'Paper mill' research shame

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New Delhi: Academic authors from India appear on 93 per cent of 1,720 conference papers flagged in a global investigation into "paper mills", or commercial entities that sell authorships on research papers.

The study matched more than 4,000 authorship-for-sale offers posted on social media between February 2021 and December 2025 with published papers, identifying patterns consistent with ghostwriting and purchased authorship in 1,720 papers.

In one case, an online post offered authorship slots on a paper on artificial intelligence and wireless networks, promising guaranteed publication. Months later, a paper with the same title appeared in conference proceedings with six coauthors from six Indian cities.

Researchers say exact title matches are among the indicators of academic misconduct.

"Our findings point to a big public market for paid authorships of academic papers," Anna Abalkina, a research fellow at the Free University of Berlin in Germany who led the study, told The Telegraph.

The study by Abalkina and her colleagues has not yet been peer-reviewed but has been posted on a public archive of research.

"The authorship-for-sale offers are in the public domain... authorities must know what is going on," said Abalkina, who has been studying research misconduct.

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'Paper mills'

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The 1,720 papers appeared across 286 conference proceedings published by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), a major academic publisher. Among 88 conferences with at least five flagged papers, 77 were held in India.

The flagged papers collectively had more than 6,500 authors from 3,500 institutions across 55 countries. About 93 per cent of the papers included at least one author from India, compared with 17 per cent from the US, 11 per cent from Iraq, and 5 per cent each from Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan.

In 1,244 — or 72 per cent — of the 1,720 papers, the titles were identical to those advertised in advance in authorship-for-sale posts. In many of the remaining papers, only minor changes were detected, such as altered word order or shifts between singular and plural forms.

The IEEE's regional sections, including those in Uttar Pradesh, Chennai and Bengaluru, had co-sponsored the conference proceedings, a pattern which some academics say raises questions about oversight and peer-review standards.

A query from this newspaper to the IEEE requesting comments on the study's findings did not evoke a response.

The findings have amplified concerns among sections of Indian academics that current evaluation systems place excessive weight on counts of academic papers rather than their quality, creating incentives for misconduct.

"This type of research misconduct inflates publication counts to dishonestly secure favourable academic assessments and institutional rankings," said Sunil Mukhi, a theoretical physicist formerly at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Mumbai.

Critics have also questioned India's National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), an annual ranking exercise introduced in 2016, which evaluates institutions partly on research output. "The emphasis on publication counts, combined with the ease of buying authorships, makes the rankings misleading," said Subhash Lakhotia, a distinguished professor at Banaras Hindu University.

In June 2025, leading Indian scientists warned the government through a joint letter that failure to reform research evaluation systems could undermine research integrity in the country.

"We have yet to see any meaningful corrective measures," Lakhotia said.

Researchers also pointed to unusual patterns of collaboration as a possible signal of authorship-for-sale papers, noting that the titles of many published papers closely matched earlier online offers but listed co-authors from multiple, seemingly unrelated institutions and cities.

One such paper had six co-authors from six different Indian cities, while another listed contributors from institutions across India, Peru and South Africa — a geographic spread that researchers said would be unlikely for small conference papers without prior collaboration.