Research Ethics and English in India

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This essay is an attempt to think about ethics issues in research firstly, as about good practices in the discipline and then, drawing on these to evolve a specific research ethics for English in India. To that end it examines the prevailing scene of research ethics that has become normative and explores what might constitute specific ethics issues for researchers in English as it is studied and produced in India.

Keywords: research ethics, research publications, humanities, journals

Ethics codes for research and for research publication from the biosciences, medicine and the social sciences have generally been used as models for those disciplines where such ethics has not yet been articulated. While many of the points raised in ethics guidelines in these areas (enshrined in ethics policies of institutions from around the world) appear to be irrelevant for the humanities disciplines, going back to the core questions from which such ethics has evolved might offer a possible roadmap for the humanities. As the points made in many of the Guidelines referred to below will suggest, ethical issues are founded on relationships among the three key epistemological points of subjects, objects and modes of study. So, going back to these points would perhaps enable humanities disciplines like English/English in India to evolve specific ethical guidelines instead of trying to adapt those of other disciplines.

The need for ethics guidelines for Research and Research Publication has become crucial for Indian higher education because of several recent developments with regard to the evaluation of academic performance of college and university teachers. The Academic Performance Index (API) – part of the assessment structure evolved by the UGC for appointment and promotion of faculty, and calculated annually – has forced research on everyone, irrespective of aptitude, ability and interest. And the huge body of new and aspiring 'researchers' has resulted in journals with no clear ethics policies, but armed with the easily procured ISSN nos., and with claims about peer review and "international" status. The problem seems to be most acute in the Humanities (perceived to offer soft subject options) and causes include inflation of marks at every level and a lack of employment-oriented alternative education opportunities; the consequent entry into higher education of thousands of students who then go on unthinkingly into MPhil and PhD research; large number of universities running PhD programmes; and an absence of training for research guides. For instance my own University of Guwahati till very recently made no mention of an ethics policy for research. In its 2016 Regulations (2016) (which came into effect in 2017) there is a list of dos and dont's in

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which the issue of plagiarism is predominant. Other universities are not significantly different in this regard with very few of them displaying any clear instructions on ethical issues for researchers. Jadavpur University repeats one sentence in both its MPhil and PhD Regulations of 2017: "The Executive Council of the University shall evolve a mechanism, using well developed software and gadgets to detect plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty" (Web 3, 12).

The UGC's recent guidelines (UGC 2017a) (The UGC Research Development and Innovation Programs Implementation Guidelines 2017, Web 22) are in the areas of

1. Data acquisition, management, sharing, and ownership
2. Supervisor/trainee responsibilities
3. Publication practices and responsible authorship
4. Peer review
5. Research collaboration
6. Research involving human subjects
7. Research involving animals
8. Research misconduct
9. Conflict of interest and commitment
   (UGC, 2017)).

Out of the nine items listed, only Research Misconduct is elaborated as including "deliberate fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results, and harmful activities" (22). This reveals a view of institutional responsibility that is more about policing than of teaching good research practices. Following the general Guidelines, the UGC Draft (2017b) Guidelines (September 2017) on academic integrity and prevention of plagiarism mandates incorporation of 'principles of academic integrity' into UG and PG curricula, MPhil and PhD coursework and Orientation and Refresher courses (Web 4).

However, guidelines for research maintained on their websites by premier international universities and key areas hyperlinked to legislations, ethics committees, and other modes of ensuring integrity suggest that research ethics is firstly about inculcating good research practices.

This essay makes an attempt to think about ethics issues and research ethics issues as firstly about good practices in the discipline and then drawing on these to evolve a specific research ethics for English in India. To that end it examines the prevailing scene of research ethics that has become normative and tries to see what might constitute specific ethics issues for researchers in English as it is studied and produced in India.

Research Ethics

The 'University of Cambridge Policy on the Ethics of Research Involving Human Participants and Personal Data' (University of Cambridge, 2016) links the University's vision for promoting good research with its ethical commitments. The Policy 'foster[s] a research culture' that adheres to 'relevant legislation governing the protection of the dignity, rights, safety and privacy of those involved in research;' 'provide clear and easily accessible guidance on best ethical practice and regulatory requirements'; '*offer support and training to staff and students* and any others . . . to

maintain awareness and high ethical standards'; 'maintain an ethical review process'; 'maintain an oversight of the policies and practices of Department, Faculty, School or equivalent-level Ethics Committees and to take appropriate action where there is evidence that the University's policy is not being followed' (Web np. Emphases added). Punitive measures are mentioned only in the event of failure.

The Policy document contains not just the items that constitute ethical research but also lays out the 'Ethical Review Process' and the role of the University Research Ethics Committee as a referral body in cases of doubt. It directs all researchers having access to university premises and facilities to familiarize themselves with the Policy. While laying out general guidelines, the Policy states that subject specific guidance should be received from the relevant Department or School. The Policy is reviewed every three years (Web np).

Where ethics concerns are expressed in India, these are in relation to research in medicine and biosciences (see Thatte and Marathe 2017 for a survey of the scene) while social science research ethics concerns too seem to be mostly in the domain of public health and individual psychology.

However, the draft code published in an issue of the *Economic and Political Weekly* widens the area of concerns. Borrowed from 'The Code of Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans' (1997) evolved by the Tri-Council Working Group of Canada it pointed out that, "While research is not the monopoly of any group or of only those who are recognised as professionals, every researcher must acquire *adequate knowledge and ability,* and should have *commitment to do research"* (*EPW* 2000: 988, emphases added). On accountability and responsibility it said: "The conduct of research must be fair, honest and transparent. The researchers are accountable to the research community and the society' (988). *"Framing of research questions and agendas should be issue/subject specific and sensitive to the culture or community being studied"* (988, emphases added). "Peer review should be an essential part of every research endeavour or initiative, and should be sought at various stages of research. Any research or peer review in which a conflict of interest could arise as a result of a personal or vested interest, should be disclosed prior to undertaking it" (988). "Researchers should report their findings accurately and truthfully. There should be no fabrication, falsification, plagiarism or other practices at any stage of the research" (988-989). *"Every researcher has a duty to protect historical records and to preserve materials studied"* (989 emphases added). Instead of assuming research ethics as necessary only when a piece of research is to be published or sent up for a degree, this code clearly demands an education that includes training in certain preliminary good practices.

Tejal Barai in a report on the discussions at the national Ethics Meeting on this 'Draft Code' writes of the expansion of areas of research in the social sciences from "studies of peasant movements, agrarian uprisings, industrial sociology, urban sociology in the 1970s (sic) to issues such as medical sociology in the 1980's (sic) (Rao, 1982), and studies on sexuality and reproductive health in the 1990's (sic)' which are both 'complex' and 'more invasive" (Barai Web np). Methods of 'interviews', 'case histories' and 'focus group discussions' (Barai Web np) are invasive because they involve the private lives of human participants.

Ethics in Research Publications

Ethical concerns in research publication have become particularly crucial in the face of the UGC's efforts to link published research to promotions in higher education institutions through

the numerically determined Academic Performance Index (2010). In the wake of this process of evaluation (under Category III of the API Form) a spate of bad papers have been published in dubious journals that came into existence almost overnight, complete with ISSN nos. and tall claims about peer review and about being 'international' journals (Recent articles in the 'Let Teachers Teach' series in *The Wire* [August 1, 4, 7, 2017] while commenting on the newly inducted MHRD Minister Prakash Javadekar's expressed intentions to do away with mandatory research requirements for college teachers, recount these developments. The ministerial intervention is yet to happen). In the first of these articles, Pushkar (2017a and 2017b) argues that "the research requirement in the API for college teachers is a travesty. All that it achieved was a proliferation of bad journals for college teachers to publish in." (Web np). While one cannot but agree with this view narrowing down the problem to college teachers alone is itself short sighted because it assumes that by virtue of being in the university a person is able to do good research. Given recruitment methods there is no guarantee that a newly inducted faculty member in a university would have an aptitude for research (even though s/he has a PhD).

In the face of the mounting problem of quality vs quantity and the numerical evaluation becoming predominant, the UGC started its fire fighting measures: it asked universities and other research institutions under it to compile lists of acceptable journals for every discipline which it then collated and put up on its website; insisted on a plagiarism check being done on all dissertations using the Urkund software (made available to all research supervisors) before they were to be certified as ready for submission; and made it mandatory for all PhD dissertations to be institutionally uploaded onto the Inflibnet site.

The sequence of these developments is interesting. The UGC first created the problem by unthinkingly insisting that a PhD and subsequently, continuous research, was necessary for all, irrespective of where they worked; by making the PhD a substitute for NET as a qualifying criterion for applicants in teaching jobs; by insisting on conference attendance and published papers on a regular annual basis without at the same time setting up mechanisms for establishing journal or article quality.

This cart-before-the-horse approach of the UGC – insisting on research for everybody and then when widespread plagiarism was discovered, trying to fight it with policing the dissertation and mandating journal legitimacy with the easily procurable ISSN number – has been responsible for the sudden proliferation of bad research in India (especially in the Humanities). This is perhaps the reason why ethics in research is institutionally perceived as being primarily about refraining from plagiarism. As the codes of ethical research formulated and displayed prominently on the websites of many respected universities show, there are several other key aspects to good and honest research..

'Guidelines on Good Research Practice' of Cambridge University includes 'Dissemination and Publication of Research' where peer review, acknowledgment of funding, the specific 'contributions of formal collaborators and all others who directly assist or indirectly support the research', the 'appropriate form' for publication of research results', dissemination 'in a responsible manner, in such a way that results are not overstated or hyped' all find mention (2014: 7-8). Other universities around the world make similar points – and nearly all of these are available in the Code of Publication Ethics (COPE).

The 1999 COPE 'Guidelines on Good Publication Practice' (regularly revised and updated, with the latest in 2014) asserts that 'authors must take public responsibility for the content of their paper'

acknowledge all 'contributions to the conception, design, analysis and writing of the study' but not credit in case 'there is no task that can be reasonably attributed to an individual', and advises 'reading of the target journal's "Advice to Authors"' (44). On Plagiarism it says: "Plagiarism ranges from the unreferenced use of others' published and unpublished ideas, including research grant applications to submission under "new" authorship of a complete paper, sometimes in a different language . . . . it applies to print and electronic versions'. To avoid this it suggests: "All sources should be disclosed, and if large amounts of other people's written or illustrative material is to be used, permission must be sought" (45). On misconduct in publication it says: "The general principle confirming misconduct is intention to cause others to regard as true that which is not true" (46). ELSEVIER identifies the responsibilities of publishers, editors, authors and peer reviewers (Web 2017) while the journal *Research Integrity and Peer Review regularly* addresses issues of ethical research (as example see Bouter et al 2016).

Journals advise potential authors in areas like simultaneous submission of same paper, process of peer review, assurances of communication to the author of editorial decisions and proper acknowledgment of sources for which a sample is usually provided and frequently also suggest jargon free writing style. While such guidelines are generally sufficient to ensure that a research communication adhere to certain commonly acknowledged codes of research conduct, in India, the persistence of papers that are badly written, poorly referenced and frequently carrying material from dubious online sources suggests that there is failure at a deeper level that cannot be addressed merely by the existence of such guidelines. The excellent paper by an Indian researcher in the Humanities is not the norm, the poor one is, suggesting that good practices in each discipline have to be acquired and these, in order to be effective, must become second nature to the disciplinary practitioner. Beyond scrupulous referencing and acknowledgment, a much wider sense of the ethical, which would imply both inwardness with the discipline's core values and self-regulation, seems to be in order.

And yet, as the tentative nature of what follows will demonstrate, this is not easy to do because the humanities rarely deals in human subjects directly (despite the expansion into cultural studies, issues of memory and representation of trauma and distress) making ethical concerns less tangible and more difficult to evolve in discipline specific ways.

Research Ethics in the Humanities

The NESH Guidelines (2016) and the SATORI Project (2015) both aim to formulate ethics of research for the Humanities. The SATORI Project borrows the idea of 'innovation' from medicine and the sciences to speak of innovation in the humanities as consisting of the following: 'creating new theories and methods', 'comparing databases of cultural heritage and preparing exhibitions,' 'advocate democratic ideas and criticise discriminatory ideologies' by using 'publically (sic) influential critical theory', 'new currents in performing and visual arts that have a wider cultural impact on society', 'developing pedagogical models', 'applied linguistics, e.g. in translation, computer science' (Satori 4). This method of deriving ethics questions for one kind of discipline from completely different ones is useful only up to a point. As Robert Dingwall declares in a somewhat irate essay: "All HSS research is based on the same methods that ordinary people use in their everyday life: observing other people, asking them questions, reading documents or looking at pictures" (2008: 3). And 'ethics and literature' is (and always has been) an area of considerable interest while 'responsibility' and 'irresponsibility' (with regard to from, narrative, self-knowledge, allusion, dissent etc) are shown as key issues for English (Jernigan et al, 2009), so that having

to work from a position of lack with reference to research ethic guidelines is a serious challenge especially when the fundamental difference from other disciplines remains in the nature of the objects of study.

The English Department at the University of Washington, appearing to be exercised by the Satori emphasis on 'innovation', declares that 'new knowledge' is created 'by examining texts and other cultural artifacts' and further that 'the products of research are predominantly intellectual and intangible, with the results contributing to an academic discipline and also informing other disciplines, a process which often effects individual or social change over time' (Web np). Ethical issues are obviously expected to evolve from within the realm of intangibility and in the growth of the discipline.

The disconnect between proposals for Humanities ethics and the ground situation becomes particularly evident in the peculiar conditions in which research in English takes place in India. The development of the discipline, the quality of teaching, the large number of colleges and universities all ensure superficiality. With topics as broad and undefined as 'women characters' in novels or plays, 'critical studies' or simply 'a study of select works' of authors, 'mind and art' and in recent years the ubiquitous theme of 'identity' which is studied for every conceivable community, region and author (titles of dissertations awarded PhD degrees by Gauhati and Dibrugarh universities), English as researched in India offers ample rationale for suggesting that more than institutional gestures and punitive measures, a comprehensive overhauling is in order. Evident in these titles is the inability to evolve a research subject or problem that is in keeping with the developments in the discipline; the related inability to lay out a roadmap or plan for the research that is in keeping with the needs of the initiatory problem; and basic uncertainty about methodologies. Such inadequate engagement with developments in the discipline is compounded by lack of decent libraries in colleges where many researchers work as teachers, teaching hours that leave no time for rigorous research and the existence of poor quality Notes and help books in the market that defines the culture of study in the first place.

The proliferation of research of this kind stems from the conditions in which English in India is studied and taught and the predominance of individual research. As conference papers and articles in some of the newly sprung journals show, two kinds of essays are usually passed off as research – those where the author examines a single text in the light of a conference theme; and secondly, those where the writer ignores the status of the field and critiques a text as if in a sealed isolation chamber. Once such publication occurs it acts as encouragement to the writer to write more of the same, present them at conferences and publish them in similar journals (many of which are in the UGC's approved list). This happens primarily because there is no systematic training in the writing of research papers or in the formulation of a research problem or thesis, no culture of self or peer evaluation and superficial and piecemeal study of the subject and area compelled by the manner in which the discipline has developed in India. Such essays when they do refer to other work only succeed in revealing the superficial culture of study (the cut and paste from Google method) which encourages a quick look at what is most easily available and conceptually friendly – a lack of rigor that also produces bad research.

An interesting way to think about these problems might emerge from Patricia Leavy's work on *Fiction as Research Practice* (2013) and which involves actually writing fiction, based on interviews 'with women about their relationships, body image and identity struggles,' helping to 'develop

empathy, develop emotional responses and ultimately engage in self reflection' (Web np). The use of fiction for social research points to the kind of understanding with which an author creates a literary work that represents character in various situations that call for sympathy and attention, and a researcher approaches the text. Leavy says of fiction-based research that it is a way to study 'topics that can be difficult to approach' (2013: 20). Fiction is more reader-friendly than academic research in dealing with such topics, and as one of the reviewers of this book writes, it makes for 'deeper understanding of experiences' and 'creates an opportunity for the writer to simulate the environment, sights, sounds, and smells of reality virtually, which captivates the reader's imagination. The writer is able to create new knowledge for the reader . . . .' (Kalu, 2013: 130). In this kind of work 'the process of writing can be the research act' (Kalu, 2013: 131). Leavy's work points to the wide referentiality of literature, and the intimacy that it facilitates between the reader and those 'difficult topics' by a process of embodiment in character of the feelings, sufferings and courageous acts that come out of the situations of crisis. The work of the writer and of the reader as critic are embedded in the practical achievements of the process, even as the method of working backwards from fiction offers an insight into what transpires in the literary work.

Margaret Atwood, playfully imagining why a writer writes, makes a long two-page list which includes the following:

> Because I knew I had to keep writing or else I would die. Because to write is to take risks, and it is only by taking risks that we know we are alive . . . . To paint a portrait of society and its ills. To express the unexpressed life of the masses. To name the hitherto unnamed. To defend the human spirit, and human integrity and honor . . . . To search for understanding of the reader and myself. . . . To defend a minority group or oppressed class. To speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. To expose appalling wrongs or atrocities. To record the times through which I have lived. To bear witness to horrifying events that I have survived. To speak for the dead. To celebrate life in all its complexity. . . . To allow for the possibility of hope and redemption. To give back something of what has been given to me (xx-xxii).

This list I believe sums up many of the ethical issues with which a writer begins and that evolves as she might research the area – attending to herself, her objects of study which are very often life forms in states of crisis and representing these to draw the attention of a readership. The researcher, in her turn, studies the way a particular area (as literary studies has expanded into many new domains of experience) is understood and depicted by the author, the accuracy of depiction but beyond that the larger truths understood from such depiction – and writes about them, pointing out what is possible to read into a literary text, how well and with what empathy and insight an author has plumbed a human condition. In depicting how characters treat one another, how the living body is depicted etc. the author is already in an ethical realm. When the researcher draws attention to these ethically conscious representations of the Other by the author she too is engaging in an ethical act. Taking note of the ethical aspects of writing and reading are among the important elements that researchers in the literary disciplines consider and should consider. The expansion of literary disciplines to include many areas of social, historical, political, anthropological, ecological research and writing, the ideological role played by literature (often by reflection, sometimes more directly when ideas from literature create public opinion, and, most often, serving as the site where what happens in a time is represented, critiqued and valued), suggests that ethical issues are situated at the heart of the discipline. Take the immensely influential work on the horrific events of the 20th and 21st centuries – the Holocaust and genocides like Nellie in Assam and in Myanmar, Partition in India, displacement of populations all over the world, ecological disasters, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, terrorist attacks, human rights violations at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib to name only some – that

is a challenge to the researcher. It would be ethically dubious if a researcher into literature produced in these situations were to separate the events from the characters or the language or some other depiction from the event which occasioned it, if it were even possible. As one researcher/critic writes of such literature, it 'rationalizes in and through its wide variety of narrative what it means to be human' (Nayar xi). To write of the human/humane, and aberrations from, and extensions of what it means to be human and other forms of life (as the ecological enjoins this further ethical behaviour upon us) - these place us in the ethical.

A researcher who wishes to examine one material element (say food or houses or attire) in a novel set against or about a horrific event, would find it difficult to critically write about it in isolation. Perhaps what we are looking at here is something like 'going with the author' – which is one of the ethical issues at stake in the case of a literary text. This might open up further if we think of 'English Studies in India' as a subset of the main discipline involving the basic epistemological questions. So here we would have texts produced in India and challenging the researcher with both over familiarity and strangeness (given India's hugely diverse literary traditions that act as backdrop to the English productions); as well as texts produced in the English speaking world where strangeness would demand a special empathy even as this empathy would prepare the ground for reading from one's location but also being open and sensitive to the work.

Why writers write and what they write about emerges in different ways from the two explorations cited above – by Leavy and Atwood – but they point to a common element: fictional representations help in the understanding of difficult and sometimes controversial topics and of people caught in the midst of critical situations. The ethical is imperative for the writer who represents people, place, state of mind etc. with empathy, who selects the most evocative situations and the most appropriate characters (the objective viewpoint that allows for the most comprehensive representation does not obstruct empathy which is the start of a process of understanding), perhaps to 'expose appalling wrongs and atrocities'. As Leavy reports from her research, the experiment of writing novels based on interviews of real life situations, demonstrates something of what the writer does and the ethical work in representing the sufferings and emotions of the characters through actual conversations on feelings in such situations.

Taking cues from such considerations the researcher in literature/English literature notes (and should note) the relationships between authors and readers; and the way a researcher may do violence to a text by deliberate misinterpretation, and through incomplete information on that which exercises a writer and compels a literary work. If the researcher is taking an interdisciplinary approach, this would mean being receptive to how another discipline approaches its objects of study/ its Others, i.e. working responsibly by learning how that other discipline works. As literature is about representation, and narratives, and individual stories and anecdotes that qualify and subvert the universal and the general, for the researcher it would mean the responsibility to frame and highlight/prevent the silencing of the individual, the tangential, the discomfiting and the controversial. In general it would mean openness/ attentiveness/ receptiveness to author and text and reader and everything that is drawn into the field of research by the needs of these relationships.

With English in India, the range of texts used, the languages in which they might have been written and the distinct socio-economic and cultural contexts in which texts are produced such attentiveness would also extend to questions of accurate representation and translation of texts to which readers of journals predominantly in English would not have access.

So while the researcher in the Humanities in common with those in the Social Sciences, Medicine and Biosciences, is enjoined to follow certain common guidelines on citations and references, on multiple submissions, and acknowledgment of contributions, follow copyright laws and generally adhere to accepted international ethical practices where publication is concerned, the really vital site for acquiring an ethical sense is in the particular culture of the discipline itself. It is here that research ethics has evolved. For ethical research practice to emerge in English it is perhaps as necessary to take note of what the discipline studies today and in a given location, as it is to acknowledge its object of study, the literary text, and all that it represents, and demands/expects of the researcher/critic.

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