

CURRENT SCIENCE

Volume 115 Number 12

25 December 2018

GUEST EDITORIAL

Why are Indian research journals not making a mark? – The enemy is within

Publication of research results in scholarly peer-reviewed journals is the near-universal practice for dissemination of new research output and for assessment of research contributions by individuals/institutions. With the advent of ‘modern science’ in India during the British period, newly established scholarly societies and academic institutions started publication of research journals. Thus many of the current research journals published in India have a fairly long history. During recent decades, commercial publishers have become major collaborators of research journals and made it a worldwide industry. Following suit, a large number of research journals published in India are also now co-associated with commercial publishers.

The total number of serial titles registered with the ISSN International Centre, India was 21,895 in 2017, while in 2009 this number was 7,425 (<https://www.issn.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Records-for-countries-with-NC.pdf>), reflecting a near three-fold increase in nine years. Although this list includes all kinds of serial publications, the number of typical research journals would also be substantial. This increase in the number of research journals published in India, instead of reflecting a desired increase, is actually a matter of serious concern as a large proportion of them are ‘predatory’ or bogus journals (Lakhotia, S. C., *Curr. Sci.*, 2015, **108**, 1407–1408). Although such journals have sprouted all over the world, India unfortunately contributes nearly 27%, highest for any single country (Béquet, G., Questionable practices in scholarly publishing: the stance of the ISSN network, 2016; <http://libraryifla.org/id/eprint/1462>). Besides the worry about predatory/bogus journals that were catalysed by faulty policies/practices (Lakhotia, S. C., *Proc. Indian Natl. Sci. Acad.*, 2017, **83**, 513–515), it is a matter of concern that even the journals of long-standing do not attract high-quality research output even from within the country.

Why have we come to such a sad state of affairs in the context of our research journals? This question has been discussed many a times, including in the pages of *Current Science*. Yet it is important to re-examine this issue to sensitize the research fraternity. The older and established journals were started by well-known scientists and academies/learned societies with a clear conviction that

India needs to have its own good research journals to support growth of competitive and quality research in the country. Despite these early efforts, the general tendency to publish in journals outside India is not of recent origin since an editorial in the first volume of *Current Science* (Editorial, *Curr. Sci.*, 1933, **1**, 335–337) lamented ‘the tendency of many scientific men to export their more important contributions for publication in foreign journals, with a proportionate impoverishment of Indian archives. ...Continuance of this practice will retard the process of building up a scientific tradition for India and keep her in a position of semi-dependence in the world of science’. Unfortunately, even after eight decades we remain ‘in a position of semi-dependence in the world of science’. Several commentaries written by Ramaseshan in *Current Science* between 1970s and 1990s, provide pithy and detailed analysis of the issues faced by scientific research and publication in India. He (Ramaseshan, S., *Curr. Sci.*, 1992, **63**, 529–534) echoed the above feelings expressed nearly 60 years ago when he quoted an eminent scientist in the country: ‘Two classes of scientists have to patronize Indian journals – those who are working in the forefront of science and hence are fighting for priority and those who cannot get their papers published anywhere else.’ Unfortunately, most of our ‘forefront’ researchers now do not like to publish in Indian journals even for the sake of priority (Lakhotia, S. C., *Curr. Sci.*, 2003, **85**, 20–22; 2010, **99**, 411; 2013 **105**, 287–288; *Proc. Indian Natl. Sci. Acad.*, 2014, **80**, 511–512). Only a small proportion of Fellows of the various academies in the country have contributed in journals published by these academies. Consequently the Indian journals rarely get an opportunity to consider manuscripts from established and reputed Indian scientists.

Since the general trend in the elite institutions in India is to hire as faculty only those who have had at least some part of their training abroad and only those who have published their research in the so-called ‘international’ journals with high ‘impact factor’ (IF), the scientific establishment in the country does not seem to have strong faith in the quality of research output from majority of laboratories in India and in journals published within the country. As none of the Indian research journals has significant IF tag, publications in these journals are

considered, by default, to be poor. Such unfounded beliefs led to the insulting distinction between ‘national’ and ‘international’ journals (Lakhotia, S. C., *Curr. Sci.*, 2013, **105**, 287–288). Although many journals in India, especially those published by learned bodies for a long time, follow good publication ethics and practices, they suffer the vicious circle of poor submissions and, therefore, poor output (Lakhotia, S. C., *Curr. Sci.*, 2003, **85**, 20–22). Good editorial practices are essential components for a journal to become attractive, but the contents primarily determine its recognition.

In recent years, the commercial publication houses have, using aggressive marketing strategies, annexed a large number of research journals, including those published by established academies and other learned societies in India and abroad. A common argument advanced for associating with international publishers is that this improves ‘visibility’. In my view this argument is as fallacious as the belief that the ‘IF’ of a journal reflects the quality of an individual researcher’s competence and contributions. During the 50 years of my research career, I have published nearly equal number of research papers in journals published in India and abroad. I have not experienced any significant differences in their citation frequencies, even for the papers that were published before the internet era. In the current internet era, ‘visibility’ of a journal is really not an issue but likeability of a journal would depend upon what is printed in its pages, rather than upon the commercial publisher’s name on the cover. One should ask if the academic content of research journals published by the learned bodies in India, who have co-associated with ‘reputed’ international commercial publishers, has significantly improved and whether they are attracting high-quality manuscripts. In my perception not much change has occurred in the quality of what is published in their pages, and this is also reflected in the fact that few of the ‘forefront’ scientists in the country publish in these journals. The establishment continues to look down upon papers and researchers who publish in Indian journals, notwithstanding their co-association with a ‘foreign’ brand name. The only advantage of the co-association with a commercial publisher is that the learned societies earn more money than they would do on their own. While our science academies maintain that their journals are fully open access, the associated commercial houses charge substantial amounts for the same pdf files when down-loaded from their sites. Out of this profit, some amount is shared with the Indian publisher. Are they justified in claiming a complete free open access? Although the academic component of these journals supposedly remains under control of the original Indian publisher, there are indirect and direct pressures from the associated commercial publishers for changes preferred by them. In my perception such acts impinge on the academic autonomy of the academies/learned societies that publish these journals. In any case, the crutches provided by commercial publishers have not conferred any academic advantage.

During more than two decades of my association with several journals published in India, I experienced, as others do, that a major problem is to get timely reviewers’ comments. Many colleagues who are requested to review do not respond even to express their inability or unwillingness. Many a times, reviewers provide perfunctory remarks which do not help the editor, but may be damaging for authors. I have often wondered if these experts would do the same when invited to review a manuscript by a journal published outside the country? Perhaps not! It may sound harsh, but these researchers appear to think it below their ‘level’ to review a manuscript for a journal published in India! The non-responding reviewers enhance the workload of the editorial office and delay the decision process, which hurts the author and places the journal in poor light for no fault of the editorial process.

While talking with many young researchers around the country, it was encouraging to learn that they are willing to publish their research results in journals from India also, especially since this would not entail any charges and at the same time would make them feel happy about contributing to national recognition. However, the single major inhibiting factor is the fear that they would receive low or no scores for publications in Indian journals when their seniors evaluate them.

If established scientists in the country do not wish to publish even some of their research output in Indian journals, do not wish to seriously review manuscripts for these journals and, more importantly, directly or indirectly penalize, irrespective of the quality of work, those who publish in them, these journals would continue to struggle and fail to become internationally competitive. *Thus we are the enemy of established research journals published in India.*

Our established researchers should also publish some of their original research output in Indian journals that follow good policies, participate in critical review of manuscripts when invited by an editor, and, more importantly, must not look down upon researchers just because they have published in Indian journals. Obviously, if the community within the country is hesitant to publish ‘good’ research in journals published in India, expecting the international community to patronize them is unjustified.

As a community, we need to strive hard to be proud of our journals rather than be apologetic. Individuals/institutions must be assessed on the basis of what they publish rather than where they publish (Chaddah, P. and Lakhotia, S. C., *Proc. Indian Natl. Sci. Acad.*, 2018, **84**, 319–329).

S. C. Lakhotia

Cytogenetics Laboratory, Department of Zoology,
Banaras Hindu University,
Varanasi 221 005, India
e-mail: lakhotia@bhu.ac.in
ORCID ID: orcid.org/0000-0003-1842-8411