

INDIAN IDOL? JINYOUNG

A Korean subculture has quietly seeped in among India's teenagers. From rock stars to TV channels, there is always a ready audience. Why is Seoul suddenly touching our souls so much?

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"Jinyoung is so cute",
"I like No Minwoo better"
"Lee Jeeung Man beats both of them
hands down."

These are strands of a regular conversation between 13-year-old Anoushka and her friends in school — all of whom follow Korean bands religiously and for whom names like Jinyoung and No Minwoo, who incidentally are South Korea's reigning superstar singers, roll easily off the tongue. And they are not the only one. The Korean Wave, a term that was coined in mid 1990s and refers to the spread of popular Korean culture encompassing music, movies and dramas, is slowly but surely making its presence felt across India. And coming under its sway are youngsters from Delhi to Mumbai, Alizad to Kufra.

In fact, the northeast was one of the first regions in the country to take to Hallyu, as the Korean Wave is also referred to. In September 2008, the Revolutionary People's Front (RPF) imposed a blanket ban on the screening of Hindi movies and Hindi satellite channels in Manipur in order to fill up this vacuum, people took refuge in Southeast Asian cinema. Today, Korean channels like Arirang TV and KBS are aired by the cable operators in the northeast and each household has its own favourite. The first Korea-India music festi-



CULTURE CURRY: Fifteen-year-old Anoushka's room in Delhi is covered with posters of Korean singers

val and cultural event was held in Nagaland in 2008. It saw a huge turnout with people queuing up to meet popular Korean artists like Ilac and Y2K.

Nobody knows for sure why the "K-word" is becoming popular among the youth, especially considering that most of the shows and songs are in Korean and not even dubbed in English. Bangalore-based Swati Sharma, who recently went to Seoul on a student exchange programme, attributes

it to cultural similarities. "I found their habits, behaviour and food to be very similar to ours. Even the way they pronounce their words and their syllables is pretty much like we do. I could easily grasp the language," she says. Not surprising then that some kids in Manipur are even learning Korean through television classes.

Apart from the cultural affinity, there is the refreshingly different content. Korean TV dramas are not about scheming mother-in-laws,

instead, many of them feature young boys and girls trying to find their place in the world. "I caught a Korean drama on a family trip to Thailand and have been hooked ever since," says Meghna Raju, a class X student from Delhi. The easy availability of these shows — courtesy the internet, which has seen a surge in India kids downloading Korean TV series, songs and movies — has evidently helped. Noreen Garung, a student, says she follows all the popular

bands on Youtube. Online streaming sites like DramaCrazy.net, My Sojin, All Korean Drama and Han Cinema are equally popular.

The Korean fixation is not just limited to music, movies and TV. It is also seeping into kids' fashion in India. In the northeast, for instance, it's not uncommon for a boy to have his favourite actor's hairstyle, or for a girl to be seen dressed up as a popular Korean actress. The style is considered somewhat unique as it includes long straight hair (some call it the David Bowie look) and fuses it with masculine side burns (think Heathcliff from *Wuthering Heights*). "It's a kind of cool hairstyle that all young people have been sporting in Meghalaya for a long time now, and it's fabulous," says Nicky Pradhan, a student in Shillong.

While youngsters may be going ga-ga over Korea, many adults are not amused. Manipuri sociologists fear that their culture is getting destroyed by the mindless aping of Korean trends. Jane R Habte, a member of the Mitroram Tobacco Control Society, blames the influence of Korean films and soaps on the youth for an increase in the number of smokers. "These serials are now getting translated into Mizo, so their influence will increase even further," she says.

But as far as the kids are concerned, that's much ado over nothing. Or, as they would say in Korean: *Gak Jang-He-Je-Ma* (No worries).