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## K-POP BEYOND THE HIMALAYAS

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**Abstract:** The past few years have witnessed a surge in the number of Indians getting hooked on K-Pop, especially the country's youth. The Hallyu Wave (including music, drama and film) has taken over the whole world, India being no exception. From crossing the Himalayas and entering the borders through Manipur to spreading over the Indian subcontinent, K-Pop today has become omnipresent. This paper is just a limited attempt at exploring the journey of K-Pop into the Indian lands over the years and is a partial look into the trends and recent changes in regards to it.

**Index Terms - K-Pop, Korean Culture, India, Music, COVID-19.**

### I. INTRODUCTION

K-Pop (케이팝) is a short or abbreviated form of Korean Popular Music. It is a genre of music that originated in South Korea as a part of the country's rich culture. K-Pop is considered a fairly new form of music, with its roots dating back to the 1950s. It came under the influence of various western music and pop groups and what we see today as K-Pop was formed somewhat around the 1990s.

K-Pop in Korean is 'Daejungeumag' (대중음악), which means pop music (90 Day Korean, March 2022). Contemporary K-Pop dates back to 11th April 1992 when the groups Seo Taiji and Boys (서태지와 아이들) performed for the first time on TV and included rap in K-Pop. H.O.T was the first K-Pop group that debuted in 1996 and since then, there is no looking back and the list went along through the years.

The increase in the usage of social media with the growing reach of the internet at the beginning of the 2000s could be seen as the reason behind the rise in the popularity of K-Pop. The more the reach of the music, the more popularity it attains. With this, India cannot be left far behind the influence of K-Pop and the journey of this music genre over the years in the country is proof of it.

### II. INDIA'S FIRST EXPOSURE TO K-POP

K-Pop has its roots in the North-Eastern parts of India. Manipur was the first state that was exposed to the world of K-Pop for the very first time at the beginning of the 21st Century when a separatist group, the Revolutionary People's Front took over the state and banned all forms of Indian entertainment sources including Hindi TV channels, soap operas, Bollywood music, etc. According to the group, the Hindi language media upheld the feudal views of the Hindi speaking mainland (Firstpost, 2021). This sudden ban on the main source of entertainment ultimately led to people looking for alternative sources thus resulting in the influx of Korean content in the state. Soon, South Korean music, K-Pop made its way to the whole of North-East India and captured the hearts of the Indians.

The local cable stations started airing popular South Korean channels like KBS World and Arirang which further strengthened the hold of K-Pop in the country. Even after the relaxation of the ban by the group, Hallyu Wave (한류, including K-Pop, K-Dramas, Movies, etc.) had a firm foothold in the North-Eastern states. The similarity in appearance, dressing style and cuisine could be perceived as a major reason behind such an impact of K-Pop on the region that people started relating and developed a deeper interest in it.

As quoted by Hyunwoo Thomas Kim, Co-founder, President and CEO of Kross Comics, "The entire North-East region of the country goes to great lengths to access Korean content through various means, despite the challenges posed by weak network infrastructure. K-Dramas and K-Pop are the front runners in terms of demand. " (Money Control, June 2021).

### III. K-POP INTO THE MAINLAND

The mainland had its first encounter with K-Pop in the year 2012 when the wildcard hit by PSY's (싸이) 'Gangnam Style' (강남 스타일) took the internet by storm. The song became a sensational hit in no time and instantly opened the doors to the world of K-Pop for the Indians. PSY's Gangnam Style could be credited for paving the way for future K-Pop groups on the international scene on a large scale, including in India as well.

The Government of the Republic of Korea has continuously been involved in propagating its culture by hosting dance contests, singing forums, language classes, etc. around the world. Under this, an annual K-Pop contest was started by the Korean Cultural Centre, India in the year 2013 with barely 37 participants and 300 spectators in the capital city of New Delhi. It is a testament to the growing popularity of K-Pop in India that the 5th edition of the K-Pop India Contest, 2017 witnessed a surge in the number of participants reaching 898, spreading over 11 major cities in India.

"K-Pop is a genre of music that the Indians are finding attractive with PSY and his iconic Gangnam Style working as an initiation into the genre for those who were new. So much so, that even in a Punjabi wedding in North India, you can see people grooving to the beats of the song.", the K-Pop India Contest 2021 website suggests. (Money Control, June 2021).

"The contest has grown over the years and the Korean Cultural Centre, India, in association with their partners brings you this opportunity to be a part of this even bigger festival, to be held again this year.", it adds. (Money Control, June 2021).

### IV. K-POP AND THE INDIAN MEDIA

VH1 in the year 2016 launched its segment under the name KPop'd which aired on Saturdays. The popular music channel 9XM followed the suit and streamed several popular BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan, 방탄소년단) songs that kept Indians hooked to their television screens. In 2017, Rolling Stone India magazine published an interview with the BTS Leader and Rapper, Rap Monster (Kim Namjoon, 김남준) (Rubal Kanozia & Garima Ganghariya, 2021). Within minutes of its release, the website servers crashed down due to excess traffic on the site. This led to the trend #IndialovesBTS on Twitter at number two on the Global Trend List. The recent interviews of BTS with the Indian media includes one with NDTV in October 2020 and the other with ENOW in June 2021. Popular K-Pop groups like IN2IT (인투잇), M.O.N.T (몬트), VAV (브이에이브이), KARD (카드) and soloists like Jang Han Byul (장한별) and AleXa (알렉사) have even performed in the country and won hearts of their Indian fans from time to time.

Indian K-Pop fans have established their presence on social media platforms as well. They haven't restricted themselves to swooning over pictures and posters of their favourite K-Pop Idols and Groups or purchasing their tickets and merchandise. Most of the fan accounts systematically organise charity and fundraiser projects in the name of their idols. An example of this is how EXO-Ls (EXO Fans) donated ₹58,000 to an NGO in Mumbai. In September 2021, ARMY (BTS Fans) celebrated BTS member Jungkook's birthday by adopting two street dogs and donating funds to an orphanage. There are many more examples out there like these where people have done such good deeds showing that K-Pop is not just music, rather, it has become a part of life with such a positive impact.

"According to Facebook analytics, there are over 15 million fans of K-Culture in India itself. The country has now become the sixth-largest consumer of K-Pop music in the world." (Money Control, June 2021).

### V. INDIANS IN K-POP

The growth of the K-Pop culture in India can be justified by the fact that Indians too are becoming a part of the K-Pop mainstream media. Back in 2019, two Indians from different cities of the country, Priyanka Majumdar and Siddhanth Arora became the world's first Indian K-Pop Stars. They both debuted under the Z-Generation K-Pop Groups, Z-Girls and Z-Boys respectively. At present, another Indian girl, Shreya Lenka from Odisha is one of the final contenders for the spot as the fifth member of the K-Pop girl group Black Swan (블랙스완).

In other events, the 2017 edition of the World K-Pop Festival held in Changwon (창원), South Korea witnessed history being made when an Indian boy dance group, Immortal Army from the state of Mizoram carried home a trophy in one of the categories for the very first time. There have been many such instances when the Indian youth's love for K-Pop either led them to South Korea or got them a chance to participate in events like the K-Pop India Contest, to showcase their talents and enthusiasm for the love of K-Pop to the whole world.

K-Pop even managed to reach the Indian parliament. It was mentioned in a speech given by the Indian President Ram Nath Kovind at an official banquet hosted for the South Korean President Moon Jae-In, back in 2018. He quoted, "Korean popular culture has also charmed us. From Gangnam Style to Korea's band BTS, our youth are captivated by the tunes of these iconic pop groups—even if many of them have never visited Gangnam! Our people, indeed, share common tastes; from music to cuisine, from the roll of drums to the tanginess of Kimchi" (PIB, July 2018).

## VI. COVID-19 and K-Pop: The real breakthrough

Even though K-Pop had already captivated the majority of the Indian youth, it was the COVID-19 pandemic that became the real breakthrough moment for K-Pop in India. The countrywide lockdown left people with more time and they started exploring more content online. K-Pop quickly caught the attention of Indian music lovers because of its exceptionally high-quality performances, synchronised choreography, simple, meaningful songs with a message, addictive hooks and the glamour associated with the K-Pop idol groups.

"The pandemic has contributed to the boom in India, as more people have the time and bandwidth to consume international content.", as quoted by Riddhi Chakraborty, a journalist covering K-Pop for Rolling Stone India (Firstpost, 2021).

The rise in K-Pop's popularity during the lockdown can be analysed through the data provided by the online music streaming platforms. The data collected shows how the genre's consumption spiked in the second half of 2020 with its popularity spanning the length and breadth of the country.

In January 2020, before the COVID-19 lockdown was imposed, BTS was ranked 68th with approximately 780,000 streams among audiences that listen to English music as per the Economic Times cited data from Jio Saavn music streaming service. In October 2020, the boy band moved straight to 8th rank with over 2.3 million streams (Money Control, June 2021); a whopping increment in just a few months, showing the effect of lockdown in increasing the popularity of the idol group.

According to Spotify, the year 2020's top-streamed artists were BTS (방탄소년단), Blackpink (블랙핑크), Twice (트와이스), Agust D (어거스트디), and EXO (엑소). Also, BTS's 'Dynamite' (다이너마이트) spent 10 weeks at the number one rank on Spotify Charts (September 2020 - November 2020), amassing around 15 million streams during that period (Firstpost, 2021).

"The most recent and most powerful (cause behind the K-Pop boom in India) is because of the rise of BTS, which then opens doors to the rest of K-Pop.", said Riddhi Chakraborty, Rolling Stone India (Firstpost, 2021).

## VII. CONCLUSION

The pandemic wave may have subsided in the country but K-Pop's popularity is definitely on the rise. However, it is not limited to just a song or two or a boy band that has created a fan base in India; rather, there are many other bands that are immensely popular among India's music aficionados. Idol groups like Blackpink (블랙핑크), Super Junior (슈퍼 주니어), Girls' Generation (소녀시대), EXO (엑소), (G)-I-dle ((여자)아이들), Red Velvet (레드벨벳), Mamamoo (마마무), Kard (카드) and many more have witnessed a rise in the number of Indian listeners in the past years.

Girl idol group TWICE's (트와이스) 'Alcohol-Free' (알코올 프리) was on the number one spot on India iTunes, according to a June report released by Kpophighindia. On YouTube, Indians have given over 15.1 million 'likes' to the song, the report added. This makes the music video India's number two when it comes to top streamers, with Japanese in the lead.

K-Pop is not just restricted to music, from McDonald's BTS Meal Concept to several online stores like, www.kpopstore.in, www.kpopmerch.in etc. selling K-Pop merchandise, India is deep into the world of K-Pop and is going head over heels for the genre and the idols.

All these events and the growing fandoms of K-Pop point toward an increase in the number of Indians embracing the Korean Culture (한국 문화) which is certainly a far cry from when K-Pop idols like Minho (민호) of SHINee (샤이니) and Suho (수호) of EXO (엑소) roamed around the streets of Mumbai unrecognised, back in 2015. From the looks of it, the soaring popularity of K-Pop is definitely making waves in India and is here to stay, proving the fact that, "Once you are into it, there is no going back."

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