

Academic Publishing in India:

Issues and Tribulations



Subhadra Mitra Channa
Delhi University.

The universities take up the publication of the academic works produced by their scholars, in most parts of the world. The higher the status of the university, the more prestige accrues to its publications; for example, Oxford University Press and Harvard University Press have very high status. However, many universities, like the University of Kentucky, in the USA, make it mandatory for the proceedings of any conference held on its premises to be published at the university press. No university press, especially the very well-known ones like Cambridge, Oxford, and Chicago, limit publication to their own scholars. Some university presses like Oxford University Press, have opened their offices in other parts of the world, to absorb the local scholarship.

For a long time, India was a British colony, and its education, particularly formal western education, was altogether initiated, programmed, and controlled by Britain. As a consequence, higher education in India was, and still is, conducted in the English language. This has led to most scholarly publishing in India to be done in English unless it is literature in a regional language. India's total commitment to English in academics can be understood in the context of English being the only link language that is acceptable to all Indians. Firstly, it is a global language, and, secondly it does not connect to the internal language politics that exist in India. The Indian sub-continent has twenty major official languages that are spoken by the majority of mainstream Indians. But India had a past of speaking and having languages such as Farsi (Iran) and Urdu (now spoken in Pakistan) as well as a plethora of local dialects that belong to the minority and ethnically marginal people. Till the Independence of the country in 1947 from British rule, Urdu was an essential language in North India to be replaced by Hindi, when Urdu supposedly migrated to Pakistan.

Nonetheless, even as of today, seventy years later, from the acceptance of Hindi as the national language, it is not acceptable to many Indians, especially from the South, who speak languages belonging to the Dravidian group.

With this background if we come to academic publishing in India, it is obvious that English is the principal language of publication at the university level. But unlike the United Kingdom, where universities play an essential role in publication, Indian universities have never taken up publication seriously. Because of the colonial legacy, Indian scholars gained prestige by publishing, in the British and now American university presses. Most social science scholars either publish with British university presses like Oxford University that has its branches in major Indian cities like Calcutta, Mumbai (Bombay), Chennai and Delhi, or with other prestigious ones like Princeton and Harvard. English language publishers from outside of India, like Sage publications, have made India their home and publish locally from there. At this time, Sage owns most of the



social science journals in India, including those that have traditionally been published by old established institutions like the Anthropological Survey of India. Maybe, because of the presence and dominance of big and established publication houses like Springer and Penguin; university publishing in India, never had a chance to develop.

I have been associated with Delhi University, for more than forty years and have seen that the university press has only been used as a printing press, to print question papers, university reports and stationery and their most important work had been to print the degrees and certificates issued by the university. For a short period in the sixties, there was some printing of text-books written by university professors; but this fell into disuse as most scholars preferred to publish from more prestigious and what appeared to them, internationally recognized sources. There was a proliferation of local publishing houses, as well and many not very successful scholars would get their works published from locally operating houses.

The publishing scene underwent a major face change when the University Grants Commission (UGC) made it mandatory for scholars to have a number of publications for various stages of their advancement in the academic field. Firstly, a scholar who aspires for a Ph. D. degree is required to have at least two publications, a person applying for an assistant professor has to have at least three, associate professor, five and a full professor, at least ten.

The point to be pondered is how publications get legitimized. It is evident that any or sundry publications cannot qualify. But the way in which UGC has set its standards leaves one perplex. They have given the highest priority to publications in journals. Book chapters, no matter how prestigious, are entirely left out of reckoning, as are contributions to encyclopaedias and anthologies. The list of journals released by them also raises eyebrows, as most of them are paid journals and not of institutions and associations; not even the ones published by eminent publishing houses like Sage. There are no university published journals. If we take say in the case of anthropology, there are journals published for decades by the anthropological associations and institutions that have been ignored by





the UGC. Since it is the main funding body that also makes all the rules for appointment into government run institutions, its rules are binding on the majority of India academics. The insidious push by UGC towards paid publishing indicates the direction which the state wishes to take the academic world.

In the house, university publishing has never been encouraged in India, and it plays practically no role in the establishment of academic credentials. Earlier, the prestigious university publishers from outside, as well as the private ones, had good control over the market. At present, a large number of dubious online publishers have created a grey area of publishing, and surprisingly, some of these private and commercial journals have been recognised by the UGC; leaving out many of the academically prestigious and non-paying journals out of the loop.

The concerted efforts of the states to corporatize education reflect in the way certain publications are being encouraged by the state-run institutions, especially the ones that make the policies of employment and promotion. Paid journals do not care about standards as much as they care for the money that they get. Online publishing has created a big market and commercialized publication. The universities in India could have stepped in, but they have shown no interest in doing so. Many students and even lower level professionals find it difficult to pay the steep price asked by some of these journals. With the mandatory requirements of publications and the restrictions put on publications that will be recognized, the academic community, as well as the standards of excellence, have been compromised.