

THE SUNDAY READ



Sameer Bhiwani misses his earlier 45-minute drive from Murgeshpalya to Whitefield, because it gave him more time to listen to podcasts

# Peace in a pod

To make their commute bearable, more and more Bengalureans are tuning out of traffic and into audio content. On the menu are diverse subjects - from storytelling and entrepreneurship to travel and politics

| Sowmya Rajaram & Barkha Kumari  
mybangaloremirror@timesgroup.com

TWEETS @BangaloreMirror

**A** 10-minute commute from home to work - what would be a dream for most Bengalureans is not so for Sameer Bhiwani, who actually misses his earlier 45-minute drive from Murgeshpalya to Whitefield. No, Bhiwani (39) is not "mad", as he laughingly confesses his wife calls him. Bhiwani (VP of design and customer experi-

ence for an online investment service) just misses the uninterrupted time he used to get to listen to podcasts (with the speed increased, so he could consume more in less time) when his office was in Whitefield. Yogesh Parmar, a 35-year-old behavioural scientist, says the "biggest motivation" for him to drive to Chennai and back two weeks ago, was that he would be able to listen to Seth Godin's podcast in full. The lure, for both of them, is the opportunity to listen to informative content that helps them tune out from the rest of the world, while maximising time spent in Bengaluru's biggest bane - traffic. Others agree, which is why last month, 70 people who create podcasts, listen to them and companies in the business of audio content came together in the city.

Naga Subramanya BB (29) of 'The Passion People', says the meet, conducted by city-based O2 Pod Collective (an initiative to create an ecosystem for the growth of podcasting in India), was the biggest such meetup in the country. "People had

Naga Subramanya BB believes podcasting is poised to explode

also come from Delhi and Mumbai," he says. Started by Subramanya, Saif Omar and Faiza Khan of 'The Musafir Stories', and brothers Vishnu and Shankar Padmanabhan of 'Writer & Geek Show', the collective conducts podcasting workshops and awareness drives in the city, and is in talks with corporate companies to launch their audio shows.

Certainly, video has not killed the audio star. In terms of podcast listenership, India ranks fifth on Audioboom, a UK-headquartered platform to create, host and monetise podcasts, after the US, the UK, Australia and Canada. "But we are hoping that India will become No 4 by the end of 2019," says Aman Goklani, head of India operations. Currently, Audioboom hosts over 50 content creators from India. "One-third of these shows come from organisations, the rest from individuals from the top cities. Since last July-August, news media too is showing interest. We now host six, and are in talks with at least two more."

### Why audio?

So is listening the new reading, or watching? Padmanabhan believes all formats can co-exist. "Each medium can exist and find its own audience," he says. Parmar too believes it is a "false dichotomy". The "sheer eclecticism" of what's on offer keeps him hooked to podcasts. "I listen to nearly everything across the board, related to economics, society, art, film and music - and then writers such as Malcolm Gladwell and Tim Ferris," he says. Bhiwani has similar reasons. "Books are deep thought pieces that you might want pause and reflect upon. But listening to podcasts while I'm in traffic helps me tune out from the world," he says, citing the "soothing quality" of '99% Invisible by Roman Mars', and 'User Defenders'. Especially in Bengaluru, Bhiwani believes it can help take your mind off of traffic and instead "help you change your perspective." Parmar likens it to therapy. "It's a spiritual experience, al-

most, where there is no other sensory stimulus involved."

The same is the case with audiobooks. Yogesh Dashrath, country manager, Storytel India (which came to India in November 2017), says Bengaluru has been doing very well when it comes to a demand for audiobooks. "It's a perfect market where people are tech savvy and there's a lot of traffic, which creates a gap for constant entertainment", he says. "You can choose the book you like and enjoy it at your own comfort. We all enjoy stories, but not all of us have the patience or time to actually sit through an entire book. Audiobooks come in handy when you can enjoy mostly-known voices reading to you while stuck in traffic, while waiting for a flight, or in zero network zones." He adds that the growth of podcasts has helped audiences "warm up to audiobooks". "The more people listen, the more any industry which has to do with audio will benefit."

That includes parents such as Gagan and Shruti Chopra, who put their five-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son to sleep by playing podcast stories in Hindi up to twice a week. Gagan, an IT professional, would earlier call her mother or mother-in-law and ask them to narrate Hindi stories to the kids over the phone from Delhi, "because our elders know far more than we do, and because there aren't enough Hindi books available in stores". But now, they switch off the lights and play podcasts. "It gives their eyes a break too," Gagan says. He says kids find the voice of a professional storyteller "far more dramatic."

**I have recently started an online course on podcasting and over 60 people have signed up. It's free now, but I plan to monetise it in a few months**



- Karthik Vijayakumar, Design Your Thinking

Subramanya attributes the interest in audio to "Internet access, cheap data plans, smartphones and digital home assistants such as Alexa and Siri". Plus, content is diversifying in languages such as Kannada, Tamil and Hindi. "Thriller and horror story podcasts are doing great (Nikesh Murali's 'Indian Noir') and travel podcasts are a hit. A lot of podcasts on news and politics are gaining traction." Factor Daily has also gone audio-only.

### Meet the makers

For those making them, podcasts are a way to share their views and interests with the world. And that takes work. In his free time, chartered accountant Subramanya hunts for enterprising people for his talk show, spends half a day with them for research, records the interview, edits and responds to his listeners on social media. He isn't a RJ but he's getting the attention. "Listeners come to the meetup to see who is the face behind the voice is. On social media, I give advice to creative people and connect them to

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5



ANANTHA SUBRAMANYAM K



THE SUNDAY READ



Seventy people attended the O2 Collective meetup in the city last month

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

business partners." His listeners are in their 20s and 30s, looking for self-help content and intellectual conversations. They are mostly from Bengaluru, Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata, and the remaining 20 per cent come from the US and the UK. "They tune in while commuting to work, at the gym or during bedtime," he shares.

Pratham Khandewal, cofounder of Bengaluru-based Headfone, an Android app that lets you create and share audio content, has 1.5 lakh active listeners, and believes the demand for audio content will only increase. "Seventy per cent of our content is user-generated (UGC) - produced without sophisticated equipment. Send us your recording and after vetting it, we upload it on our app," he says. "Podcasts are usually made by the urban people - storytellers and RJ's, on topics of inspiration, politics and stories (love, horror and ancient tales are most heard). UGC, on the other hand, is being made by introverts living alone in flats in Tier-2 cities, or by extroverts, who simply want to speak their mind on everyday issues."

In 2017, Padmanabhan (28), cofounder and host of 'Writer & Geek', got on board his brother Vishnu's (also co-host and co-founder) idea to upload the conversations they had about space, history and technology, to the web for others to listen. Two dynamic mics and a mixer make up their equipment with which they upload 30 minutes to hour-long episodes on everything from popular culture to the history of toothbrushes, unravel serial killer stories and more. Research can take anything from a week to a month-and-a-half, depending on the topic. The content too has undergone much tweaking, before the brothers nailed down what works for them - "a conversational style with a bit of humour where the audience also feels part of what is going on".

Karthik Vijayakumar of 'Design Your Thinking' says podcasting is "nothing but two or three people



Vishnu and Shankar Padmanabhan of the Writer & Geek Show

coming together". And so chances are when interviewees come on a show or share the podcast later in their network, their followers can add to the traction. "For instance, this season, I had comedian Atul Khatri, who has over 2 million followers," the 38-year-old says.

Show me the money

Not that the numbers are enough for podcasters to trade in their day jobs. So most do it part-time, like Subramanya. Vyas's day job is that of country manager for a non-profit, while Pandit is a risk management professional. Omar runs a family business and Khan is a techie. A few have crossed over. Vijayakumar started podcasting while on a career break in 2016 and hasn't gone back to the cubicle. He interviews Indian and foreign creators, entrepreneurs and non-conformists for lessons his listeners can take away. From clocking 3,000 listeners a month in 2017 to 9,000 in 2018 and 6,000 this year (after a break), his show has aged well.

One thing led to another and now Vijayakumar is consulting with companies and doing workshops on 'Design Thinking'. "So very accidentally, I have managed to monetise my podcasts." Next, he has a plan. "I have recently started an online course on podcasting. Over 60 people have signed up and the majority are non-Indians. It's a free course but I plan to monetise it in a few months."

Padmanabhan has plans too. When they started, most listeners were from the US. Today, the 70/30 ratio between listeners from the US and listeners from India has changed to 60/40, and they get 1,000 downloads per week for an episode. While he shuns "advertising" because it is "intrusive", he is looking at a subscription model for his podcast. Other avenues include creating podcasts for companies, (end-to-end or just production), coaching, building a brand based on his expertise in certain areas, or doing events and livestreams.

There are those like Amar Vyas, who says that in the three-and-a-half years he's been making 'Baalgatha' - a weekly series of podcasts (for children aged between three and 12 years) along with his wife Minu Pandit, they've spent only ₹1,500 on Facebook ads. They make money through syndications or brand collaborations. "We've grown by word-of-mouth, one parent recommending the other. Now, we get 60,000-65,000 listens every month," says Vyas (40). Their listeners are mostly parents in the age-group of 25-45 from Bengaluru, Delhi and Mumbai. They have published over 500 audio stories in English, Hindi and Marathi and are now testing in Kannada, Telugu, and Gujarati. They've also done Chinese and

Egyptian versions of *Cinderella*. After engaging kids, the couple is set to roll out Startup Nibbles, a market-oriented podcast for 25-35-year-olds.

Subramanya believes "podcasting is poised to explode, like YouTube did", and when it does, youngsters like him, in their 20s and 30s, will have the first-mover advantage.

Sounds of the future

Until then, a lot still remains to be done. In the US, Audioboom gets more than 35 million listens every month as opposed to 1.5 or 1.7 million in India, with Bengaluru, Mumbai and Delhi their biggest base. "It's a big number in the podcasting industry but not as much when compared

to other medium. A video on YouTube alone gets 50,000 views per month, for instance. So, we have just scratched the surface (of the podcast market in India)," says Goklari.

Most people in India are simply not aware of the medium, which makes it difficult to monetise the content. But in five or 10 years, podcasting will become commonplace, much like blogging, he believes. This stems from the interest coming in from streaming and distribution partners - Spotify entered India this February, competing with Indian players Gaana and JioSaavn, and there is growing Internet access. "In India, 77 per cent of podcasts are consumed on mobile phones. It's a passive activity," he points out.

9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> Students  
**CAREER IN DESIGN ARCHITECTURE**  
**NID | NIFT | ISDI**  
**Woxsen | GLS<sub>ID</sub> | VU**  
**NATA | UID | U/CEED**  
 BRDS 2018 Result : 143 NID, 575 NIFT, 87 CEPT, 47 ISDI, 27 WWI, 32 IIT, 676 NATA & 401 Others  
 Highest selection record from BRDS as compared to any coaching institute in India  
 89807 57598  
 www.rathoredesign.com  
 भनवर राठोड़ डिजाइन स्टूडियो  
 BHANWAR RATHORE DESIGN STUDIO  
 Art, Design and Portfolio Consultancy  
 Malleswaram - BTM Layout

**A COLLEGE THAT VALUES SUCCESS**  
 YOUR CAREER STARTS HERE  
 MEMBER CII CONFEDERATION OF INDIAN INDUSTRY  
 ASSURED CAREERS THROUGH EDUCATION SYNCHRONIZED WITH INDUSTRY  
 WORLD DESIGN ORGANIZATION  
 ADMISSIONS 2019 OPEN  
 MEMBER ELIA HOLLAND  
 14 YEARS OF CREATING GREAT CAREERS IN DESIGN  
 OVER 90 % PLACEMENT | TOP INDUSTRIES | TOP SALARIES  
 DESIGN SPECIALITIES | VISUAL ARTS | ANIMATION FOR INDUSTRY  
 U.G & P.G. COURSES | TWINNING PROGRAMS  
 AND IF YOU WISH :  
 YOUR ROUTE TO THE BEST DESIGN SCHOOLS WORLDWIDE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION  
 VISIT: WWW.NICCINDIA.ORG  
 INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE OF DESIGN  
 CALL +91-99011 34421 +91 96205 98006