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EDITORIAL

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The Saga of Audiobooks

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Advances in technology inevitably lead to newer ways of looking at and using everyday things, often totally changing conventional everyday practices. And in no other field has this change been as glaring as in the field of communication. The Internet and the mobile phone, for example, have made letter writing an almost forgotten art. At the same time they have facilitated instant connectivity and also eliminated irritating instances of missing mail. The same is true of digital edition of journals, which are delivered to the desktop before or on the day of publication, and there are no missing issues. Besides, the subscriber can access back issues online, which can save both time and effort.

One innovation that has added a new dimension to the way we enjoy books is the audiobook, tens of thousands of titles of which are now available. As the name indicates, an audiobook is basically a recording of the spoken word as opposed to music. Most early audiobooks were audio versions of printed books, based on recordings of commercially available printed material. But this is not always the case; audiobooks available today are much more than simple recordings of spoken word. They are often recorded in more than one voice and embellished with sound effects that make them more lively and enjoyable.

It was in 1931 that the US Congress established the 'talking-book' program, which was intended primarily to help visually challenged adults who could not read print. This program was called "Books for the Adult Blind Project." The American Foundation for the Blind developed the first talking books in 1932. Mass publishing of talking books began a year later. Originally they were designed as educational material and were popular in 331/3 RPM vinyl record format and were primarily available in school and public libraries and to a lesser extent in music shops.

> *...The commercial success of audiobooks can be traced to the introduction of the audio cassette and cassette players. With the development of portable cassette recorders, audiotapes became very popular and by the late 1960's libraries became a source of free audiobooks. In 1970 Books on Tape Corporation in USA started rental plans for audio books distribution...*

The commercial success of audiobooks can be traced to the introduction of the audio cassette and cassette players. With the development of portable cassette recorders, audiotapes became very popular and by the late 1960's libraries became a source of free audiobooks. In 1970 Books on Tape Corporation in USA started rental plans for audio books distribution. The company expanded their services selling their products to libraries and audiobooks gained popularity. Soon audiobooks became commonplace on bookshelves in retail shops and by the middle of 1980's the audio publishing business had grown to several billion dollars a year in retail value.

Invention of the compact disc (CD) in the late 1970's added to the convenience and flexibility of listening. Unlike a cassette tape, tracks on which are recorded serially, a track on a CD could be accessed randomly, which was a big boon for an audiobook listener. But the biggest change in the way audiobooks are distributed and accessed came with the advent of the Internet, broadband technologies, new compressed audio formats, and portable MP3 players, which made it possible to purchase, download and listen to a favourite title anywhere. The popularity of portable music players such as the iPod has made audiobooks more accessible to people for portable listening. These developments have increased the popularity of audio books significantly.

Audiobooks can be created with text-to-speech software, but the quality of synthesised speech can never equal professional voice recordings. Listening to a well-produced audiobook with appropriate sound effects can be an exhilarating experience that one can never get by merely reading the printed copy, as anyone can find out after listening to a series of audiobooks based on Agatha Christie's famous thrillers.

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In a country like India where the level of illiteracy is high, apart from its entertainment value, audiobooks can play a vital role in raising the awareness level of the people. Audiobooks of folk tales and mythological stories in regional languages can be distributed free over broadband network for downloading by local Panchayats and NGOs and can then be played back at gatherings in villages. For mass awareness campaigns audiobooks provide an ideal, cost-effective medium that needs to be exploited efficaciously.

-Biman Basu
India

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