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Rohith Jyothish October 23, 2025

In October 2025, several Hindi dailies reported that a professor from my department has been accused of defrauding forty-nine scholars through a conference that promised publication in a Scopus-indexed journal after peer review. I had sent a paper to that conference.

It was not a naive decision. The paper had been moving through journals since 2022 with two rejections, multiple revisions, and neglect for several months. When the call for papers arrived from a colleague, I recognised it as a shortcut and went ahead. I wanted the work to appear somewhere rather than remain an unfinished file on my desktop.

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The episode now sits uncomfortably in retrospect, not because the fraud was spectacular but because it was plausible. The website, the registration process and the assurance of indexing resembled ordinary academic life. That resemblance is what makes the case sociologically instructive. Any attempt to address academic fraud must begin with the incentive system that renders such choices both intelligible and rational.

The old warning, publish or perish, once described the precarity of academic careers. Now there's no need for the conjunction. The distinction between survival and collapse has disappeared. Publish, and perish.

Quantification as Institutional Logic

Over the last 10-15 years, Indian higher education has been transformed by the quantification of scholarly value. Rankings, accreditation grades, citation counts, and database visibility have been replaced older modes of professional judgment.

Espeland and Stevens (2008) describes quantification as a *performative act*. Numbers don't simply measure the world, they participate in its creation. Once universities begin to evaluate research through publication and citation counts, those numbers become the reality of "research productivity". A related process, which they call *commensuration*, converts heterogeneous practices into a single metric so that they can be compared. A laboratory experiment, an ethnographic article, and policy paper all become equivalent "publications". This commensuration is administratively convenient. It allows vice-chancellors and accreditation boards to rank performance, but it erases qualitative differences.

In India, commensuration underwrites the entire evaluative architecture. The National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), NAAC's grading, and even faculty appraisal systems all translate complex labour into countable outputs.

> *When measurement becomes meaning: Indian academia's pursuit of metrics over judgment.*

Reactivity and the Manufacture of Behaviour

Espeland and Sauder (2007) define *reactivity* as the tendency of measures to modify the behaviour they record. When measures become public and consequential, actors reorganise their conduct to improve their scores. Indian universities display reactivity in textbook form.

- Faculty promotions require publications in SCOPUS-indexed journals.
- PhD submission mandates at least two indexed papers (Though the latest regulations seemed to have removed this).

- NIRF derives 30 percent of its score from publication and citation data taken from Scopus and Web of Science.

India Research Watchdog's analysis of NIRF 2024 shows that 76 percent of private universities improved their NIRF positions between 2023 and 2024, primarily through publication metrics, while 61 percent of public universities declined. Quantity, not substance, drives this upward trajectory.

Reactivity also explains why fraudulent or low-quality outlets flourish. The faster a paper becomes countable, the more attractive it is. The system no longer punishes failure to publish, it punishes those who publish too slowly, too carefully, or in venues that don't count. The result is paradoxical. **The more we publish, the less what we publish matters**.

The Economy of Output

Investigations by *Retraction Watch* documented a surge in AI-generated commentaries and citation cartels, much of it originating from Indian and South-Asian institutions. At *Neurosurgical Review*, more than half of all published items in 2023 were commentaries, 80 percent from South Asia.

At home, the NIRF's reliance on Scopus data has incentivised "paper mills" that sell authorship and citations. Saveetha University's exponential growth in commentaries (hundreds of near-identical letters cross-citing each other) is the extreme but logical consequence of a performance system that prizes volume.

The distinction between legitimate and illegitimate output thus becomes procedural, not substantive. Both circulate through the same databases, yield the same digital object identifiers, and count equally in ranking spreadsheets. Fraud, in this sense, is not deviation, but optimisation—a more efficient route to the same reward.

The Rationalisation of Shortcuts

Within this structure, the "shortcut" is not a moral lapse. It is an adaptive response. The scholar facing multiple rejections and limited recognition must decide between two losses. Credibility or visibility. Visibility usually wins because appraisal forms and ranking dashboards register only what can be counted.

Quantification translates ethical reasoning into technical reasoning. When output quantity substitutes for evaluation of quality, the question shifts from *should I*? to *can I afford not to*? The system converts hesitation into inefficiency.

That reasoning is not confined to individuals. Universities rationalise in similar terms. "Strategic" publication derives, incentive payments, and "research weeks" are framed as necessary to remain competitive. Each layer reproduces the same arithmetic.

Authority and Dependence

Numbers derive their authority from what historian, Theodore Porter called *mechanical objectivity*. They appear neutral because they limit discretion. Databases such as Scopus and Web of Science gain legitimacy because their criteria seem impersonal. Yet their coverage is partial and geographically biased—English-language, STEM-heavy, Northern-centric.

Indian universities nonetheless outsource legitimacy to these databases. Their validation becomes a substitute for internal peer evaluation. NIRF amplifies this dependence by using the same datasets while keeping its algorithms and weightings opaque. The outcome is a system that rewards those most adept at mimicking international visibility, not those who address local research priorities.

Empirical Consequences

India now records over **5,000 retractions**, placing it third worldwide after China and the United States (*Retraction Watch Database*, 2025). Much of this growth arises from authorship or editorial-process breaches rather than data fabrication. The best-known case is that of Ashok Pandey, formerly of CSIR–NIIST and later CSIR–IITR, whose 43 papers in *Bioresource Technology* were retracted after Elsevier found that he had continued to handle peer review on manuscripts that later listed him as co-author. He denies deliberate wrongdoing, attributing the lapse to editorial procedures. Cases like this illustrate how performance pressure, positional authority, and blurred accountability interact inside India's publication economy.

Other scholars with extraordinary publication rates, such as Abhijit Dey, have been criticised for quantity over quality but have no recorded retractions—underscoring how hyper-productivity itself now signals success rather than suspicion. The issue, therefore, is not individual misconduct but structural incentive. When visibility and output are the currencies of value, both the editor-in-chief and the over-productive researcher embody the same logic.

Metrics Policing Metrics

In September 2025, the Ministry of Education introduced a formal penalty for research retractions within NIRF, applying negative weights to the "Research and Professional Practice (R&P)" score. The rule applied to four categories—Overall, Engineering, Universities, and Research Institutions—but is method remains undisclosed.

Early results expose contradictions. Six universities previously red-flagged by watchdogs—Symbiosis International, Chandigarh University, Graphic Era, Christ, Amity and UPES—improved their R&P scores, while Anna University's fell from 63.5 to 54.9 and Saveetha Dental College's from 60.9 to 66.3. The detailed scoring formula has yet to be released.

The attempt to discipline misconduct numerically demonstrates the self-referential nature of the metric regime. When numbers fail, they are repaired by adding more numbers.

Structural Beneficiaries

Universities: Higher rank → marketing advantage, donor confidence

Administrators: Quantified progress → legitimacy in governance

Publishers / databases: Article-processing charges, subscriptions

Faculty: Promotions, bonuses, travel grants

Because every actor benefits from the same indicator, the collective outcome is self-reinforcing. The academic market achieves equilibrium around numerical performance, not intellectual contribution.

The Cost of Quantification

Trust erodes. Mentoring and slow research become invisible. Public universities lose rank for maintaining standards. Academic life becomes a contest in self-measurement. In Espeland and Stevens' terms, this is the disciplinary dimension of quantification. It produces self-regulating subjects who internalise numeric expectations (Sauder and Espeland, 2009). Faculty adjust goals to metrics, departments adjust policies to rankings, and eventually no one remembers an alternative measure of worth.

This is what *publish and perish* names. A system where success destroys the conditions of its own possibility.

Redesigning Incentives

Because the pathology is systemic, policing individual misconduct cannot resolve it. Fraud must be made irrational by altering the reward structure itself. Possible interventions include:

1. **Decoupling appraisal from indexation**: Evaluate peer-reviewed work regardless of database inclusion.
2. **Recognising diverse outputs**: Translations, edited volumes, and policy reports should carry weight.
3. **Auditing ranking data**: NIRF and database algorithms must be public and reproducible.
4. **Investing in domestic journals**: Public funding for independent, non-profit outlets can reduce dependence on commercial databases.
5. **Accounting for integrity**: Retractions and proven misconduct should carry negative weights in institutional assessments.

These steps would not abolish measurement but recalibrate it toward credibility than throughout.

Toward an Ethics of Numbers

Espeland and Stevens (2008) end their essay with a call for an *ethics of numbers*—an understanding that quantification is a human craft with moral consequences. Applied to Indian higher education, that ethics would begin by recognising that numbers are not neutral mirrors, but negotiated artefacts.

Fraud, in this framework, is not a sudden collapse of ethics but the normal operation of a system that converts judgment into counting. Until universities reward reflection, originality, and time itself, shortcuts will remain rational strategies within an irrational design.

To publish, under such conditions, is no longer to survive, it is to participate in a mechanism that consumes the very thing it claims to measure. That is the true meaning of publish and perish.

Endnotes

1. Espeland & Stevens (2008) outline five analytical dimensions of quantification—work, reactivity, discipline, authority, and aesthetics. The Indian case exhibits all five simultaneously.

2. Espeland & Stevens (1998) trace commensuration to Marx's abstraction of labour and Weber's bureaucratic rationality; academic metrics reproduce this logic.

3. Sauder & Espeland (2009) demonstrate how rankings create "tight coupling" between external scrutiny and internal routines; their analysis explains why Indian universities cannot buffer themselves from NIRF or QS pressures.

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