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National Conference on Open Access to Scholarly Information: Research & Academic Communities Role in Building a Sustainable Knowledge Society

Editors

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**Open Access to Scholarly Information: Research & Academic Communities
Role in Building a Sustainable Knowledge Society**

EDITORIALS

In today's interconnected world, open access to information was pivotal for fostering a sustainable society built on knowledge and equity. This conference highlighted the vital role of academia in advancing open access, exploring how it democratized research, spurred innovation, and enhanced collaboration across disciplines. By addressing key topics such as equitable access, innovative practices, and the evolving landscape of open access policies, we aimed to illuminate the path toward a more inclusive and transparent knowledge environment. Discussions covered sustainable information practices, the impact of open access on researcher visibility, and strategies for navigating challenges such as predatory journals. Through these deliberations, we sought to enhance our collective understanding and commitment to creating a globally accessible and sustainable knowledge society.

We hope the proceedings will serve as a valuable resource for advancing the discourse on open access and inspire further innovation and collaboration across the academic landscape.

Warm Regards,

Editors

Dr. Sarika Sawant, Associate Professor, SHPT School of Lib Sc, SNDT WU
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CONTENTS

Open Access: Specialised Resources

Use of Open Access Resources

Transformative Agreements

Artificial Intelligence: Academic community

Sustainable Information Resources/Systems

OA Publications in Social Science:
CEHAT Case Study

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Abstract:

Open access is a publishing model which refers to the practice of making research articles, datasets, and other scholarly materials freely available to anyone, anywhere in the world, without the need for a subscription or other barriers, that makes research information available to readers at no cost, without licensing or copyright restrictions. Articles are freely available to both subscribers and the wider public with permitted reuse. Visibility and free access to the scholarly literature overcomes the barriers of paywall and issues faced by the researchers in developing countries. This paper provides useful insights on the issue of the open access in low middle income countries and accessibility of information. It presents a case of a non-profit research organisation's which has made several efforts to make their research available on the public domain to bridge the gap between academic research and its social relevance at ground level activities.

Keywords: Open Access, CEHAT, Social Science, LMICs, India

1 Background:

Researchers, Academicians, Scientists, Students etc. are the largest consumers as well as the producers of knowledge. Over the years, there has been a change in the ways the knowledge is produced and utilised. As Suber (2019) mentioned, a movement of shift from ink on paper to digital text has indeed enabled us to make perfect copies of our work with ease. This has revolutionised the way we collaborate, revise, and disseminate written content. Moreover, the shift from isolated computers to a global network of connected computers has opened up new avenues for sharing our work with a vast audience. The internet has enabled us to reach people across the globe in real-time, without the need for physical distribution or costly logistics. This has democratised access to information, making it possible for individuals and organisations to share their ideas and perspectives with a global audience (Suber, 2019). The crucial role that opens access to publications plays in bridging the knowledge gap between these communities of different socio-economic backgrounds (Hegde, 2017).

A publication is defined as 'open access' when there are no financial, legal or technical

barriers to accessing it - that is to say when anyone can read, copy, download, print, distribute, search for and search within the information, or use it in education or in any other way within the legal agreements (Dutch National Website, n.d.).

In other words, Open Access (OA) is a publishing model for scholarly communication that makes research information available to readers at no cost, as opposed to the traditional subscription model in which readers have access to scholarly information by paying a subscription (Dutch National Website, n.d.).

2 OA initiative:

The OA initiative, was mainly initiated by academicians and researchers across the globe. The Budapest initiative launched in 2022, provided a concise framework for implementing OA policies. Bethesda and Berlin declaration of 2003 are also notable initiatives in this context.

Suber (2019) has referred to these three events combined as the "BBB definition" of OA as the three overlap with and inform one another, and he defines it as "BBB definition go beyond removing price barriers to removing permission barriers, or beyond gratis OA to libre OA. But at the same time, all three allow at least one limit on user freedom: an obligation to attribute the work to the author. The purpose of OA is to remove barriers to all legitimate scholarly uses for scholarly literature, but there's no legitimate scholarly purpose in suppressing attribution to the texts we use."

2.1 Brief history of OA in India:

In India, the OA movement has gained significant momentum in recent years, driven by the need for greater accessibility, transparency, and collaboration in research and academia. The following Figure 1, notes few key events in OA development in India

Figure 1: Key Events of OA in India
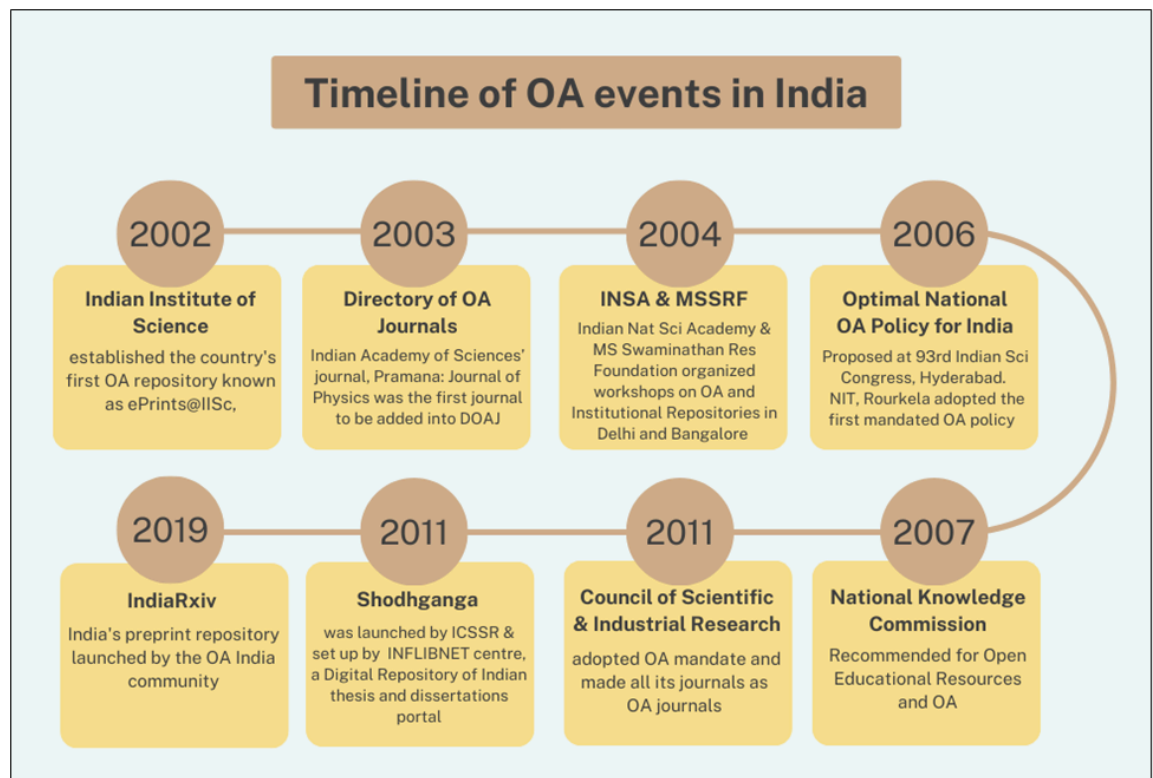
Generated timeline from Shah, Dandawate & Gutam, 2016; McKenna, 2024

These events have contributed to the growth of OA in India, promoting greater transparency, collaboration, and innovation in scientific research and development.

Despite the efforts of academicians and researchers to advocate for OA, there are still significant barriers of unequal access to knowledge in the field of research, particularly for those in developing countries.

2.2 Open Access in LMICs:

The fact that research conducted by high-income countries (HIC) groups is often published in subscription-based journals, which can be expensive and inaccessible to researchers and institutions in low and middle-income countries (LMICs), raises serious concerns about social justice (Smith et al., 2017).

HINARI (Health InterNetwork Access to Research Initiative) is a global initiative launched by the World Health Organization (WHO) to provide developing countries with access to academic and scientific journals, books, databases in the field of health and also on social science and humanities related research work. HINARI aims to address the problem of limited access to scientific and medical information in LMICs, which can hinder their ability to conduct research, improve healthcare, and address health challenges. While free access is only given to research institutions in low-income countries, medium-income countries require to pay a 'low-cost fees' (US$1500 per year) for full access to HINARI resources (Smith et al., 2017). But a few developing countries like India or China are not eligible for accessing HINARI as their Gross National Income (GNI) exceeds USD 1 trillion (Research4life, n.d.). As HINARI is a voluntary programme, many publishers may choose to back out or restrict access to specific countries; this creates uneven and uncertain access for users (Smith et al., 2017).

One of the main issues of OA journals is that they charge article processing charges (APCs), which can be a barrier to publishing for researchers who cannot afford them. This can worsen existing inequities in research dissemination, especially in LMICs. Some OA journals offer waivers to researchers from low-income countries, but the criteria vary between journals, creating uncertainty and additional barriers. A sustainable solution to offset the financial burden of OA publishing is needed and may involve alternative funding models or ways to reduce costs for authors (Smith et al., 2017).

Currently, over 13,683 OA journals without APCs are registered in the Directory of OA Journals (DOAJ, 2024). The median cost for publishing an OA article in a medical journal is about Rs. 3,82,000 (Kilgallon, Khanna, Dey, Smith & Ranganathan, 2023). APC cost depends on factors such as journal prestige, impact factor, scope of the journal, and the services provided by the publisher. Few OA journals have introduced waiver policies, which may not be effective in reducing costs for authors from low-income countries, but often, the waiver process is opaque and requires authors to provide motivation for waivers. The lack of transparency and clarity in the waiver process can perpetuate inequities in research dissemination. APCs may exceed the monthly salary of researchers and academicians in Global South. Unfortunately, three-quarters of journals do not offer waivers to researchers from lower-income nations, perpetuating inequities in scientific knowledge (Saloojee & Pettifor, 2023).

Preservation of electronic resources is difficult and a costly affair especially for LMICs researchers, as ambiguity can be dangerous since electronic resources are vulnerable to various threats, such as hardware or software failure, natural disasters, or economic failures, etc. As per the study conducted by Laaksoo, Matthias & Jahn (2021), 174 OA journals that, through lack of comprehensive and open archives, vanished from the web between 2000 and 2019, spanning all major research disciplines and geographic regions of the world. The results indicate that while many OA journals don't disappear, few are more likely to vanish. Particularly the journals affiliated with academic institutions or scholarly societies, publishing research in social sciences and humanities, mostly located in North America. These findings suggest that specific challenges may contribute to the disappearance of these journals, such as funding, language, and cultural differences. The results have important implications for OA journal sustainability (Laaksoo et al., 2021).

Another major hindrance for LMIC researchers is of Predatory journals. It copies the OA publishing model by levying APCs on authors, but does not deliver high-quality, peer reviewed articles and does not ensure the scientific quality of submitted articles (Richtig, Berger, Lange-Asschenfeldt, Aberer & Richtig, 2018). Such journals have been given various names like fake journals, predatory journals, and many others. A sting study conducted by Bohannon (2013) on "Predatory Journals", where they submitted fake scientific papers to 304 journals which were so called paid OA publishers. The articles were designed with flaws that should have led to immediate rejection by editors or reviewers, according to the data provided in this landmark paper, 60% of these flawed articles were actually accepted by the journals. This implies that the peer review process in these journals is inadequate or non-existent, allowing flawed articles to be published (Singh, Prasad & Shankar, 2021). What was more disturbing was that about one-third of the journals targeted in this sting are based in India, out of 304 journals, 64 accepted the fatally flawed papers and only 15 rejected it (Bohannon, 2013).

The irony while a literature search about the OA to write this paper, was that many articles about OA in India were behind a paywall, which is contradictory to the very concept of OA. It's as if the authors of these articles are preaching about the importance of making knowledge freely available, but their own work is not following the same principles.

Indian Librarians Online Study Circle (ILOSC) a Google group of around 6441 members such as librarian / academicians across country, was scrutinised (https://groups.google.com/g/ilosc/members). A quick scanning was done in the ILOSC group emails received from 1st to 31st July 2024. It was found that out of 57 emails, 45 emails were requests from a large number of librarians for sharing full text articles or E-book PDF copies for their students / faculties / researchers. It suggests that there is a significant demand for academic resources and materials among Indian academicians / researchers, particularly in smaller institutions where access to these resources is limited. It's also possible that there is a lack of awareness about available resources among these groups and also cannot deny their difficulties in accessing them due to geographical constraints and budget limitations.

2.3 Cost of publishing in OA for LMICs and overcoming its issues:

Lack of strong policies and support from government funding agencies and educational institutions is a major hurdle in significant challenges in LMICs for authors to access and afford OA publications, including India. Additionally, the contingency funding provided by these agencies is often insufficient to cover the costs of OA publication fees, which can range from 1 lakh/year (USD 1300) or more per article. The issue is further compounded by the fact that contingency

funding is often used for other expenses such as conference registration fees, membership fees for scientific societies, and stationery expenses. This means that authors may not have the necessary funds to cover OA publication fees, which can lead to a reliance on predatory journals. It's also concerning that funding agencies do not have a provision for separate allocation for publication money, even after a project has been successfully completed. Here authors are left to cover these costs out of their own pockets, which can be a significant burden. It's essential to address these challenges to ensure that Indian authors have access to OA publications and can publish their research in reputable, OA journals (Singh et al., 2021).

Publishing in a journal can be a barrier for authors from LMICs due to APCs. As noted earlier APCs can be waived for LMIC authors. The cost of publication is particularly crucial if authors consider how such charges and subscription fees would impact the potential readership of the articles by other researchers in LMICs. By resolving the article accessibility issues in the planning phase may help in reducing power inequities that could exist in global health research and publication. To mitigate this, authors should self-archive their work in online repositories to increase accessibility and reduce barriers to access (Abrons et al., 2020).

Free access to knowledge may also be provided when researchers self-archive their papers, as we often see in public or institutional repositories. The copyright transfer agreements of many journals allow making research papers available online, either in pre-print or post-print form, through OA repositories or personal websites, which is allowed by many journals know as 'Green OA'. Journal policies that do not allow for self-archiving often have a restricted period during which they control access to peer-reviewed articles for a specific range of time from 6 months to one year (generally for papers published in global health); the impulsion behind such embargos is to require institutions to purchase and thus fund subscription-based journals (Smith et al. 2017). Proportionately many publish less than 25 papers per year often issued annually in diamond OA journals, these mostly belonging to social sciences and humanities (Saloojee & Pettifor, 2023). More than 70% of diamond OA journals are published by universities, around 15% by publishing companies, while the rest are published by societies, professional associations, or libraries (Hagve, 2020).

The importance of a mindset shift in the research community to promote and recognise the value of OA journals and research outputs. Researchers should actively seek to publish in OA journals, such as - preprints, articles, data, peer review reports, and grey literature etc. All research outputs should be given equal recognition in academic evaluation systems, rather than focusing solely on traditional journal publications.

This will create a more inclusive and open research ecosystem, where all research outputs are valued and recognised, regardless of their format or publication channel (Saloojee & Pettifor, 2023).

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In a study done by Hegde (2017) was an attempt to understand the perceptions of faculty members of Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) institutes located all over India regarding accessing and publishing their work in OA resources. The finding indicates that 67% of the respondents are aware of OA resources available in the social science research arena, but are not very keen on publishing their research work in OA journals, due to its low impact factor, author charges, copyright issues etc. Although social scientists are aware of OA publication, they showed a least interest in publishing their research papers in OA journals. It is a known fact that OA publications give more visibility and remove the price barriers to scholarly communication and the peer reviewed OA journals may fetch better citations. The user perceptions regarding OA journals are quite interesting, in that many feel that OA journals are quite useful especially to academicians in the developing countries as non-OA journals are generally expensive. OA helps remove the publication biases by understanding the other side of the research world.

2.4 Efforts in re-using the Social Science data by OA:

Access to and sharing of data are crucial for conducting and advancement of further research, it is a link to the chain of investments in research, an OA to the factual data plays an increasingly important role in public research (Arzberger et al., 2004). Dunleavy (2022) highlights the significance of open social science data, which is characterised by transparency, accessibility, and collaboration. Advancements of digital infrastructure and the explosion of data in a range of disciplines, this access to and sharing of publicly funded data must be advanced within an international framework, beyond technological solutions (Arzberger et al., 2004). By developing open social science practices, it has the potential to transform the way we conduct and disseminate research in the social sciences. By making research data more accessible, reusable, and citable, researchers can increase the impact of their findings, foster greater collaboration and innovation, and ultimately contribute to a greater understanding of important societal processes (Basak, 2023; Dunleavy, 2022). The data collected through public funding should be freely accessible for research purposes. It maximises the use of such information for public policy, public knowledge development and further research (Arzberger et al., 2004).

3 CEHATs efforts towards bringing knowledge ethically accessible to all:

CEHAT (Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes) is a not-for-profit research organisation of Anusandhan Trust, based in Mumbai, India. CEHAT was conceptualised with the idea to fill the gap between academic research and its social relevance. The purpose was to generate actionable knowledge in a scientifically and ethically sound manner. Organisation use their work to establish direct services and programmes that can demonstrate how health can be made accessible, ethical and equitable. A multidisciplinary team, they offer courses and training, disseminate information through databases and publications, and work around the themes based on health services and finances, health legislation, ethics and patient rights, gender and health, violence and health (www.cehat.org; Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies, n.d.).

CEHATs research is not undertaken with mere academic interests, rather it takes efforts to share the findings with grassroots organisations and make the research findings usable for social change, campaigns and advocacy. CEHAT produces a wide range of IEC resources, scholarly publications, reports, blogs etc. highlighting the intersection and interaction of health, health systems and gender. Their OA research outputs, publications and resources aim to inform grassroots practice, advocacy, campaigns and policymakers (www.cehat.org).

3.1 Few initiates by CEHAT for bridging the knowledge gaps

· CEHATs Website provides access to its 30 years of rich research work freely available for other organisations working towards the same cause and for the health activists.
CEHATs Publications, such as research reports, health data etc. in the initial phase were on nominal amount. Now the publications are freely available for access in print as well as in electronic formats. Since CEHAT developed its first Website in 2001, the digital copies of scholarly research publications were made available on website on a free access (CEHAT, 2003). So that it can reach social science researchers, grass roots activists and so on. Open knowledge was made accessible to influence policy and practice and CEHAT endeavors to do this through accessibility.
· 'Database on health' was a part of CEHAT's policy of making health related data easily accessible to researchers, activists and journalists. These data on health in India have been collected from several state and central government documents and fill in the lacunae of non-availability of such information in one place (CEHAT, 2006). A partial information on 'Health Database' was made available on website, giving state-wise data on manpower, infrastructure, and finance at five-year intervals (CEHAT, 2003).
· Gender in Medical Education (GME) project, aims to change in the education of future doctors/ medical educators so as to create a generation of medical doctors who will come forward to develop an intersectional lens in providing clinical care take up their role in promoting sexual and reproductive health rights while dealing sensitively with concerns around gender-based violence, access to safe abortion and sex determination (www.gme-cehat.org). CEHAT has created a platform to upload their work / research articles and access the information of peers through the GME website.

CEHATs research data is on public domain so that other researchers / organisations could use this quantitative data and for their own analysis. Due to CEHATs work available on the public domain, led to implementation research on sexual violence, in developing of a uniform and sensitive medico-legal protocol for examination and treatment by Ministry of Health, India. After decades of legal advocacy, CEHAT approached the Supreme Court with Lawyers Collective as its legal counsel. The Maharashtra government was compelled to withdraw the old proforma and implement the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) proforma in 2014 (CEHAT, 2010; MoHFW, 2014).
Lastly, CEHAT has also put efforts to build research capacity of grassroots organisations to generate evidence in form of media articles, reports and fact sheets in order to inform program and policy (Damle, 2024).

4 Way Forward:

In a knowledge-driven society, access to information is crucial for individuals, communities, and societies to thrive. The privileged academic communities / researchers often have access to resources, funding, and infrastructure that enable them to produce and disseminate high-quality research. However, this can create a barrier to entry for poorly resourced social science and humanities communities from LMICs, who may lack the same resources and opportunities. In the quest of decolonizing social science research, OA can be an important lead in accessibility.

When deciding where to publish research, authors should consider the pros and cons of publishing in international journals versus regional or country-specific journals/ repositories. Regional journals offer advantages such as enhanced local accessibility, discussion of relevance, and lower costs, but may have limited indexing and readership. International journals, on the other hand, offer advantages such as enhanced scholarly dialogue, increased citation rates, and indexing, but may have higher costs and competition. The decision to publish in a regional or international journal depends on the goals and objectives of the research project, and authors should carefully consider their target audience, relevance, and potential impact (Abrons et al. 2020).

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