

# Seoulmates



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Korea Through Indian Eyes

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 juggernaut



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*Dedicated to*

*Our parents,  
who shaped us,  
and  
our son Chinmay,  
daughter-in-law Divya  
and grandson Siddhartha,  
for motivating us to write!*



# Contents

<i>Prologue</i>	ix
1. Land of Morning Calm	1
2. Miracle on the Han River	19
3. 'Uri Nara' Mantra	63
4. Work–Life Imbalance?	109
5. Life Without a Work Visa	157
6. Travel in Four Seasons	201
<i>Afterword</i>	221
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	231
<i>A Note on the Authors</i>	233
<i>Glossary of Korean Words in the Book</i>	235





## Prologue

When Sudha's book *Saptarangi Korea: Ek Anubhav* was published in Marathi by Granthali in December 2022, many people asked her, 'Why not in English?' Sudha was quick to respond, 'Vasudev will do that.'

Having worked in finance and accounts all my life, I have been a 'numbers' guy and generally a man of few words. 'At best,' I said, 'I can write a one-page executive summary. But a book? No way!'

After seeing the positive response to Sudha's Marathi book and the growing interest about South Korea in India, especially among Gen Z – thanks to Korean dramas and K-pop – I thought it would be worthwhile to document our experiences in Korea. I felt this could be useful to an Indian reader who wants to know more about South Korea from an Indian perspective.

Sudha's book had a theme. It was based on the seven colours of the rainbow, each colour highlighting some Korean characteristic seen through an Indian prism. It was not possible to translate the same into English, as the order



of rainbow colours in English is different and the essence would have been lost.

This book includes Sudha's experiences, to which I have added my own corporate life experience in Korea, a brief history of the country, how it managed to become a developed country within two generations and what learnings Indians can glean from Korea's economic miracle story. The K-wave part in Chapter 2, and Chapters 5 and 6 are written in Sudha's voice, and the rest of the book is in my voice.

The book is about South Korea, where we had the privilege to live for over six years, from 2013 to 2019. In this book, we have used 'Korea' to mean South Korea most of the time, unless the context speaks of a time before its division. 'North Korea' is mentioned only where we refer to that geopolitical entity and at times, 'South Korea' is mentioned for clarity or emphasis.

Full Korean names have been used for real people and only Korean surnames have been used if a person's identity was not to be disclosed.

I would like to add a caveat here. This book is about our experiences in Korea, which were very enjoyable and memorable. The same may not be true for everyone else. I was fortunate to have a comfortable life with an English-speaking driver and an interpreter in office. Sudha was able to enjoy her time in the country because she learnt the language, and went out of her way to make new friends and try different cuisines. The experiences may have been different if we were strict vegetarians or students, or were just starting our careers.



The biggest lessons we learnt were to appreciate the culture of a new country, assimilate with its people and be ambassadors of our own country because, no matter where one goes in the world, we always represent the country we come from.

– **Vasudev Tumble**



I love to travel and make new friends. The first time Korea caught my attention was during the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Soon after, however, our focus shifted to Japan, what with its then-ubiquitous products and brands like Sony TV, National VCR, Hitachi music player and Maruti Suzuki car. So much so that I started learning Japanese in 1990. At the time, our travels were restricted to India with an occasional foreign trip thrown in.

The twenty-first century heralded a change in our personal lifestyle and a greater use of Korean products when Hyundai, Samsung and LG became household names in India. We started going for annual foreign trips but Korea was still not on our radar. There were many other countries on our bucket list and Korea could wait.

In December 2012, I celebrated my fiftieth birthday in Mumbai in the presence of family and friends. This was a time in our lives when Vasudev would be busy with office work throughout the week, and I with my various interests. I would spend three days every week at Lotus Eye Hospital, Juhu, as a low vision rehabilitation specialist; two days at Veermata Jijabai Technological Institute



(VJTI) Engineering College, teaching management as a guest faculty to final year engineering students; and on Saturday and Sunday, I would teach a distance education programme at Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey (SNDT) Women's University, Juhu.

All this was to change when Vasudev told me in late December 2012 that he had been offered a position as the CFO of SsangYong Motor Company based out of Korea and that he had accepted it. I was surprised to hear this news but was not unhappy that he had already accepted the position without discussing it with me. This is because we had already spoken about it in the past, that if any international assignment came our way, we should take up the challenge and use it as a way to expand our horizons.

Vasudev's transfer was yet to be confirmed by the Korean CEO of SsangYong, and we were supposed to go to Korea for a 'look and see'. We arrived there in March 2013 with the assumption that we may not be transferred after all, so we decided to make the most of the opportunity to see Seoul. When Vasudev was busy with work, I went sightseeing using the efficient public transport, especially the metro. Occasionally, when Vasudev was free, we went around in his company car.

My first impression of Korea was love at first sight. The beautiful airport, the wide roads, the cleanliness and the friendly people who did not seem to mind that I did not know their language made me want to stay on. I said to myself, 'Now, it does not matter whether Vasudev gets a transfer or not, I have seen the place. But I hope we get transferred to Korea. I want to live more in this country.'



As it turned out, Vasudev did get the transfer, and we started packing to move to Seoul in July 2013. It felt like I was going to start life afresh at 50!

When we bid goodbye to our friends in Mumbai, many were surprised and asked us questions like, ‘Does your son live in Korea?’, ‘Why are you going abroad at this age, that too to an unknown country?’, ‘Are you going to North or South Korea? We read reports of some conflict between North and South.’

We reached Seoul on 6 July 2013 on a direct Korean Air flight from Mumbai. After a nine-hour journey that was quite comfortable, we were welcomed at the Incheon Airport by our driver, Jay, who was holding a placard that said, ‘Welcome Mr Tumbe, SsangYong Motor Company.’

With our six bags, we entered 301-I Park, 1604, our new home for the next 36 months, which eventually turned into home for the next six years and six months.

– **Sudha Huzurbazar Tumbe**