

²² See, <https://theswaddle.com/podcast/episode-1-what-the-hell-is-hallyu/>

²³ See, Kshetrimayum, Chanu, 'Mapping Cultural Diffusion', pp. 187-191.

²⁴ See, John Walsh 'Hallyu as a Government Construct: The Korean Wave in the Context of Economic and Social Development' in Yasue Kuwahara (ed.) *op. cit.*; Hyejung Ju, 'Transformations of the Korean Media Industry by the Korean Wave: The Perspective of Glocalization,' in *ibid*; Swaddle, *Hello Hallyu* Podcast, 'Episode 1: What the Hell is Hallyu?' Spotify, 21 July 2021.

²⁵ J.D. Straubhaar in his seminal essay argued that the audience consumes media that is closer to their own culture. See, J.D. Straubhaar, 'Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity,' *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 8:1991, pp. 39-59. I would like to thank my reviewers for their comments and suggestions, especially on this issue.

²⁶ Swaddle, *Hello Hallyu* Podcast, 'Episode 1: What the Hell is Hallyu?' Spotify, 21 July 2021.

²⁷ It has been pointed out that in the context of Darjeeling too, the depiction of the locals in the mainstream media led to creation of a space where they were consuming Korean media. See, U.T.L. Yolmo cited in Smriti Rai, Pooja Basnett, "'Hallyu' Wave & Women Fandom in Darjeeling Town: A Study on Binge Watching, User's Satisfaction and Participatory Culture,' *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 26, Issue 2, 7(February, 2021), pp. 21-31.

²⁸ See, Rakesh Batabyal, 'A Holistic Education: The Dilemma of the New Times' in *The Modern School 1920-2020: A Century of Schooling in India*, Westland, New Delhi, 2000; Menon, Visalakshi, 'Aspects of Colonial Education in India', in Raghavan, Vyjayanti, and R. Mahalakshmi (eds.), *Colonisation: A Comparative Study of India and Korea*, Academic Foundation, Delhi, 2015.

²⁹ Kim Youngdae, *BTS The Review*, p. 49; Myoung-Sun Song, 'The S(e)oul of Hip-Hop: Locating Space and Identity in Korean Rap in Yasue Kuwahara (ed.) *op. cit.* See also, Dal Yong Jin, 'The BTS sphere: Adorable Representative M.C. for Youth's transnational cyber-nationalism on social media', *Communication and the Public* Vol. 6(1-4) 33-47.

³⁰ Ayesha I. Viswamohan, Sanchari Basu Chauduri, 'Bollywood's Angromance: Toxic Masculinity and Male Angst in *Tere Naam* and *Kabir Singh*', vol. 5, no. 2(2020), pp. 146-170.; See also, Sun Jung, *Korean Masculinities and Transcultural Consumption*, Hong Kong University Press, Hong Kong, 2011; <https://rollingstoneindia.com/kulture-kolumn-the-story-of-how-bts-saved-my-life/>.

³¹ <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/daylight-attack-with-iron-rods-killed-college-student-nido-tania-550373>; <https://time.com/4876/nido-taniam-india-racism/>; <https://www.news18.com/news/buzz/armys-outraged-after-indian-prof-verbally-abuses-bts-fan-for-spam-comments-during-class-5764057.html>; <https://www.straitstimes.com/life/entertainment/billboard-for-bts-jungkook-removed-in-pakistan-for-promoting-homosexuality>

³² 'Delhi's Ugly Racist face: Arunachal boy beaten to death in Lajpat Nagar market', India Today Online, 31 January 2014; Shrinkal Bhushan, 'The Trials of a K-Pop YouTuber,' *The Ultimate Guide to BTS - Rolling Stone India-Collector's Edition*, Mumbai, 2020, p. 21; Divyansha Dongre, 'How Self-Appointed Vigilantes are Exploiting Policy Loopholes to 'Police' BTS' ARMY,' *Rolling Stone India*, 23 November 2021.

³³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/973644/south-korea-bts-youtube-channel-views-by-country/>; The twitter account @btsyoutubedata - part of the BTS fandom keeps a record of all data regarding BTS media consumption on YouTube.

³⁴ <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/industry-revenues-in-japan-worlds-second-biggest-recorded-music-market-didnt-grow-in-h1-2019/>

³⁵ Riddhi Chakraborty, 'BTS Reflect on the Massive Success of 'Dynamite' in India,' *Rolling Stone India-Collector's Edition*, Mumbai, 2020, p. 55.

³⁶ Hugh McIntyre, 'BTS Dominate India's First-Ever Ranking of the Biggest International Singles,' *Forbes*, 22 June 2021. See, IMI Charts - <https://imicharts.com/archives/>; <https://imicharts.com/annual-chart-2021/>

³⁷ Netflix has reported a 370% increase in the viewership of K-dramas from India in 2020 from the previous year. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/the-k-magic-is-taking-over-india-people-find-comfort-in-korean-dramas-music-and-food/articleshow/86836620.cms>

³⁸ Twinkle Choudhary, 'BangtanIndia and the Mechanics of the BTS ARMY,' *The Ultimate Guide to BTS - Rolling Stone India-Collector's Edition*, Mumbai, 2020. Currently they have 204k members on Instagram and 161k followers on Twitter. Some of the regional bases include @mizo_bts_army, @bangtanamritsar, @bangtanaurangabad, @armybengaluru, @bangtan_northbengal, @army_hubli_dwd, @bangtannagaland, @bangtanpunjab, @bangtan_gujarat, @bangtanchattisgarh @bangtan_bihar, @btamadyapadesh, @bangtan_nashik, @mumbai_bts, @jharkhandbts, @army_chd_hp, @btsarmykerala @btstamilnaduarmy etc.

³⁹ BangtanIndia, 'BTS on 9x0 and VH1 India,' <https://bangtanindia.wordpress.com/2017/08/19/bts-on-9xo-and-vh1-india/#more-333>

⁴⁰ Choudhary, 'BangtanIndia and the Mechanics of the BTS ARMY', p. 19.

⁴¹ Riddhi Chakraborty, 'K-Pop's Biggest Boy Band BTS: 'We Write About Things People Don't Want to Say', *Rolling Stone India*, 2017. The Rolling Stone India site crashed due to heavy traffic after it published the interview.

⁴² See, <https://www.change.org/p/sign-this-petition-to-get-burn-the-stage-the-movie-in-hyderabad>; <https://kpophighindia.com/bts-bring-the-soul-the-movie-is-set-to-release-in-india-50-cities/>.

⁴³ See, <https://mediabrief.com/inox-to-screen-btss-break-the-silence/>

⁴⁴ '2020, year in music: Spotify reveals top artists of the year, Arijit Singh takes #1 spot, BTS also feature,' *ET Online*, 1 December, 2020; @btschartdata - "BTS (15.987b) surpassed Coldplay (15.982b) and is now the most streamed group of all-time on Spotify (all credits)"

⁴⁵ <https://kpophighindia.com/indian-armys-amaze-everyone-by-their-major-contribution-in-bts-butter-breaking-records/>

⁴⁶ <https://twitter.com/btstamilnadarmy/status/1361749606049091584?lang=en>.

⁴⁷ In a recent trip to Katwa, Sneha Ganguly had an interesting encounter. She had gone to a small shop to get some grocery. The owner's daughter who studies in fifth standard immediately recognised the sanitizer that was hanging from her bag that depicted one of the BTS signs, and asked if Sneha was an ARMY. On further questioning she informed that her entire class was a huge fan of the group and her 'bias' (favourite member) was V aka Kim Taehyung.

⁴⁸ <https://rollingstoneindia.com/bts-indian-fans-raise-over-five-lakhs-for-assam-flood-relief-funds/>; <https://www.india.com/entertainment/bts-army-raises-over-rs-10-lakh-to-help-covid-19-crisis-in-india-deet-inside-4611997/>; <https://milaap.org/fundraisers/support-covid-19-initiatives-4>; <https://www.india.com/entertainment/bts-jimins-birthday-indian-army-members-raise-rs-1-65-lakh-fund-provide-shelter-needy-5049562/>; <https://www.onmanorama.com/entertainment/music/2020/09/12/bts-indian-army-celebrate-jungkook-rm-jimin-birthdays-special-way.html>; <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>

⁴⁹ 'India: Citizenship Amendment Act is a blow to Indian constitutional values and international standards', Amnesty International, March 14, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/03/india-citizenship-amendment-act-is-a-blow-to-indian-constitutional-values-and-international-standards>

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ <https://scroll.in/article/948311/nrc-debate-how-assams-complicated-history-has-shaped-its-current-predicament>; <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/in-indias-citizenship-test-a-spelling-error-can-ruin-a-family/articleshow/65434885.cms?from=mdr>

⁵² <https://www.vice.com/en/article/4ayq7w/how-right-wing-trolls-silenced-indias-bts-army-on-anything-political>

⁵³ Chandi, J.K., Trehan, K., 'Mediation, Motivations and Experiences of BTS Fandom in India' in R.K., B. Das (eds) *Korean Wave in South Asia*, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore, 2022; This article is part of my ongoing project on trying to locate the rise of BTS in the Indian context which is based on Quantitative data collection and the initial results of the survey indicates the role of BTS's message through their music that had a role to play in their popularity.