Vivekananda Journal of Research
An official Journal of **Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies-TC,** Delhi, India

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE
Published on 15 September, 2026
www.vjr-vips.com

The Potential of Digital Regional Podcast: Use of Immersive Audio Storytelling for Gen Z Engagement on Youtube

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ARTICLE INFO

DOI:
10.61081/vjr/16v1i105

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Keywords
Radio, podcast, audience engagement, digital media.

How to cite:
Basu, A., Kayal, S., Agarwal, S. (2026). The Potential of Digital Regional Podcast: Use of Immersive Audio Storytelling for Gen Z Engagement on Youtube. Vivekananda Journal of Research, 16(1), 38–44

ABSTRACT

The radio industry gained widespread popularity and is regarded as an influential tool for entertainment, information dissemination, and education. Radio has a rich legacy in India where it has also contributed to the growth and development of the society and it had a prominent role in the modernization, making a contribution to many developmental campaigns. Radio has provided support by reaching the audiences far and wide by supplying information on a range of issues like health, education, agriculture, and has truly been a catalyst in heralding modern society. With the growth of digital communication systems, radio has found subsistence through the podcast. These days podcasts are popular with the audiences, and the interest seems to grow more and more. The objective of the paper is to analyze the content for the podcast in Bengali language and analyze the reasons for its popularity among the audiences. The study adopts qualitative methodology, and focused group discussions are conducted. The data thus obtained inform that the regional language (Bengali) podcasts combine convergence and traditional storytelling methods to interest the audience and nostalgia and Bengali literature adaptations invite regular listeners. The podcasts also serve as a platform to keep linguistic and cultural identity thriving in the Bengali-speaking diaspora.

INTRODUCTION

Radio is an audio medium that became immensely popular because of its capacity to reach out to audiences instantly and share important information. Radio is considered to be a medium that has covered almost all of India and has a reach of almost the entire population. The device is cheap, it is a portable medium, and the cost of operation of the radio device is also low – all these

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factors have contributed to making it the people's medium. The device could be operated with the help of portable batteries, which makes it feasible for a land where electricity is not available everywhere. But due to the constant developments in technology, radio lost its monopoly due to the upcoming mediums but never its charm. Since then, radio has been reinventing itself, from All India Radio and Akashvani days to FM where private players started entering the industry as the government gave permission to the private sector, to the podcasts. A podcast is an audio programme that is shared on the internet, which is very similar to the experience of listening to a radio programme, only that it is in a digital format. The digital format of the programme makes it easily available to a large audience, specially making it popular amongst the younger generation.

The availability on the internet makes it globally available, and content can be viewed anywhere, irrespective of time constraints. The regional content is also witnessing growth because of advancements in technology, as audiences worldwide can watch their preferred content. A person can view a podcast in their own regional language even if they migrate to a foreign land, enabling them to feel connected with their own culture and people. Podcasts are available in diverse genres - education, news, interviews, entertainment, storytelling, science, technology, current affairs, and many others. They are available in a series of episodes which can be subscribed to through online platforms. The podcasts are gaining popularity as they combine the convenience of technology with the 'warmth of a personal conversation' of the radio. Above all, they are a revolution - as they have ushered in an era of democratization, giving space to individual creators and independent voices to be heard by a global audience.

According to a report published on December 2025 in Mint by PwC, India has 177 million monthly podcast listeners in 2024, reflecting a significant increase from 154 million in 2023. The podcast audience is expected to continue expanding steadily, with projections indicating that monthly listeners may reach 267 million by 2029. This growth represents a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8.5 percent during the period from 2024 to 2029. Astute Analytica India Podcast Market Report (2025) and Indian School of Business (ISB) report that India's podcast market is characterized by predominantly young Gen Z audiences of the age group 20-21 years which is primarily because of the growing penetration of smartphones and cheaper internet rates. There has been a surge in the consumption of audio content because of the popularity of streaming platforms and the availability of diverse content.

As per the above figure and a report published by ISB, APB Live, Indian audiences are increasingly embracing a wide range of audio content, with podcasts leading the space, while audio series and audiobooks are also gaining popularity, indicating a growing preference for diverse sound-based entertainment. The demographic says that the audience is men (52%) and women (48%) and around 45% of the listeners are between 18-30 years. Research has also found that a huge number of audiences, listen to podcast while they are travelling, working or studying, doing household chores, relaxing or exercising, which indicates that listening to podcast is their secondary activity, which supplements their primary work. Another interesting factor is that around 57% express their interest in paying for subscribing to audio content. These patterns suggest that audio content, particularly podcasts, is becoming a regular and valued part of Indian digital life. Thus, only audio format gives listeners flexibility and freedom to multitask without disrupting their primary activity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The growth of podcasts has been due to the shift in media consumption where content is designed to hold audience attention as mobile users increasingly engage with long-form digital media. This study examines three cases to show how different sectors of the podcasting industry create compelling nonfiction through transparent storytelling (Dowling & Miller, 2019).

The research study 'You're the Gatekeeper: Exploring Open-Access Podcast Creation in the Sport and Exercise Sciences' aimed to study the reasons for independent podcasters to initiate radio podcasts related to sports and sciences. Podcasting is often viewed as a democratic medium, but research shows that podcasters practice gatekeeping.

The topics are chosen carefully, and guests and guests are invited to maintain credibility. The existing power structures within are often reinforced through the podcast which validates existing knowledge. The study found that podcasts reduce technical barriers to communication. They are also as per the social and professional norms which makes it possible that voices are heard. The study emphasizes the need for podcasters to reflect on serving audiences to a niche audience and how their choices influence access and diversity in educational media (Shaw *et al.*, 2025). A research study 'Understanding the Far-Right Podcast Ecosystem: Production, Politics, and Rhetoric' addresses podcast as a means to reach voices of the marginalised far and wide and a tool for personal storytelling which also serves as a representation of the marginalised sectors (Dowling & Dowling, 2026). A study 'Emoting with Friends of the Pod: How Podcasters Make Space for Listeners to Process Politics' explores how political podcasts create emotional connections with listeners by analysing podcast Pod Save America. The research shows how hosts used emotional openness, self-disclosure, and listener engagement to support audiences during the 2024 U.S. presidential election. The study highlights how podcasts can build trust, offer emotional comfort, and motivate listeners (Powers & Tilley, 2026).

Another research titled, 'How Do You Pod? A Study Revealing the Archetypal Podcast Production Workflow' observes that podcasts have become popular in the last few years and the production of content in podcasts has amplified. It has become a highly commercial platform which caters to a huge number of audiences. The study ascertains that less attempt has been made to study the producer of the content and the strategy employed in the production and popularity of the medium (Rime *et al.*, 2022). Another research titled 'A report on the use of open access podcasting in the promotion of social work highlights that podcasts in niche areas are gaining popularity, but there is not much research done. This research studies the use of podcasts for educating social workers in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice. The podcast would also serve as a medium to introduce developmental issues to young students. The research aims to attain its objectives through a content analysis of the listeners (Fronek *et al.*, 2015).

The research study titled 'Practitioners' Use of Open-Access Sport Science Podcasts' adds that the sports practitioners are not adept with the scientific research, so open access podcasts can serve as a medium to provide knowledge to them. The research conducts interviews of podcast listeners and analyses the data using a thematic analysis. The three themes that emerge from data analysis say that portability, liberty of watching in parts, and availability of authentic information are the factors for the popularity of the podcast (Shaw & McNamara, 2021). The research titled 'Podcasting and ethics: Independent podcast production in New Zealand' examines independent podcasters and their management of content with less data available to help podcasters succeed. The study highlights that the podcasters follow journalistic values and adherence to ethics.

Audio media is going through a major shift. In 2020, commercial radio turned 100 years old. It was once the major ways people connected with the world. Today, people can access music, news, and entertainment anytime through a wide range of digital platforms. Streaming services like Spotify, YouTube and others are taking over radio's traditional role, with listeners now spending more time on streaming than on radio. To keep up, radio needs to change and find new ways to stay relevant as technology and listening habits continue to evolve (Grant & Meadows, 2020).

OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The objective of the study is to explore the reasons for the popularity of the regional language (Bengali) audio podcast on YouTube. The study adopts a qualitative methodology, and focused group discussions are conducted among postgraduate students of the age group of 21-25 in Kolkata. The qualitative data collected from the group discussions are analyzed to achieve the results. A content analysis of the data will enhance the understanding of the popularity of the regional (Bengali) podcast. During the focused group discussions, the participants were probed about their interest in Bengali language audio podcasts, reasons of their popularity; whether they can recall any story or part which they particularly appreciated; do voice artists, sound effects, background music have any role in their popularity, do literature

adaptations suit to radio format, reasons for losing interest, role of audio podcast in reviving literature for Gen Z.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

A group discussion was conducted among different groups of postgraduate students of 21-25 years, and they were asked about the reasons why do they think Bengali language podcast are gaining popularity. The following was the outcome of the group discussion:

Flexibility in consuming the content

A respondent informed that he had been listening to podcasts in Bengali for quite a long time. Initially, his attention was captured by the podcasts of 'horror' genre, but then he started consuming other types of content mainly for the voice and presentation style. He became a regular listener because of the flexibility the medium offers, and he also mentioned the quality of audio that kept improving over the years. He said, "the advantage of listening to online podcast it that I have flexibility in terms of consuming the content, I can listen to some of it and carry listening to it later. I listen to Bengali audio podcasts while travelling. I don't need to sit and watch the screen, so it fits perfectly into my busy routine". Another respondent shared, "unlike videos, podcasts don't demand full attention". A 23-year-old postgraduate student said, "I usually hear Bengali storytelling podcast at night before sleeping. Audio content is more relaxing and flexible than videos". Another student articulated, "I listen to Bengali podcasts during study breaks. It refreshes my mind and is convenient because I don't need to watch anything". "Many young people prefer audio podcasts because we can listen while gyming, travelling, or doing other work", said another respondent. While some were of the opinion that they prefer to watch horror and mystery genre for relaxation and they said, "I enjoy Bengali horror podcasts while resting, as audio storytelling create a sense of suspense. In the absence of visuals, listeners imagine the characters, settings, and frightening moments in their own way, which makes the experience more engaging and exciting. The narration, sound effects, and background music enhance the overall atmosphere of fear". Another reiterated, "I remember watching the episode *Nishir Daak* from Sunday Suspense. Listening to it as an audio-only experience made the suspense more intense, as I had to imagine the dark setting, mysterious sounds, and unseen presence through the narration alone. The voice acting and background effects felt more engaging than watching visuals". Yet another respondent added "I especially enjoyed listening to Taranath Tantrik in the voice of Mir Afsar Ali on Sunday Suspense. His narration added depth to the character, making the story feel vivid and engaging. Through voice modulation alone, he created a powerful atmosphere of suspense that made the audio experience truly memorable".

The Language Connect

Another respondent highlighted that the language of the medium was in itself important for listeners as they could hear people speaking in their native language. One of the respondents said, "I prefer Bengali audio podcasts because I feel more connected when I hear my own language. It is easier to understand and feels natural while listening". Another respondent said, "Bengali podcasts are enjoyable because they reflect our culture, traditions, and daily life. I can relate to the topics more than content in other languages". Many other respondents were of the opinion that Bengali podcasts are useful because content becomes easier to understand when explained in their native language. There are some respondents who also mentioned that listening to conversations in Bengali seemed soothing to them, and provided relaxation, it provided them with a sense of comfort and familiarity. "Listening in my mother tongue feels natural, and I can easily understand the message without making extra effort. Another reason I enjoy Bengali podcasts is that the emotions and expressions sound more genuine in my own language. I believe podcasts in Bengali are becoming popular because many people want quality content in a language they speak every day", said a respondent. Another reiterated, "I watch Bengali audio podcasts because the emotions, the expressions sound more genuine in my own language". For some who live away from home, it is an experience of feeling connected to their mother tongue.

Adaptations of Bengali Literature

The podcast carry content from not only Bengali literature but also from literature all over the world. A respondent said, "I remember listening to the radio on a certain time of the day for example, on Sunday 1 pm I would sit down and listen to the show. But the advantage of listening to online podcasts is that I have flexibility in terms of consuming the content, I can listen to some of it and carry listening to it later". Many respondents discussed about Radio Mirchi Bangla, which is widely known for Sunday Suspense, a popular Bengali audio drama format featuring Feluda, Byomkesh, horror tales, and suspense fiction. A respondent noted, "I listen to Sunday Suspense because it brings Bengali literature alive in a very engaging way. Many classic and popular Bengali stories that I had only read, become more exciting when performed through voice acting, music, and sound effects. When they adapt works by Satyajit Ray or Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay, it feels as if the characters are real and speaking in front of me. I especially enjoy detective and suspense stories because the background sounds create interest and curiosity. Another reason I like it is that it allows younger audiences to connect with Bengali literature in modern format. Even people who do not regularly read books can enjoy these stories through audio".

Another respondent said, "I enjoy Sunday Suspense because it presents different kinds of Bengali literature in an audio format. I especially like when they adapt ghost stories and supernatural tales by Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay, and other Bengali writers. These stories become much more powerful when combined with background music, and sound effects. It creates a mysterious atmosphere. Another reason I appreciate it is that it introduces old literary works to today's generation in a modern and convenient form. Many young listeners may not read classic Bengali books, but through Sunday Suspense they can still connect with Bengali language".

Golpo Mir-er Thek tells stories in a lively manner. Mir's narration makes the story feel personal, as if someone is sitting in front of me and telling a tale. I especially like when classic Bengali works are told into audio form, because the emotions come across very naturally, as if someone is retelling us the story. The conversational tone makes literature less forma. Sometimes stories that may seem difficult in written form become easy to understand when narrated with expression. I also feel that the show helps preserve Bengali language and storytelling traditions in a modern digital format. Another respondent added, "*Golpo Mir-er Thek* adapts humorous stories by Sukumar Ray, where the playful narration makes the characters even more enjoyable. The expressions and comic timing bring the characters to life in a way that feels fresh and entertaining".

Another respondent said that they remember a story presented by *Sahitya Samahar* where they adapted *Byomkesh Bakshi* stories because the suspense felt stronger in audio form. The background music and voice acting make every clue and conversation more exciting.

Nostalgia - emotional connect

Many respondents informed that listening to Bengali podcast remind them of their childhood and make them feel closer to home. A respondent said, "I also prefer listening to my favourite old episodes, I have listened to it 3 years ago, and I listened just yesterday, listened to the entire episode, it also gives you nostalgic feeling.". Another respondent said, "I enjoy Bengali podcasts because they represent our culture, traditions, and lifestyle in a way that feels authentic. Many Bengali podcasts discuss literature, food, cinema, and local social issues, which makes them highly relatable. I feel more engaged when examples and stories come from our own surroundings. Bengali language also carries warmth and emotional depth, which improves the listening experience". They also said that when they hear Bengali in podcasts, they feel connected to their childhood memories and family environment. A respondent said, "For me, Bengali podcasts are enjoyable because I understand every detail naturally without needing extra effort. It feels close to my heart". A student said, "It makes one feel nostalgic, as it takes you to your childhood, where children love listening to the stories recited by their mother, grandmothers and the family. Listening to radio podcast evokes an emotional response and rekindles our love to listen to audio stories. Where absence of any visual allows one to be creative.

Still, there are people who like listening to stories, and also listening to stories by a voice artist where audio specials are also used".

Another student stating that many are disinterested in audio only said, "however, there were few who would like to watch audio-visual content and not many are there who would like to hear only an audio story. Perhaps, there are many 90's generations who get nostalgic feelings and remember the experience of listening to stories and they perhaps they feel associated with their emotions. No, people do not have so much patience and interest, so in my opinion, the importance is reducing."

Technological advancements

A respondent added, "Also, there are some thumbnails which are very attractive, and comments are there, which are also enjoyable and people can also converse with each other". Another respondent shared, "it can help in forming a small community where you can converse with people having similar interests", "the comment section under Sunday Suspense is enjoyable. Listeners discuss endings and favorite voice artists" – which hint at convergence. Many listeners appreciated the availability of digital formats of podcasts due to technology. One respondent stated, "The digital upload of Sunday Suspense episodes helps busy people like us. I can still hear it on my mobile phone whenever I want to. And it is a good thing they uploaded it on YouTube, it will be available for others". Another respondent added, "the surround sound effects and audio clarity on Sunday suspense uploads feel better with modern headphones. Technology improves the suspense experience". A respondent pointed out, "YouTube autoplay suggests similar Bengali thriller stories, because of algorithms, I discovered many more channels".

Storytelling

Many respondents admired podcasts in Bengali and said, "they have revived radio drama for our generation. Even though we grew up with screens, it made us enjoy storytelling through sound." Yet another student said, "I have listened to *Taranath Tantrik* series, *Feluda* series which are a favorite of any Bengali and give a glimpse of Bengali childhood, *Romancho Rohosyo, Moynagudi Rajakanya*, are some of my favorite stories." Another 21-year-old said, "I like listening to horror stories, sometimes I sit with friends and listen to podcast, it is a good way of spending time with them." However not everyone is ardent listener of podcasts as a respondent denied, "I don't listen to a lot of podcasts, I don't have that much time." There were many who discussed the nostalgic storytelling memory by elders, and thus they found the audio podcast appealing. There were few respondents who were able to summarize the content of stories that they heard on podcasts, shedding light on the factor that storytelling increases remembrance.

DISCUSSION

The splurge of digital audio podcast on YouTube have revolutionized the media landscape as they provide space for the growth of content in regional language such as Bengali and help them to flourish in the digital territory. Bengali podcasts on YouTube are illustrations of convergence that combine traditional storytelling with audiovisuals. This also increases the reach of the regional content by removing the language barrier but also keeps the spirit of the language alive. YouTube also offers features like sub-titles, visual cues and the interactive comments section that adds to the vitality of the audio only podcasts. It offers scope for audience participation and community building approach where people who like similar content can come together, interact, discuss and form a community.

The discussions in the podcast and in the interactive community are often rooted in local culture of the Bengali community and inked with linguistic identity. Discussion ranges from literature to social critique, mental health, and education. The audio only podcasts often have a comparatively low production cost and thus are financially viable. The regional language – Bengali podcast is not only a source of entertainment but also a space for cultural preservation which is part of the digital media ecosystem. The following podcast series are popular with the population, and many of the respondents claimed to have consumed the content - Midnight Horror Station, Mirchi Bangla (3.17 M subscribers), Mir Afsar Ali (*Goppo Mir er thek* – 1.88 M Subscribers), Thriller Station (216 K subscribers), Radio Milan Audio Story (281 K subscribers), *Sahitya Samahar* (81.4 K subscribers),

221B Harrison Road (261 K subscribers) and many more. The podcasts in the regional language Bengali have been envisioned and shaped by techniques of storytelling, particularly dominated by literary adaptations, thriller, and horror genre. Their popularity is driven by strong narration, sound design, and the enduring appeal of Bengali literature and horror fiction, especially during the surge of digital consumption around 2019–2021.

CONCLUSION

The digital media is dominated by English-speaking narratives, at such a time, the Bengali podcasts strengthen linguistic identity in a globalized environment. Specially for the Bengali diaspora, it creates a space where local stories, literature, culture, humor are shared in their native language. This helps keep the regional narratives alive. This is how democratization is encouraged, and more diverse voices are given representation, enabling grassroots of information and stories to find their way to a large audience.

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