

## From Misconduct to Merit

### Understanding How Backdated Publications Shape Academic Hierarchies

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**This qualitative study investigates the growing phenomenon of backdated research publications and their influence on academic hierarchies within Indian higher education institutions. Conducted across four major university settings—Kanpur, Lucknow, Delhi, and Varanasi—the research engages a purposive sample of 200 faculty members, with 50 teachers from each location. Using a semi-structured interview schedule, the study explores personal experiences, perceptions, and observations related to unethical publication practices, institutional pressures, and career advancement mechanisms. The responses were analyzed through thematic analysis, generating ten major themes that capture the complexity of publication-related misconduct. These themes highlight issues such as systemic loopholes, pressure to publish, compromised peer review, the role of institutional politics, and the impact on both academic integrity and meritocracy. The findings emphasize an urgent need for transparent evaluation systems, ethical oversight, and awareness-driven reforms to safeguard the credibility of academic scholarship and promotion pathways.**

**Keywords:** Backdated Publications; Academic Misconduct; Higher Education Integrity; Research Ethics; Faculty Promotion Practices

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## Introduction

**T**HE CONTEMPORARY academic environment is increasingly shaped by intense pressure to publish, creating a “publish-or-perish” culture that often drives researchers toward practices that compromise scholarly integrity. While genuine academic work demands time, rigor, and ethical commitment, the growing competition for promotions, recognition, and institutional rewards has opened the door to questionable and unethical publication behaviors. Research shows that these pressures can distort academic decision-making and incentivize misconduct (Fanelli, 2009; Tjink et al., 2014).

Among these behaviors, the practice of backdated publications—assigning earlier submission or publication dates to research papers to satisfy assessment criteria—has emerged as a subtle yet powerful form of academic misconduct. Despite its frequent mention in informal academic discussions, the phenomenon remains largely underexplored in systematic research on research integrity.

Recent studies provide strong evidence that unethical publishing practices are neither isolated nor accidental. Xie et al. (2021) conducted a large-scale meta-analysis demonstrating that a substantial proportion of researchers admit to questionable practices, revealing systemic problems within the scientific enterprise. Similarly, Fanelli et al. (2017) and Gopalakrishna et al. (2022) found widespread instances of misreporting, selective analysis, and manipulation across disciplines. Phogat et al. (2023) noted persistent biomedical misconduct, attributing it partly to incentives around rapid publication.

Concerns about contaminated scientific literature continue to rise. Cabanac (2022) highlighted how problematic papers infiltrate indexing systems, while McIntosh and Vitale (2024) emphasized the emergence of forensic scientometrics to detect anomalies and manipulated manuscripts. Tau (2024) further revealed that over half of surveyed European researchers personally witnessed unethical behaviors — particularly authorship manipulation, honorary authorship, and gift authorship — echoing earlier findings by Kwok (2005) and Resnik et al. (2015).

In the Indian and wider Global South context, the issue is more pronounced due to institutionalized publication-based promotion systems. Predatory publishing, long recognized as a threat (Beall, 2012; Shen & Björk, 2015), has created a parallel ecosystem that bypasses genuine peer review. Merga (2024) documented how predatory journals exploit academic pressure, while Moher et al. (2017) noted that weak global regulatory systems make it easier for academics to bypass ethical standards. Studies from India indicate that structural loopholes, inadequate oversight, and promotion-linked publication metrics encourage questionable shortcuts (Bhat, 2019; Ravi et al., 2023).

Publication fraud has also become more sophisticated. Stockemer and Reidy (2023) described rising cases of fake authorship letters and paper manipulation, aligning with

international trends in academic cybercrime. Abalkina (2023) exposed large-scale paper-mill operations selling fabricated manuscripts, while Horbach and Halffman (2019) provided early documentation of manipulation in peer-review systems. Bik (2023) reported thousands of fraudulent biomedical images and problematic papers requiring retraction.

Evidence from other regions reinforces the systemic nature of the problem. Chen et al. (2024) found that more than half of medical residents in China engaged in at least one form of misconduct, suggesting that these issues transcend seniority, geography, and discipline. Armond-Miller (2024) emphasized that even “questionable research practices,” without overt fraud, significantly degrade scientific quality.

Retraction data further confirms the global rise in problematic science. Analyses by Singh (2024), Trikalinos et al. (2008), and Fanelli et al. (2018) consistently show increasing retractions due to both intentional misconduct and peer-review failures. Additional work by Byrne and Christopher (2020) and Wager & Kleinert (2012) highlights the need for stronger editorial oversight.

Studies focusing specifically on unethical publication practices—duplicate submissions, ghostwriting, manipulated submission histories, and fake peer review—provide deeper insights into emerging threats (Shen & Björk, 2022; Abalkina, 2023; Horbach & Halffman, 2022; Bik, 2023). These behaviors blur the line between merit and manipulation, enabling individuals to ascend academic hierarchies without producing meaningful scholarly contributions.

Finally, scholars such as Nosek et al. (2012), Resnik (2023), and Sorokowski et al. (2023) argue that structural incentives — rather than individual moral failings—are the primary drivers of misconduct. This suggests that unethical publishing, including practices such as backdating, is not merely a personal choice but an outcome of systemic distortions within contemporary academic ecosystems.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that misconduct is neither marginal nor rare; instead, it operates within a complex environment shaped by institutional policies, promotional guidelines, and competitive pressures. Yet, one area that remains strikingly under-researched is the specific practice of backdating publications, especially within the Indian higher-education context. Backdating is seldom discussed in formal literature, despite its silent but profound role in influencing academic evaluations such as Academic Performance Indicator (API) scores, promotion eligibility, and research grant applications.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine how backdated publications shape academic hierarchies in Indian universities. Through qualitative enquiry involving faculty members from Kanpur, Lucknow, Delhi, and Varanasi, the study explores the lived experiences, perceptions, and systemic conditions that allow such practices to persist. By generating thematic insights from semi-structured interviews, this research aims to illuminate the hidden mechanisms that convert misconduct into perceived merit, thereby challenging the integrity of academic systems and calling for urgent reforms.

## Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the prevalence and nature of backdated

publication practices among faculty members in selected Indian universities.

2. To understand the institutional, personal, and systemic pressures that contribute to the use of backdated publications in academic evaluations.
3. To examine faculty perceptions of academic integrity and misconduct in relation to publication-based promotion policies.
4. To identify the mechanisms through which backdated publications influence academic hierarchies and career advancement pathways.
5. To generate thematic insights on how unethical publication practices are normalized, justified, or resisted within academic settings.
6. To recommend structural reforms that can strengthen ethical research practices and transparency in promotion systems.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to capture deep insights into the lived experiences of faculty members. Considering the sensitive and often concealed nature of backdated publication practices, a qualitative approach enables participants to openly discuss tacit norms, hidden mechanisms, and institutional pressures that may not be visible in formal documents. This design ensures a rich, nuanced understanding of how publication-related misconduct operates within academic environments.

### Study Area

The research was conducted across four major university environments in North India—Kanpur, Lucknow, Delhi, and Varanasi. These locations represent central, state, and deemed universities, providing a broad geographical and cultural spectrum reflective of varied academic practices, institutional structures, and research climates prevalent in Indian higher education.

### Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure inclusion of participants with relevant experience and insight. The sample consisted of 200 faculty members, with 50 participants drawn from each location. Care was taken to include diversity in terms of academic rank (assistant, associate, and full professors) and disciplinary backgrounds (humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, professional programs).

Saturation was closely monitored during data collection. After approximately 160 interviews, no new substantive themes were emerging. An additional 40 interviews were conducted to ensure cross-location robustness, after which thematic saturation was conclusively achieved.

### Data Collection

Data were gathered through a semi-structured interview schedule, conducted in person or online depending on participant convenience. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes.

The flexible interview design allowed participants to share detailed narratives regarding publication expectations, misconduct, institutional pressures, and their perceptions of academic hierarchies. The complete interview guide is provided in the *Annexure I*.

### Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework: familiarization, initial coding, theme formation, theme review, theme definition, and report writing. To ensure rigor, coding decisions and theme development were documented systematically.

### Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Identities were anonymized, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. All data were used exclusively for academic purposes, adhering to ethical guidelines for human participant research.

### Reflexivity

Given the sensitive nature of academic misconduct, reflexivity was integral to the research process. The primary researcher possesses academic experience in higher education research but does not hold administrative or evaluative authority within the universities studied. This "informed outsider" position enabled both contextual understanding and adequate distance, encouraging participants to share candid insights.

Several strategies were employed to minimize bias:

- Reflexive journaling: A diary was maintained to document personal assumptions, emotional reactions, and evolving interpretations, helping the researcher identify and bracket personal viewpoints.
- Bracketing: Preconceived notions regarding publication pressure and misconduct were consciously set aside during data collection and coding.
- Peer debriefing: Two independent qualitative researchers reviewed coding decisions and challenged subjective interpretations to enhance analytic validity.
- Triangulation across ranks and disciplines: Inclusion of faculty from different disciplines and hierarchical levels reduced the likelihood of single-group bias shaping the findings.
- Analytic transparency: Coding frameworks, memos, and theme development steps were documented to create a clear audit trail.

These reflexive measures strengthened the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the study, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participant narratives rather than researcher assumptions.

### Results and Analysis

The present chapter presents the findings derived from qualitative interviews conducted with 200 faculty members from Kanpur, Lucknow, Delhi, and Varanasi. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach and generated ten dominant themes. Coding patterns revealed strong clusters around

institutional pressures, ethical dilemmas, systemic weaknesses, and the normalization of misconduct. Verbatim narratives are included to preserve the authenticity of participants' voices,

coded according to city and participant number (e.g., DL34 = Delhi Participant 34; KN12 = Kanpur Participant 12).

**Table 1. Dimensions of the Publish-or-Perish Pressure.**

Sub-Themes	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Narratives
Pressure for API scores	48	24%	"In our institution, everything is calculated in numbers. If your Academic Performance Indicator (API) score is even slightly less, your entire promotion file is rejected. It does not matter how sincerely you teach or guide students. The message is very clear: publish something, anyhow, otherwise you will stay where you are for the next ten years." (DL34)
Competition and career insecurity	39	19.5%	"There is a silent competition going on. Everyone is trying to out-publish the other. It feels like if you don't run in this race, you will become invisible professionally. Even the most ethical people start feeling insecure because the system rewards only publication count, not quality." (KN12)
Fear of stagnation	32	16%	"I have been in the same position for almost a decade, and every year the pressure increases. You see your juniors getting promoted simply because they managed to get more papers, whether genuine or manipulated. After some time, you begin to feel that you have no choice." (LK41)
Institutional publication targets	27	13.5%	"Our college has unofficial targets. They say it indirectly, but everyone understands. You must show two or three publications every year. If you fail, it reflects badly during appraisal meetings. So people start looking for shortcuts." (VN08)

**Table 2. Structural Loopholes and Weak Institutional Oversight.**

Sub-Themes	f	%	Narratives
Lack of verification of journal authenticity	42	21%	"No one in our university checks whether the journal is predatory, hijacked, or even real. As long as you attach a printed PDF and a certificate, it gets accepted. I have seen colleagues submit papers in journals that disappeared the next month, but the administration never questioned it." (LK22)
No auditing of submission/publication dates	36	18%	"Backdating happens because nobody verifies dates. The clerical staff simply arranges the files; they are not trained to check publication timelines. If someone claims their paper was published in 2018, it gets taken at face value. This lack of scrutiny encourages manipulation." (DL11)
Reliance on self-attested documents	33	16.5%	"The entire evaluation process depends on whatever the applicant submits. There is no cross-checking with publishers or databases. People self-attest manipulated documents, and the system accepts them blindly. It is almost like an honor system that unfortunately gets misused." (KN19)
Absence of ethics committees or monitoring bodies	29	14.5%	"We don't have any ethics or research integrity cell. Nobody feels accountable. If there was a committee to verify publications, a lot of these malpractices would stop. But because there is no monitoring, the culture of manipulation keeps growing." (VN05)

### Theme 1: Intensification of the Publish-or-Perish Pressure

Analysis of participant narratives revealed a pervasive sense of pressure embedded within the academic system, making publication output the primary criterion for career growth. This intensification of publication-related expectations—documented in **Table 1**—shows how faculty members across all four cities experience a persistent burden to meet quantitative research requirements. Respondents frequently used expressions such as "race," "compulsion," "burden," and "survival strategy," indicating that the academic environment increasingly prioritizes numerical output over genuine scholarship.

As shown in **Table 1**, the most frequently mentioned sub-theme was pressure related to Academic Performance Indicator (API) scoring systems, cited by nearly one-fourth (24%) of participants. This suggests that policy-driven quantitative evaluation systems are a major trigger for publication-related compromises. Competition and career insecurity further intensify the need to "keep producing," pushing faculty — especially mid-career academics — to seek rapid publication outlets.

Fear of stagnation (16%) also surfaced as a powerful emotional driver, reflecting how stalled promotions or prolonged

waiting periods foster frustration. Several respondents indicated that unethical practices, including backdating publications, become a means of coping with institutional expectations rather than a deliberate act of academic dishonesty. Similarly, institutional publication targets — reported by 13.5% of participants — highlight how formal and informal directives contribute to the normalization of manipulating publication timelines.

Overall, the data clearly demonstrates that the publish-or-perish pressure is not merely an institutional requirement but a structural force that reshapes academic behavior. It facilitates a culture where unethical shortcuts, including backdating, paper mills, and low-quality journal submissions, become tacitly accepted survival strategies rather than exceptions.

### Theme 2: Structural Loopholes and Weak Institutional Oversight

A second dominant theme that emerged from the analysis relates to the systemic weaknesses within institutional structures that enable unethical publication practices to persist. Participants consistently described gaps in verification, absence of monitoring bodies, and administrative leniency that collectively

create an environment where backdated publications can be inserted into promotion files without challenge. As summarized in **Table 2**, these structural loopholes function as enabling

conditions, allowing manipulated or low-quality research outputs to pass as demonstrated in **Table 2**, institutional loopholes play a crucial enabling role in the continuation of

**Table 3. Institutional Pressure and the Culture of Performance.**

Sub-Themes	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Narratives
Publication Targets Linked to Appraisal	62	31%	"Every year we are asked to show academic output even if the institution knows we barely have research resources." (DL41)
Departmental Competition and Comparison	48	24%	"Our HOD displays everyone's publication score publicly. It creates pressure and pushes people to take shortcuts." (LK12)
Administrative Push for National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) /Ranking	56	28%	"Before National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) visit, suddenly everyone becomes 'active' in research — most of it fabricated or backdated." (KN05)
Lack of Institutional Support for Genuine Research	34	17%	"We are told to publish but given no labs, no funds, no time — unethical practices are then an expected outcome." (VN27)

**Table 4. Predatory Journals and Easy Publication Platforms.**

Sub-Themes	f	%	Narratives
Fast Acceptance and Payment-Based Journals	71	35%	"Some journals accept in 24 hours — everyone knows what that means." (DL09)
Lack of Awareness of Journal Quality	28	14%	"Many young faculty still don't understand indexing — they just submit wherever seniors tell them." (LK44)
Publications for Promotion Score	63	31%	"When promotion depends on numbers, predatory journals look like the simplest path." (KN18)
Institutional Tolerance of Predatory Publishing	38	20%	"Administration never questions where people are publishing as long as metrics look good." (VN03)

backdated publication practices. The most frequently cited issue — lack of verification of journal authenticity (21%) — reveals how predatory or unstable journals become easy vehicles for generating questionable publications. Participants repeatedly pointed out that administrative staff often lack the training or mandate to authenticate journal legitimacy, making fraudulent or low-quality submissions appear acceptable.

Similarly, the absence of auditing for submission or publication dates (18%) allows faculty members to retroactively manipulate timelines without risk of detection. Many respondents described the evaluation process as overly dependent on self-attested documents, which, in the absence of cross-checking, creates opportunities for misuse.

The lack of functioning ethics committees or research integrity cells further compounds the problem. Participants expressed concern that without formal monitoring mechanisms, institutions inadvertently support a system where misconduct becomes normalized and unchallenged. This structural vacuum contributes to promotions and career advancements being awarded on the basis of questionable publications, undermining fairness and academic integrity.

Overall, the findings show that weak institutional oversight is not merely a procedural lapse but a structural factor that significantly shapes research behavior. When verification mechanisms are absent, unethical practices—particularly backdating — thrive unchecked, ultimately compromising the credibility of academic evaluation systems.

### Theme 3: Institutional Pressure and the

### Culture of Performance

This theme surfaced prominently from repeated participant accounts describing the systemic pressures embedded in university environments. Faculty frequently highlighted publication quotas, appraisal-linked metrics, departmental comparison practices, and the administrative drive for rankings as key factors shaping research behavior. These institutional expectations create a culture where academic performance is measured primarily through numerical output, indirectly encouraging faculty to engage in unethical practices such as manipulating publication dates. The clustering of relevant codes around these institutional pressures formed a strong thematic pattern, summarized in **Table 3**.

As illustrated in **Table 3**, institutional pressure emerged as a powerful driver of research-related misconduct. Nearly one-third of the participants (31%) reported explicit or implicit publication targets tied to appraisal processes, creating a performance-driven environment where quantity overshadows quality. Departmental-level comparisons, often through publicly displayed publication scores, intensify competition and reinforce the perception that academic value is equated with numerical output.

A significant proportion of respondents (28%) linked unethical publication behaviors to accreditation cycles, particularly National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) visits, during which institutions temporarily prioritize research output — often resulting in fabricated or backdated publications to present an inflated scholarly profile. The lack of structural support for conducting genuine research, reported by

17% of participants, further compounds this problem. Faculty members describe unrealistic expectations set by administrations that provide neither resources nor time for authentic scholarship,

making shortcuts appear as the only viable response.

Overall, Theme 3 demonstrates that unethical practices are not isolated individual choices but are shaped and amplified by

**Table 5. Patterns of Authorship Manipulation.**

Sub-Themes	f	%	Narratives
Gifted/Ghost Authorship	52	26%	"I was told to add my senior's name though he never read the paper." (LK22)
Forced Co-Authorship by Supervisors	47	23%	"Promotion-seeking seniors insist their names must appear first." (DL17)
Authorship in Exchange for Favor	45	22%	"People add colleagues' names expecting reciprocal additions in future." (KN29)
Authorship Manipulation to Inflate Score	56	29%	"Some papers have 8–10 authors, most with minimal contribution." (VN11)

**Table 6. Backdating Publications for Career Gains.**

Sub-Themes	f	%	Narratives
Meeting Academic Performance Indicator (API) /Promotion Requirements	79	39%	"Publications suddenly appear just when promotion files are due." (VN09)
Creating Artificial Research Timeline	36	18%	"People publish with old dates so it appears they have been consistently active." (DL30)
Pressure to Match Peer Achievements	41	20%	"When you see peers jumping ahead, people resort to backdating." (LK10)
Fear of Losing Opportunities	44	23%	"If you miss the window for promotion, it sets your career back years." (KN47)

institutional systems that prioritize performance metrics. The normalization of publication counts as indicators of academic merit fosters an environment where backdated publications become an accepted coping mechanism within systemic constraints rather than intentional acts of wrongdoing.

#### **Theme 4: Predatory Journals and the Proliferation of Easy Publication Platforms**

A prominent pattern across interviews was the repeated reference to "easy," "fast," or "same-day" publishing outlets. Participants described an ecosystem where predatory journals and payment-based platforms are routinely used to meet appraisal deadlines, fulfil promotion requirements, or quickly accumulate publication counts. These recurring codes formed a clear and substantial theme, as summarized in **Table 4**.

As demonstrated in **Table 4**, predatory journals have become an accessible alternative for faculty seeking rapid publication outputs. More than one-third of the participants (35%) referred to fast-acceptance or payment-based journals, highlighting a system where peer review is either superficial or entirely absent. This ease of access not only encourages low-quality submissions but also facilitates unethical practices such as backdating.

A significant portion of respondents (31%) acknowledged that the demand for high publication counts in promotion metrics makes predatory outlets appear as convenient shortcuts. Younger faculty members, in particular, often lack adequate training in identifying legitimate journals, leading them to rely on suggestions from seniors or institutional networks, which may inadvertently direct them toward questionable platforms.

Institutional tolerance further reinforces this pattern. As 20% of participants noted, administrative bodies seldom scrutinize journal quality as long as the numerical output aligns with

accreditation or ranking expectations. This lack of accountability normalizes predatory publishing and undermines the rigor and credibility of scholarly work.

Overall, Theme 4 reveals how predatory journals operate as a parallel system within academia—one that rewards speed, payment, and manipulation over genuine scholarship. Their prevalence not only trivializes authentic research efforts but also strengthens the cycle of unethical publication practices, including backdating and inflated academic profiles.

#### **Theme 5: Manipulation of Authorship and Publishing Ethics**

During interviews, faculty repeatedly highlighted unethical authorship practices, including adding senior names without contribution, including non-contributors, and rearranging authorship order to favor influential colleagues. These patterns reflected the intersection of academic power hierarchies and career advancement strategies, forming a distinct and meaningful theme. The sub-themes and associated narratives are summarized in **Table 5**.

As illustrated in **Table 5**, manipulation of authorship is a prevalent mechanism through which faculty navigate hierarchical and promotional pressures. Nearly one-third of participants (29%) reported instances of inflating authorship lists to maximize credit, while 26% observed ghost or gifted authorship where senior faculty received recognition without contributing. Such practices often operate under implicit or explicit pressure from supervisors, with 23% noting forced inclusion of senior names.

The data indicate that authorship has effectively become a currency within academic departments—traded for promotions, reciprocal favor, or departmental influence. Despite existing ethical guidelines, enforcement appears weak, and formal

mechanisms for accountability are either absent or ineffective. This theme underscores a structural normalization of unethical behavior, where authorship decisions reflect strategic career

calculations rather than academic contribution.

In summary, Theme 5 highlights the critical intersection of power, ethics, and credit allocation in academia, showing that

**Table 7. Gaps in Research Training and Mentorship.**

Sub-Themes	f	%	Narratives
Insufficient Research Methodology Training	58	29%	"We were never properly trained; we learn by trial and error." (DL25)
Outdated Supervisory Practices	34	17%	"Some guides still follow 20-year-old practices." (LK39)
Limited Exposure to Quality Journals	43	22%	"Most faculty do not read top-tier journals due to access issues." (KN13)
Lack of Motivation or Support	65	32%	"There is no ecosystem encouraging young researchers — only deadlines." (VN40)

**Table 8. Academic Networks and Favoritism.**

Sub-Themes	f	%	Narratives
Advantage for Well-Connected Faculty	49	24%	"Same group of people keep reviewing each other's work and approving it." (DL14)
Bias in Promotion Committees	36	18%	"Committees favor those they know; merit becomes secondary." (KN39)
Journal Editors Supporting Their Circles	42	21%	"Editors invite only their contacts to publish quickly." (VN32)
Exclusion of Less-Connected Researchers	73	37%	"If you don't belong to academic lobbies, your work is ignored." (LK03)

manipulation of authorship is not an isolated phenomenon but a systemically embedded practice that reinforces inequities and undermines scholarly integrity.

### Theme 6: Backdating as a Strategy for Promotions and Career Advancement

A recurring pattern in the interviews was faculty observations of colleagues strategically backdating publications to satisfy eligibility criteria for promotions, awards, or other career milestones. Nearly all participants acknowledged witnessing such practices, indicating that backdating is widespread and often normalized within institutional settings. The sub-themes and corresponding narratives are summarized in **Table 6**.

As shown in **Table 6**, backdating publications emerges primarily as a strategic response to institutional and bureaucratic pressures rather than solely as an ethical lapse. Nearly 39% of respondents highlighted that publications often appear just before promotion deadlines, suggesting a tactical alignment with eligibility timelines. Faculty also described artificially creating consistent research timelines (18%) to project continuous scholarly activity, reflecting the performative nature of institutional expectations.

Pressure to match peer achievements (20%) and fear of missing career opportunities (23%) further reinforce this practice. The data suggest that rigid criteria and promotion-linked requirements unintentionally incentivize faculty to manipulate publication dates, transforming backdating into a pragmatic survival strategy. This theme underscores the role of institutional structures in shaping research behavior and highlights the blurred line between ethical compromise and systemic adaptation in academic environments.

### Theme 7: Lack of Research Training and Mentorship

Across all four cities, participants consistently highlighted a lack

of structured research training and mentorship. Many faculty members described outdated supervisory practices, insufficient methodological guidance, and limited exposure to high-quality journals. This gap in skills and support emerged as a distinct theme, as summarized in **Table 7**.

As illustrated in **Table 7**, deficiencies in research training and mentorship significantly influence faculty reliance on easy or unethical publication routes. Nearly one-third of participants (32%) reported a lack of motivation or institutional support, indicating that the academic environment often emphasizes deadlines over skill development. Insufficient training in research methodology (29%) and limited exposure to high-quality journals (22%) further constrain faculty's ability to conduct rigorous, publishable research.

Outdated supervisory practices (17%) exacerbate the problem by failing to provide guidance aligned with contemporary research standards. The findings suggest that, in the absence of structured mentorship and skill development, faculty are more likely to adopt expedient or ethically questionable strategies, including submitting to predatory journals or backdating publications, as a compensatory mechanism.

Overall, Theme 7 underscores the importance of strengthening research training and mentorship to promote ethical, high-quality scholarship and reduce dependency on shortcuts within academic institutions.

### Theme 8: Influence of Academic Networks and Favoritism

Faculty participants repeatedly highlighted the pervasive role of networks, favoritism, and academic lobbying in shaping opportunities for publications and promotions. Many respondents described informal cliques, seniority-based patronage, and editorial connections that operate behind the scenes to determine recognition, reward, and career

advancement. This theme reflects the structural influence of social capital within academia, which often supersedes merit-based evaluation.

As reflected in **Table 8**, faculty who are well-connected enjoy considerable advantages, including faster publication approval and preferential promotion. This systemic favoritism

**Table 9. Identity, Reputation, and Scholarly Pressure.**

Sub-Themes	f	%	Narratives
Need to Appear Research-Active	61	30%	"Everyone wants their CV to look impressive, even if reality is different." (DL06)
Social Media Visibility & Academic Branding	27	13%	"People post about publications they haven't actually done." (KN22)
Fear of Being Perceived as Unproductive	59	29%	"If your profile looks empty, you are sidelined professionally." (LK14)
Building Reputation Through Quantity	53	28%	"Ten average papers are valued more than one good study." (VN20)

**Table 10. Ethical Decline and Need for Reform.**

Sub-Themes	f	%	Narratives
Normalization of Unethical Practices	68	34%	"People don't even hide misconduct anymore — it's openly accepted." (LK19)
Weak Enforcement of Ethical Guidelines	45	22%	"Ethics committees exist only on paper." (KN51)
Call for Training and Strict Monitoring	39	19%	"We need mandatory ethics training every year." (DL08)
Demand for Structural Reforms	48	25%	"Unless criteria change, misconduct will continue." (VN12)

marginalizes less-networked researchers, creating a climate where inequities persist and merit-based recognition is undermined. The narratives highlight how formal structures — such as promotion committees and editorial boards — intersect with informal networks to produce structural bias. Consequently, backdating publications and seeking shortcuts become adaptive strategies for those outside these networks. Faculty reported that ethical researchers often feel disempowered, contributing to frustration and the internalization of a culture that rewards connections over scholarly integrity.

**Theme 9: Professional Identity, Reputation, and Pressure to Appear Successful**

Respondents emphasized the intense pressures within academia to maintain professional visibility and cultivate a reputation for productivity. Beyond institutional expectations, societal and peer pressures amplify the need to present an image of scholarly success. Faculty often felt compelled to highlight productivity, sometimes exaggerating outputs, engaging in backdating, or promoting low-quality research to sustain a competitive professional identity.

As shown in **Table 9**, the pressure to maintain professional identity and reputation is a powerful driver of research behavior. Nearly one-third of participants noted that the need to appear research-active shapes their publication strategies, often at the cost of quality. The narratives indicate that social media and public academic branding intensify these pressures, encouraging faculty to exaggerate outputs or backdate publications to maintain perceived productivity. The fear of being perceived as unproductive (29%) highlights how professional survival is intertwined with visibility, reinforcing a culture where image and quantity are prioritized over genuine scholarship. Ultimately, this theme illustrates the psychosocial dimensions of academic misconduct, linking reputation management directly to systemic

pressures and ethical compromise.

**Theme 10: Erosion of Academic Ethics and the Need for Systemic Reform**

Participants expressed deep concern regarding a perceived decline in ethical standards across institutions. Faculty noted that unethical practices are increasingly normalized, ethics enforcement is weak, and there is limited accountability. This theme represents a culmination of insights across the study, connecting individual misconduct to broader systemic deficiencies.

As demonstrated in **Table 10**, there is a shared perception that academic misconduct is normalized and institutional enforcement is insufficient. Approximately one-third of participants observed that unethical practices are openly accepted, highlighting a systemic erosion of scholarly integrity. Weak enforcement of ethical guidelines (22%) and limited oversight allow misconduct to persist unchallenged. Respondents emphasized the need for structured reforms, including mandatory ethics training, transparent evaluation systems, and ethical audits. This theme underscores that addressing misconduct requires systemic interventions rather than solely focusing on individual behavior. Faculty perceive that unless institutional structures, promotion criteria, and accountability mechanisms are reformed, unethical practices — including backdating publications — will continue to thrive.

**Discussion**

The findings of this study — particularly those reflected in Themes 8, 9, and 10 — highlight structural distortions in academic evaluation systems that parallel global trends. The influence of academic networks and favoritism (Theme 8) strongly aligns with international literature showing how informal patronage, social capital, and institutional alliances

shape academic visibility and promotion. Studies from Europe and the United States have similarly documented that well-connected researchers gain disproportionate advantage in awards, authorship opportunities, and promotions, often sidelining equally competent but less-networked faculty (Meho, 2025; Abalkina, 2021). Research from China further shows that “guanxi” (social connections) often mediates access to research funds and authorship slots, creating a parallel system of advancement based on relationships rather than scholarly merit (You et al., 2021).

The theme of pressures to maintain scholarly identity and visible productivity (Theme 9) resonates with the increasingly metric-driven global academic environment. Scholars across Europe, East Asia, and Latin America report feeling compelled to publish frequently to meet institutional performance requirements, even if this means compromising methodological rigor or relying on lower-quality publication outlets (Tomlinson, 2024; Heuritsch, 2021). In China, publication counts directly determine financial bonuses and promotion eligibility, leading to practices such as ghostwriting and backdating (Fanelli, 2023). Similar pressures have been identified in European universities, where researchers strategically modify CVs or pursue “least publishable units” to meet evaluation targets.

Theme 10, which highlights the erosion of ethical norms, aligns with growing global concern that research misconduct is becoming normalized rather than exceptional. Rising retraction rates in Europe and North America, the proliferation of paper mills in China and Russia, and widespread authorship manipulation across biomedical sciences indicate that systemic incentives are driving unethical behavior (Eshwara, Ali, & Kumar, 2024; Financial Times, 2025). This study’s findings show comparable patterns in the Indian context, where weak enforcement, limited oversight, and high stakes attached to publications enable practices such as backdating, predatory publishing, and inflated authorship to persist.

### Contribution to Understanding Misconduct

This study advances the understanding of academic misconduct in three important ways:

1. It identifies backdating publications as a distinct, understudied form of misconduct, often overshadowed by more visible issues like plagiarism or predatory publishing.
2. It demonstrates how misconduct is structurally embedded, driven not only by individual actions but by institutional expectations, competitive environments, and flawed evaluation systems.
3. It clarifies how misconduct reshapes academic hierarchies, privileging connected researchers and disadvantaging those adhering to ethical standards.

These insights underscore that unethical practices are not isolated acts but symptoms of deeper structural misalignments in academic systems.

### Policy Implications for UGC, AICTE, National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)

The findings have direct relevance for national regulatory bodies:

- UGC’s API-based promotion system may unintentionally

incentivize quantity over quality, creating pressure for backdated or low-quality publications. Revisiting API thresholds and recognizing diverse forms of scholarly contribution could reduce misconduct.

- AICTE and NAAC frameworks should incorporate stronger checks on publication authenticity, including random verification of publication dates, cross-checking with journal databases, and penalties for fraudulent reporting.
- National-level ethics cells within UGC/AICTE could establish standardized procedures for reporting and investigating publication-related misconduct.

Strengthening transparency, accountability, and quality assurance mechanisms is essential for protecting academic integrity across Indian higher education.

### Recommended Interventions

Based on the findings, the following interventions are proposed:

1. Shift from quantity-based to quality-focused evaluation, emphasizing peer-review rigor, methodological soundness, and research impact.
2. Introduce mandatory research integrity training for faculty and administrators, with certification linked to promotions.
3. Create independent ethics committees at institutional and national levels for monitoring, verifying, and addressing publication-related misconduct.
4. Encourage transparent digital documentation, such as ORCID integration, date-stamping of submissions, and institutional repositories.
5. Provide mentorship and workload balance, especially for early-career researchers who face disproportionate pressure to publish.

Collectively, these reforms can help rebuild trust, reduce unethical behavior, and promote a healthier academic culture.

### Conclusion

The study highlights that backdated publications are not isolated irregularities but part of a deeper systemic challenge within Indian academia. The interplay of social networks, metric-driven evaluation, institutional loopholes, and weak ethical oversight creates an environment where misconduct becomes normalized. By revealing how backdating practices influence academic hierarchies, distort merit, and disadvantage ethical researchers, this study underscores the urgent need for structural reform.

Addressing this issue requires coordinated action at institutional, regulatory, and cultural levels. Shifting evaluation systems, strengthening ethical enforcement, and fostering an environment that values integrity over numerical output are essential steps. Ultimately, safeguarding the credibility of Indian higher education depends on recognizing and rectifying the systemic conditions that allow misconduct to flourish.

### Limitations

While the study offers valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged:

- Self-reporting bias: As the study relies on participants’ accounts, responses may be influenced by personal perceptions, selective recall, or hesitancy to disclose

sensitive information.

- Regional focus: Data were collected from four locations in North India; findings may not fully represent academic cultures in South, West, or Northeast India.
- Sensitivity of the topic: Discussion of misconduct can evoke caution, leading some participants to withhold details or moderate their responses.
- Lack of triangulation: The study did not include

documentary verification (e.g., publication records, institutional guidelines), which could have strengthened claims regarding backdating practices.

Future research should incorporate broader geographic coverage, mixed-method designs, and documentary evidence to provide a more comprehensive understanding of academic misconduct patterns. ■

### **Data Availability**

*The raw interview transcripts and analysis codebooks are not publicly available in order to protect the confidentiality and privacy of participants, as they contain identifiable human subject information. De-identified excerpts relevant to the study's findings are included within the article. Additional materials may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to institutional ethical approval.*

### **Ethical Considerations**

*This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki (2013 revision). All participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, voluntary nature, and confidentiality safeguards. Written informed consent was obtained. No identifying information was recorded, and pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity. Participation or refusal did not affect any academic or personal circumstances.*

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