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Reception to Korean Cinema and Korean Cultural Troupes in Chennai

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An upsurge of interest in the Korean society and Korean culture has coincided with full fledged participation of Korean cinema in the principal World film festivals during the last few years. The reception to Korean films in various film festivals like Philadelphia Festival of World Cinema 2002, Sanfrancisco Asian Film Festival, Cannes Film Festival, Melbourne International Film Festival, Montreal Film Festival, Pusan International Film Festival, to name some of the festivals, seem to be fairly appreciative and the richness and the breadth of the films is being acclaimed by many discerning viewers. It is being suggested that Korean cinema is one of the most productive and successful film industries outside USA. Reviewing Korean cinema, Boris Trbic believed that the quality films produced in East Asia in 2000 indicate that “this region will in the foreseeable future remain at the helm of new and exciting tendencies in the world cinema.”

Korean films are more internationalized among the Asian nations. Korean cinema addresses the questions of national identity, historical memory, gender and contemporary cultural issues in a critical manner and provide much scope for serious interrogation. A glimpse of contemporary mores and attitudes of Korean society is available through this media. Korean cinema both reflects and is reflected through the country’s political, economic social and cultural features.

India is easily one of the largest producer of films for a long time and the Indian films are produced at least in 11 languages, though in some languages the number is not very large. Cinema is still a principal form of leisure and entertainment for the mass of population. Despite the onslaught of Cable TV and numerous regional language channels, around 12 million people are believed to be watching films everyday in India. Many of the regional language channels also screen movies and transmit film based programmes much of the time. Film personalities and film industry in India have much more intimacy with society and films and politics are getting much more intertwined than in any other contemporary society in the world. Chennai, the city in which I live is a major producer of films and the relationship between Korea and Chennai is on the rise particularly during the last decade. In nineties both the societies are in the throes of far reaching changes in the political, economic and cultural fields. Among the Indian cities, probably the second or third largest number of Koreans are living in Chennai.

Tamil Nadu is one of the major industrial states in India and Chennai, its capital, with its six million population is known for culturally plural, industrially advanced, economically stable character. The number of Koreans living in Chennai boomed after the Hyundai came with its giant plant (Hyundai Motor India Limited) outside Chennai in 1996. The Koreans built their largest overseas production base in a remarkably quick time and the ancillary Units and new

companies grew in significant numbers. If the plans of the India Korea Joint Business Council succeed, the markets in various sectors like ports, ship building, roads, power, oil and gas etc are likely to grow and the bilateral trade will show further improvement. The investment policies of India as well as Tamil Nadu are found to be satisfactory at current juncture and there is every possibility that these relations would grow.

Koreans in Chennai

During the last decade in particular the number of Koreans streaming into city is on the increase. Tamil Nadu being the destination of many industrialists in automobile sector, the Koreans found an hospitable environment in Chennai. In this paper an attempt has been made to chronicle aspects of Korean films in an Indian city.

There are around thirty companies with Korean connections/or with Korean employees. Most of the Korean population in the city are in the business or

employees in private organizations with professional background in Finance or Engineering. Most of them stay for a short duration of three to four years (on transfers in case of employees) and go back to native country soon after. Nearly 500 Koreans are believed to be living in Chennai and The Korean Association takes it for granted that all most all are its members. The number is almost one sixth of the Koreans living in India.. The Executive of the Korean Association periodically meets to discuss matters of importance and plan collectively.

Playing golf seemed to be the principal leisure activity of a majority of working Koreans in Chennai Social life in Chennai could be limited, though Chennai can boast of three Korean Restaurants. Most Koreans watch popular and successful films on CDs that the expatriates who go back to Korea on holiday would bring back. These would circulated among neighbours and friends. Most of them are in Korean (without English subtitles) and the movies that are currently going around circulation include `Shiri`, `Friend`, `Joint Security Area` `My Wife is a Gangster`.

Film Societies in Chennai

Being a film city, where films in multiple languages used to be produced, Chennai developed a strong tradition of critical appreciation of films and in early fifties the first film society got established. . The Federation of Film Societies, an apex body of the film societies in India, is provided grants by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India to spread film awareness and development of audience taste in the realm of cinema. These Film Societies aim at nurturing and developing film culture in the country. The Directorate of Film Festivals was set up in 1973, under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, to help promote Indian films of aesthetic and technical excellence, both within India and abroad. Since then, the Directorate has supplied a platform for the best in Indian cinema by holding the National Film Festival every year. The Directorate has been successfully promoting Indian cinema abroad and also given a chance for Indians to appreciate some of the finest works of international cinema. Within the country, it has made the newest trends in international cinema accessible to the general public.

Dring the last 40 years and more, several film societies like Madras Film Society, International Film Club, Chennai Film Society, Film Appreciation Club, Chennai Film Club, Movie Appreciation Society among others promoted viewing quality films in Chennai, from different parts of the world. The societies run their activities on the basis of the annual membership

collected from their members. The members of these societies envisage to explore the distinctive

styles of the masters of Film makers of India and the world to help them arrive at an understanding of the history and contemporary trends in world cinema. and to develop a deeper perception of, and better perspective to, this most significant mass media of our times. For their viewing they depend on the National Film Archive of India, Pune, from the producers and distributors at minimal or no cost, commercial purchase, and sponsorship and the goodwill of overseas Embassies. Between the 60s to 80s the Soviet and East European Films used to be screened in reasonably large numbers.

The Embassies, the Consulate Officers or High Commissioners take interest in providing movies to some of these societies and often they come down from the national capital to inaugurate an important Film Festival attaching much importance to them. They agree that some of the films do portray their culture in an authentic manner. They often provide appropriate back drop and create an atmosphere for happy viewing.

Apart from some of the Embassies, organizations like Max Mueller Bhavan, British Council, Russian Cultural Centre, The United States Information Services, take significant interest in promoting cultural events as well as screening films often in their own premises. The general public or the members of the libraries or public would get invited. It is also possible that sometimes the Directors or the important artists visit and explain the nature of their creations or their role in the making of particular art forms.

My own introduction to Korean films took place through a Film society which could get Korean films to Chennai in early 90s. Some of the films had later successful run in the commercial circle as well. Korean Films were screened in film theatres in a series with advertisement as a Korean film series. In all, only a handful films have been screened in India and in Chennai. The Madras (present Chennai) film audiences saw Im Kwon Taek's *Adada* (1987) *Surrogate Mother*, *The Misty Village* (1982) among others. . It may not be out of place to point out that some of the films enjoyed commercial success because viewers regarded eroticism as the main reason for seeing a Korean film.

After considerable time, I believe that during the July month end of the current year, the Honorary Consulate of the Republic of Korea has

arranged for the screening of three films in collaboration with a Film Society—My Sassy Girl, Last Present and I wish I had a Wife.

The Korean Foundation sponsored a Tour of Korean Films and Photo Exhibits involving five Asian countries –India, Laos, Qatar, Nepal, and Myanmar which thus far have had only limited cultural exchanges with Korea in an effort to enhance understanding of Korean culture and society in this region. In India, two Korean films 'Marriage Story' by Kim Ui-Seok and 'My Love, My Bride' by Lee Myong-Se were shown in Mumbai in September 2001 , while these two and three other films 'The Stairway to Heaven' by Bae Chang-Ho, 'Chil-Su and Man-Su' by Park Kwang-Su, and 'Death Song' by Kim Ho-Sun were screened in Pune in September 2001.

It is surprising that there are only limited cultural exchanges between the two countries though relations in other sectors had grown significantly during this period.

Cultural Scenario in Chennai

Theatre, both traditional and modern, is very strong in Chennai and Tamil Nadu. One of the ancient forms of Theatre, Therukoothu has been vibrant in recent times and that form has been making experiments with form and content. Several cultural festivals 'The Other Festival' that

brings to the city to the city the best of international talent and artistry on the arts, theatre, dance and music front. There is also the culture of Supper Theatre, entertainment evenings offered by corporate houses and NGOs who bring theatre into the banquet halls of city's choicest restaurants either as a service to their valuable customers or in aid of some special and noble cause. Some of the Embassies also sponsor theatre programmes and they, along with professional theatre groups play a major role in scouting new talent in educational and other institutions.

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations, with primary motto to strengthen cultural relations and mutual understanding with other countries, which has branches in different Indian cities arranges the programmes of overseas cultural troupes and music groups in Indian cities and also sponsor trips

for Indian artists in other countries either on the basis of mutual agreements or to celebrate important festivals, anniversaries or occasions. Government of India also plays a role at times and scholars, dancers, musicians have represented India to portray the classical Indian cultural heritage. It is surprising that the city of Chennai which has very rich cultural heritage of both classical music and dance missed the chance of hosting any troupes from Korea. In the recent past.

Chennai city during December–January months celebrates numerous cultural programmes organized by private organizations and people visit Chennai just to follow the music (Instrumental and vocal) and classical dance?Bhratanatyam, Kuchipudi, mythological dramas, through out period in several Sabhas.

In July 1998 Chennaites, through the Korean Art Exhibition, learnt about the abundant collection of Korean paintings, porcelain, embroidery items and books on various subjects. . Korean paintings dealt with a wide variety of objects such as, portraits, landscapes, animals, flowers, and birds.

New Delhi, the capital of India had the fortune of hosting Korean Musical: "Chang Pogo: the Prince of Maritime Trade", Korean Traditional Dance & Music, Music concert by Kumho Asiana String Quartet in February 1999.

Protectionism

Chennai, one of the major film production centers in the country felt the pinch of competition from time to time in different forms. The competition could be from other regional language films, TV Channels, English films, Dubbed English films in the late 90s. In the recent period when the local industry was finding itself not very attractive, the Hollywood production companies have never had it better in India. Apart from the ubiquitous Titanic, films like Batman & Robin, Eraser, Face–Off, Speed, and Independence Day have been box–office hits in the south, especially in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. The action movies irrespective of where they may have been made, proved to be good markets for English films. Films from East Asia with thin story line but films with martial arts/action component made good money. The Indian government's liberalisation policy since 1993 that lifted the restriction on the import of English films and number of prints helped the market for English films. The marketing strategy has been found to promote films which are dubbed into the

regional languages (particularly in Hindi, Tamil and Telugu) rather than with subtitles in the regional languages.

In Korea too there seems to be worries from time to time about the domestic film industry vis a vis foreign films. The success of directors like Shin Sang-Ok, Yu Hyun Mok and Im Kwon-Taek made it possible for the audiences going back to the theatres and also get critical acclaim

in films festivals. When the Korean industry's share is around 40% of the total market, it is being considered favourable to the local industry. In both the countries there have been protests at allowing screening of foreign films beyond a particular number of days in a theatre.

Adding to the interest for English movies are the 'Hollywood specials' aired on almost all the regional television channels. From time to time there has been demand from the local film industry to curb the onslaught from the Hollywood companies, television and piracy problem of the CDs. Industry has been demanding curbs on screening new films by cable operators, and a decrease in entertainment tax to pull them out of depression.

Several innovations have been made during the last decade to promote the film viewing and survive in the competition. Tamil version of the English films, particularly the computer graphics and the wonder and fear elements in the themes brought audiences back to the theatres. Film Theatres also made innovations by providing refreshments, facilities for new games, provision of couple seats, ticket booking over phone, delivering tickets home and equipping the theatres support with DTS and Dolby Digital formats; and superior quality JBL speakers. Recent years witnessed some theatres sponsoring niche films in the art and animation genre and some critically acclaimed foreign movies, alternative films which are shown only in Film Festivals

Conclusion

The trade volume between South Korea and India is very low pointing to the high potential of growth if both the countries are willing to extend themselves. The industrial and trade relations have been showing uptrends and there is every chance that even films of both countries would also find appropriate market in the near future.. No one would have predicted some

years back that south Koreans will be one of the largest expatriate populations in Chennai.

South Korea and India are countries which are proud of their ancient traditions. However, the former did not shy away from marching towards the path of industrialization and modernization. South Korea has been making its presence on the global scene felt in various small ways. Events like Organising and performing beyond popular expectations in events like World Cup Football would make more and more people aware of the Korean society, culture and their habits in different parts of the World. An attempt has been made in this paper to possibly understand the Korean culture, society and history through the utilization of film and art media. The traffic between the two countries is in for a raise.

Korea's most prestigious films or cultural troupes will find their way to India but need official patronage and resources would be a problem for private agencies to promote them on their own. One of the problems is Korean movies with English subtitles are very hard to get in India. .

Indians are habituated in the recent times to shoot their films in new locations and have explored Europe often. With sizeble Tamil population living in Singapore and Malaysia, Tamil Nadu wooed the industrialists successfully and on more than one occasion actors from East Asia acted in Tamil films acknowledging the linkages. Some Tamil films dubbed into Japanese did very good business and a Japanese actress acted in one of the recent Tamil films. If there are attempts to promote each other's culture in a sustained way, even South Korea and Tamil Nadu can find something in common in some spheres. It is true that language is a barrier but circumstances brought the Hyundai people and Chennaites together.

With globalization and more and more foreign media entering into Indian markets, one should not be surprised if one of the South Korean chaebols makes investments in Indian Cinema or Arts and bringing in a new culture like the way they did in South Korea before the Asian Crisis. It is not impossible to expect a Korean-Indian film or Indian-Korean film in the near future. elodramas during the early phase and the gangster, spy/action films, youth oriented films seem to be sounding familiar ring to Indian cinephiles.

India has to be concerned about its image as the largest film making nation only in quantitative terms. It would lose out to smaller nations in the

Asian region in terms of quality cinema. According to a perceptive opinion, the dances in Indian cinema is 'rather callisthenic and repetitive' (Gokul Singh and Dissanayake p.133) . Sunil Khilnani's observations that Bollywood cinema of its formulaic character and its escapist inclinations holds good for other Indian cinemas as well.

For a Film Studies Scholar, a comparative study of Indian and South Korean films would provide a very rich terrain. Representation and treatment of women----- in Indian cinema?nurturing mother, the chaste wife, the vamp, or educated modern women-----in South Korean Cinema with Im Kwon Taek and the contemporary directors could be a fascinating subject now that a women Prime Minister has assumed office in South Korea. Both in the Indian cinema and Korean cinema the interplay of tradition and modernity in its various guises seem to be recurrent theme. The two recent books in English--- Im Kwon Taek: The making of A Korean National Cinema (2002) ed. David E.James and Kyun Hyun Kim and Contemporary Korean Cinema : Identity, Culture, Politics (2001) by Hyangjin Lee --- would explain the Korean film enthusiasts the basic parameters. Korean cinema is one way of revealing facets of the Korean culture and society. Like some other East Asian cinema, the directors flourish as 'auteurs' in Korean cinema.

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