



When fact meets fiction

Masaba and Neena Gupta on their new Netflix series and why truth is stranger than fiction p4

escape," says Shroff, who recommends *It's Okay to Not Be Okay* (no 3 on Netflix a few weeks ago), *Descendants of the Sun* and *Guardian*.

Digital players

While Amazon Prime, a leading player in the category, opted not to comment on this viewing trend, Dish TV, which launched their streaming service/app Watcho last April, says they have noticed and acted on the rising popularity of Korean dramas in India. "Earlier this month, we added a new feature called 'Korean Drama Active' on Dish TV and d2h platforms. Users can now watch their favourite shows dubbed in Hindi," says Sukhpreet Singh, Corporate Head, Marketing. For now, Dish TV has added 300+ hours of K-dramas.

Down South, Chennai is a surprising market too. A couple of years ago, journalist-author Krupa Ge, in a newspaper article, noted how popular these shows were among young girls in Tamil Nadu. "...they are turning to K-dramas, watching them on streaming sites, exchanging downloaded versions..." she wrote, adding how the launch of Viu streaming, with a focus on Tamil and Korean content, "points to the fact that some have already begun to see a business model here".

Meanwhile, last November, Netflix signed a multi-year content production and distribution agreement with Korean entertainment company, CJ ENM, and its subsidiary, Studio Dragon. "This is an exciting time for not only Korean content, but content in any language to be successful anywhere. The language barrier is lowering and more audiences are discovering great stories made by the world," a Netflix spokesperson told *Mint* recently, sharing that the platform was doubling down on its investment in such content.

Of culture and connections
But why are Korean – and more recently, Chinese, Thai and Japanese – shows so popular? "A show like *Kingdom* (Korean) has fantastical ele-

ments, like zombies. But the underlying emotional space occupied by Korean, or Japanese and Chinese characters for that matter, is something that resonates with Indians. We are all extremely emotional people!" says filmmaker Vishnuvardhan Kula-sekaran, known for Bollywood films like *Arrambam* and *Killa*. He particularly enjoys Chinese content. "In the recent past, I've enjoyed shows like *The Untamed*, a fantasy drama (about two magic-wielders battling demonic forces, which made lead actors Xiao Zhan and Wang Yibo popular worldwide). Other favourites include the German fiction series *Dark* and Israeli action thriller *Fauda*, which he finds addictive. "All of them have very different settings, but it's the emotions and the characters that resonate with you," he says.

Subtitles for the win
Interestingly, Asian content is finding more unusual fans: an older generation. Chennai-based food writer Geeta Doctor blames her "new obsession with Turkish soaps on *The Janissary Tree*" and wrote in *The Hindu* last month that "every evening I levitate on Turkish serials... and, depending on my mood, land in Istanbul or Cappadocia, the Anatolian region of central Turkey." In Mumbai, Poorvi Bose got her parents into K-drama during the lockdown because "there was nothing to watch on TV and the news was really depressing". "I started them off with *Itaewon Class* and my dad was totally into it. Now we watch these shows together," says the 27-year-old, who recently wrote about her 'K family' for an online news portal. "The shows are tightly knit, with most having just one season. They also explore various genres – action, drama, fantasy – and themes like mental health. The fact that they don't end with a cliffhanger makes them appealing too," says Bose.

Seven months ago at the Golden Globes, Korean director Bong Joon-ho (of *Parasite* fame) famously said, "Once you overcome the one-inch tall barrier of subtitles, you will be introduced to so many more amazing films". Well, the lockdown and Indian viewers with an appetite for more have proved him right. So break out those chopsticks and packet of ramen, and check in with grandma in Coimbatore or the uncle in Bareilly who are bingeing on 'phoren Asian' shows.

– With inputs from Surya Praphulla Kumar and Nidhi Adlakha



Starter kit

- **It's Okay to Not Be Okay** (South Korea): With each episode depicted as a chapter from a fairytale book, it explores sensitive topics such as mental illness and trauma – wrapped in a complex love story beautifully portrayed by actors Kim Soo Hyun and Seo Ye Ji.
- **The Untamed** (China): Based on the popular *Xianxia* novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi*, the epic fantasy has a queer romance (couched as bromance, thanks to Chinese censorship laws), martial arts, clan rivalry and a demonic flute.
- **Kingdom** (South Korea): One of the best series produced in Asia, it is visually stunning and wonderfully executed, keeping in mind the aesthetics of the period it is set in," says Aashish Singh, Director - Original Film, Netflix India.
- **Girl From Nowhere** (Thailand): A mystery thriller, it follows a transfer student at a new school as she exposes the atrocities on campus, from bullying to faculty misconduct.



ADITYA MANI JHA

For those of us who grew up in the nineties and the early noughties, world cinema was Hollywood's overly 'arty' cousin with subtitles. Then, when UTV World Movies launched a few years later in India, people couldn't shut up about directors like François Truffaut and Vittorio De Sica. Back then, I'd wonder: Eurocentric cinema is fine, but what do people in Japan or China watch on TV?

The streaming era ended that speculation. Over the last few years, major streaming networks like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video have been investing heavily in content from Asia, and smaller players like Dish TV and MX Player are now following suit. Indian audiences have been reciprocating, going beyond the predictable languages (like French and Italian). The lockdown has accelerated this trend. With more time on hand, people are bingeing on South Korean, Turkish, Chinese and Thai dramas. Netflix's 2017 Spanish original series, *La Casa de Papel* (*Money Heist* in English), is the streaming service's most-watched international series in a non-English language, while Korean one-season dramas such as *Healer* and *Itaewon Class*, Turkish soaps *Ask-i Memnu* and *Kuzey Güney*, and Chinese shows *The Untamed* and *Ashes of Love* are popular examples of international offerings.

According to UK-based online market research firm YouGov's 2019 report, 55% of Indians now watch foreign language content. "YouTube is the biggest platform for foreign content consumption", it says. In fact, when Thai series *Still 2gether* premiered on August 14, India ranked no 9 on producer GMMTV's worldwide viewership list.

All things K

Hallyu (the Korean wave) isn't new. For over a decade it has dominated playlists and vanity counters (K-pop, K-beauty – you name it, we've had it). In a 2019 interview with *The Hindu*, film editor Appu N Bhattathiri (*Drishyam*) highlighted how the International Film Festival of Kerala helped popularise Korean content. "K-dramas explore narratives that deal with the youth; I don't think Indian television targets the youth like they do. Besides, access to Netflix, Amazon and so on has... created the urge to explore," he says.

Of late, social media, and forums on Reddit and Quora, are driving more people to K-drama. Mumbai-based influencer Scherezade 'Sherry' Shroff chanced upon this genre during lockdown, when she couldn't find anything new and exciting to watch. "Normally I'm not someone who likes to watch shows with subtitles as you have to really focus. But after *Crash Landing on You*, I was sucked in," she says. That a "whole world online is into K-drama" surprised her even more. When she shared her opinion on the show on social media – a 'taboo' romance between a South Korean fashion heiress and a North Korean secret police captain – she received an overwhelming barrage of requests for recommendations. "Nobody does romance like they [Koreans] do. It may not always be realistic, but when you are watching a romantic show you want that bit of

With subscriptions costing approximately ₹399 a month, Asian streaming platforms like Viki and Jaiyi – with original content such as *Tower of Babel* (Korean), *My Strange Friend* (Chinese) – are finding subscribers in India.



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VISHNUVARDHAN KULASEKARAN, FILMMAKER



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SCHEREZADE SHROFF, INFLUENCER



I love watching K-dramas, such as *Whisper* with Secretary Kim? We have remade so many of their [Korean] horror films because there's this South East Asian connection with the audience here.
CHINMAYI SRIPAADA, SINGER



Asian shows are usually just one season long. So the story is fast-paced and you know you can finish them soon. The fact that they don't end with a cliffhanger makes them appealing too. I am now checking out the storylines of Chinese and Japanese shows.
POORVI BOSE, WHO WATCHES K-DRAMAS WITH HER PARENTS

Now streaming: KOREAN, TURKISH, CHINESE

Strong storylines, cultural similarities and no cliffhangers are making Asian shows popular in the country. Meanwhile, Spanish and Turkish content find fans too



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