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## **Disrupting Predatory Journals**

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Jeffrey Beall, University of Colorado Denver, United States coined the term 'predatory publishers' in 2010 to hint 'they trick honest researchers'<sup>1</sup>. He noticed such publishers who use the gold (author pays) open access (OA) model maximizing revenue sacrificing the vital peer review and listed these from 2012 to 2017<sup>2</sup>. Kurt made distinctions between legitimate Open Access (OA) journals and predatory OA journals such as the former are usually affiliated with a society or institution; have dedicated editors, editorial staff, and peer reviewers with requisite expertise; share and explain publication fees; usually indexed by scholarly databases; and outline the scope of publication for the benefit of potential authors<sup>3</sup>. A list of resources on predatory journals<sup>4</sup> is maintained by the UGC Cell for Journal Analysis, Savitribai Phule Pune University.

The 'UGC (Minimum Standards and Procedure for Award of M.Phil./Ph.D Degrees) Regulations, 2016' stipulated Ph.D. scholars must publish at least one research paper in refereed journal before the submission of thesis<sup>7</sup>. Similarly the 'UGC Regulations on Minimum Qualifications for

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Appointment of Teachers and other Academic Staff in Universities and Colleges' prescribed the minimum number of papers in journals for direct recruitment and for career advancement<sup>8</sup>. Two, seven and ten research papers in journals respectively were stipulated for direct recruitment for Assistant Professor, Associate Professor and Professor. The same during the assessment period prescribed for career advancement promotion to the next level are: one publication from Academic Level 10 to Level 11, three publications from Level 11 to Level 12, three (out of seven total) publications from Level 12 to Level 13A, three (out of ten total) publications from Level 13A to Level 14 and ten publications from Level 14 to Level 15. All these hint for a 'publish or perish' race among researchers, scientists, professionals and teachers, sometimes forcing at least some of them to opt for quick outlets for publication falling into the trap of predatory publishers. UGC has already prescribed a two credit course on 'Research and Publications Ethics'<sup>20</sup> compulsory for all Ph. D. students for pre-registration coursework. It is heartening to note that one of the topics covered in the course is to sensitize new researchers about predatory journals. With a strong base and history of research institutions and journals, this study explores how to groom reasonable number of quality journals in the country to arrest the menace or predatory publishing.

### **Research and Publications on the Rise**

There is an increase in number of universities, colleges, private educational institutions, national institutes and research laboratories in the country to effectively fulfill the teaching learning aspirations of public. With enhanced research funding and with numerous researchers

across the world, many more papers are being written for publication<sup>10</sup>. According to Gastfriend, 90% of all scientists that ever lived are currently alive<sup>11</sup>.

The scampering for more publications by many aspirants in the limited outlets of Indian journals and premier journals from advanced countries restricts publication of only those papers of quality. As jack of all trades, predatory publishers and journals woo authors by quick publication with editorial responsibilities, entrusting for special issues, mails complementing publications and scholarship, unsolicited requests for reviewing papers etc. Some researchers reported being flattered when they received an e-mail invitation to publish their work<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, few researchers also publish out of ignorance papers of quality in predatory journals.

### **Predatory Journals**

The latest available Beall's list for 2017 contains 1155/1294 potential, possible, or probable predatory scholarly open-access publishers/journals, 53 companies that "calculate" and publish counterfeit impact factors and 115 journals<sup>13</sup> counterfeiting website of genuine journals. Though predatory journals keep customers content by publishing manuscripts rejected by the top publishers catering both authors needing easy publishing outlets and sketchy entrepreneurs wanting easy money<sup>2</sup>, their perils according to Beall<sup>1,2</sup> are:

- money preferred over business/research/publishing ethics
- strong conflict-of-interest for peer review because rejection cuts revenue
- gold (author-pays) open-access does not sustain quality

- abandons integrity in publishing
- threat to science, research, academic evaluation, and scholarly communication
- use spam email to solicit submissions
- give false locations
- claim fake 'impact factors'
- state false coverage in abstracting and indexing services
- paper held as a 'hostage' for the 'ransom' of the publishing/withdrawal fee
- mega-journals with broad scopes to accept many papers for more revenue
- pollute science arresting the cumulative nature of research

The label 'predatory' is illogical and it can be called 'low quality journal' as an 'obligate symbiosis' is witnessed between journals and writers in reciprocal alliance for mutual benefit<sup>5</sup>. There has been a rise in dishonest, 'predatory' journals of ill repute, questionable integrity, and low academic standards<sup>3</sup>. Other names to denote predatory journals are in vogue such as illegitimate journals<sup>6</sup>, deceptive journals<sup>12</sup> (deceiving authors, readers, and institutions), dark journals<sup>18</sup> and journals in bad faith<sup>9</sup>.

Why predatory journals are still attractive to some authors is a bewildering question needing close scrutiny. Such journals try to capitalize on the pressure researchers feel to publish<sup>3</sup>. 57% of researchers are unaware of predatory journals but 40% recognize predatory open access publishing and 90% self paid the article processing charges<sup>14</sup>. Scholars from low- or middle-income nations who fall victim to 'predatory' journals often lack the resources and guidance

that researchers in developed-nations have<sup>3</sup>. Beall cautions the extent to which researchers who published in predatory journals defend such publishers<sup>2</sup>. When the system (sponsors, institutions and accrediting bodies) recognizes low-quality publications, expecting scholars to refrain is in fact counterproductive<sup>5</sup>. The reasons for publishing in predatory journals emerged as four themes: social identity threat (alienation from reputed scholarly team, nationality, religious issues, English skills and editorial bias), unawareness (or system credits such publishing), high pressure (frequent publication required for tenure and promotions; inclined to publish rapidly bypassing peer review), and lack of research proficiency (limited knowledge of research methodologies, ethics and writing skills)<sup>3</sup>.

Janodia suggested simple steps to identify predatory journals such as disguised title, doubtful credentials of the editorial board, coupling of unrelated papers, violation of instructions to authors as well as typographical and grammatical errors in published articles, clandestinely levying charges, guaranteeing fast turnaround time, and absence of contact address<sup>15</sup>. Clark proposed a five point plan to contain predatory journals: avoiding journals and publishers in the Beall's blacklist; checking the journal, if open access in the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ); verifying the publisher is a member of Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), the International Association of Scientific, Technical, & Medical Publishers (STM), or the Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA); ascertaining coverage in reputed indexing databases; and compliance to best practices of revealing email, postal address, working telephone number for the journal and its staff, submission fee, and publication charge<sup>16</sup>. 'Think. Check. Submit. Initiative' helps researchers identify trusted journals and publishers for their

research<sup>17</sup>. The strengthening and streamlining of Indian journals of quality would provide viable outlets saving many researchers from the trap of predatory publishers.

### **Journals Published in India**

Sharma points out problems of Asian journals (more than a quarter from India) as many journals do not appear on time; combine issues and volumes; use of very poor printing paper; senseless writing in poor sentences with no link between paragraphs; editors desperate to get articles and publish them bereft of reviewing or editing or proofreading; absence of marketing attracting small circulation; journals launched without proper planning, finances, and marketing leading to premature death of many; majority of the editors are part-time, without any proper help constraining operations<sup>21</sup>. Many problems of Indian journals are self created out of the processes and perspectives in which they operate. Numerous colleges, universities and research institutions in India operate low-quality journals for professional recognition and positive points in evaluation by NAAC<sup>5</sup>.

The scornful attitude of many senior 'experts' and their blind faith in Impact Factor (IF) have contributed to enrichment of 'international' journals through the 'export' of quality publications, leaving Indian journals in a poor state<sup>22</sup>. It appears there is also the problem of 'citation hiding' where the authors do not cite what they read, especially papers from Indian journals. 'Look west' policy is invading the citation space which further deteriorates the quality and visibility of Indian journals. Every researcher has to give preference to citing suitable

references from Indian journals to ensure a level playing field and provide the much needed visibility to the former. Two journals (one published without any break from 1962-2008<sup>23</sup>) edited by a leading professor which covered over a quarter of papers from India abstracted in the international abstracting source, Library & Information Science Abstracts (LISA) abruptly stopped publication after his sudden demise. The same is the case with many other good journals floated by spirited individuals. Many such editors, who are luminaries in their chosen fields, want to serve the discipline through the journal till their last breath failing to make a suitable succession plan doing more harm than good to the journals they nurtured for so long.

There is an urgent need to have good international recognition of research/review journals published in India<sup>19</sup>. To encourage this, Chaddha and Lakhota recommended no agency should seek separate listing of research publications in 'National' and 'International Journals' for any assessment purpose. They further proposed 'assessment of an individual's research contributions based on what is published rather than on where it is published.' Another recommendation is to grant papers published in established Indian journals special attention during any assessment if their citation significantly exceeds the average citation rate of the journal.

### **Identifying and strengthening Indian Journals**

It is the onus of established scientists in the country to engage with Indian journals by publishing as well as reviewing and, to avoid directly or indirectly penalize, irrespective of the

quality of work, those who publish in them<sup>24</sup>. There are some journals with better peer-reviews and no page charges such as the 'Journal of Bombay Natural History Society', one of India's oldest science journals since 1886 which has no IF owing to poor marketing and low circulation<sup>5</sup>.

A checklist for identifying and strengthening Indian journals for minimizing the impact of predatory journals should examine the following:

1. Sponsoring body: Institute/University/College/Association/Society/non-profit private
2. Number of years of publication: At least 5-10 years of continuous publishing history
3. Subject Area: One of the areas of aggressive research pursued in India's institutions
4. Language: English and any language<sup>25</sup> listed in the 8<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the constitution
5. Diversity of persons involved in editorial board and authors. If they are from different institutions, states and countries, it indicates more transparency and less bias in operations of the journal<sup>42</sup>.
6. H-index of the journal or number of citations received for the articles published in it
7. Indexing in reputed national and international sources

The number of journals published from India assigned ISSN numbers by the Indian ISSN Centre at the National Science Library, NISCAIR, New Delhi from 1986 to 2018 is 23459<sup>26</sup>. There is a spurt in the number of ISSNs assigned after 2008 by the Centre though the essence of ISSN is to 'uniquely identify a serial' and 'not an indicator of quality'<sup>27</sup>. The standard numbering systems, ISBN and ISSN for books and serials respectively were evolved to effectively deal with

identifying unique items by trade entities and for helping in acquisition systems of libraries. Why UGC considered these numbers vouching in no way for the quality of content as quality indicators is beyond the grasp of academia. It will be in the interest of academic and research fraternity that ISSN is removed from the Academic Performance Indicator (API) criteria<sup>27</sup>. The same holds true for ISBN too.

Table 1 presents an approximate estimate of the journals published in the country to minimize the devastating impact of predatory journals and predatory publishers. The data presented is collected from different sources to work out the approximate minimum number of quality journals that can be strengthened using state of the art technology solutions as well as internationally competitive journal editorial, review and publishing procedures. Journals listed in Sl. No. 1 to 6 and 10 to 13 (3311 journals in total) in the Table 1 are all reputed journals. Barring few, their problems are limited number of papers are currently being published in these journals, and there is scope for increasing the number of papers published in each issue and for enhancing the frequency of publication. Also most of these journals still deal with print format only though some provide free electronic access. Nobody reads a journal issue in entirety and shifting to an electronic only format is the first step to augment the frequency as well as the number of papers they include in one issue using present costs. This also requires extending the panel of reviewers to deal with peer reviewing extra papers received for publication. The print format may be continued only for those journals with many subscribers insisting for the same.

As far as journals in Sl. No. 7 to 9 in Table 1 are concerned, close scrutiny is required to identify good journals from the not so good ones. The experience and expertise of the UGC CARE

initiative would help in this exercise. Preference must be given to those journals published by non commercial entities such as institutions, societies and associations. There is no close estimate of journals published by such entities in the country. The journals in Sl. No. 9 with the title words 'Bulletin', 'University', 'Society', 'College', 'Institute', 'Association', 'Academy', 'Reports', 'Transactions', 'Proceedings', 'Department' and 'School' add to 1419 journals. Let us take 50% of the journals with title words 'India or Indian' as of quality short-listing another 863 journals. Considering only 10% of journals with the term 'International' in title as of quality, the number of such journals stands at 615. Imagine 50% of journals at Sl. No. 7 (126) and 25% of journals at Sl. No. 8 (83) are of quality, yielding another 209 journals. Thus a base of 5134 journals (6417 minus 20% to avoid the duplication in the different lists considered in Table 1) can be identified for grooming to counter the negative impact of predatory journals which comes to almost a quarter of the approximate total number of journals currently published in the country.

**Table 1: Assessing the potential of Indian Journals to counter predatory journals**

Sl. No.	Publisher/Aggregator/Other	Number of journals
1	Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR)	19 <sup>28</sup>
2	Indian Academy of Sciences (IASc)	13 <sup>29</sup>

- 3 Indian National Science Academy (INSA) 3<sup>30</sup>
- 4 National Academy of Sciences (Allahabad) 3<sup>31</sup>
- 5 Institution of Engineers (India) (IE(I)) 5<sup>32</sup>
- 6 Defence Scientific Information & 3<sup>33</sup>  
Documentation Centre (DESIDOC)
- 7 Indian Social Science Journals covered in 252<sup>34</sup>  
Institute for Studies in Industrial  
Development (ISID) Database
- 8 Indianjournals portal 332<sup>35</sup>
- 9 ISSN's assigned in India for specific words 'International'-6154; 'India or Indian'-1727;  
in title<sup>36</sup> 'Bulletin' 282; University'-241; 'Society'-239;  
'College'-126; 'Institute'-112; 'Association'-106;  
'Academy'-75; 'Reports'-70; 'Transactions'-56;  
'Proceedings'-43; 'Department'-40; 'School'-29

- 10 UGC Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics (CARE) Journal list for group I 1292 (Sciences 292, Social Sciences 301, Arts & Humanities 362, Multidisciplinary 47 and Indian Languages 290) (as per search on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2021)<sup>37</sup>
  - 11 Science and Technology journals covered in International Indexing & Abstracting databases 1169<sup>38</sup>
  - 12 Journals from India in SCImago Journal & Country Rank 482<sup>39</sup>
  - 13 Open Access Journals published from India covered in DOAJ 322<sup>40</sup>
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Support through Open Journal System and Funding:

Format of publication shall be electronic only considering the decades of positive engagement of researchers with electronic journals. The INFLIBNET Centre has installed Open Journal System (OJS) to facilitate hosting electronic version of journals in open access mode handling processes of submission, peer-review, editing, layout design and publishing with a view to host

electronic version of print journals currently published by universities and institutions as well as to start new ones<sup>41</sup>. UGC may support the INFLIBNET Centre with additional resources and staff to strengthen this endeavour. Though the editorial operations can be handled without much computer expertise through OJS, senior editors may co-opt junior professionals as Assistant Editors and research scholars or office staff as Editorial Assistants, if required.

Additionally, the journal hosts, institutions, associations and societies entrusted with the editorial responsibilities must be funded by research councils and agencies engaged in supporting research. Chakraborty et al.<sup>44</sup> proposed that the Government of India should earmark funds for upgrading and supporting Indian journals on a long-term basis to improve their infrastructure, attractiveness, visibility and efficiency of editorial processes. They want such support to augment the editorial office staff to an optimal level, to improve the editorial office infrastructure and to provide for good software for processing of submissions. American Physical Society launched 'Physical Review Letters' series of journals to facilitate a fast channel for reporting new research results in brief. Such journals are not available in our country. There is a rush of researchers and new professionals needing quick publication for the sake of fulfilling the requirements of research degree or for meeting the eligibility of jobs advertised. Midcareer researchers also need publications at frequent intervals for selections and promotions. There may be special sections in journals to handle such quick publishing needs. The excessive rush for publications can be effectively met only by strengthening existing journals and launching new ones. Institutions may be encouraged to float journals in specialized areas with aggressive research activity instead of the present trend of A-Z subject journals published by some institutions.

The base of 5134 journals may attempt to provide an opportunity for fast handling of papers sent by research scholars, research associates, early career teachers and scientists as they were lured easily by predators. More journals could be identified over a period of time when the fruits of this exercise were visible to authors, reviewers, editors and publishers. Journals need to identify experts from different regions and ethnicities of the country to give a diverse face to the editorial board with options for periodical changes in its members. A diverse editorial board will help create inclusive peer review processes accommodating authors from different backgrounds and cultures<sup>42</sup>. The objective of handling more papers and its peer review put a toll largely on researchers in the country. UGC may hence consider assigning API points for reviewing papers and editorial responsibilities of quality journals to attract and sustain talent in these areas<sup>43</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

The might of predatory publishers is strong to discontinue a valuable tool such as Beall's List. There is an urgent need to develop a mechanism to identify the quality of articles published by the respective institutes and researchers<sup>14</sup>. It may also be useful to have a committee or body that authorizes the work to be published in a specific journal<sup>3</sup>. Editors of Indian journals need to follow the best practices adopted by their international counterparts in handling the various operations right from receipt of a paper till its publication<sup>43</sup>.

It is not easy to curtail or deal with the commercial interests of predatory publishers through academic safeguards alone. But at least their negative impact can be contained to a certain

extent through a set of action plans by authors, institutions, funding agencies and publishers such as sensitizing authors about the perils of predatory publishing, training new authors about the nuances of academic publishing so that their manuscripts get accepted by good journals, strengthening Indian journals to publish more quality papers, etc. Grooming at least a quarter of Indian journals to international quality offering multiple alternative publication channels to authors who fall easy prey to predatory publishers is the first pragmatic step in that direction. Similar initiatives by other developing countries in Asia, Africa and Americas (other than North) whose researchers are more prone to the trap of predatory publishers will no doubt generate sufficient collective might to effectively contain the wrath of predatory publishing sooner than later.

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