



RANGANATHAN—APOSTLE OF LIBRARIANSHIP

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Abstract

Focuses attention on the human aspects of the personality of Dr SR Ranganathan. Describes his entry into the profession and the problems he faced. Gives briefly his contributions and achievements. Traces his leanings towards spiritualism and mysticism and their influence on his work. Gives instances of his interest in literature, poetry and music. Comments on his style in writing and public speaking. Pleads that to pay a befitting homage to him, more so in his Centenary Year, Ranganathan should be posthumously honoured with the highest possible Republic-Day Award.

1. Introduction

Much has been said about Ranganathan's achievements and contributions to the development of librarianship. However, some aspects of his personality which had an important bearing on his work, have not been projected adequately. In this paper, an attempt has been made to highlight these points. The author had the opportunity of attending some of his lectures delivered in Delhi and also of meeting him at his residence in

Bangalore in December 1968, alongwith Shri Harjit Singh, then a student of DRTC and now Adviser in the Ministry of Environment and Forests. He talked on current library problems for about half an hour, almost non-stop. It appeared as if a Rishi were giving discourse to his disciples in the Ashram.

2. Ancient Indian Tradition

India has a rich tradition of building up knowledge and disseminating it to the

aspirants. It dates back to the Vedic period when the sages called *Rishies* i.e. seers normally associated with spiritual pursuits, . . .; had sound knowledge of mundane sciences and arts. Those still referred to in the present times are Manu (law), Panini (grammar), Aryabhata (astronomy and mathematics), Charak (medicine), Sushruta (surgery), Kautilya (statecraft), Bharata (performing arts), etc. The medium of communication at that time was oral; and even at a later period, whatever manuscripts appeared on *bhojpatra*, palmleaf, parchment, paper, etc, were very few, which did not cause any serious problem of their maintenance and use. Probably it was left centuries later to one of their compatriots, the modern *Rishi*, Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan to formulate and codify laws on the use of books—to be precise the library science.

3. Reluctant Entry

Ranganathan came to this profession accidentally and rather reluctantly. He was serving as Assistant Professor of Mathematics in the Presidency College, Madras in the payscale of Rs 125-5-250 and wanted a much needed opening. His guide and benefactor Prof EB Ross and other well-wishers coaxed him to apply for the newly created post of the University Librarian, which he did, without possessing any prior knowledge or experience of librarianship. He was selected even though the Chairman of the Selection Committee would have a post-graduate in entomology, as in his opinion, the chief problem in the library was to save books from insects. For the first few days of his appointment as librarian, he could not know the difference between a book and a bound journal. Some months later, he was sent to London where he studied librarian-

ship under WCB Sayers. He served as the first University Librarian of the University of Madras from 1924 till his retirement in 1944.

4. Achievements

With his total involvement in work and missionary zeal, Ranganathan brought librarianship to the level of a science and evolved 'Five Laws of Library Science' which may be considered his prime achievement. His other significant contributions to the library profession include Colon Classification, a catalogue code, drafting of library development plans and legislation, formulation of library standards, education and research in library science, etc. He organised libraries of Madras, Benaras and Delhi Universities. Later he became Professor of Library Science in Delhi and Vikram Universities. He also served as the President of the Indian Library Association for about a decade (1944-1953).

After a sojourn at Zurich (1955-57) he returned to India on the persuasion of Prof PC Mahalanobis and organised Documentation Research & Training Centre (DRTC) at Bangalore as its Honorary Director, which has now grown into one of the best institutes of its kind in the world. He contributed original ideas and concepts to almost all the branches of library science. Ranganathan enriched the professional literature and to date, he stands as the most prolific writer in library science having to his credit 65 books and some 2000 articles besides numerous reports and notes.

5. Simple Life Style

Although recipient of a number of honours and awards from India and abroad which include Padma Shri

(1957), DLitt from Delhi University (1948) and University of Pittsburgh, USA (1964), National Research Professor in Library Science (1965), he led a very simple life. Even when his chief disciple Prof PN Kaula (who is also Editor of the latest book on Ranganathan 'A Librarian Looks Back, 1992') met him for the first time, he mistook Ranganathan for his servant. He worked for more than 12 hours a day and had very frugal meals with no tea or coffee. He was free from any addiction. He put all his earnings to create Sarada Ranganathan Endowment (named after his wife) for library development in the country.

6. Visits Abroad

Ranganathan attracted a large number of admirers and disciples from India and abroad. He visited a number of countries on lecture tours, attending or presiding over professional conferences, and impressed the audience with his scholarship, originality of ideas and sincerity of purpose.

7. Professional Jealousies and Pinpricks

In his early phase of life, he faced criticism and pinpricks from professional and non-professional colleagues. In Madras someone ridiculing his achievements remarked that he knew the so called great developments made by Ranganathan in library science, he had simply moved a single dot (decimal) to make a double dot (colon). When his book *Five Laws of Library Science* was being published by Madras Library Association (MALA) in 1931, he wanted to dedicate it to his late first wife Srimati Rukmani. The President of MALA objected to it on the ground that the book was a publication of the Association. In protest, Ranganathan tendered his

resignation as Secretary of MALA and proposed to withdraw the book from the Association. Finally the matter was amicably resolved. On the proposal for publication of *Colon Classification* by MALA, Prof KA Neela Kantha Sastri reportedly said in the meeting, 'Are we a publication body to publish every book of the Secretary?' Finally it was suggested that the book being too big, should be reduced to less than 200 pages.

8. Leanings Towards Spirituality

Ranganathan had a religious bent of mind and was well-versed in the *Ramayana*, the *Puranas* and other scriptures. This had a great impact on his work in librarianship. He would, often quote profusely and use similes and metaphors from the scriptures. Between 1930 and 1937 Ranganathan felt some internal change and developed a feeling to improve his inner life. He even thought of taking retirement and settle down in the Ashram of Ramana Maharshi. It was Purohit Swamy, a scholar of Gita who asked Ranganathan, 'Does the *Rishi* sell peace in bottles?' Purohit Swamy diagnosed that whenever the work slackened, Ranganathan's body went wrong. He admonished Ranganathan that if he hated intellectual work and ran away from the work of the library, he would become a great traitor. Consoling Ranganathan, Purohit Swamy gave some rose petals sent to him by Ezra Pound, the great American poet.

9. Influence of Mysticism

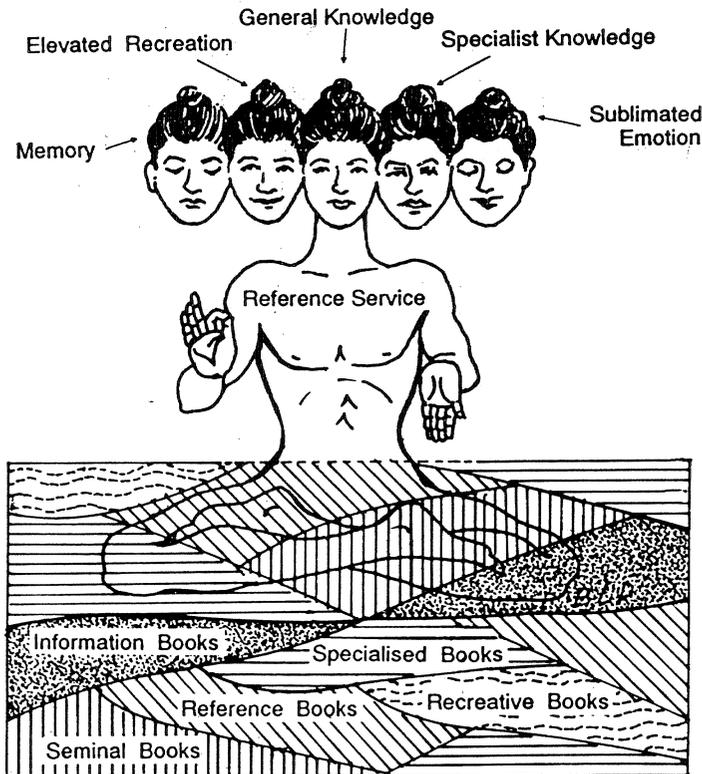
Evidence of mysticism in his work may be found in the assignment of the triangle symbol to the class on Spiritual Experience and Mysticism in the *Colon Classification*. This symbol has been borrowed from the Hindu Tantrism.

Ranganathan was fascinated by the figure 108 and 1008, which in numerology have the same value i.e. $1+8=9$ (zeroes being omitted). The number nine is very auspicious and signifies ascending wisdom. As a result, his book *Classification: Fundamentals and Procedures* and its counterpart in cataloguing is based on 1008 titles. In his minibook *Elements . . .*, the graded examples are of 108 titles. Significance of this number, i.e. 108 lies in the fact that the total number of Upanishadas is 108 although only about 14 are popular; there are 108 shrines of special sanctity; and 108 heads in the Hindu (Shaivite rosary).

Describing book as immortal soul in a mortal body, Ranganathan says 'from the point of view of a service library, every book is a mortal. Its physical body will perish by use or by mere efflux of

time and ageing even when locked up against use. This does not mean that the work embodied in a book is necessarily a mortal. The work may be immortal. Examples are the Vedas, the Talmud, the Bible, the Koran, the Gita . . . , and the seminal books in any subject. Such immortal works get embodied repeatedly in new editions, translations and versions. It is called a classic. Each particular embodiment of a classic is mortal. But the work contained in it *transmigrates* from one body to another. It is like the immortal soul in a mortal body'.

Reference service, according to Ranganathan forms the penultimate stage in the library's achievement of its ultimate end of cultivating the mental resources of the community. A schematic representation given below, which looks like



a figure from the Hindu pantheon is self explanatory.

10. Interest in Fine Arts

Although projected to the world, as a workaholic, full-time devotee of library science, Ranganathan did have some literary and cultural interests. Bernard Palmer, one of his great British admirers, felt amazed by the breadth of his knowledge which gave evidence of wide reading at some time of his life. Ranganathan would quote from English and American poets to illustrate points and of course could do the same from Indian classics. When Palmer visited Madras he was taken by Ranganathan to Madras Music Emporium where a 'boy-prodigy flautist' (most probably TR Mahalingam) was giving performance. Ranganathan also had the heart of a poet and could compose verses of quality. Here is an extract from his short poem on the virtues of the Five Laws:

*There is room for all
Let not the mean
Or learned dean
Restrict the books
T'a favoured few
We 've books for all*

11. His style

Ranganathan had a distinctive style in writing and public speaking. He used simple language but fortified it with his own developed terminology. Sometimes he used the dialogue form interspersed with anecdotes, similes, metaphors from daily life as well as from the ancient scriptures. A scholarly study on Ranganathan's method and style carried out by Dr MP Satija (see reference 5) provides an interesting reading.

12. New Terminology

Ranganathan coined a number of new words on various analogies. The

word 'librametry' was coined in the course of a talk in ASLIB Conference 1948 on the analogy of biometry and psychometry. The acronym PMEST which is gaining currency, is on the analogy of VIBGYOR (seven colours of sunlight). A travelling library was called 'librachine' (a portmanteau word of 'library' and 'machine').

13. A Bullock Cart Mobile Library

This brings us to Ranganathan's bold and novel experiment in mobile library service. Inspired by his ideas, a Sub Engineer named Kankasabai Pillai designed a bullock cart for use as travelling library. It had books, maps, charts, and a gramophone with records. This was inaugurated in Mannargudi Conference held on 18 October 1931. With a stock of 4000 books, it served villages within a radius of ten miles and was in operation for nine years.

14. His Disciples

Some critics aver that Ranganathan in the true *guru-shishya* (teacher-disciple) tradition, which he was so fond of, did not produce a disciple who could excel him. It is well-known that Ranganathan had a galaxy of disciples like Prof PN Kaula, Prof MA Gopinath, Prof A Neelameghan, Prof G Bhattacharyya, who have an honoured place in the profession. But who could excel a colossus that is born only in centuries!

15. How Should We Honour Him?

Ranganathan lived for 80 years (12 August 1892-27 September 1972). In view of his extraordinary achievements and rich contributions with a whiff of Indianness, he can rightly occupy the ranks of the great Indians like Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore (literature), Sir CV Raman (science), Dr S Radhakrishnan (philosophy), Shri Nand Lal Bose (art),

Pt Vishnu Digambar Paluskar (music). In the Ranganathan's Centenary Year (1992), the nation should honour him posthumously by the highest possible Republic-Day Award. This will be a befitting tribute to him.

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“Intuition is known to be notoriously erratic. In Shambandar it got realised at 3. In Appar it got realised at 50. In Sankara it got realised at 7. In Pattinattar it did not flare up till after middle age. The inner light blazed forth in Christ and Buddha at the threshold of adolescence. It was delayed till about the fortieth year in Muhammad. In Ramana rishi intuition began to function when he was at school; in Aurobindo it waited till he had been in service for some years.”

“Intellect is best cultivated at adolescence and till about 25. That is why that, except in the case of the few who are slow to mature, the best fruits of cultivation of intellect are borne before the thirtieth year is reached. Newton, Abel, Galois, Gauss, Ramanujam, and many others are well-known examples.”

-SR Ranganathan in *Education for Leisure*