

The Paper Mill

Hindustan Times, October 17, 2025

The call was from an unknown number and my colleague picked it up by mistake. The person on the other end instead of hawking property in Noida or Gurgaon mentioned that she belonged to a research organization. This piqued my colleague's curiosity. He was stuck in one of the perennial rush hour traffic jams in Delhi and so he continued the conversation.

What he found out was astonishing- the person told him that their organization is in the business of getting one's research published in Scopus listed or UGC CARE listed journals for a fee. This was not all- you didn't need to actually do anything. They would even write the paper for you (of course for an additional fee) and you could decide on the month when you wanted the paper to be published as long as the date was post-2012. When my colleague asked her to send all the details, she messaged him the details of the offer and continued a Whatsapp conversation subsequently with many messages regarding choice of journals, negotiations on price etc. This was not a cloak-and-dagger operation. It was all open and brazen.

The organization had sensed a huge market opportunity and so was making the most of it- courtesy the mandarins who decide our higher education policy.

The first opportunity came when the UGC mandated a certain number of research papers for promotion of teachers in colleges and universities. It then came out with a fairly comprehensive list of refereed journals (the UGC CARE list) in which they could be published. This obviously was meant to encourage research among the teachers and improve our ranking in the global pecking order of number of papers published- something which has become a fetish with our planners.

Clearly the policy makers seemed to be completely ignorant of the conditions under which teachers, especially college teachers work in our country- poor or non-existent infrastructure, poor access to libraries electronic or otherwise as well as being overburdened with teaching and administrative work. This is not just the state of affairs in some *moffusil* college- faculty in colleges of Delhi University face similar issues. Teachers rarely have a decent place to sit (not to speak of laboratories), teach

more than 16 hours in a week, grade and have to spend enormous time and energy keeping records and other administrative stuff. With all this, to expect the person to do cutting edge research and publish a number of papers to advance in her career could only have been thought of by a bureaucrat who was oblivious of the educational landscape.

In this state of affairs, it was only natural that some dodgy entrepreneur would step in and provide a useful service. Teachers paid a small fee to get the required number of papers, the organization facilitating this made money and everyone was happy. What was more, the “research output or papers” would add to the overall number of papers published by Indian researchers, thus making the rankings obsessed bureaucrats happy. Never mind the quality of the “research”.

This was the state of affairs till the much-awaited NEP was introduced. The undergraduate program now offered students to continue for a fourth year. Colleges are supposed to handle an increase of 25% in student strength with no extra funding for infrastructure or for faculty. When asked about how this will be managed, one of senior functionaries of Delhi University had a bizarre suggestion- the colleges should have their classes till 8.30 pm. Clearly he was blissfully unaware of the fact that Delhi is almost at the very bottom of the list of cities considered to be safe for women.

The main emphasis of the fourth year in NEP is research where the students are supposed to carry out original research and either publish their findings in refereed journals or apply for a patent. The objective is clearly a noble one. Unfortunately the objective conditions are not conducive. First, there is a selection effect for students who have opted for the fourth year. The good students have moved on to do their post graduate degrees and the majority of the students left to undertake this challenging task are precisely those who could not go anywhere. Lack of infrastructure and an over worked faculty means that that the students face an uphill.

Enter our publishing messiah as a saviour. Research publications (though thankfully no patents yet) can be delivered to the students who can then claim to have fulfilled the requirements for an Honours degree with research. And as the UGC has specified, if their performance is good enough, be eligible for a direct PhD.

The NEP has been lauded as the best thing that happened to Indian education. Many respected academics though have pointed out several shortcomings in the policy. One

would expect that the education policy makers would take heed of these genuine criticisms and do a course correction. Moreover, as they say, the real test comes when the rubber meets the road. Noble intentions and utopian ideals are laudable. Unless attention is paid to the ground realities, the net result would only make a mockery of the stated goals.

Shobhit.mahajan@gmail.com

9811222582