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## Contextualizing Social Learning Theory Through Korean Media: A Case Study of Cultural Heterogenization in North East India

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### **Abstract:**

*Culture is the manifestation of varying patterns of human behavior and ways of life shared by the society. Every society is marked by a unique cultural tendency which symbolizes its identity to the whole world. The most primary way of expressing one's culture is through human communication. Cultural elements such as language, values, morals, customs, traditions, art, etc., are exhibited consistently through different mass media forms. The present study highlights the case of Korean cultural diffusion in north east India through Korean popular films, dramas, songs, music, etc. Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Korean cultural wave has been consistently spreading in many parts of north east India. The study explores the varying patterns of Korean wave in north east India by contextualizing the rich theoretical background of Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory. The theory, which depicts that people learn and come to acquire new forms of behavior and actions by observing other people's action in the society, explains the dynamics of cultural assimilation of Korean popular culture among the north east Indians.*

**Keywords:** Human communication, cultural diffusion, north east India, Korean wave, popular culture, Social Learning Theory

### **1. Introduction**

Culture includes a full range of learned and shared human behavioral patterns in the society. It is a term that cultivates people. A community's culture can be reflected in the language we speak, the food that we eat, the dress we wear, the rules and tradition we follow, the way we pray, the style of showing respect to our elders, the arts and aesthetics that we possess and produce, the festivals, ceremonies and rituals that we perform, the history, geography, technology and even the weather of the place we live. According to Taylor (1871), culture is that "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Culture, in a nutshell is a way of life.

Culture, society and human communication are inextricably connected. It is through human behavioral communication that culture is exhibited in diverse ways in the society. A society's identity is reflected from its own culture which includes a wide array of both tangible and intangible forms. Tangible forms of culture includes the physical artifacts such as clothing, jewellery, objects, decorative items, etc. whereas intangible forms includes language, customs, beliefs, traditions, law, etc. Culture is exhibited in every behavioral pattern of members of the society. It is in fact, the continuously evolving product of dynamic interaction of members of the society. So, communication has the power to unite and instill a sense of belongingness in the community.

With the constant proliferation of mass media in the society, transmission and promotion of culture through mass media content has become highly evident. The cultural traits of a particular society such as language, dressing, eating habits, fashion, lifestyle, etc. have become easily assimilated to other societal cultures. This paper highlights the case of Korean cultural diffusion in north east India through Korean popular films, dramas, songs, music, etc. Among the various foreign media forms, Korean media is one of the most popular and affluent medium that has easily mingled with the cultural traditions of north east India. Many of the popular Korean cultural traits are heavily accepted and followed by the mainstream north east population.

The study, overall explores the varying patterns of Korean cultural wave in north east India by contextualizing the rich theoretical background of Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory. By observing the diverse cultural traits of the Korean society through their popular films, dramas, songs, music albums, etc., mainstream north east Indians have started assimilating the Korean cultural traits in varying ways. The theory, which depicts that people learn and come to acquire new forms of behavior and actions by

observing other people's action in the society, explains the dynamics of cultural assimilation of Korean popular culture among the north east Indians.

## 2. Exploring the Korean Cultural Wave in North East India

With the whole world undergoing a rapid process of urbanization, modernization and globalization, a structural change in the cultural traditions of societies have become evident. The evolution of a mass popular culture has been observed in many societies. The rise of contemporary popular culture can be exhibited in many societies. Popular culture is less a culture of art objects and images, and more a set of cultural practices by which art is imbricated into the routines and conditions of everyday life (Curran & Gurevitch, 1997). In simplest terms, popular culture is simply culture which is widely favored or well liked by many people (Storey, 2001).

The term 'Korean cultural wave' refers to the export of Korean cultural force to Asia and other countries on a wide scale (Jang & Paik, 2012). Popular culture, consisting of mainly different forms of cultural content intended for the masses have been the dominant form of cultural market force exported to different countries by the Korean media. Such Korean cultural content have become widely popular in Asia and beyond because they have a high rate of entertainment and consumption factor. Korean films, dramas, daily soaps, pop albums and other media content forms have been liked and followed worldwide on a large scale. Korea, now has become an important agent for cultural globalization process.

The Korean cultural wave started since the late 1990s from the neighbouring countries of Japan and China and gradually spreading to the south east Asian countries (Khetrimayum & Chanu, 2008). In India, the north eastern states was one of the first regions in the country to be hit by the Korean Wave or the 'Hallyu' as it is popularly known (Chitransh, 2012). From Arunachal Pradesh to Mizoram and Sikkim to Manipur, Korean culture is the fastest selling commodity since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in north east India. The Korean media successfully penetrated the north east Indian audience through its varying popular cultural content.

The Korean media, for the very first time in India explored the Indian audience through the Korean drama "Emperor of the Sea" which was aired by DD 1 from 23rd July 2006 followed by the MBC hit drama "A Jewel in the Palace" again on DD 1 from 24th September 2006 (Khetrimayum & Chanu, 2008). Due to the ban of Hindi satellite channels (except the national Doordarshan channels) by underground revolutionary outfits of Manipur in 2000, the Korean popular channel Arirang was already a hit in the state and neighboring areas. So, with the audience unable to watch the Hindi channels, their alternative wholesome entertainment provider became the Korean popular dramas, films, music, albums, etc. aired in the available Korean channels.

In the markets of north east state capitals such as Dimapur, Sikkim and Imphal, pirated DVDs of popular Korean films and television serials, sold at anything from Rs 80 to Rs 250 are the highest selling products ("Say hello to Hallyu", 2010). One advantage of the Korean media in successfully penetrating the north east Indian audience is the border trade relations between south east Asian countries such as Myanmar and Thailand with India through the border states of India such as Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram. Pirated CDs of movies, dramas and music albums are abundantly smuggled and made available amongst the masses. Korean dramas such as Full House, Boys over Flowers, Stairway to Heaven and many others are extremely a big hit among the north east Indian households, catering to all age groups of audience.

The Korean cultural invasion is evident from the fact that people, especially the young population unquestionably accepts everything ranging from latest Korean fashion to adoption of Korean indigenous food habits. It is a phenomenal fact that the youth population of this region is already trending to the latest styles exhibited by Korean actors and celebrities with a high speed and magnitude.

## 3. Understanding Cultural Diffusion Through Social Learning Theory

According to Williams (1961), culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain values and meanings not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary people. In case of dissemination of cultural content through mass popular culture, the cultural diffusion takes much faster as the adoption rate is much quicker. One consideration that makes sense in the explanation of the acceptance of mass popular culture among the public is the concept of Albert Bandura's (1971) Social Learning Theory. The theory states that people learn through observation of other people's actions in the society. Cultural diffusion occurs when people learn and accept the cultural traits of other societies.

According to Bandura (1977), in the process of observational learning, people come to acquire new forms of behavior and actions such as new patterns or modes of response to problems, conditions and events in their daily lives. People learn from observation with the help of three basic models – (i) a live model, which involves an actual individual demonstrating or acting out a behavior, (ii) verbal instructional model, which involves descriptions and explanation of a behavior (iii) symbolic model, which involves real or fictional characters displaying behaviors in mass media such as newspapers, books, television, films, etc.

In the study of the acquisition of popular Korean cultural traits by the north east Indians, the Korean media portrayals act as attractive source of live models, verbal and instructional models or symbolic models for people. Ultimately, while observing

things and people through the media portrayals, they try to follow the behavior of the chosen model in the observational learning process. Human communication behavior, hence, is a very dynamic phenomenon where people continuously form tendencies to learn and acquire new forms of behavior in the social environment through observation. The frequent exposure to mass media messages instills the tendency to acquire new cultural forms among the masses.

In the process of acquiring the cultural exports through Korean media, people in north east India experience observational learning through a series of stages (as outlined by Albert Bandura in Social Learning Theory). In the first stage, in order to learn something, an individual must first try to pay attention to the modeled behavior. Many factors such as interest, nature of observed model, societal context and issues contribute to the degree of attention paid by the observer. Korean cultural exports are primarily mass popular culture, highly accepted by the mainstream north east Indian population. In the second stage, if the individual likes the modeled behavior, it is more likely that the observer retains such information in the receiver's brain for longer period which may be reproducible in the future also.

After longer retention of observed behavior, people ultimately start reproducing it the society. Subsequently, in the third stage, reproduction of the modeled behavior occurs when people start imitating the behavior or performing the behavior of the Korean actors/celebrities in terms of dressing, hairstyle, attitude, eating habits, etc. In order to learn through observation successfully, one has to get motivated to imitate the modeled behavior. So, in the final stage of observational learning, positive reinforcement such as rewards, satisfaction and relief instill motivation and enthusiasm to continue using the reproduced activity for subsequent positive results. People at the mass level, on finding huge popularity of Korean cultural traits, find enjoyment and satisfaction in acquiring it. This explains how cultural diffusion is exhibited in the north east Indian society through social observational learning.

#### **4. Koreanization Through Social Learning – An Analytical Approach**

In the process of Koreanization of north east India, a strong impetus of cultural heterogenization is observed. The cultural values of the country of origin are mixed with the local values of the recipient country when a cultural product enters another country (Suh et al., 2006). Certain popular cultural traits of Korea are adopted and followed along with the local cultures of the north east community. For instance, the kind of dressing and hairstyles exhibited by the Korean actors and celebrities, specific body gestures of the actors, mobile gadgets popularly used in Korean movies and dramas, specific eating styles such as using chopsticks, eating rice on bowls, sleeping on floors instead of wooden beds, using popular Korean phrases like *anna saiyo* (hello), *sarange* (I love you), *watuke* (what to do), *waju waju* (yes), etc. are some of the popular cultural traits learnt and acquired by the north east people (Khetrimayum & Chanu, 2008).

In north east India, it is not uncommon to see high school and college going students sporting 'cool Korean hairstyles'. Boys and girls are often dressed up as popular Korean actors/actresses (Chitransh, 2012). Even in the local films, the tendency to exhibit the Korean style make-up, dressing and hairstyles have crept up. Apart from learning common Korean phrases, it is also quite interesting to note that people can even sing their favorite Korean singer's song (Khetrimayum & Chanu, 2008). For many youngsters, following the Korean style is 'simply cool' and fashionable. Youngsters even have Facebook profiles with Korean names photos of celebrities. It is truly amazing to know that people of the north east Indian community observe the Korean media exports with such great interest and they end up learning and acquiring the Korean popular culture and inculcating it in their daily routines and lifestyle.

In Nagaland, the popularity of the Korean culture is such that the most watched TV channel in the state is the Korean channel Arirang TV, the DVD and CD shops are bursting with Korean films, the hottest hair-dos offered by salons are the ones flaunted by popular Korean actors and actresses, shops are selling street fashion that are currently in vogue in Korea, cultural events in the state has special 'Korean songs' contests, sport events now have categories like 'Korean wrestling' (Paul, 2010). It is also surprising to note that even in the interior remote areas of north east India where people are mostly attached with the forest and their ethnic traditions, there is still the reach of Korean cultural market force.

It is also noteworthy to mention that along with the society, the Korean cultural infusion in the north eastern states of India has a favorable support from the Government as well. For instance, the first ever Korea-India Music Festival in north east India was staged during Hornbill festival, 2008 by the Government of Nagaland in collaboration with Korea's leading music channel Arirang TV (Sarkar, 2013). In a place like north east India, pop music is a huge popularity. With the Korean pop music album (or simply K-pop) having a huge popularity amongst the young generation, it is indeed a great initiative from the Government to organize such events for enhancing better cultural ties between north east India and Korea.

One important factor that enhances the learning capabilities of Korean cultural traits by the north eastern community is that the Korean movies, dramas, TV shows and music albums have English subtitles which make the people easy to understand. Hindi (which is the national language of India) is not spoken in most of the parts of north east India, but English is predominantly popular in these areas. So, for many people who do not understand Hindi, Korean media with English subtitles is always a better option. Preference of English over Hindi language which is a common phenomenon in north east India is an added factor for learning and adopting Korean cultural styles.

Another reason for the expansion of Korean cultural market in north east India is the cultural proximity concept. According to Straubhaar (1991), cultural proximity is a characteristic that is predominately reflected in “nationally or locally produced material that is closer to and more reinforcing of traditional identities, based in regional, ethnic, dialect/language, religious, and other elements”. According to Khetrimayum and Chanu (2008), “the key factor that abets the popularity of Korean wave is the cultural proximity of Korean and Manipuri societies in terms of both being of Mongoloid stock; both societies being based on clan communities”.

Moreover, people from India’s northeastern states have been facing various forms of racial discrimination in the mainstream Indian cities. This may be attributed to their different physical looks (north east India has a mongoloid look and features whereas the mainstream Indian population has an Indo-Aryan look) and ways of lifestyle. The north eastern community has been experiencing alienation from the rest of the country (Das, 2014). In such situation, people of north east India find comfort and satisfaction in following the cultural traditions of Korean lifestyle, where cultural proximity is more evident.

## 5. Conclusion

The spread of the Korean cultural wave in north east India is a clear indication of the growth of Korean culture industry. The north east Indian population is one of the most heavily hit regions in terms of the Korean cultural invasion in south east Asia. Clubbed with globalization and expansion of media communication technologies, the Korean cultural diffusion is highly infused in this region. From adopting the fashion styles of Korean actors and celebrities to speaking and singing in Korean language, the whole of north east India is heavily mesmerized by the Korean culture.

Many factors such as cultural proximity, alienation and racial discrimination faced by the north east Indian community in its native country and ban of Hindi films and channels in some of the regions are responsible for the unconditional acceptance of the Korean cultural traits. It is indeed noteworthy to state that the demand for Korean cultural products is still going at a fast rate in India’s north eastern states.

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