

# Publishing in Predatory Journals from India:

## Making Sense of the Conundrum



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## The Dramatic Introduction

When you are an early career psychiatrist, fresh out of the oven of the academic rigours of residency, you feel you have a lot to offer. This eagerness further intensifies when you receive a mail from the editor of a journal asking for your contribution. As a young academician, you will think that here is somebody asking for my opinion, and also providing me with the ease of submitting by mail (and hence circumventing the tedious process of manuscript submission). Same happened with me.

But, at the same, some promises appeared too good to be true. The assurance of early acceptance and free access appeared so lucrative that I decided to jump on the project. It was only later that I looked into the fine print and the steep article processing charges caught my attention. When I discussed this with my colleagues, I realised the offer was no privilege, and it is fair to consider myself a victim. This is how mostly academic fraternity in India is introduced to the business of predatory journals.

## Harsh Fact Findings

A little bit of research can explain the modus operandi of such journals. Such journals are usually published from less known or often self-proclaimed newly initiated publishers. The name usually includes the term *international*, and they offer pretty lucrative assurances of timely publications. As widely claimed by researchers, the essential ethics of publications are not followed. The peer review in such journals is a sham, plagiarism checks are obsolete, and there have also been instances where manuscripts have been stolen. Needless to say, most of the research results were a turn off. But there was another side of the coin. Numerous independent researches confirm the fact that India happens to be the major contributor to the business of predatory journals (Priyadarshini, 2017). It was almost like something did not explain this enigma.

## The Indian Academia

To understand further the dynamics, we have to comprehend the competitive field of Indian academia. Several indicators govern faculty positions in various universities in India. One of the prerequisite parameters gauged are the publications of the candidate. The University Grants Commission (UGC), which is the highest regulatory authority, has laid down detailed guidelines in these regards. Being a faculty of a medical college entails being under the purview of Medical Council of India (MCI). Initial notifications by both the authorities focus on the publications quantity. It was only in the later notifications that the authorities revised guidelines inserted clauses that focused on the quality of the publications. MCI, in its latest update, has recommended some journals archived in specific indexing databases only as valid publications to consider. In the same vein, UGC has also implemented a system of Academic Performance Indicator (API). According to its latest revision of API, UGC has also drawn up a list of recommended journals to guide the faculty.

## The Paradox

It has been a few years that the recommendations are in place. But, the reality is that the results have been far from what was desired. The recent reports do not show any dip in the publications from India in predatory journals. We need to take a closer look into the picture to understand this paradox. Many of the journals recommended by UGC or MCI actually fall into the category of predatory journals. UGC has recently published a revised list of recommended journals. Even in that, there are approximately 71 journal titles that are considered predatory. So basically, the conclusion may be that one may end up publishing in a predatory journal even after abiding every law in the book, thus, defeating the purpose of the whole exercise (Pal & Paul, 2017).

## An Author's Viewpoint

A valid question that arises at this stage is that if publishing in a predatory journal is considered detrimental to science as well to one's career, why do not the authors themselves become wary? As much apt as the question may seem, there are many reasons why such journals have been able to sustain their business. The most important reason why these journals flourish is that the whole process seems very easy and time-saving for the author. Prerequisites for manuscript submission and the submission process itself are very author friendly. Since peer review is debatable, the manuscript process time frame is very short. The final outcome is that the authors get manuscripts published in a very short time span. For faculty preparing for interviews regarding promotion, this is priceless. These journals usually rigorously follow the recommendations of MCI and UGC. Thus once published, you get decently formatted manuscript abiding all the rules. For example, the guidelines have stressed that the journals have to have International Standard Serial Number (ISSN), both print-ISSN and electronic-ISSN. Many renowned journals will fail to meet these criteria, but these debated journals will have both the ISSN printed on its title page. The journals perform decent formatting and will have their archives in most indexing databases. Basically, these journals tick all the boxes in the rule book.

Another reason why such journals continue to flourish is they follow an open access policy. The longing to reach

other researchers without any barriers is a major driving factor behind the success of predatory journals. Recent reports also show that predatory journals tend to get decent citations. As a result, authors look for widespread viewership for their works. But, why do not the authors prefer any other open-access journals? The answer to this question lies on the allegations that established publishing firms are much more rigid in their scope. If you are planning to write on something that is controversial or not well accepted in the purview of established science, there is a high chance that you will get rejected. Thus predatory journals provide a platform to gather foothold with less recognised theories.

## Steps taken

The crucial step taken is to educate authors. Volumes of literature have been published to educate authors about the jeopardy of publishing in predatory journals. The ethics of publication is also something that has been talked about in great details to all faculties at all stages of their career. In addition, the UGC has created their white list of recommended journals to consider for publications, and it also has mandated that each university should come up with its white list (Priyadarshini, 2018).

UGC, on the other hand, has too encouraged researchers to alert them about any potential culprit they come across. Though this idea is praise-worthy, many feel that this process unnecessarily routes through a faculty member. Also, it is mandatory for the complainant to identify oneself. Such measures are deemed redundant as these measures decrease the chance of someone in the lower rungs of academic hierarchy exposing a guilty party.

There is no doubt that all these efforts are laudable. But, we also need to reflect on the limitations of these steps. The idea of a white list seems utopian. Experts have already speculated that it is impossible to identify all journals in a particular field, leave aside classifying them.

## My Comments

As an early career researcher and clinician, I believe that there is a need to decouple research from academic performance. Research should be encouraged but not putting academic progress at stake; it should be a





matter of choice and, unless that is the case, faculty will always try to choose the shortcut to success. Moreover, the process of judging by quantity should also be replaced. The future guidelines should also place importance on the quality of the publication. How to judge the quality will again be a matter of controversy, but I think that is something worth exploring.

Publishing in predatory journals is usually not something done out of choice. It is often a result of despair or mistake on the part of an author. But, we cannot ignore the fact that a huge amount of effort and research grants is going down the drain when it gets published in these debatable journals. Predatory journals tick all the right boxes of a guideline but miss the most basic one: the ethics of research. Thus, unless we address the deeper issues, this menace is going to continue.

## References

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