Decolonizing Knowledge Systems: Open Access in the Indian Context

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Open Access (OA) began with the promise of a more equitable approach to sharing knowledge through increased scholarly communication, changing the ways in which research can be disseminated and accessed. Its initial intent defied the privileging of knowledge as it presented alternatives to traditional subscription models of journal publication that sustained inequality, since these models allow only elite institutions to afford exhaustive research databases, thereby widening the gap between large and small institutions, developed and developing economies, as well as rich and poor nations. Against such traditional models, Open Access offered a level playing field to all, not only benefitting the readers, but also the researchers participating in it, a fact often overlooked in the discussions surrounding this movement. Within the academic community, the production of knowledge through research gains credibility only when it is validated by the scholarly use of the work, a process for which quantitative models of assessing credibility have been created. The reformation of knowledge-disseminating systems assured global visibility to authors from diverse geographical regions across all classes by tearing down the prohibitive barriers of cost and copyright.

Economic sustainability, however, remains a formidable hurdle in the democratisation of knowledge within existing OA models. The inadequacies of Article Processing Charges (APCs) are well-documented, and alternative funding mechanisms remain largely experimental. Most Diamond OA Journals[1] struggle to secure sustainable funding, compounded in the field of humanities by the limited funding options available. Unlike STEM disciplines, which benefit from substantial grants to cover their publication costs, humanities researchers in India struggle with smaller or even non-existent budgets, which creates a structural disadvantage that current OA models fail to address. OA's ecosystem, for Indian academicians and world over, remains a deeply unequal system

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[1]Diamond OA refers to a radical publication model where neither the readers nor the authors pay for the publication. Funding for journals in such a model is received from other stakeholders, like research institutions, universities, governments, or patrons. For further information on the different types of Open Access publications, see, "What is Open Access?" *OpenAccess.nl*, www.openaccess.nl/en/about-open-access/what-is-open-access.

which remains blind to the problems of the Global South scholarship. Its policies, moreover, remain heavily influenced by corporate/capitalistic publishers, demanding disproportionate APCs which Global South scholars generally can't afford unless they are funded by their universities. In contrast, most Western universities have infrastructures, policies, and budgets in place to pay the publication costs, providing their scholars opportunities to publish in OA, thereby enhancing the visibility and accessibility of their work. Corporate publishers' covert cooption of OA also helps silence the voices of scholars from Global South, and their work marginalized, as they struggle to gain wider visibility within academia. This paradox of OA creating new economic disparities then works against empowering marginalized scholarship, by keeping scholars as passive readers and limiting their participation in producing and disseminating knowledge. Thus, the promise of OA to serve as a model for democratizing publication opportunities has, unfortunately, fallen short of providing inclusive frameworks that accommodate epistemological systems outside Western standards. Western systems dominate the OA ecosystem through quality-control metrics and evaluation systems, giving impetus to embedded biases that favour methodologies used in the West. This shortcoming has reinforced entrenched homogenous structures that impose rigid standardization on diverse epistemologies. Mehmood Mamdani points to such an imposition of standardization and eventual appropriation by Western systems by referencing the etymology of 'university' which, "as the name suggests, claims a universal significance as a site for the study of the humans" (15). He argues that while diverse forms of higher education have emerged in various parts of the world since premodern times, "it is only one particular historical experience, the Western, that became globalised during the modern colonial era"; and it is only students from such institutes who "claim 'excellence' globally" (15).

Open Access's skewed state in favour of Western-generated models of knowledge can be interpreted as a fallout of the post-colonial dichotomy that plagues nations with rich cultural history yet poor economic conditions and inadequate technical facilities. This is particularly true in the context of Indian humanities scholarship, which is rooted in indigenous traditions and community-based knowledge. India, a multilingual country with 22 official languages and number of dialects reaching up to several hundreds,[2] boasts a scholarly tradition that has been a blend of Sanskrit, Tamil, and Persian since ancient times. When such a rich tradition engages with the Anglophonic Western world, its contributions are often underappreciated and even misrecognized by a homogenous evaluation standard, where only one language, English, becomes dominant, failing to appreciate its cultural and linguistic diversity. Monica Berger observes the socio-political implications of this guise of globalisation which masks the systemic erasure of non-Western experiences and epistemological frameworks. She notes that OA "continue[s] to be mired in colonial, one-size-fits-all conditions whilst universities and research institutions value traditional, prestige publishing based in the North" (384). This bias results in scholars being evaluated for grants and promotions based on a narrow set of metrics (384), placing them at a disadvantage. Consequently, the majority of scholarship from India, and the entire Global South, is unjustly relegated to the role of passive consumers, contradicting OA's self-proclaimed mission to provide

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[2]See, Government of India. The Eighth Schedule to the Constitution of India. *The Ministry of Home Affairs*, www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/Eighth_Schedule.pdf.

an equitable platform for all kinds of scholarship.[3] In the same vein, Florence Piron warns that "open access can become a tool of neocolonialism if it only gives students and academics better access to science from the North" (117).

While it is an imperative of contemporary times to discern and engage with the knowledge structures from the Global South—acknowledging the historical and cultural factors that shape these knowledge forms—Michalinos Zembylas provides a word of caution against the potential misuse of decolonial rhetoric. He argues that the decolonial rhetoric can be used to further "nationalist and authoritarian agendas [that] reinforce exclusionary and anti-democratic educational policies" (1). The need of the hour is not to uproot all perceived remnants of colonial structures ruthlessly, but to draw out colonising elements from the current blend of structures. 'Delinking' existing knowledge systems from their visible colonial markers should not be misconstrued as a debunking of sorts. That can be misinterpreted as a misguided attempt to erase the history of coloniality. Instead, one should strategically distance one's perspective from colonial structures by rethinking their detrimental impact on native knowledge systems. A genuine pursuit of decoloniality needs to go beyond debunking of colonial power structures and evolve an active discourse on how to relink existing structures with native knowledge systems and re-establish them in the context of pluriversality. To truly decolonize OA, then, we need to reimagine not only validation and dissemination of knowledge but also the very foundations of its production. This involves reviving knowledge systems embedded in native languages and ensuring they receive equal respect alongside colonial languages like English, without forcing their reinstatement as the exclusive mode of education. A decolonized OA champions non-English scholarship by building infrastructure for multiple scripts, establishing comprehensive metadata standards, and developing diverse evaluation criteria for regional language publications. OA initiatives can only thrive as inclusive spaces for diverse epistemological traditions when quality metrics—scholarly communication, citation indexes, and peer-reviews— are reconceptualized to include non-Western cultural approaches alongside Western academic judgments.

An equitable OA is bound to unravel the barriers of inequality in technological infrastructure and digital literacy. Despite India's significant progress in digital connectivity, disparities persist between urban and rural areas, elite and non-elite institutions, and across different regions. The transition to digital-first publishing, while making publication accessible, raises critical sustainability concerns that are too

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[3]As stated in the Budapest Open Access Initiative, signed on February 14, 2002 at Budapest, Hungary:

> An old tradition and a new technology have converged to make possible an unprecedented public good. The old tradition is the willingness of scientists and scholars to publish the fruits of their research in scholarly journals without payment, for the sake of inquiry and knowledge. The new technology is the internet. The public good they make possible is *the world-wide electronic distribution of the peer-reviewed journal literature and completely free and unrestricted access to it by all scientists, scholars, teachers, students, and other curious minds*. Removing access barriers to this literature will accelerate research, enrich education, share the learning of the rich with the poor and the poor with the rich, make this literature as useful as it can be, and lay the foundation for uniting humanity in a common intellectual conversation and quest for knowledge. (emphasis added)

See, Budapest Open Access Initiative. "Read the Declaration." *BOAI*, 14 Feb. 2002, www.budapestopen accessinitiative.org/read/.

significant to be ignored. Although digital formats are deemed more accessible, the looming threats of server changes, format obsolescence, and institutional instability jeopardize long-term availability. These preservation challenges disproportionately affect scholars engaged in historical research or long-term projects. Similarly, digitization of texts—through digital humanities projects that have revolutionized access to manuscripts—raises pressing issues of ownership and cultural appropriation. Key concerns include involving traditional knowledge holders in decision-making about online accessibility. While Creative Commons licensing provides control options to OA's unrestricted use, its mechanism remains rooted in Western intellectual property rights frameworks that can clash with indigenous knowledge systems.[4]

Indian education system, despite incorporating English as one of the official languages and its remarkable technological advancements, continues to exclude the broader society from the latest technologically integrated education. This exclusion is particularly pronounced in the humanities, where the absence of comprehensive indigenous frameworks in vernacular languages on the internet stifles alternate knowledge systems. The overwhelming dominance of English on major OA platforms perpetuates a form of linguistic colonialism, marginalizing multilingual scholarship and severely restricting India's intellectual potential. Digital publishing platforms and repository systems, originally designed to democratise knowledge, often unintentionally discourage participation, especially among senior scholars accustomed to print traditions. Online archiving too is dominated by anglophone texts, while native language systems remain marginalized.

A successful decolonization of OA in higher education is not just a possibility; it is an imperative that demands a robust policy framework. India's higher education system, with nearly 1200 universities and 50,000 colleges serving over 43 million students,[5] stands at a crossroads in OA implementation. The challenges are clear, particularly in humanities, which, despite their historical significance in Indian intellectual traditions, are overshadowed by STEM disciplines, whose methodologies closely align with the modern Western knowledge systems. These fields receive disproportionate government funding, industry partnerships, and international rankings. Through the One Nation, One Subscription (ONOS) scheme, Indian government is offering Indian institutions journal-access on a single portal through centralised

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[4]Mehtab Khan points this clash by stating that,

> [indigenous communities] haven't always had the autonomy to decide what can be done with their knowledge. International and national instruments have attempted to codify the value of traditional knowledge and rights of indigenous peoples, but the place of such knowledge within conventional intellectual property structures remains deeply contested and uncertain. […] [T]raditional knowledge is often perceived as being part of the public domain by default, when it is not.
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> There is a colonial history of this perception. The doctrine of discovery, which was used to legitimize and expand colonization, held the assumption that indigenous peoples were "uncivilized," and hence could not own property like European settlers. Therefore, the land and knowledge of indigenous peoples were seen as part of the commons, open for 'discovery' and appropriation. (Khan)

[5]These figures are taken from the latest All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), conducted in the academic year 2021–22. See, Ministry of Education. *All India Survey on Higher Education 2021-22*. Department of Higher Education, Government of India, https://aishe.gov.in/aishe-final-report/.

subscriptions, but this access is merely that of a passive consumer.[6] The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020's endorsement of OA principles through an emphasis on equitable use of technology (Ministry of Human Resource Development 58–59) marks a crucial step forward. The Science, Technology, and Innovation Policy (STIP) of 2020 specifically insists on an open data policy for publicly-funded research, laying the groundwork with OA guidelines for the field of Sciences in India (Ministry of Science & Technology 12–13). Yet, many institutions remain hamstrung by inadequate infrastructure and support for effective implementation. The problems of a developing country like India require local solutions for knowledge inclusion, preservation, and assimilation. We need policies that would empower Indian researchers to actively publish and engage on the global stage. Indigenous publishing platforms, for instance, hold the potential to present an alternative to commercial publishing models. However, they face challenges of visibility and recognition in the global academic arena. Policy changes, though, are merely the starting point, and it is imperative to embrace a sense of global responsibility to ensure that all communities participate actively, ensuring necessary resources for indigenous knowledge forms to strengthen the academic landscape and improve their global standing. Disciplinary associations must redefine standards to evaluate scholarly contributions beyond traditional metrics. Funding agencies must establish guidelines that champion diverse publishing models, moving beyond the narrow confines of high-impact Western journals.

Ultimately, decolonizing OA is not merely a call for change in publication of research, but about transforming the entire ecosystem of knowledge production to be more inclusive and representative of human intellectual diversity. Success will likely require hybrid approaches that combine the best aspects of traditional and digital models of disseminating knowledge while developing more elastic frameworks that can support multilingual, multicultural, and methodologically diverse scholarship. This might include creating new metrics that can assess impact within specific cultural and linguistic contexts. This would require sustained commitment from all stakeholders: individual scholars, institutions, policymakers, and funding agencies to serve the democratic ideals that inspired the OA movement.

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[6]For further information on the ONOS initiative, see, www.onos.gov.in.

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