

PhD Theses and Online Availability in India

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Locking away awarded PhD theses instead of publishing them for public and academic knowledge only encourages mediocrity and enhances poor academic practices. It also propagates unhealthy hierarchy among universities and hinders the advancement of knowledge.

One cannot help but wonder: what happens to thousands of doctoral theses that are awarded by the Indian universities every year? To answer this, we need to consider what an awarded PhD thesis is: is it a confidential document over which only the author has the sole sighting rights (excepting of course the three or four examiners) or is it a document which the public may see if they wish to? Universities in India seem to be caught in a dilemma. This is the reason why the University Grants Commission's (UGC) ShodhGanga project seems to be not progressing very well^[1]. Such hesitation is in stark contrast with the global trend, where in most university libraries, in keeping pace with advances in electronic publishing media, a doctoral thesis, once awarded, is seen as an "unpublished manuscript". This manuscript can be borrowed and used by other researchers who might want to work in the same field, extend or expand it, or even critique the previous approaches.

The strategy fits with the academe where the impact of one's research is measured by the number of citations of a scholar's work. For example, Cambridge University observes: "Print theses deposited with the University Library are legally seen as unpublished manuscripts." Cambridge University also makes these theses available in its DSpace, which is an electronic storage of PhD theses which can be viewed online, [and says that](#) "... when we put them on the web as we do with [DSpace@Cambridge](#) they are in fact legally published." In fact, in today's information technology enabled world, many universities encourage that the thesis is submitted electronically, that is as a PDF file, which can be downloaded from the library website. My own university, the ANU, certainly does so. Through my university's library, I can request any PhD theses from other universities in the Western academe, and reading others' theses is considered to be good academic practice. Just to try this out, I requested the Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen's doctoral thesis. Moreover, many scholars upload their own theses on the cyberspace - not necessarily through commercial

databases but on their personal websites or blogs for wider dissemination.

One wonders why the picture in India is so very different. Once a degree is awarded by the parent university, a bound copy of the PhD thesis gets stacked in the library shelves. Without full guidance librarians in many smaller universities tend to refuse other researchers although technically the latter group should be able to access it. What might be the issues involved in this regrettable waste of relevant source material? Is this secrecy responsible, particularly in certain social science disciplines, for their growth acting as a hurdle in the development of a field which is enriched and advanced by active debates and the offering of different perspectives? It seems as though the UGC does not seem to have a clear and substantial policy on this, although certain universities (such as Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University) have recently started to digitise and upload their PhD theses to make them accessible to all intending students^[2]. At least my thorough search of the UGC website and the internet did not yield any results. When I asked my academic colleagues in India, they narrated stories of difficulties in accessing the awarded PhD theses and described how the librarians are reluctant to let others consult a PhD thesis. Most Indian librarians are reluctant to allow others to consult and borrow earlier PhD theses probably because of the belief that it will enhance the chances of academic dishonesty. Plagiarism is indeed an important issue, and it has been difficult to hinder it effectively in India where the use of detection softwares (such as *Turnitin*) is still rare, excepting in better-funded central universities like the JNU.

So, one immediately confronts two diametrically opposite views. The one from the Western world, which is also the centre of global knowledge production and more in keeping with electronic media, sees awarded doctoral theses funded by public money as a part of the “library resources”, made available to others on request for further research. The other thinks that a PhD thesis is a confidential and classified document that cannot be made available to the public.

Different Academic Cultures

The two views are rooted in different academic cultures. There are, however, important legal issues involved with regard to intellectual property rights (IPR), and [as suggested by the Essex University](#) of the UK, a balance between academic access & IPR has to be maintained. China allows students and their advisors to decide whether the thesis should be made accessible online. However, most students prefer to let their theses viewable online soon after submission, while the others choose to protect confidentiality for a certain period of time. For example, when offered this option, in 2003, 69% of PhD students in Shanghai's Jiao Tong University opted to make their theses accessible online immediately, with only 2% opting for confidentiality for five years or more.

Issues around IPR and PhD theses are actually more complicated than they might seem; plagiarism may occur at both ends: either the PhD student's work may contain copyrighted

material not properly used, or the thesis may be copied by others without proper acknowledgement. The global consensus is that plagiarism cannot be kept at bay if awarded theses are locked away in library shelves. Cambridge University gave this a careful consideration [and arrived at the conclusion](#) that by making theses openly^[3] available the chances of discovering plagiarism increase (for example, these days it is possible to find text snippets in Google), even when the use of plagiarism detection tools like Turnitin is uncommon.

I am fully aware of the inequities in the world of knowledge production, and the mutual exclusion of different actors in it who seem to converse within their respective silos of knowledge. An argument, often made by academics, based in the less developed world, is that the unfair use of their research (“we are treated as sources of data by them”, “they take our stuff to theorise”) by their academic counterparts located in more developed countries. Such grievances are often genuine; I remember when I taught in Burdwan University in West Bengal, my 1990 book *In Search of a Homeland* on McCluskiegunge, the homeland planned by the Anglo-Indians in early 1930s, was used by a renowned British-based film company to make a film on the same name. Someone from the company’s local office visited my home, took copies of all the old documents and maps, never to return them and never to even acknowledge that the film’s name was borrowed from that of my book. At the time, my marginal location (as a woman academic based in a regional university) made it quite impossible to get PEN International or such bodies or prominent individuals to even consider my case. A few years later, another UK-based academic, researching the “home” of Anglo-Indians came to visit Calcutta to meet, to make contacts through me for interviews with Anglo-Indian community members, and eventually published a book that conveniently forgot to mention my prior work on the topic.

Such examples are neither exceptional nor new and many other academics have had similar experiences of having been used brutally by visiting academics. On retrospect, I think a wider-based openness in academic publishing may in fact reduce such incidences. If my book, published from Calcutta, was as widely available as the British film or British book, then it would have been more difficult for them to just get away by using the research materials collected by someone else. The IT-enabled world has done just that: open access to each other (and each other’s academic outputs) leading to more intense intellectual dialogues and exchanges. Indian libraries (and publication houses) should jump in and take the bull by the horns to attune themselves with the rapidly-changing times.

Rather than the intellectual property rights of the person writing a doctoral thesis, the emphasis in the Western academe seems to be on the use by him/her of any copyrighted material in the thesis. The universities generally offer basic knowledge about academic honesty, copyright laws and use and citation of other scholarly work done prior to the PhD. Hence [Danish universities suggest that](#) the PhD student has the responsibility to ensure that no material included in the doctoral thesis violates copyright rules because the university rule requires printing out 25 copies for circulation. Even when the PhD thesis is

electronically submitted and published online, the main concern seems to be on third party copyright issues (such as quotations used by the PhD student) of material used in the work rather than relating to the work. Such openness has great implications for not only copyright matters, but for the overall quality of research work which can only improve immensely if made open to viewing by general public. One could argue that the general public also has a right to know what research goes on in the publicly-funded universities.

“Confidentiality Culture”

At this stage, the basis of the opposite views seems to get blurred, and a “confidentiality culture” appears to be the main reason why easy access to PhD thesis is denied. This culture is a legacy of colonial laws that flourished in India to protect official secrecy and eventually came to dominate almost all spheres of life. As a result, a thesis is presumed, without evidence, to be beyond and above scrutiny by general public in India. Because it is above scrutiny, it can gather dust rarely or never to be touched again by another human, and its owner – the student – can then continue to claim sovereign rights over that topic, keeping others away from being able to know its contents in order to critique them (or extend the theorisations). This secrecy fosters closeness of the mind, and is quite contrary to the academic ideal of making knowledge more widely available and accessible.

Copyright issues tend to arise when innovation is involved and commercial use of the research output is possible. For science and technology disciplines where a doctoral research might have been sponsored by a commercial firm or might have commercial usage, confidentiality may be a valid and necessary means to ensure that the person who innovates receives the benefits of his/her intellectual labour. If the commercial sponsor would like to restrict access to that particular thesis, at least for some time, then special permission has to be sought. But for most social science disciplines, such secrecy serves to lower the quality of research and impedes the very purpose of research. The British system [generally places great importance of making doctoral theses public](#), and kind of suggests that “confidentiality primarily serves the purpose of commercial firms”, and supports open access (the link also talks about UK's laws about this – again they are in favour of making PhD theses public).

There is obviously a personal angle to these thoughts. I have been thinking about the rights and wrongs of consulting doctoral theses because I have borne the burdens of both ends. In 2001, when I taught in an Indian university, I acquired one of the awarded theses as part of the literature review of my research, though due permissions of the faculty dean and the librarian. Since then, I have been a part of the much-maligned Western academe, probably the reason why I was recently accused of undertaking an “illegal, immoral and unethical” act in consulting the thesis. Accessing prior work at that time seemed to be a good research agenda and I was convinced of my honesty and competency as a good researcher, which encouraged a thorough review of all the past contributions to the field. It was beyond comprehension that it could have even the slightest tinge of unethicity in this course of

action because in my academic life, I have come across innumerable instances of references in scholarly articles to “unpublished PhD thesis by so & so”. How are these theses accessed I wonder? In ANU, I regularly encourage my students to look up previous PhD theses on similar topics, and who, like Harvard University students and researchers, have automatic access to all PhD theses awarded by the university over the last 20 years or so.

Locking away awarded PhD theses only encourages mediocrity and enhances poor academic practices. It also propagates unhealthy hierarchy among universities and hinders the advancement of knowledge. Imagine the benefit when a student researching a topic from a remote regional university would be able to see a list of PhD theses awarded in metropolitan universities such as the JNU or DU, and acquire them on loan or download then onto her computer, the overall academic practices including referencing and writing standards can only improve. Once extended to universities based in other countries, such exchanges can only benefit the Indian academia and improve the quality of our scholarly outputs.

Two actions leap up to my mind - at policy and academic ends. To start with, there should be a debate on this topic led by the UGC as part of its package of actions on revival of libraries in Indian universities, but also woven into its thoughts about National Accreditation and Assessment Council (NAAC) research assessment exercises and bibliometrics to bring Indian knowledge production and dissemination at par with the international standard^[4]. A similar prescription is offered by Vijayakumar et al (2005) who say that it is: “essential that bodies like [the] UGC should evolve a regulatory policy mechanism in maintaining standards, quality, proper submission and publication practices for Doctoral research both in print and online environment.” More importantly, at the academic end, Indian academics would do well to put pressure on their university libraries to open up and ask the librarians to take up the challenge to preserve and make available to the world the key intellectual product of their institutions. We, as researchers, are living in interesting times. Major changes are being driven largely by (apart from funding) three main contemporary factors: the institutionalisation of more accurate and intricate measurements and assessments of research performance (for individuals, units and institutions), widespread use of information technology offering new ways of research dissemination as well as offering hitherto unforeseen challenges, and academics rethinking and reinventing themselves to initiate new ways of doing research. There is no reason why the Indian research administration should not be influenced by these changes.

[1] The Shodhganga@INFLIBNET Centre provides ‘a platform for research students to deposit their Ph.D. theses and make it available to the entire scholarly community in open access. The repository has the ability to capture, index, store, disseminate and preserve ETDs submitted by the researchers.’ For more on this project, look up <http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/>

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[2] Although through my search, I could not see which ones have been digitised and uploaded, and where, and did not find any instruction regarding how an outsider can access them.

[3] I use this word with a pinch of salt; to access these theses, one must pay a substantial charge which may often be difficult or even impossible for a student residing in less developed countries to pay.

[4] The UGC's attention is more on commercialisation of intellectual products than on knowledge dissemination, as expressed in the note by Ganguli, (2003).