

Patterns and Growth of Open Access Journals in South Asia: A DOAJ-Based Analysis

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Abstract

Open Access (OA) publishing has transformed scholarly communication by removing financial and legal barriers to research dissemination. This paper examines the trends and characteristics of OA journal publishing in South Asia, drawing on data from the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). A total of 602 journals from seven South Asian countries were analyzed in October 2024, focusing on country of origin, subject coverage, language of publication, and article processing charges (APCs). The findings reveal that South Asia contributes 2.8% of global OA journals, with India leading the region (59.8%), followed by Pakistan (25.2%). Medicine dominates subject coverage (59.9%), while the humanities remain underrepresented (4.3%). English is the primary publishing language (92.8%), and most journals (68%) do not charge APCs, making them accessible but raising concerns about sustainability. These patterns highlight both strengths—such as affordability and visibility—and challenges, including disciplinary imbalance, linguistic exclusivity, and uneven regional contributions. The study concludes that OA has significant potential to democratize knowledge in South Asia, provided that policies and funding mechanisms support diversification and sustainability.

Keywords: Open Access, DOAJ, South Asia, Scholarly publishing, Article processing charges, Multilingual publishing

1. Introduction

The availability and accessibility of research information are fundamental to advancing knowledge, supporting innovation, and driving national development. Scholarly publishing has historically been dominated by subscription-based models, which, while effective in certain contexts, have created significant challenges for researchers in developing countries (Harris, 2018). High subscription costs limit access to the latest global research output, preventing institutions and scholars in resource-constrained regions from keeping pace with international developments. At the same time, these traditional publishing models also restrict the visibility of local research. Scholars in developing nations often struggle to integrate their findings into the global knowledge pool because of financial and technical barriers associated with traditional publication avenues (Johnson, 2018).

The growth of Open Access (OA) has been global in scale, but its significance is especially pronounced in developing countries. Scholars and institutions in these regions face difficulties as they are unable to afford subscriptions to international journals, and they also encounter structural and financial hurdles when seeking to publish their own research in high-impact venues. OA offers an alternative publishing pathway, by removing barriers to access

and dissemination (Suber, 2012). OA offers developing countries the opportunity to maximize their scholarly impact, integrate more fully into global research networks, and contribute meaningfully to international debates. At the same time, OA enhances the visibility and usability of research output from developing countries, thereby increasing its potential for societal and policy impact (Nobes & Harris, 2019).

South Asia represents a particularly compelling case for examining the dynamics of OA publishing. With a population of nearly two billion people and a rapidly expanding higher education sector, the region has seen remarkable growth in research activity over the past two decades. Yet structural barriers remain: limited research funding, uneven digital infrastructure, and the dominance of English-language publishing all shape the research landscape. Open access, therefore, offers both opportunities and challenges for South Asian scholars. While OA models can expand visibility and reduce costs, their adoption depends on local policies, institutional support, and cultural attitudes toward publishing.

The Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) has become one of the most authoritative sources for tracking the global growth of OA journals. Established in 2003, DOAJ now lists more than 21,000 journals from 136 countries, representing over 10 million articles as of October 2024 (DOAJ, 2024). Its inclusion criteria ensure that indexed journals maintain standards of quality and transparency, making DOAJ an important barometer of OA publishing worldwide. Within this global context, South Asian countries have steadily increased their presence in DOAJ, contributing hundreds of journals across diverse fields. Nevertheless, their share of global OA publishing remains modest compared to other regions.

The need to examine OA publishing in South Asia stems from several considerations. First, South Asia's research output has grown significantly, yet much of it remains underrepresented in global indices. Understanding how OA journals are developing in the region can shed light on the pathways through which local scholarship gains international visibility. Second, OA publishing in South Asia reflects the unique intersection of global trends and local conditions. For example, while high article processing charges (APCs) are a common feature of many OA journals in the West, most South Asian OA journals do not charge authors, reflecting both regional economic realities and a commitment to inclusivity. Third, the subject distribution of OA journals in South Asia appears to prioritize medicine and science-related fields, raising questions about the visibility and support for disciplines such as the humanities and social sciences.

Despite the importance of these dynamics, systematic studies of OA publishing in South Asia remain limited. Existing research often treats developing countries as a single category, overlooking regional variations in publishing practices and challenges. This paper addresses this gap by examining the trends and characteristics of South Asian OA journals indexed in DOAJ as of October 2024. Specifically, it analyzes the number of journals by country, subject distribution, language of publication, and APC policies, with the aim of identifying both strengths and areas for development.

The objectives of this study are threefold:

- i. to analyze open access initiatives in South Asia, with a particular emphasis on OA

- journal publishing;
- ii. to identify and describe the key characteristics of OA journals published in South Asian countries; and
 - iii. to propose strategies for strengthening and sustaining OA publishing in the region. By situating South Asia within the broader global context of OA publishing, this paper highlights the potential of OA as a tool for empowerment and inclusion, while also drawing attention to the structural and disciplinary imbalances that need to be addressed.

In summary, the introduction of open access journal publishing has the potential to redefine the research landscape in South Asia. By expanding access, enhancing visibility, and lowering barriers to participation, OA can serve as a vehicle for democratizing knowledge production and dissemination in the region. However, realizing this potential requires a nuanced understanding of current trends and challenges, which this study seeks to provide through an analysis of DOAJ-registered journals from seven South Asian countries.

2. Literature Review

Global Open Access Trends and Regional Variations

The open access movement has reshaped scholarly communication by promoting free, unrestricted access to research. Analyses of DOAJ data worldwide reveal that key contributors include the United Kingdom, Indonesia, and Brazil in terms of journal counts, and that most indexed journals do not charge article processing charges (APCs). The majority also publish in English, with medicine and education among the most represented disciplines (Hugar, 2019).

However, regional disparities persist. Europe leads in OA journal representation (nearly 48%), while developing countries remain underrepresented (Mendes & Rodrigues, 2021). Hybrid OA models—where authors can choose to make individual articles open access in a subscription journal—have not gained widespread traction, accounting for only 3–8% of articles globally, and peaked around 2016 (Piwowar et al., 2018).

A broader view of global OA trends in the Global South underscores systemic inequities. Movements like Plan S, while progressive, have yet to fully address publication access for low- and middle-income countries. Studies have noted that APC-based OA models risk reinforcing divides—now shifting costs from readers to authors, limiting participation from those lacking funding (Irfanullah, 2021).

Open Access in Asia and South Asia

Asia's open access ecosystem is evolving but remains nascent. A 2018 report by Open Access Asia found that while many countries, including those in South Asia, have begun adopting OA policies, organized national-level efforts and support systems remain lacking (DOAJ, 2018).

In a 2021 overview, there were about 3,636 Asian journals listed in DOAJ and 1,253 repositories registered in OpenDOAR. National digital libraries and OA initiatives exist in

India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and others. However, only 82 OA mandates were on record in Asia, and few countries—such as Cyprus, China, and the UAE—had formal national policies (Harris, et al. 2021).

In India specifically, OA publishing is gaining momentum. Recent data indicate India holds around 317 OA journals and 98 repositories, ranking in the mid-teens globally. Despite this progress, OA publications still represent just 23% of the country's overall research output—below the global average of 30%—though the annual growth rate stands at approximately 18%. Indian institutions and funders have made some efforts toward OA mandates and self-archiving practices, but implementation remains inconsistent, and support for APCs is minimal (Nazim, et al. 2023).

Broader Insights from DOAJ-Based and Comparative Studies

Global DOAJ-based studies emphasize the importance of language, publisher types, and APC models. Analysis of over 9,000 journals revealed that DOAJ-covered journals often show a higher presence of certain publishers—such as Elsevier, Springer, Hindawi—and that DOAJ Seal journals are more likely to charge APCs (Mendes & Rodrigues, 2021). English remains the dominant language of academic publication, creating a linguistic hierarchy that disadvantages non-English-speaking researchers (Amano, et al., 2023).

Moreover, the Global South faces structural and financial hurdles in OA adoption. APCs introduce a "publish-pay" model that many authors in developing regions cannot afford, reducing their ability to participate in prestigious OA venues (Frank, Foster, & Pagliari, 2023).

Concerns also arise over predatory publishing, which exploits authors by offering rapid but dubious OA publication without proper peer review or transparency. These exploitative practices threaten the credibility of OA, particularly in regions where authors face immense pressure to publish and may lack awareness of quality safeguards (Mills & Inouye, 2021; Inouye & Mills, 2021).

Gaps in South Asia–Focused Literature

Though Asia-wide OA literature is emerging, in-depth, region-specific studies focusing on South Asia remain sparse. Few studies explore disciplinary distributions (e.g., humanities vs. STEM), APC policies, language usage, or the influence of DOAJ-indexed journals within the South Asian context. India stands as a partial exception, with recent multi-source analyses shedding light on its OA landscape (Nazim, et al. 2023).

Consequently, there is a clear need for a focused, systematic exploration of OA journal characteristics in South Asia—particularly through the lens of DOAJ—which would help illuminate regional strengths, structural challenges, and pathways to more equitable scholarly visibility.

3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach that combined a qualitative review of existing literature on open access (OA) publishing in South Asia with a quantitative analysis

of journal-level data from the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). Together, these methods provided both contextual insights and empirical evidence to understand the characteristics of OA journals in the region.

Data Source

The primary dataset for this study was drawn from DOAJ, one of the most authoritative and widely used indexes of OA journals worldwide. Established in 2003, DOAJ maintains rigorous inclusion criteria that ensure indexed journals meet standards of peer review, transparency, and editorial quality. As of October 2024, DOAJ listed over 21,000 journals from 136 countries, covering more than 10 million articles. Within this global dataset, 602 journals originating from South Asia were identified. These journals represented seven of the eight South Asian countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. No OA journals from the Maldives were recorded in DOAJ at the time of data collection.

Data Collection

The DOAJ records were accessed during the final week of October 2024. Metadata for each of the 602 South Asian journals was extracted manually and compiled into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for analysis. The following journal-level attributes were recorded:

- Country of publication
- Subject coverage (as categorized by DOAJ, later grouped into broader fields: Medicine; Science and Technology; Social Sciences; Humanities; and General Works)
- Language(s) of publication
- Peer review process (single-blind, double-blind, open peer review, or other)
- Plagiarism screening practices
- Article Processing Charges (APCs)

For journals reporting APCs in currencies other than U.S. dollars, conversion to USD was performed using the exchange rates current as of 30 October 2024.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each attribute to identify patterns in journal distribution, subject coverage, language, and APC policies across South Asian countries. Results were presented in the form of tables and figures to illustrate regional and disciplinary variations. Where relevant, findings were compared against global OA trends reported in prior literature.

Ethical Considerations

All data used in this study were obtained from publicly available sources. No human subjects were involved, and therefore no ethical approval was required. The analysis focused solely on secondary data without alteration or manipulation of DOAJ records.

4. Results

Regional Contribution to OA Publishing

The analysis of DOAJ records revealed that South Asia contributes a modest but significant share to global open access publishing. As of October 2024, 602 journals from seven South Asian countries were indexed in DOAJ, representing approximately 2.8% of the world's OA journals. While this proportion is small compared to global leaders in OA publishing such as Europe and Latin America, it nevertheless reflects the region's increasing engagement with open science and the visibility of its research output in an international index.

India emerged as the dominant contributor, accounting for nearly 60% (n = 360) of all South Asian OA journals. Pakistan followed with 25.2% (n = 152), while Nepal (5.3%, n = 32), Sri Lanka (4.6%, n = 28), and Bangladesh (4.4%, n = 27) contributed smaller but still notable numbers. Afghanistan (n = 2) and Bhutan (n = 1) had minimal representation. No OA journals from the Maldives were indexed in DOAJ at the time of data collection (Table 1).

These figures highlight the uneven distribution of OA publishing across the region. India's strong performance reflects its relatively larger research base, institutional infrastructure, and policy support for OA. In contrast, countries such as Afghanistan and Bhutan lag far behind, underscoring the disparities within South Asia in terms of publishing capacity and access to digital platforms.

Table 1: Number of OA Journals by Country

Country	N (%)
Afghanistan	2 (0.33)
Bangladesh	27 (4.48)
Bhutan	1 (0.16)
India	360 (59.80)
Nepal	32 (5.31)
Pakistan	152 (25.24)
Sri Lanka	28 (4.65)
Total	602 (100)

Subject Coverage

Subject analysis of the 602 journals revealed a clear disciplinary skew in South Asian OA publishing. Medicine was by far the largest category, representing nearly two-thirds of journals (59.9%, n = 361). Science and Technology, encompassing fields such as agriculture, biological sciences, and physical sciences, accounted for 17.9% (n = 108). Social Sciences journals represented 17.1% (n = 103), while the Humanities were severely underrepresented

at just 4.3% (n = 26). A small number of journals (n = 4; 0.6%) were classified under General Works (Table 2).

The dominance of medicine suggests that regional research priorities and funding mechanisms are strongly oriented toward health and clinical sciences. Conversely, the limited number of humanities journals highlights a disciplinary imbalance, raising concerns about the visibility of scholarship in literature, culture, history, and related areas. This imbalance reflects broader global trends, where STEM fields often benefit from stronger funding streams, but it is particularly pronounced in South Asia.

Table 2: Subject Coverage of OA Journals

Subject Area	N (%)
Medicine	361 (59.96)
Science & Technology	108 (17.94)
Social Sciences	103 (17.10)
Humanities	26 (4.31)
General Works	4 (0.66)
Total	602 (100)

Language of Publication

Language analysis revealed the overwhelming dominance of English in South Asian OA publishing. A total of 559 journals (92.8%) published exclusively in English, while 37 journals (6.1%) accepted both English and one or more regional languages, including Arabic, Bengali, Hindi, Tamil, and Urdu. Only five journals (0.8%) published solely in regional languages.

The predominance of English underscores its role as the lingua franca of global scholarly communication, facilitating international readership and citation. However, the marginal presence of regional languages raises concerns about inclusivity. Scholars who publish only in local languages may face limited opportunities for dissemination, while local communities may find research inaccessible if published only in English.

Article Processing Charges (APCs)

The analysis of APC policies showed that a majority of South Asian OA journals (68%) did not charge authors any publication fees. This pattern is in contrast to the APC-heavy models common in Western publishing, where charges often range from several hundred to several thousand dollars. Among the journals that did impose APCs, charges varied considerably by publisher and country, with some journals charging modest fees (under USD 100) and others charging several hundred dollars.

The predominance of no-APC models suggests a strong commitment to inclusivity and affordability in South Asian OA publishing. This model lowers barriers for researchers with limited funding, thereby expanding opportunities for participation in scholarly communication. However, questions remain about the sustainability of no-APC journals, particularly in the absence of stable institutional or governmental support.

Summary of Key Findings

In summary, the results demonstrate that:

- South Asia's contribution to global OA publishing is modest but growing.
- India dominates the regional landscape, followed by Pakistan, with other countries contributing smaller shares.
- Medicine is the leading discipline, while the humanities are underrepresented.
- English is the overwhelmingly dominant language of publication.
- A majority of South Asian OA journals operate without APCs, enhancing accessibility but raising sustainability concerns.

These findings provide a foundation for interpreting the strengths and limitations of OA publishing in South Asia, which are further explored in the discussion section.

5. Discussion

The analysis of 602 South Asian OA journals indexed in DOAJ highlights both progress and persistent challenges in the region's scholarly publishing landscape. While South Asia's contribution to global OA publishing is modest at 2.8%, the findings underscore significant regional dynamics that align with, and at times diverge from, global trends.

Regional Disparities and India's Dominance

India's leading role—accounting for nearly 60% of South Asia's OA journals—reflects the country's relatively well-developed higher education and research ecosystem, as well as its policy-level engagement with digital scholarship. India's large population of researchers, extensive university system, and expanding IT infrastructure have created conditions conducive to OA publishing. In contrast, countries such as Afghanistan and Bhutan remain marginal contributors, illustrating how structural limitations, including political instability, lack of infrastructure, and limited funding, constrain their ability to establish sustainable OA journals. These disparities suggest that regional collaboration and capacity-building initiatives are needed to reduce gaps and ensure a more balanced representation across South Asia.

Disciplinary Imbalance: Medicine vs. Humanities

The dominance of medicine (59.9% of journals) reveals regional research priorities shaped by urgent health concerns and availability of funding in biomedical fields. This reflects global trends where medicine is also a leading OA discipline due to strong public interest and funder mandates. However, the severe underrepresentation of the humanities (4.3%) is concerning. Scholarship in literature, history, philosophy, and related fields plays a crucial role in

addressing cultural and social dimensions of South Asian societies. The lack of OA outlets in these fields risks perpetuating disciplinary inequities in visibility and recognition. Similar concerns have been raised in other regions of the Global South, where humanities and social sciences often face difficulties in securing funding and institutional support for OA journals. Addressing this imbalance will require deliberate interventions, such as targeted funding programs and institutional incentives for journals in underrepresented disciplines.

Language and Accessibility

The overwhelming dominance of English (92.8% of journals) reflects both advantages and drawbacks. On one hand, publishing in English facilitates global visibility, readership, and citation, helping South Asian research to reach international audiences. On the other, it risks excluding non-English-speaking researchers and communities, limiting the local impact of scholarship. The marginal inclusion of regional languages highlights missed opportunities to engage broader audiences within South Asia. Multilingual publishing could serve as a bridge, allowing research to circulate globally while remaining accessible locally. Encouraging journals to publish abstracts, summaries, or full articles in regional languages could enhance inclusivity without sacrificing international visibility.

APC Models: Accessibility vs. Sustainability

A striking finding is that 68% of South Asian OA journals do not levy article processing charges. This contrasts with the APC-heavy models common in Western publishing, where high fees often restrict participation by underfunded scholars. The prevalence of no-APC models in South Asia enhances inclusivity by lowering financial barriers to publishing, ensuring that resource-limited researchers can contribute to scholarly communication. However, this raises questions about sustainability. Without stable revenue streams, many journals may rely on volunteer labor, institutional subsidies, or short-term funding. Over time, such arrangements may be difficult to maintain, potentially compromising editorial quality or long-term viability. Exploring alternative models—such as government subsidies, consortial support, or philanthropic funding—could help sustain South Asia’s low-APC approach while ensuring quality and stability.

Comparison with Global OA Trends

When compared with global patterns, South Asia’s OA publishing landscape reveals both commonalities and unique features. Like other regions, medicine dominates journal coverage, and English is the primary publishing language. However, South Asia diverges in its reliance on no-APC models, reflecting both economic realities and a commitment to inclusivity. This distinguishes the region from Western contexts, where APCs are seen as essential to sustaining OA publishing. South Asia’s approach offers valuable lessons for the global OA movement, demonstrating that models prioritizing accessibility can thrive, but also highlighting the need for long-term financial strategies.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings have several implications. First, policymakers and academic leaders should recognize the potential of OA to amplify the global visibility of South Asian research.

Investments in infrastructure, training, and policy support can strengthen the region's OA ecosystem. Second, efforts should be made to diversify OA publishing by encouraging growth in underrepresented fields and regional languages. This will broaden the inclusivity and relevance of OA for both global and local audiences. Third, sustaining low-APC models will require strategic interventions, such as national or regional funding schemes, collaborations with international organizations, and innovative publishing models that balance affordability with sustainability.

Summary

In summary, South Asia has made measurable progress in adopting OA publishing, but challenges remain in achieving disciplinary balance, linguistic inclusivity, and financial sustainability. India's dominance, the medical focus, the English-language bias, and the reliance on no-APC models all reflect both strengths and vulnerabilities. Addressing these issues through targeted policies and collaborative initiatives can help South Asia leverage OA not just as a publishing model, but as a transformative tool for enhancing equity, visibility, and participation in global scholarly communication.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the trends and characteristics of open access (OA) journal publishing in South Asia using data from the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). The analysis of 602 journals highlights both the promise and the challenges of OA in the region. South Asia accounts for only 2.8% of global OA journals, yet the diversity of contributions across seven countries reflects an emerging commitment to open scholarship. India dominates the regional landscape, while smaller countries such as Afghanistan and Bhutan remain minimally represented, revealing uneven development across the region.

The subject distribution demonstrates a strong focus on medicine, which accounts for nearly two-thirds of journals, while the humanities remain severely underrepresented. English is the dominant language of publication, enabling global visibility but limiting accessibility for local audiences. Importantly, most South Asian OA journals (68%) do not charge article processing charges (APCs), enhancing inclusivity for underfunded researchers but raising questions about long-term sustainability.

Overall, these findings suggest that open access publishing in South Asia is positioned at a critical juncture. It has succeeded in providing pathways for affordable and accessible scholarly communication, yet structural and disciplinary imbalances persist.

7. Recommendations

- a) **Enhance support for underrepresented disciplines:** Governments, universities, and funding agencies should prioritize support for humanities and social sciences journals to ensure disciplinary diversity in OA publishing.
- b) **Promote multilingual publishing:** Journals should be encouraged to incorporate regional languages alongside English through bilingual abstracts or parallel publishing models, improving both global reach and local accessibility.

- c) **Expand OA in underrepresented countries:** Capacity-building initiatives, technical assistance, and targeted funding can help countries such as Afghanistan, Bhutan, and the Maldives strengthen their OA presence.
- d) **Sustain low-APC models:** Governments and regional consortia should explore funding mechanisms to sustain no- or low-APC journals, ensuring inclusivity while maintaining editorial quality and long-term viability.

By addressing these areas, South Asia can build on existing progress and position OA not only as a publishing model, but also as a transformative tool for democratizing knowledge and amplifying the region's scholarly voice globally.

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