

“Who Will Stop The Plagiarists?”

In the drawing room of a suburban West Delhi home sits an elderly vigilante, the head of an organization that has been tracking criminal vice-chancellors, unethical professors and copycat students since 1981. But with only the force of moral authority to help them battle plagiarism in India's scientific community, can the Society for Scientific Values keep up the good fight?

The year was 2002. A research group in theoretical physics, led by Professor BS Rajput, then Vice-Chancellor (VC) of Kumaun University, had been accused of scientific misconduct.

The news came as no surprise – in the past, Rajput had allegedly been involved in several cases of scientific research plagiarism. Moreover, the local media reported that there were financial irregularities at the University, and published pictures of protesting students. The reports also said that Rajput's proximity to the Sangh Parivar had played a role in the extension of his term as VC at the University. But this time, one of Rajput's scientific papers was alleged to have been completely plagiarized from a research paper by the famed Stanford University physicist Renata Kallosh, published in the journal *Physics Review D*.

One of Rajput's associates at the University, Kavita Pandey, was one of the first whistleblowers. Later she claimed that she'd been suspended from the university for making the issue public. The dots connected, and one thing led to another: Ashoke Sen, an eminent theoretical physicist and a Fellow of the Royal Society of London, along with fellow theoretical physicist Sunil Mukhi, created a website where they exposed Rajput's plagiarized research papers. Later, a group of physicists from India endorsed the website. In an official letter to the President of India dated October 11, 2002, which was signed by three Nobel Laureates and Kallosh, Stanford University expressed its concern and asked the President to take immediate action. Under pressure, APJ Abdul Kalam initiated an inquiry by a committee chaired by the AIIMS biologist Professor Indira Nath. The Governor of Uttaranchal at the time, SS Barnala, claimed the whole issue was merely propaganda to defame the university. Rajput later resigned from his position after the official committee found him guilty of plagiarism. “It took the committee just five minutes to spot the plagiarism,” Mukhi recalls. But by then, Rajput's mere resignation from the university was not enough for some – many prominent researchers expressed dissatisfaction with the turn of events; they wanted him to be punished. He could have gotten away with the plagiarism, considering his political influence, if not for the wide publicity that the issue generated.

India doesn't have an official watchdog or authority to look into the extent of scientific plagiarism. Even today, cases appear and vanish into thin air, slowly eroding the credibility of scientific research in the country.

The Society

Professor Kasturi Lal Chopra is an aging man now. On a cold January morning, we sit and munch cashew nuts in the drawing room of his house, which is located in a calm neighborhood amidst the frenzy of West Delhi suburbia. There is a photograph of him seated next to Mother Teresa, and the front wall is decked with a large framed engraving of former President Pratibha Patil's words granting Chopra the Padma Shri for his services to modern science. He is president of the Society For Scientific Values (SSV), which was formed in Delhi in 1981 by a group of eminent scientists

and engineers. Since then, it has remained an influential body in India, looking into scientific plagiarism and misconduct, and acting as an 'unofficial' watchdog.

"People call us policemen," Chopra remarks. "You have to understand the fact that we don't drag people to court if we find evidence of misconduct against them [for lack of manpower and resources]."

The Society, as it is known within India's scientific community, caters to complaints filed by victims of plagiarism within the scientific establishment. After an inquiry, if the Society finds evidence of plagiarism, it writes to the person to whom the plagiarized scientific paper is credited and asks for the withdrawal or 'retraction' of the paper, later exposing the plagiarized papers on their website.

In 2009, a PhD student at the Electronics Department of Delhi University's (DU) South Campus published the same research paper twice in two different international journals. The Society followed the case and brought this case of plagiarism twice to the notice of Professor Deepak Pental, the Vice Chancellor of DU (now [accused of plagiarism](#) himself) but he did not inquire into or take any action on what was a clear case of plagiarism by a student who was on the verge of getting his PhD from the university. The Society decided to expose the case on its website.

In 2007, the Society investigated a case of alleged plagiarism against Professor PK Abdul Aziz, the former VC of Cochin University, who had been charged with obtaining his DSc by "recycling the data from the PhD thesis of his former students". After the investigation proved the charges of plagiarism against him, the Society took up the case with the university and their queries remained unanswered. That year, Aziz was appointed the VC of Aligarh Muslim University by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD).

"See, as a society we don't have the mechanism as well as the resources to go after the 'thieves'. Some people pursue the cases on their own and some come to us because they can't go to the government seeking help," says Chopra. He makes a brief pause and adds, in a vehement tone, "Understand the fact that nobody in the history of the Department of Science and Technology has ever been blacklisted."

When the Society wrote to Professor Abhijit Chakraborty, the VC of Jadavpur University, accusing him of plagiarism in one of his papers, he responded by rubbishing their claim. "His reply was very foolish. He claimed that there was only 40 percent plagiarism in the paper according to the software used to detect plagiarism. Later, he said 'Why is the society pursuing this case now? You should have done it when the paper was published,'" says Chopra. A few days ago, Chakraborty was forced to [resign](#), allegedly because of political pressure.

In the last three or four years, the famed international body Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), which publishes a number of journals and magazines, has served notice to some 250 scientists and engineers across India's premier institutions citing plagiarism in their papers previously published by the institute. It has also refused to publish any more of their papers for at least three years. "Most of these scientists are from our esteemed institutions. When I meet the VCs of these institutes and ask them about it, they promise action and institutional inquiries," says Chopra.

The Society means different things to different people. For some, it is their last hope. It is admired within the scientific establishment as much as it is disliked. But its path isn't without roadblocks – a couple of years ago, when the society tried to pursue a case of plagiarism against a student of IIT Kanpur, the student wrote a letter to the Chief Minister's Office in Delhi, claiming that Chopra was misusing his power. Chopra was then summoned to a police station.

Apart from threats and harsh reminders to mend their ways, the Society has witnessed a crunch in the number of actively working members. There are several complaints to be handled, each of which takes a considerable amount of time to pursue, and the members can seldom be found at the Society's office. Chopra is the lonely captain: he slowly types away at the keyboard of his computer, sending out letter upon letter to the people against whom he has painstakingly found guilty of plagiarism. While his inbox is flooded with complaints, the Society's activities are slowing down.

In the course of our conversation, one puzzling question remained unanswered. Professor CNR Rao, who was recently awarded the Bharat Ratna, has been the chief scientific advisor to the Prime Minister for over a decade now. Interestingly, he was a former member of the Society for many years. So why hasn't the society approached him to lend a voice to the government to form an official body or a regulatory authority to check the extent of scientific plagiarism in India?

"We have approached the government on several occasions. At times, the government has formed committees to look into the possibility of coming up with an official body, but nothing much happened." After a brief pause, he adds, "I don't think CNR Rao likes us. After a point of time, he refused to be part of the society."

Later, I spoke to Dr RK Kotnala, who is the chief scientist at the National Physical Laboratory, and secretary of the Society. "He [CNR Rao] has not taken care of the society. Being [in] his position he could have taken up our proposition [to grant] the society a legal entity and conveyed it to the government," he says.

The curious case of the three professors

On September 25, 2013, Dr Praveen Kumar Janjua, President of the Society For Values and Ethics In Education (SVEE), wrote a letter to Professor Dinesh Singh, VC of Delhi University, alleging serious plagiarism by Professor Gurmeet Singh, who is the Head of the Chemistry Department, Delhi University, and Dr Kalpana Bharara of Kirori Mal College, Delhi University.

The letter alleged that 85 percent of the research paper titled "Hibiscus cannabinus extract as a potential green inhibitor for corrosion of mild steel in 0.5M H₂SO₄ solution" by Gurmeet Singh and M Ramananda Singh (an assistant professor at Kirori Mal College) was work that had been plagiarized. Seventy-five percent of another paper, titled 'Inhibiting effects of butyl triphenyl phosphonium bromide on corrosion of mild steel in 0.5M H₂SO₄ solution and its adsorption characteristics' by Dr Kalpana Bharara, Hansung Kim and Gurmeet Singh was work that had been plagiarized. This was a case of copyright violation.

On 27, September, 2013, Janjua was served legal notice by Gurmeet Singh. It said: "Our client has been given to understand that you have written a letter to the Vice Chancellor, Delhi University and distributed the same to several other faculty members making broad ranging, false and baseless allegations against my client." In November 2014, Ramananda Singh filed a case of harassment against Janjua with the SC/ST Commission.

On September 11, 2014, the MHRD, ordered a one-man fact-finding inquiry committee to look into cases of plagiarism against three professors: Gurmeet Singh and Bharara, citing the allegations by Janjua in their official notice; and Professor Vijayshri Tiwari of the Indian Institute of Information and Technology, Allahabad. The committee was to be chaired by Prof Chopra. Interestingly, the letter was delivered to Chopra on Sep 17 by speed post.

"I was surprised. The Ministry appointed me to chair the committee without my knowledge. I read about it somewhere in the papers. Later they sent me the official letter," Chopra says, looking perplexed.

Chopra had just started with the first phase of his investigation. He made some calls and spent time pondering over the research papers and digging out plagiarized material. According to him, it was not very hard to prove the charges against the three professors.

On September 22, 2014, Chopra again received a letter from the MHRD. It said the order by the MHRD initiating inquiries against the three professors "stands withdrawn with immediate effect." Chopra was surprised. He was not given a clear explanation for the withdrawal of inquiries against the professors.

"In principle, the ministry is wrong," he says.

When I called up Janjua to inquire further about the case, he told me he was aware that the ministry had initiated an official inquiry citing his appeal. He could not digest the fact that I was more informed about the withdrawal of the inquiry.

There is also the letter written by the Bharatiya Janata Party MP, Keshav Prasad Maurya, who was on the committee of the MHRD, to its head, Smriti Irani. In the letter he appreciates the efforts of the minister to form a fact-finding committee chaired by Chopra, and vouches for a strict investigation against the accused professors. He writes: "where institutions fail to act against perpetrators of misconduct, science and education itself is the loser and a cloud will remain over our academic and research community globally." In the letter he stresses on the fact that a committee "must" be appointed to look into the matter and recommends "strict action". When I tried to contact Maurya, all my calls went to his assistant – who promised Maurya would get back to me – or remained unanswered.

Scientific plagiarism: the larger problem

"Plagiarism is easy, you know, and it all goes back a long way," says Professor Indira Nath when I meet her at her apartment in Hauz Khas. A painting by Krishen Khanna hangs on a big wide wall; on another wall are paintings from Indian mythology. "The strategy is to look for papers in some international journals, perhaps two or three years older, and then straight cut-and-paste. Then send it to some Indian journals and sometimes to some international journals. A few bad apples can ruin the reputation as far as the public is concerned. The public loses faith in science. See, the problem in India is when you go and talk to them – the youngsters – they are unaware that plagiarism is wrong."

"[The] one thing I feel very angry about is [that] we think of protecting the institutions from getting a bad name. The scientific advisory committee tried to do the same thing in the case of Professor Kundu," she says.

In 2006, Professor Gopal Kundu at the National Center For Cell Science (NCCS), Pune, and his colleagues were accused of misrepresenting data in a paper published in the *Journal of Biological Chemistry*. Kundu was awarded the Bhatnagar prize in 2004, India's equivalent of the Nobel Prize. The NCCS set up an internal committee, which asked Kundu to retract the paper, and an independent committee chaired by G Padmanabhan (the former director of the Indian Institute of Science), which cleared Kundu of all the charges. The Indian science community was divided over the issue. When the accusations were found to be true, the Indian Academy of Sciences banned Kundu from participating in its activities for three years.

“See, the international journals are harsher toward Indians as compared to say, Americans,” says Nath. “So, when you try to protect the institutions, Indian science is at danger.”

In a [paper](#) by Kenneth Foster and KL Chopra, titled “Journals of Plagiarism”, they point out that copy-and-paste plagiarism is a global phenomenon that is driven in part by institutional policies that link hiring, promotion and awards to publications. While research universities around the world typically place great emphasis on publication in top-tier, high impact journals, many institutions and funding agencies in India and other countries accept, for recruitment and promotion, publications in dubious journals with an ISSN/ ISBN number that is rather easy to obtain.

In my conversation with Kotnala, he pointed to the practices of the University Grants Commission (UGC), which he said was a catalyst in the larger perspective of plagiarism in the country. “UGC is the biggest problem. They have linked promotions to the number of published papers. All it needs is publication of 15 papers in good journals for a professor to seek promotion. They have diluted the situation by making mandatory the ISSN number for published papers. And everybody wants a promotion,” Kotnala says.

The Society, and the many eminent scientists I spoke to in the course of my reporting, agree that there is a lack of awareness in the country; plagiarism is considered fine – it gets your job done. ‘*Jugaad*’ – that’s another Indian metaphor for plagiarism. “It’s the *chalta hai* attitude amongst us,” says Chopra.

Globally, scientific plagiarism is a menace. There’s the case the Society pursued in 2008 where Professor Karmeshu from the School of Computer and Systems Science, JNU, reported that a paper of his had been plagiarized by Professor Demetres Kouvatzos of the University of Bradford, UK, and his student, Dr Salam Adli Assi. Kouvatzos was later found to be a referee of the journal in which Karmeshu’s paper was published. He was immediately dropped from his position.

Scientific plagiarism has always been a menace in the US, which forced the government to form the Office of Research Integrity (ORI). The former President Bill Clinton signed the NIH Revitalization Act in 1993, establishing the ORI as an independent entity, which has [curbed](#) instances of plagiarism to some degree. The Society has been urging the Indian government to either come up with a similar regulatory body or grant the society legal status. To date, the society is member-funded and now, Chopra claims, on its last legs. “I am too old to go after each case. These days we also get some threatening calls,” he says. There is a talk of another academy to be formed by concerned scientists to tackle plagiarism in the country.

Some days, Chopra and other members of the Society can be spotted in colleges in some faraway corner of the country, giving lectures to young scientists to create awareness about scientific misconduct. They do this because there’s a bottom line here that leaves much at stake. As Nath puts it: “If the extent of plagiarism remains unchecked, the credibility of research in the country will be definitely hit”

The interview was taken by Rohit Inani who is an independent journalist based in New Delhi.