

# Insights from PRISM

Policy Dialogue on Open Access in South Asia



**Centre for  
CIVIL  
SOCIETY**

SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH PUBLIC POLICY

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# Background

On 26th March 2022, Centre for Civil Society hosted a panel discussion on 'Open Access in South Asia' as part of the PRISM - the science & technology policy dialogue series. The speakers included Ms. Anubha Sinha (Senior Researcher at Centre for Internet and Society), Dr. Haseeb Irfanullah (Independent Consultant in Environment, Climate Change & Research System, based in Bangladesh) and Prof. Devika Madalli (Chair, Working Group, Open Access India; Professor, Documentation Research and Training Centre, Indian Statistical Institute, Bangalore). The discussion was moderated by Dr Moumita Koley (Policy Researcher at DST-Centre for Policy Research, IISc, Bangalore). This document captures some key insights from the discussion.

The speakers shared their insights on differences in open access narratives in high income countries vs low & middle income countries, India's 'One Nation, One Subscription' idea, potential for a unified power of South Asia, Copyright Act, and the need for a national open access, among other key topics.

The full video of the policy dialogue can also be accessed on Centre for Civil Society's official YouTube channel.<sup>1</sup>

**An Online Policy Dialogue Event**

**Centre for CIVIL SOCIETY**  
SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH PUBLIC POLICY

**SATURDAY**  
**26 MAR 2022**  
ZOOM 7-8 PM IST

**PRISM: Open Access in South Asia**

**SPEAKERS:**

- Prof. Devika Madalli**  
Chair, Working Group, Open Access India  
INDIA
- Dr Haseeb Irfanullah**  
Independent Consultant in Environment, Climate Change & Research System  
BANGLADESH
- Anubha Sinha**  
Senior Researcher, Centre for Internet and Society  
INDIA

**MODERATOR:**

- Dr Moumita Koley**  
Policy Researcher, DST-Centre for Policy Research, IISc, Bangalore  
INDIA

1. PRISM: Open Access in South Asia - YouTube Link (Centre for Civil Society)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8rd7KQnrOKE>





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# 1

## Introduction to Open Access

*(by Dr Moumita Koley)*

Open Access (OA) has been a part of the academic debate for quite some time now. A publication (such as a journal article) in a very simple term is defined as 'open access' when we can freely access it over the net. There are many dimensions to open access but for now, let's stick to this simple understanding! Why is it important? Because we usually face barriers while trying to access any scholarly article- either we need a subscription through an institution or we have to purchase an individual article that we want to read. These are all expensive options. Subscription charges are quite high at least for developing and low-middle income countries of South Asia or so as in Africa or Latin America. In fact, many researchers are completely dependent on websites such as Sci-Hub.

Since most of the scholarly articles come from publicly funded research there is a general conviction that it should not be behind the paywall of big commercial publishers. It is also pertinent to note that reviewers and editors, who are the backbone of the scholarly publishing system, are usually not on the payroll of the publishers, but they do it voluntarily for science.

The open access (OA) movement started to make scholarly knowledge accessible. Since the inception of OA in around 2002-2003 many changes happened in the scholarly publishing industry as an aftermath of the rise of demand for OA. At present many articles are accessible from the website of publishers as they are published in open access journals or hybrid journals (where some articles are open access though article processing charges (APC) mode), where the authors usually pay a few thousand dollars from their research grant to make them open access. There are other forms of access where authors deposit a version of their article, which is not the final version, to an open repository (and so on). The complexities are not trivial, especially the situation in South Asia. For low and middle income countries globally, the challenges come from lack of resources to pay APC to publish and lack of funds to subscribe to journals.



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# 2

## India's Open Access Journey

### Early Adopters, Predatory Journals, Plan S and the One Nation One Subscription Policy

*(by Ms Anubha Sinha)*

When the open access movement came into being, the Indian approach to open access was pretty lukewarm, even though India was perhaps one of the countries that needed affordable and better access the most. At the time, it was believed that scholars were disinterested in making papers open and compared to the public discourse and activity in the West, there was at the time, less attention given to the issue of journal access and prices. However, Indian librarians had realised the unsustainability of journal prices, and that led to the formation of a consortium to bargain better and distribute costs. So we had government agencies, such as ICMR, CSIR, and ICAR, making their journals open access. The Indian National Science academy's journals were also open access by then.

Post-2010, the department of biotechnology, the department of science and technology, the Indian Institute of Mathematical Sciences became a few notable institutions that had also adopted open access policies—still largely voluntary.

Shortly after, the serious problem of predatory journals happened. This problem was primarily feeding on the scholarly need to be published and profiting from this inclination. And again, preying on the open-access wave. So as a policy response in India, we had institutions create white lists for preferred journals to publish. However, this effort was later heavily criticised for the reasons of the methodology used for creating such lists and given its impingement on academic freedom. The unfortunate fact is that many Indians, both individuals and companies, were in the business and continue to be in this business and posing a threat to the integrity of research not only in India but globally. It so happens to be the culture in many countries, including India, that the numbers matter more. It's about how many articles you published and it's much less about the quality of the published article. As a solution to that, publishing a white list of journals that do not qualify as predatory journals, may perhaps have been a valid first reaction as to sort of try to help authors as much as possible from falling into this trap. We cannot just choose relying on a list and excluding the ones that may not have come to the fore. This needs more thinking. On a positive note, Indian experts and especially Indian academics have also continuously written and weighed in on open access issues such as Professor Lakhota, who suggested stopping payments of all kinds of open access charges, and modifying the present faulty assessment system that relied on numbers of publications.

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In 2018, it was also announced that India would be joining the European effort of **Plan S**—but then we went back on the decision<sup>2</sup>. Plan S was about addressing the problem of hybrid open access journals, amongst other things. It basically required that all state-funded research be mandatorily published in Plan S compliant Open Access venues, which were bereft of the extracting nature of hybrid open access. But it still did not go far enough, as it still permitted journals to charge any publishing fees to be commensurate with the publication services delivered and the structure of such fees be made transparent. Following this episode, there were deliberations between scientists, government science agencies and publishers. And by this point, the idea had evolved to adopting green open access as national policy and discouraging gold open access, and embargo was considered to be okay.

By then, we were spending 1500 crores on accessing journal articles. We instead wanted to optimise this amount on accessing journals through a **one nation one subscription policy**, and also declaring the predatory journals problem a national shame and calling for further ideas to tackle it. Hence in 2020, the process to proceed with this idea in the new Science Technology Innovation policy (STIP) was well underway. This was a major shift after 2013 policy, which had not even recognized the affordability or availability of scientific literature as a problem.

The idea of one nation, one subscription has now been carried over through the draft STIP policy 2020. The scheme requires the government to negotiate and purchase a single unified subscription from a consortium of publishers. After which these books and papers will be made available to all government-funded institutions, as well as taxpayers. India needs to deliberate further as to what a nationwide subscription would mean for her and the OA movement.

*In 2020, Ms Anubha had written about various details that needed ironing out in regard before something like this gets adopted.<sup>3</sup> The concerns for her back at that point were about which journals would get included and which would get excluded? And how will we adopt a methodology to do this, and will we still end up paying article processing charges (APC) to publish in the journals that may be covered by this. The other thing to be noted here is that only two countries in the world, Egypt and Uruguay have actually implemented something like this.<sup>4</sup>*

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2. To read more about 'Plan S' and 'cOAlition S' refer to <https://www.coalition-s.org/>

3. Ms Anubha Sinha's article titled '[Research Publishing: Is 'One Nation, One Subscription' Pragmatic Reform for India?](#)' published in October 2020 in The Wire Science

4. Read more on the Draft STIP 2020 and Open Access by Ms Anubha Sinha in her article '[The STI Policy Proposes a Transformative Open Access Approach for India](#)' published in January 2021 in The Wire Science





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# 3

## The Four Components of the Research Ecosystem

*(by Dr Haseeb Irfanullah)*

When we see the research system, we can figure out four components to it:

1. **Access to research:** This is where Open Access becomes relevant. The importance of access is unquestionable.
2. **Conducting research:** Based upon the past research which we access, we build or we design our research and conduct it.
3. **Communicating the research:** It essentially also contributes to accessing research and building global knowledge
4. **Using/Utilising research:** This is related to utilising the research outputs to improve lives, thus deals with research impact.

When we talk about access to research or open science or open access, we end up talking about all four components –accessing research, conducting research, communicating research and using the published research/publicly available research.

Accessing global research can be challenging since most research is still behind a paywall—you need to subscribe to it.





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# 4

## Open Access and LMICs

(by Dr Haseeb Irfanullah)

Open Access barriers we face in the Global South, essentially for low and middle-income countries (LMICs) are different from high-income countries. When we talk about the Global South or low middle income countries, there are numerous journals—regional journals, national journals, or even international journals published from those regions—which are freely accessible.

*“When we talk about open access, I often ask the question, who closed it at the beginning? Because it’s supposed to be open anyway; supposed to be free. Of course, now, the words open and free are quite different.”*

There are certain interventions architecting the Global South. One such example is [Research4Life](#)<sup>5</sup>. It has brought together 1000s of institutions from all around the world and they are categorised into Group A and Group B. If you are a low-income country and your GDP is less than a certain amount, say \$200 billion, you can get access to hundreds and thousands of journal articles for free. If you are a middle-income country, you have to pay a certain amount. For instance, Ukraine was supposed to pay a certain amount, but given the current day circumstances research4life made it free for 2022 for Ukrainian scientists. These are examples of the kind of interventions that we may enjoy access to global scholarly knowledge. In terms of communicating research, if you want to publish and make your research publicly available in a very well reputed journal, sometimes you have to pay as much as US\$10,000 for a particular article. Imagine paying US\$10,000—if your article is 5000-word long, you are paying \$2 for one word. Inequity can be seen at the end of this arrangement. On the other hand, there are publishers who offer 100% waiver/discount for the authors who want to publish their articles in open access. So you don’t need to pay anything. US\$10,000 can be totally waived off depending upon which country you belong to. But you need to know these rules/options to get benefitted.

However, the way high-income countries approach open access differs from the approach of LMICs. We must admit that scholarly publishing practically originated in the 17th century in the West, and the Global North has been leading in scholarly publishing as of now. They are talking about rules and regulations, about movements, like Plan S, and even testing different models of access through transformative agreements, forms of hybrid open access and so on.

*“I believe most of our (South Asian) journals, if not all, have always been freely accessible, because the journal publishing costs are traditionally quite low here. And now, they term it in the West as Platinum or Diamond Open Access. But we have been practising it without thinking of it as free access or easy access. In this part of the world, our senior professors for decades did the editorial work and ran the editorial office for free. They didn’t think much of the money they were earning. We are left to wonder how we lost this or to question who to blame?”*

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5. Research4Life describes itself as a platform that “provides institutions in lower- and middle-income countries with online access to academic and professional peer-reviewed content.” In South Asia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal are categorised as Group A countries (for free access) while Maldives, Sri Lanka and Pakistan are categorised as Group B countries (for low-cost access). India is the only South Asian country that features neither in Group A nor in Group B lists.  
<https://www.research4life.org/access/eligibility/>



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# 5

## Policy Moves by India

*(by Prof Devika Madalli)*

In India, we have various kinds of consortia for technical or university level or the country level. India is also speaking about ‘**One Nation, One Subscription**’<sup>6</sup>. *I believe these are still cost containing efforts, and are not open-access efforts. We have to understand the difference.*

The Indian academic community, including the many small universities, which have bright students who are not necessarily from the affluent urban class, still need to access scholarly communication, scholarly content, for studies and for doing their own research. Something like a capability to be able to pay two Plan S kind of things is really out of the common academic scenario in India. So that is the reason, I am sure a lot of thinking went into the construction of plan S. And I congratulate them on that, but I have my reservations—how that will ever work for a country like India.

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6. ‘One Nation, One Subscription’ mentioned in para 1.5 under Chapter 1 on Open Science of the [Draft Science, Technology and Innovation Policy 2020](#)



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# 6

## A Sweeping Statement/Age-old Accusation

### Open access is not quality content?

(by Prof Devika Madalli)

The age-old sort of accusation/sweeping statement has been that ‘all that is open access is not quality content.’ This is something we need to contend but might have to live with. If one says that their institute has a repository where their scientists can deposit their preprints or if they want to publish a paper then they can publish it there. *“I question: Is this publishing model even acceptable for decision-makers and top personnel? To the ones who are involved in deciding the career progression of scientists and academicians.? Would they accept that? And what is in their way of accepting these - that is the notion of quality.”*

So who ensures quality in paid content in commercial journals? It is the scholars, it is not the publishers. It is my friend, a professor in some country or other working for some university or the other who makes the effort to read through, make sure of the quality, and provide feedback. Why can’t the same quality be used in open access content? The entire stakeholder scenario in the cycle of stakeholders in OA: The publisher is the person who only publishes. The academician and scholar is the one who peer reviews and the one who consumes it. And again, it’s the academicians and the researcher in the scholar who’s going to take it forward to the next level by using this research in this entire cycle. The publisher is at best an outsider to the cycle, facilitating the publication. There’s a lot of work that goes into publication, but not so much that the entire content should be kept away from the academic community.

Issues also exist with the words ‘impact’ and ‘quality’. These words have been so deeply ingrained into the brains of our academic community and of the decision makers that it’s very difficult for us to wash it away.

We cannot take away from the commercial publishers that they started way ahead of the now open-access publishers. They have the advantage of the years of the decade. OA is just like a toddler, started merely ~25 years ago, and very seriously about 15 years ago, and gained much traction only about five years ago. Considering these open access journals must be on par. I (Prof Devika) am nowadays trying to work on building open metrics called Open Content metrics (OCMs). This is a term that I coined, and with my research team, I am trying to work on this concept. We have published a very first metric out of it, in the last ISSI conference, called the Open Factor.

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We have a list which is held in front of our eyes. It is called the 'Consortium for Academic and Research Ethics' (CARE) list by the UGC. So, I have a problem with that, because that somehow is ranking journals with a policy that is not quite clear. Which journal makes the cut and which doesn't make it? Luckily, nowadays, it is much better, some open access journals have been included. However, I have a problem with many of the words. For instance, I do not agree with the words 'ranked journals' - who ranks them and gives them the award and 'podium finish'? I do not know. This is why open access and open content must have its own metrics. The metrics for measuring the impact factor of commercially published content cannot be used. We have lived with them and we have accepted them as the metrics that really work as indicators to quality of content. The world has accepted them. However, for open access content, we have to bring up some metrics for open content and prove that here are some metrics that can be actually used to see the quality of the content. Unless we work on the set of metrics for open content, we can't beat the notion of that rank in ranked journals.

We must work and establish the quality of open content so that questions raised about open content are not raised anymore. I'm not under any illusion that it will go away tomorrow. It does take time. But we have to take the first baby steps towards it with the right intention. And I'm sure we can beat them at their own game. I mean, they created impact factor. So I have published on O factor. They did citation index. So I'm doing O, index i.e. open index. Maybe it's not the perfect one but I want more discussion on this for sure.

The open access community of the world and of South and Southeast Asia is headed in the right direction. In particular, there are worthwhile initiatives to mention in Southeast Asia, such as the survey-based report published by the Confederation of Open Access Repository's (COAR) Asia OA. According to the survey findings, there's already a lot of awareness of open access. One of the key findings of the report states that there are a lot of initiatives ongoing in the countries but they're not coordinated. The cooperation is also not visible between these open access programs. I think the way forward is to forge cooperations and to make the best use of whatever we already have, at least to take stock of where we are, collectively, as the global south.







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# 7

## Indian Copyright Act and Author's Rights

*(by Ms Anubha Sinha)*

As per the law, author rights, once copyrighted, are transferred, becoming fairly limited. But at the same time, typically rights are transferred in the final publication and not preprint or any prior versions. The underlying data, the preprints or prior versions can be distributed and published by the author unless there is an embargo limitation. Unfortunately, the contracts that authors sign eventually with publishers play a key role. And nowadays, with the proliferation of open access policies, you also see the institutional policies playing a role that authors may be subject to. Sometimes we see that, despite an institutional open access policy in place, authors end up agreeing to terms that do not align with open access. It is important to recognize this practice and set a few measures as a course correction.

Something we are yet to see in institutional policies or, in discussions around open access is, as to how it's playing out in reality in institutions. Secondly, let's assume that there are a few authors who do manage to retain the copyright in their works, and now in the spirit of open access, they are interested in openly licensing their works. This would mean something like a Creative Commons (CC) zero licence. Unfortunately, at this point, the law does not make it easy for an author to relinquish their copyright or, basically, adopt a CC zero licence. In our law, there happens to be a rather formal procedure that an author may have to follow to relinquish copyright, which involves publishing a public notice in respect of their works. And given the legalistic approach, it might not be easy for the average person to undertake such a process. Although the intention behind this rule in the law is clear, and in the process of making that latest amendment to the law, it was recognized that relinquishing copyright and giving the power to authors is important. But unfortunately, how it played out in practice, has not been in the most author friendly way. To know about this issue further, read Dr. Arul Scaria's (from National Law University Delhi) [write-up on spicy IP](#).

It is not easy for the average person to understand law, and copyright law is a complex law. But nonetheless, as copyright remains one of the most important legal barriers to open access, it cannot be incumbent on the authors to familiarise themselves with the law. But it can be an awareness building and sort of education happening around what copyright law means for authors in practice, and depending on the realities of discipline, and institution, and how it sort of typically affects them. I think that would be another step that must be taken in this regard.



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# 8

## Unified Power of South Asia

*(by Dr Haseeb Irfanullah)*

We need to contextualise the kind of Western or Northern concepts that exist. It seems that the West or the Global North are trying to define things for us. However, we, as scholars of the Global South, need to figure out what exactly we aim to define. If we believe in our legacy and our history of creating knowledge and are talking about publishing it, making it open access, then we need to define it for ourselves first and then contextualise it.

As a first step, individual countries as well as their institutions, need to understand what they mean by open access and by the open science movement. The Global South is not isolated, it is part of the global movement. If we don't match all our diverse notions, we will be seeing isolations. In countries like Bangladesh, researchers will be reading global research but publishing in local journals, because they will be just getting promotion out of it. But do we really want to see that kind of isolation? Silos? We must contextualise at the country level and then also have South Asia-wide interactions with various kinds perspectives and aspects. Lastly, when we talk about openness, the issue of trust must also not be forgotten. The much-needed discussion to understand who we are collaborating with, and why.

If we want to create a new system by contextualising open access for us, we also need to bring in the policymaker and the funder who are actually funding our research. Unless you do research, you can't communicate it, unless you create new knowledge, you can't actually make it open. That's why we need to appreciate the fact that many of our countries, especially in South Asia, are countries in transition. So as we are changing economically, becoming middle income countries, we need to change the mindset of our policymakers and our politicians. On a lighter note, perhaps we need more researchers and scientists as politicians to make real change because it seems that we can't actually convince politicians to understand science.

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*(by Dr Moumita Koley)*

We, as the countries in the South Asian region, can come together to build our context because, to an extent, our problems and our research needs are very similar<sup>7</sup>. Why should our region not come together and build a discussion like what the Latin American region (through Redalyc and AmeliCA) has done? What is stopping us? I believe, with the one nation, one subscription, we will again be putting back the money again to the coffers of the commercial publishers. What is the way out of it and what should we do? Perhaps we need to change our evaluation systems. But why evaluate research on where it is published? Or what is the quality based on its so-called impact factor? As a whole, how do we want our Open Access journey to move forward, as India and as South Asia? These are important questions that South Asia must work on together to answer.

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7. Open Science South Asia Network (OSSAN) is a South-Asia wide initiative to engage stakeholders of the region in an international dialogue and share relevant best practices. To read more about OSSAN, visit: <https://ossan2022.net/>





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# 9

## Need for a National Open Access Policy

*(by Prof Devika Madalli)*

At the Indian Statistical Institute, where I work, for about 15 years, we were driving practical workshops to build repositories, so that we empower researchers and small institutions and even universities to bring up their own repository and to have their own workflow to publish papers. Whenever we held such workshops, some 20 librarians or 25 faculty members attended all over India—all across Asia at times. In fact, we had one workshop in Tunisia for Libyan librarians. Wherever there was a call for us to help with repository building, we held a workshop. I saw repositories come up because we trained them on the technology, we gave live CDs and facilitated the bringing up of the repository. However, even after months and years, they are not being populated. This is when we realised that perhaps we have over-emphasized on technology. We were doing it only bottom up by approaching them and telling them that open access is good and this is how to go about it. But we realised that it's not working. It should really have been a top-down approach, hand in hand with the bottom-up approach.

In the pandemic situation, nobody can overemphasise the fact that if it was open knowledge, the spread of the pandemic could have been contained based on learnings much quickly—maybe we could have prevented a lot of deaths. It is a very good example of what Open Knowledge can do and how we can leverage upon it. In today's interconnected world, India is not isolated and cannot afford to be isolated in the dialogue. This is what we need to understand: we cannot talk about one country, one subscription. That's a cost-containing effort. It's required—I'm not disputing that, but OA is one step beyond that. It's about celebrating science as a common commodity which reaches everybody in time without any economic barriers, without any economic bias. Thus, I argue that as a nation, we need an open-access national policy.





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# 10

## New Movement in Bangladesh for Open Access & University Ranking

*(by Dr Haseeb Irfanullah)*

We are easily influenced by numbers, aren't we? On social media when someone writes about their published papers, they talk not about what they have published, but about the impact factor of the journal they have published in. This shows how much we are influenced by numbers. But I argue, the situation is different in Bangladesh. We don't produce many research publications in terms of quantity. However, there are certain individuals who are trying to take things forward. Unfortunately, the policymakers are still struggling to update the situation.

In 2017, there was an attempt to unify university recruitment and promotion rules, where they tried to identify what kind of journals you are supposed to publish in for different disciplines. That was fantastic. But unfortunately, over the last five years or so, things didn't happen as planned. There are some discussions going on nevertheless. For example, in the agricultural sector, when wheat blast, the disease, came in 2016, within a few weeks open science data sharing could resolve the problem—perhaps because in Bangladesh, we invest so much money and effort in agricultural research. In Bangladesh, we see some discussions—something that has started recently.

Lastly, another important issue is rankings of universities. It is the global rankings that we can't afford—because we can't publish 1000 papers per year. It is impossible for our institutions. So, there is a new ranking that started in 2019—[the Impact Ranking of Higher Education](#). The focus is on SDGs. They pick up your article from the SCOPUS, and check whether you are contributing to the SDGs or not. The way they are trying to rank us, researchers, will now rely on using certain keywords in the papers to be included in the ranking assessment.

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# Conclusion

The pandemic showed us what kind of impact open access can make to society. As many interesting developments happen across the globe, we must take into consideration the regions' problems and requirements. A continued dialogue among policymakers and scholars will definitely play a key role in taking open access forward.



