



The gun's still smokin'
Our collective craze for crime drama, crime fiction, true-crime podcasts and web shows may not be the same as watching public hangings live but those primal fears and desires remain pretty much the same. The proof is in the growing appetite for crime-based content across platforms — we are seeing, hearing and watching hungrily. **Savitha Karthik** tries to make sense of this rather grisly obsession

For centuries, Londoners were known to throng Tyburn, the site of the infamous gallows, to watch public executions. These hangings were a sort of theatre, with makeshift galleries erected for the spectators. Today's obsession with crime drama, crime fiction, podcasts and true crime shows may not be the same as watching public hangings live but the primal emotions, fears and yearnings are all very much the same.

From 'The Keepers' to 'Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story', from 'Unsolved Mysteries' to 'Indian Predator' and 'Delhi Crime', the OTT space is abuzz with true-crime shows.

According to market and consumer data platform Statista, the user penetration in the OTT video segment is expected to touch 45.7 per cent in 2023 and reach 53 per cent by 2027, globally. A Dentsu Marketing Cloud Insights-India Millennial & GenZ Study conducted during 2020 shows that the thriller and crime genre constituted the top second and third categories after comedy. It also showed that every day, Gen-Zers and millennials binge-watched content on OTT for 4.45 hours and 3.66 hours, respectively. The pandemic-induced lockdowns may have contributed to building an appetite for binge-watching. Crime-based shows, by their very nature, lend themselves to binge-watching rather well.

Ashwin Rai Shetty, writer and director of 'Beast of Bangalore: Indian Predator', a Netflix original says, "Mainstream Indian cinema has always had crime-based themes. In the cinema of the 80s and 90s, we had a hero and a villain; there were fight sequences between the two...We have always had an appetite for crime-based content; in fact, we have been desensitised. However, there was no space for niche documentaries. The OTT revolution gave us the option to foray into the docu space. Also, true crime is an easy stepping stone for makers exploring the format of the documentary," he says.

Crime shows are indeed not a new genre for Indians fed on a steady diet of 'Byomkesh Bakshi', 'Police Files Se' et al through the eighties and nineties on television. The advent of cable television brought several true-crime-based shows like CID and Crime Patrol through the late 90s and early 2000s.

More crime-based books in the offing

As a huge fan of the crime genre, Namrata, Editor, Kitaab International, a publishing platform and founder of Keemiya Creatives, an author support services agency observes that while previously there was a certain taboo associated with people who enjoyed the genre, it has been done away with now.

"The explosion of true crime and crime-based entertainment on OTT has definitely made an impact on crime-based book publishing and a huge one at that. I know of at least four authors being commissioned by publishing houses to write in this genre. Though 2022-23 releases might not show this jump, 2024-25 will definitely have these titles flooding the markets in huge numbers," she adds.

Has this increased taste for the crime genre led to a rise in crime-based submissions? Namrata notes that she has worked on close to eight titles in this genre in the last 12-15 months.

Hear, hear!

Another format that has lent itself rather well to crime-based content is the podcast. The true-crime-based podcast, Serial, was a game-changer of sorts for not just the genre but also for podcasting itself. The podcast, which first aired in 2014, has seen over 300 million downloads in its first season, globally.

According to a study by PwC's Global Entertainment and Media Outlook, India has the third-largest podcast listener base, after the US and China. The listener base is expected to exceed 17 million by this year, the report notes.

Aryaan Misra and Aishwarya Singh, both in their early 20s, started the Desi



Aryaan Misra and Aishwarya Singh

Crime Podcast during the first year of the pandemic because they felt most crime podcasts catered to the US or UK audiences. Their podcast focuses on cases across the Indian sub-continent, zooming in on stories of honour killings, gender violence and other social concerns. "CID was watched by boomers, John Grisham was read by millennials, and now, The Desi Crime Podcast is there for Gen Z," is how they describe their target audience.

The appetite for crime shows or literature translates into lots of discussions and analyses about it as well. On the news and discussion forum Reddit, a subreddit called r/TrueCrimeDiscussion and r/UnsolvedMurders together have nearly seven lakh members. Members discuss the latest shows, the ethics of true-crime shows, and also, many times, problematically, try their hands at sleuthing.

"Everybody wants to be a detective," says Naman Jain, who is a private investigator and MD of Sleuths India, a national

private detective agency. He attributes this to the number of shows that cater to true crime or crime-based entertainment.

What about the fallout of the rise in appetite for crime-based content? Are there cases where he sees perpetrators inspired by fiction? Naman, whose agency sees about 200 cases a month across nine branches, says only 10-15 out of them have perpetrators inspired by a movie or crime fiction.

In the case of Shradda Walkar, a resident of Delhi who was allegedly murdered by her partner Aftab Poonawala, he reportedly confessed that he was inspired by the American crime drama 'Dexter', in which the eponymous killer disposes of victims' bodies by dismembering them. "Not all of us who watch these shows commit horrific acts of crime. But if we already have a predisposition towards criminality, these shows can also give us a sense of controlling the consequences of committing a crime — that is getting

away with it, and not getting caught. Or the sense of achievement, release and power — if that's what one is aiming for," explains Bengaluru-based Dr Meghana Srivastav, criminal investigative psychologist, Forseti Consulting.

"For a person without such criminal instincts, these shows can add to the fear that any regular looking person with a picket fence life can be engaging in terrible acts of crime," she notes. "On the flip side, these shows can also provide us with the comfort of having the knowledge of how criminals work, and that might allow us to prevent ourselves from becoming victims," the psychologist adds.

Private investigator Naman Jain agrees. On the positive side, viewers can feel a sense of relief and satisfaction that justice does get delivered and a killer is caught. The negative impact is that they gain access to the modus operandi to commit a crime, he adds.

The ethical question: A valley of grey?

While true crime-based content is grabbing eyeballs, making us binge-watch and read frenetically, what about the ethics around it, for instance, taking care not to glorify the perpetrator and, more importantly, ensure the victim is portrayed sensitively?

Ashwin Rai Shetty, director of 'Beast of Bangalore...', says that they made sure to be sensitive in their approach to the victims' narratives. "In fact, we took two approaches in talking to the victims or their families. One was the direct approach where we contacted them and asked them if they were willing to talk to us. The other one was non-intrusive, where we wrote them letters explaining the intent of the show. If they refused, we would drop it," explains Shetty. There is a poignant moment in the show where the son of one of the victims, now a young man, recalls his trauma as he saw the killer who had just assaulted his mother on the way out, and his mother dying. Ashwin says that the son was willing to speak about his traumatic experience as long as the makers didn't show his face. The makers made sure to respect the request.

Shetty says the team was aware of how the Umesh Reddy case was sensationalised during the mid to late 90s by private television channels and newspapers.

"The nature of the crime was delicate and we knew we would inadvertently tread down the same path. We were conscious about shooting sensitively and making the show fact-driven."

It's not as if true-crime shows and podcasts are all just meant to titillate or excite audiences. There are times when victims' families hope for such shows to help them in their fight for justice or simply provide them with some sort of catharsis. Aryaan Misra of The Desi Crime podcast remembers an episode they recorded about the murder of a 19-year-old Swedish woman living in Sri Lanka. The victim's family member shared the podcast details on their social media account.

"This was the moment when we realised the importance of continuing our podcasts with a focus on facts and sensitivity," Aryaan explains.

Crime podcasts to check out

- **Serial:** Hosted by Sarah Koenig, this is the podcast that spawned several clones — it debuted in 2014 and is essentially investigative journalism at its best.
- **My Favorite Murder:** The hosts, Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, tell each other their 'favourite' stories of murder with lots of wit and sass.
- **Khooni: The Crimes Of India:** Written, hosted and produced by Aditi and Sneha, this covers different cases across India.
- **Death, Lies & Cyanide:** Written by Ramesh Ravindranath, narrated and produced by journalist Sashi Kumar (Assiaville), it covers six murders of a family in Kerala, allegedly by a 47-year-old woman Jolly Joseph.
- **Casefile:** An Australian true-crime podcast hosted by an anonymous Australian, which actually ended up solving several cold criminal cases.
- **Vanished: Inside India's Bermuda Triangle:** The story of mysterious disappearances in the Parvati Valley, investigated by host Kunal Purohit.

Why we love crime-based content

We are an inherently curious species, says Dr Meghana. "True crime shows us a side of humans that most of us are curious about but do not want to get close to; neither do most of us wish to engage in activities that resemble theirs. This attracts us to consume more media that gives us a perspective that otherwise we'd probably never encounter in our lives."

Noting that such emotionally triggering shows produce different chemical reactions in our brains, that charge us up mentally, she explains, "watching torturous acts inflicted upon a human by another human releases adrenaline. The fact that we are far away from actually being the victim, and that we are understanding some thoughts of the perpetrator gives us a sense of comfort and a feeling of control, which releases endorphins (the feel-good chemical)."

To quote crime writer Ian Rankin from his piece in an *Edinburgh Review* issue, the crime novel "fascinates so many people partly because it entertains, partly because it offers the rewards any good quality fiction provides and partly because it deals with some of the uglier aspects of human nature."

(Except *Vanished* which is on Audible, the rest of the podcasts mentioned above are available on Spotify.)



Dr Meghana Srivastav

“NOT ALL TRUE CRIME SHOWS ARE MEANT TO JUST TITILLATE. THERE ARE TIMES WHEN THE FAMILIES OF VICTIMS HOPE FOR SUCH SHOWS TO HELP THEM IN THEIR FIGHT FOR JUSTICE



ASTROSPEAK Feb 5 to Feb 11 *Guruji Shrii Arnav*

ARIES: MAR 22-APR 20
Ignorance can be educated. Crazy can be medicated. But there is no cure for being foolish. It's important this week for you to realise your mistakes and work on correcting them, rather than work on defending them. Do not get into unnecessary arguments or discussions. **Advice:** Accept your mistakes.

GEMINI: MAY 22-JUNE 21
People rarely succeed unless they have fun in what they are doing, and you have really been bored crazy by what you have been doing. This week will give you an opportunity to contemplate what you are doing and where it is taking you to. Realignment and career shifts are highly foreseen. Listen to your inner voice, rather than social pressure. **Advice:** Focus on your career.

LEO: JULY 24-AUG 21
To be successful you must accept all challenges that come your way. You can't just accept the ones you like. The last few days have been tough, and you are getting oblivious to your goals and ambitions. This week you will slow down a bit. Be a little careful in your financial dealings and consult a financial expert before taking any decision. **Advice:** Be careful in financial dealings.

LIBRA: SEP 22-OCT 23
It is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation. It's high time you carve your own niche rather than follow the social norm or the path others have followed. A lot of your beliefs are bound to get broken or realigned this week. Adapt to the change and do not hesitate in walking through uncharted territory. **Advice:** Accept changes.

SAGITTARIUS: NOV 22-DEC 21
You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your enemies and that's precisely the reason you should be very careful with people around you as you will tend to make enemies this week. Do not let your emotional or sentimental side overpower your senses. Try and have a balanced demeanour and maintain silence wherever and whenever you can. **Advice:** Be practical.

AQUARIUS: JAN 21-FEB 19
It is not ignorance that is the problem, but the illusion of knowledge. You will realise that there is a lot to be learned. This is a perfect time to check the skill gap you have and upgrade your skills or go for a certification that will take your career a long way. Just do these three things this week — learn, learn and learn. **Advice:** Time to learn.

TAURUS: APR 21-MAY 21
It is better for the development of character and contentment to do certain things badly for yourself than to have them done better for you by someone else. The week will teach you self-motivation and self-realisation the hard way. If you want to succeed in what you do, procrastination and laziness should take a back seat. Time to work hard and take the matter into your hands before it's too late. **Advice:** Avoid laziness.

CANCER: JUNE 22-JULY 23
There is no chance, no destiny, no fate, that can hinder or control the firm resolve of a determined soul and you will be highly determined this week to take control of your destiny. This is the best time to start a new venture if a business was on your mind or go for the job switch you were eyeing. Rewards and recognition are also foreseen in this sweet period of hard work. **Advice:** Time to take big decisions.

VIRGO: AUG 22-SEP 21
Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no help at all. It's a tough week wherein you will face resistance in almost everything you do and there will not be any help from the people around you. This is the time to buckle up your seat belts and get the work done by yourself, rather than expecting others to help you. Time to be self-motivated and relentless. **Advice:** Time to enhance your self-motivation.

SCORPIO: OCT 24-NOV 21
A successful man is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at him and this week you are sure to collect a lot of bricks. A difficult week wherein you will face a lot of criticism and resistance. This week will be the perfect time to awaken your hidden leader and take control of things. Communication will be key and can help turn the tide for you. **Advice:** Take criticism in your stride.

CAPRICORN: DEC 22-JAN 20
No man goes before his time — unless the boss leaves early and this week you will have many such moments. A week wherein your work will take a backseat and you will enjoy time with your friends and at home. While this is good for the short term and you will have loads of fun, do not let this jeopardise your image at the workplace. Do not ignore your spouse or love interest this week. **Advice:** Seek a better work-life balance.

PISCES: FEB 20-MAR 21
This week will be like your Social Security number: long, useless, but needed. Do not get perturbed by the hurdles or the sudden enmity you are facing at the workplace as it will get resolved. All in all, a long tiring week that will suck the energy out of you. Do not set very high expectations and ensure that you keep a low profile. **Advice:** Keep your expectations low.