

Book review

Open Access to Knowledge and Information: scholarly literature and digital initiatives – the South Asian scenario

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Open access was initially projected as a publishing model parallel to commercial publishing model for scholarly communication to check spiralling prices of journals. The philosophy behind this movement was that global and unrestricted access to literature is essential for knowledge growth and knowledge generation. National and international bodies provided impetus to this movement by coming out with declarations/statements of principles and action plans aimed at enabling freedom from copyright restrictions and other such restrictions that are coming in the way of free and open access including cost, time, space, language, and digital divide. Internet being the main medium for disseminating open access resources, lack of information infrastructure is construed as a country-specific restriction to access global knowledge. Hence, freedom from digital divide is equally important.

Budapest Open Access Initiative was the first formal open access movement launched in February 2002. It is time to judge to what extent this movement and the later open access initiatives have been successful in

· enabling freedom from restrictions. To begin with, let us consider freedom from copyright restrictions. Journals from commercial publishers still continue to remain protected by copyright restrictions. The situation is no different with regard to other restrictions. We are still far away from our goal of universal access to global information.

· However, open access has come to stay as a medium for digital access to resources that are out of copyright restrictions. This is because open access movement has been successful in catalysing digitization activity, digitizing out of copyright content, and making this content available for global access via Internet. Open access by default has become the channel for storing, preserving, and protecting traditional knowledge and heritage cultural resources, which are on the verge of extinction. India has emerged as the leading player amongst South Asian countries for preserving and protecting out of copyright material and heritage cultural resources. This message is very much evident from the recently brought out publication titled Open Access to Knowledge and Information: scholarly literature and digital

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initiatives – the South Asian scenario. This is an authentic piece of work on open access resources in India and Pakistan brought out by Anup Kumar Das and published by UNESCO Office in Delhi. The editors to this volume are Bimal Kumar Sen and Jocelyne Josiah.

The document discusses successful activities in the South Asia sub-region on scholarly literature and documentary heritage available for open access. It covers important topics such as digital library initiatives, open course ware initiatives, open access journals, metadata harvesting services, national-level digital repositories, and institutional repositories. The document covers 52 open access initiatives. The description of each initiative is preceded by the following metadata elements: (1) type of initiative, (2) principle implementing agency, (3) supporting agency, (4) software used, and (5) web address. The brief description on the project that follows metadata is indeed informative and forms an interesting reading. The introduction to the document lists important information on the open access activities and also the principles of open access as defined by the World Summit on Information Society and the action plan for implementing these principles.

The document could have become more interesting and useful had it included an evaluative summary on unsuccessful and successful projects in the South Asia sub-region, though it underlines the factors that support open access movement. On reading this book, one could speculate on some important factors that have potential to influence open access movement. These include (1) adoption of free and open source software for developing and managing repositories, (2) mandated funding by governmental agencies for conducting open access projects, (3) mandated coverage of literature emerging from projects supported by governmental funding in the institutional repository, (4) policy support to check duplication in open source projects, (5) policy support for determining priorities in the selection of materials for long-term preservation, and (6) information infrastructure.

This book will be of special interest to libraries, teachers, students, universities, research institutions, funding agencies, government departments, and others involved with digital initiatives.