

The Proliferation of Crime Narratives in Indian Podcasts: A Qualitative Analysis of Two National and Two Regional Podcast Channels Narrating True Crime Stories

Reetuparna Bhattacharjee

Mahindra University, Hyderabad 500043

Corresponding author

Reetuparna Bhattacharjee, Mahindra University, Hyderabad, India.

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Introduction to True Crime Podcasts in India

True crime as a genre has witnessed a meteoric rise in India, facilitated by the growth of digital platforms and a burgeoning podcasting culture. Podcasts like Khooni and Crime Kahaniyan in Hindi, as well as The Crime Paradox and Sujoyneel in Bengali, mark the entry of regional storytelling within the digital audio space. While true crime podcasts have been widely researched in Western contexts for their societal and psychological implications, little literature exists on their proliferation in India. This study seeks to address this gap, positioning true crime podcasts as a cultural phenomenon and evaluating their narratives through the lens of media effects theories, particularly the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Cultivation Theory (CT).

This literature review explores three pivotal themes: (1) the emergence of true crime podcasts as a media form and its appeal, (2) engagement with regional and national content within the Indian podcasting ecosystem, and (3) the sociocultural and emotional impact of narrating crime stories within Indian audiences.

Theme 1: The Rise of True Crime Podcasts Globally and in India

Growth of the Podcasting Medium

Scholarly inquiry into digital storytelling highlights the podcast as an impactful auditory medium that has gained prominence due to on-demand accessibility and personalized engagement [1,2]. Scholars like McHugh (2016) argue that podcasts differ

significantly from traditional forms of media in their immersive and intimate narrative style. True crime in particular benefits from the episodic structure of podcasts, which allows for detailed storytelling and emotional investment (Steib & Schmid, 2020).

Globally, iconic podcasts such as Serial have been instrumental in popularizing the genre, sparking discourse on justice, empathy-building, and the ethics of crime storytelling (Peck, 2016). These frameworks have provided a foundation to examine the crossover of these narratives into burgeoning regional media landscapes like India. Despite this universal appeal, the research seldom addresses how social and cultural differences—such as those prevalent in Indian contexts—modify the genre's impact.

True Crime in Indian Media

In India, mainstream Hindi cinema (Bollywood) and regional cinema have long romanticized crime narratives in films like Gangs of Wasseypur (2012) or Drishyam (Malayalam/Hindi, 2013/2015). However, podcasts add intimacy and immediacy to crime storytelling. Scholars note a surge in the production and distribution of vernacular podcasts aimed at narratives deeply rooted in cultural and linguistic specificities [3]. Platforms such as Spotify, Hubhopper, and Audible have begun prioritizing Indian-language content, catering to what Khanna (2021) calls "emerging regional digital literacies" [4].

The Hindi-language podcasts Khooni and Crime Kahaniyan reflect a demand for authentic, locally relevant content. Similarly, Bengali-language podcasts like The Crime Paradox

and Sujoyneel connect more personally with listeners through their linguistic and cultural ethos. Yet, scholarly work on these podcasts remains limited, despite the acknowledgment of India's growing vernacular digital audience by Maheshwari and Mandal (2022). This underlines a distinct research gap that this study intends to fill.

Theme 2: Media Effects Theories and Audience Engagement

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) in Podcast Consumption The Uses and Gratifications Theory, pioneered by Katz (1974), serves as a vital framework for understanding why Indian audiences are drawn to true crime podcasts. UGT postulates that media users actively seek content that fulfills specific psychological and social needs. Research on podcasts (Edison, 2020) suggests that individuals consume true crime for entertainment, curiosity, and emotional catharsis.

Hindi and Bengali podcasts, including Khooni and Sujoyneel, align neatly with these paradigms. These podcasts offer more than storytelling—they provide cultural commentary on systemic justice failures, gender-based violence, and class divides. Through linguistic familiarity and culturally adapted narratives, they likely resonate more deeply with regional audiences than mainstream English-language counterparts.

However, questions remain regarding the socio-emotional outcomes of consuming these narratives in an Indian context. Is the appeal solely rooted in curiosity and voyeurism, or does it foster empathy and critical engagement with social injustice? Identifying such nuances constitutes an important gap that this study investigates.

Cultivation Theory and Worldview Alignment

Another theory relevant to this study is Cultivation Theory, which posits that long-term media exposure influences viewers' perceptions of reality [5]. While extensively applied in television studies, scholars like Shanahan and Morgan (1999) emphasize its applicability to new media. For Indian listeners, repeated engagement with grim crime narratives may impact their worldview, perhaps cultivate fear of crime or reinforce skepticism toward societal institutions.

Regional podcasts like Crime Kahaniyan and The Crime Paradox hold specific relevance to this theory, as they weave crime narratives with local cultural and societal critiques. This raises critical questions: Do these podcasts deepen a sense of insecurity within Indian communities? Or do they provide catharsis and promote societal reform? Further research can illuminate the Indian audience experience, bridging theoretical gaps in the application of Cultivation Theory to podcasting content.

Theme 3: Ethical and Sociocultural Debates in True Crime Podcasting

Empathy vs. Voyeurism in Crime Narratives

One significant scholarly debate surrounding true crime narratives concerns the ethicality of consuming someone else's trauma for entertainment. Western literature, such as Kincaid (2018) and Smith (2019), critiques true crime media as glamorizing violence or exploiting victims' tragedies. However, few works explore how these critiques intersect with regional or culturally specific storytelling.

Indian podcasts like Khooni, which frequently detail unsolved cases or systemic lapses in justice, challenge this framework. By offering nuanced and culturally adapted contexts, they arguably function as more than just voyeuristic entertainment vehicles—potentially fostering empathy, civic awareness, and critical thinking [6]. Nevertheless, empirical data supporting this claim in India is scarce, revealing a crucial gap that this study addresses.

Amplifying Marginalized Voices

True crime in Western contexts has often been critiqued for reflecting dominant cultural narratives, sidelining marginalized groups. Indian podcasts, particularly those in vernacular languages, may disrupt this trend by narrating stories involving Dalits, women, and other underserved populations. For example, Sujoyneel highlights cases from rural Bengal, raising awareness about cultural and gendered violence within these contexts. These narratives have the potential to foster collective solidarity among listeners, contextualizing crime within broader social inequalities.

However, there is little systematic examination of whether vernacular storytelling creates an authentic representation of marginalized voices or perpetuates reductive stereotypes—a question that this study seeks to explore.

Gaps in Existing Literature

1. Underrepresentation of Indian and Regional Contexts

Scholarship on true crime podcasting is almost exclusively Western-centric, with Indian media disregarded despite evidence of its growing podcast ecosystem. Furthermore, regional language-specific content in India (e.g., Hindi, Bengali) remains virtually unexamined.

2. Lack of Theory-Driven Analysis

Existing studies rarely apply media effects theories such as UGT or Cultivation Theory to podcasting, leaving a theoretical void, particularly in the context of Indian vernacular audiences. This study aims to contribute to the conceptual understanding of how these theories function in digital audio ecosystems.

3. Empirical Investigation of Impacts

While much has been posited about the cultural resonance of crime narratives, limited empirical research evaluates their social, emotional, or cognitive impacts on Indian audiences.

Conclusion

The growing interest in Indian and regional true crime podcasts necessitates closer scholarly attention. This literature review identifies critical gaps in the current research on how podcasts like Khooni, Crime Kahaniyan, The Crime Paradox, and Sujoyneel narrate crime through culturally and linguistically specific lenses. By addressing themes such as audience engagement through UGT, the worldview-altering potential of Cultivation Theory, and debates surrounding ethical storytelling, this review lays the foundation for a more nuanced understanding of crime narratives in India.

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