

THE FORGOTTEN LEGACY OF PRINCESS SEMBAVALAM: A HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL IMPACT

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ABSTRACT

Princess Sembavalam, also known as Queen Heo Hwang-ok, is a pivotal figure in the historical and cultural relationship between India and Korea. Her journey from Tamil Nadu to Korea and marriage to King Suro of the Gaya Kingdom marks one of the earliest recorded cultural exchanges between the two regions. This article explores her forgotten legacy, highlighting her influence on the cultural, social, and political landscapes of both nations. Drawing on historical research, oral traditions, and cultural parallels, the article associates Sembavalam with the Pandya Kingdom, a hub of Tamil maritime trade and cultural diplomacy. Her impact is reflected in shared traditions such as festivals, language, arts, clothing, and cuisine, emphasizing the rich connections between the two cultures. Festivals like Pongal in Tamil Nadu and Chuseok in Korea, traditional dance forms such as Kummi and Ganggangsullae, and culinary parallels like kimchi and aचार serve as testaments to the enduring legacy of her journey. The scarcity of written records, colonial-era name changes, and the reliance on oral traditions have obscured her story, posing challenges in fully reconstructing her extraordinary life and contributions. Princess Sembavalam's story is a reminder of the enduring power of cultural exchange and the unifying strength of historical connections. It highlights the importance of preserving stories that connect nations, cultures, and communities across borders and centuries for future generations. This article emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary and international research to revive such overlooked historical narratives, particularly those of women, to deepen our understanding of shared global cultural heritage.

Keyword: - Princess Sembavalam, India-Korea cultural exchange, Pandya Kingdom, Cultural heritage

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the achievements of the powerful are often celebrated, while many influential figures fade into the background. Princess Sembavalam, also known as Queen Heo Hwang-ok, is one such figure whose contributions have largely been forgotten, despite her significant influence on both Indian and Korean cultural and political landscapes. According to Korean legend, Sembavalam travelled from a distant land to marry King Suro of the Gaya

Kingdom, an ancient Korean dynasty. Her journey is seen as one of the earliest recorded cultural exchanges between India and Korea, significantly impacting the historical relationship between the two nations [1,2].

Although many details of her life remain obscured, historical research and oral traditions (the practice of passing down stories, history, and cultural knowledge through spoken word) have kept her legacy alive in both countries [3]. Storytelling and folklore, in particular, have helped preserve her memory even in the absence of formal written records [4]. Her story has often been overlooked, highlighting the exclusion of women from historical records and the importance of revisiting such stories to fully grasp their lasting impact [5].

Piecing together fragments of her story allows us to honour her legacy, as well as the legacies of countless other women whose significant roles have been buried over time. Understanding Princess Sembavalam's life offers an opportunity to reflect on broader historical narratives that shape cultural identities in both India and Korea today. This article aims to explore her life and highlight the significant yet often forgotten influence she had on the culture and society of both nations.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2.1 India and South Korea: A Legacy of Cultural and Political Ties

The relationship between India and South Korea is multifaceted and rich, extending across cultural, political, and economic lines [6]. While these modern ties are undeniably important, the connection between the two nations dates back over 2,000 years, to the marriage of Indian Princess Sembavalam, also known as Heo Hwang-ok, and Korean King Suro [7]. This union stands as one of the earliest recorded interactions between the two regions, and it laid the groundwork for a relationship that continues to thrive today.

In modern times, this connection is reflected in the widespread influence of Korean culture in India [8]. The Hallyu wave, which includes K-pop, Korean dramas, and cinema, has taken root in various parts of India [9]. At the same time, Indian culture has left its mark in Korea's history, most notably through Rabindranath Tagore's poem "Lamp of the East," which celebrates Korea's glorious past and its potential as a beacon of light in Asia [10].

Economically, the relationship between India and South Korea is equally strong [11]. Companies like LG, Hyundai, and Samsung have established significant operations in India, contributing to its industrial growth [12,13]. South Korea's involvement in the Mumbai-Nagpur Expressway project highlights the mutual benefits derived from this partnership [14]. It shows how infrastructure development has become a critical area of collaboration between the two nations.

Politically, the bond between India and South Korea has only deepened in recent years. India has stood by Korea in critical moments, particularly after Korea's liberation in 1945 [15]. The two nations have worked together on numerous international platforms, including the G20 (Group of Twenty) [16,17], Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank [18], and the East Asia Summit [19], reflecting their shared vision for regional cooperation and development [20].

The people-to-people connections are another testament to the strong relationship between the two countries [21]. Today, around 11,000 Indian nationals, including 120 Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs), reside in South Korea [22,23]. Similarly, many Koreans have chosen India as a destination for higher education, benefiting from the diverse range of academic opportunities available [24,25].

At the core of this enduring relationship is the story of Princess Sembavalam [26]. Her marriage to King Suro symbolizes the historical link between the two countries [27]. Her legacy continues to live on, despite having been altered over centuries. Unfortunately, much of her story was obscured during India's colonial period, when British rule resulted in the renaming and reshaping of many historical narratives [28].

2.2 Evidence of Sembavalam's Tamil Nadu Origins

One of the primary arguments supporting Princess Sembavalam's connection to Tamil Nadu is the deep cultural and artistic similarities between South India and South Korea [1,2]. Scholars have traced many historical elements back to Tamil Nadu, particularly to the Pandyan Dynasty. Despite confusion caused by British colonial-era name changes, research strongly suggests that the "Ayuta Kingdom," from where Sembavalam originated, actually refers to the "Ayi Kingdom" of ancient Tamil Nadu [3,28].

The Pandyan Dynasty used diplomacy and trade to expand its cultural influence across Asia, and Sembavalam's marriage to King Suro may have been part of this strategy to strengthen ties with Korea [4].

Cultural parallels between the two regions provide further evidence of Sembavalam's Tamil Nadu origins. Traditional dance forms, such as Tamil Nadu's Kummi and Korea's Ganggangsullae, share striking similarities in patterns and communal participation. Festivals like Pongal in Tamil Nadu and Chuseok in Korea reflect shared agricultural

traditions and cultural values. Linguistic connections between Tamil and Korean, including over 1,500 shared words, also point to long-standing interactions between the regions, with Sembavalam playing a key role in facilitating these exchanges [3,9].

2.3 The Ayuta Kingdom: Clarifying Historical Misinterpretations

The "Ayuta Kingdom" is believed to refer to the "Ayi Kingdom," which was part of the Pandyan Dynasty of ancient Tamil Nadu. However, some people have mistakenly linked Ayuta to Ayodhya in North India, a confusion that arose due to the name changes during British colonization. Notably, both the Government of India and the Government of South Korea have established a memorial for Princess Sembavalam in Ayodhya. This has sparked debates among scholars, many of whom argue that Sembavalam's true origins lie in Tamil Nadu, rather than Ayodhya²⁹

2.4 Sembavalam's Journey to Korea

King Suro was urged by his people to choose a wife from among the maidens brought to the court. However, he declared that the heavens would decide his bride. Sembavalam's parents were astonished when the Heavenly Lord appeared to them in a dream, instructing them to send their daughter to the Gaya Kingdom (referred to as the "Purple Kingdom of Korea") because King Suro had yet to find his queen [1,7].

Accompanied by her servants from Tamil Nadu, Sembavalam travelled to Korea to marry King Suro. Ancient Tamilakam's established maritime trade links and cultural diplomacy with regions across Southeast Asia, including Korea, played a key role in fostering such connections. This journey likely contributed to spreading Tamil culture in Korea and strengthening ties between the two regions [3,4].

2.5 The Gaya Kingdom

During Korea's Three Kingdoms Period (1st century BCE – 668 CE), three main kingdoms—Goguryeo (purple), Baekje (yellow), and Silla (blue)—dominated the landscape. Amidst their influence, the Gaya Kingdom emerged as a notable power in the southern Korean Peninsula. Founded in 42 CE, Gaya governed areas that include present-day South Gyeongsang Province, extending east of the Seomjingang River and south of Jirisan Mountain, and even encompassed parts of what is now North Korea. Gaya maintained its political and cultural significance until its eventual surrender to Silla in 562 CE [2,4].

When Japan invaded Korea in 1910, they falsely claimed that Gaya had been a Japanese military outpost from 300–710 CE to justify their occupation. Modern scholars have widely discredited this assertion, emphasizing Gaya's distinct Korean origins and identity [15]. The Gaya period remains significant not only for its political history but also for its contributions to the rich cultural exchanges that helped shape Korean identity [1].

3. CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

3.1 Festivals

Both India and South Korea place great value on their festivals and national holidays, which serve as opportunities for families to come together, express gratitude, and dress in vibrant traditional attire. A notable example is the similarity between India's Pongal and South Korea's Chuseok, both of which are three-day harvest festivals. In South India, Pongal is celebrated by thanking the sun god for a bountiful harvest. Homes are decorated, sweet rice (known as Pongal) is cooked, and the festival is shared with family and friends. Cows, vital for farming, are also honoured during the celebration [1,3]. Similarly, Chuseok in South Korea is a time for families to gather and express gratitude for the harvest. Families enjoy traditional foods like songpyeon (rice cakes) and play folk games. Visits to grandparents or family elders to pay respect to ancestors are also an important part of the festival [2,4]. In addition to harvest festivals, both India and South Korea share Independence Day on August 15th [7]. They also recognize the tiger as their national animal [8], and have significant peaceful movements from their pre-independence days: India's Gandhi Movement and Korea's 3.1 Movement, both of which sought unity and peace in the face of colonial rule [10,15].

3.2 Language

Language plays a crucial role in the cultural exchange and development of both India and South Korea. A shared linguistic heritage fosters unity, promotes education, and supports economic growth [1,3]. Remarkably, the languages of Tamil, spoken in South India, and Hangeul, the official language of South Korea, share over 1,500 similar words. This linguistic overlap highlights the lasting impact of Princess Sembavalam's presence in Korea [4,9]. Both languages also feature similar phonetic structures. Indian languages, particularly Tamil, have a specific letter for each

distinct sound, even slight variations. This is also true for Korean, which, like Tamil, uses a limited set of consonants, some of which have strikingly similar structures [1,3].

3.3 Entertainment and Arts

Music and dance hold a central place in both Indian and South Korean cultures, serving as important mediums to reflect traditions and preserve cultural identities. Scholars have noted striking similarities between dance forms in Tamil Nadu and Korea, particularly in their group formations and rhythmic movements [1,3]. Traditional musical instruments also reflect this connection; the Korean *Wolgeum* and the Indian *sitar* are two string instruments that showcase a shared musical heritage, once popular during festivals and royal court entertainment [1,3].

The cultural connection deepens with theatrical dance traditions. India's *Kathakali* and Korea's *Cheoyongmu* both incorporate elaborate costumes and dramatic storytelling to explore spiritual and historical themes [2]. Similarly, female-centred dance forms emphasize grace and tradition. In Tamil Nadu, *Kummi* is performed by women who clap their hands in rhythm while dancing in a circle, especially during the harvest festival *Pongal*. In Korea, *Ganggangsullae*, performed during *Chuseok*, features women forming a circle, holding hands, and clapping to the rhythm of the song. Both dances symbolize unity and celebrate the harvest, highlighting deep cultural parallels [4,9].

3.4 Clothing and Fashion

Traditional attire plays an important cultural and social role in both Korean and Indian societies. In South Korea, the *Hanbok* is the traditional dress, characterized by its loose-fitting, wrapped shirts and long skirts [4,8]. Similarly, in Southern India, the *Pattu Pavadai* is a vibrant two-piece outfit consisting of a blouse and a long skirt. Both garments reflect the richness of their respective cultures and are worn during significant festivals and occasions, symbolizing heritage and pride [1,3].

3.5 Culinary Cuisines

The cuisine of a country not only fulfils a basic need but also reflects its geography, available resources, and cultural traditions. Both India and South Korea share numerous similarities in their culinary practices and dishes, providing a fascinating glimpse into the connection between the two cultures [1,3].

Following is some of the shared dishes and culinary practices between India and South Korea:

- Rice is a staple in both Indian and Korean meals [1,4].
- *야채튀김* (Vegetable stir-fry tempura) is similar to India's *pakora*, a popular fried vegetable snack [3].
- *만두* (Korean dumplings) resemble *momo* or *samosa*, both of which are common in India [9].
- The iconic Korean dish *김치* (kimchi) is comparable to India's *achaar* (pickle). Both are fermented and stored in similar ways, using jars like the *barni* or mason jars [8].
- Instant noodles are beloved in both countries, with *Maggi* in India and *라면* (*ramyeon*) in Korea serving as popular go-to comfort foods [8].
- *Biryani*, a flavourful and aromatic rice dish in India, is similar to Korea's *볶음밥* (*bokkeumbap*), a fried rice dish, with both dishes offering a blend of spices and rich flavours [4].

There are also similarities in dining etiquette between India and Korea:

1. **Sitting while eating:** In both cultures, it is common to sit on the floor while eating, a practice believed to enhance the spiritual connection to food and aid digestion [1].
2. **Dessert culture:** Both countries have a tradition of enjoying a sweet treat after meals, balancing the spiciness of the main dishes with a final touch of sweetness [8,9].

4. CONCLUSIONS

Princess Sembavalam, also known as Queen Heo Hwang-ok, was an Indian princess from the Pandya Kingdom in South India. Over time, her true birthplace has often been misidentified due to the name changes that occurred during British colonization. Her influence on both Indian and Korean culture is undeniable. Through this research, we have

explored deep cultural connections between South India and South Korea, including shared traditions in festivals, clothing, music, cuisine, language, and historical ties. These parallels highlight the lasting impact of Princess Sembavalam's journey to Korea and her contribution to the intertwined heritage of these two nations.

The importance of this article is in uncovering the story of a historical figure whose contributions have been forgotten over time. It shows the deep connections between India and Korea that have lasted for centuries. The article also highlights how similarities in language, art, and food reflect the strength of cultural exchange in shaping the identities of both nations.

This research, has its limitations. The scarcity of written records, particularly regarding women, poses challenges in reconstructing Princess Sembavalam's full story. Much of the information relies on oral traditions and cultural folklore, which can vary over time and regions. Colonial-era name changes have complicated efforts to pinpoint her exact origins. These challenges suggest that much remains to be discovered about Sembavalam's life and legacy.

Future research should focus on uncovering additional historical narratives by examining archaeological findings, ancient texts, and regional folklore. Collaboration between Indian and Korean scholars could further illuminate the cultural and political exchanges of the time. Interdisciplinary approaches that integrate linguistics, anthropology, and trade history are essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the ties between the Pandyan Kingdom and the Gaya Kingdom.

Princess Sembavalam's story is not merely a relic of the past but a symbol of enduring connections between India and Korea. Rediscovering her legacy reminds us of the transformative power of cultural exchange and the need to preserve the stories of influential figures, particularly women, whose contributions have shaped history across borders.

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