



THE INCREASING RELEVANCE OF THE FIVE LAWS OF RANGANATHAN

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1. The Five Laws of Ranganathan

The most seminal contribution of Dr SR Ranganathan to librarianship has been the Five Laws. Profound messages are hidden in these laws and it is likely that this profoundness will continue to increase as librarianship advances further. The Laws are more relevant today than they were 60 years ago when Dr Ranganathan enunciated these. This is because of various factors such as the increasing urge by individuals, institutions and nations to be on the forefront; stiff competition in every sphere of activity; unprecedented resource limitations; availability of technologies and so on. It is very unlikely that these trends will be reversed. In this scenario, Ranganathan and his Five Laws will earn more and more relevance in the years to come.

Ranganathan's early writings show that at the time of formulating the Five Laws, the library scene was very different. In fact, there was hardly any professionalism then. Closed access, if not chained libraries, highly restricted use, libraries run by scholars or clerical staff was the rule of the day. It was against this background Ranganathan started his career as a librarian. Overwhelmed by the potentials of libraries and concerned about the non- or under-utilisation of library resources, Ranganathan started organising the Madras University Library in 1925, immediately after his return from the UK, where he studied librarianship and visited as many libraries as he could. 'It was a rich experience,' wrote Ranganathan. This rich experience and the 'greatest inspiration' which he received from Berwick Sayers, had helped Ranganathan in organising the Madras University Library and in formulating the Five Laws.

* The author was research assistant to Dr Ranganathan during 1969-1972.

2. The Message of the Five Laws

The Five Laws enunciated by Ranganathan are :

*Books are for use
Every reader his book
Every book its reader
Save the time of the reader
Library is a growing organism*

Later versions of these laws replaced books by 'documents' and then by 'information.' As is evident from these laws Ranganathan's focus was on 'the user.'

The first four laws very clearly point this out. In fact, the first law 'Books are for use' is the *summum bonum* of librarianship.

The second, third and fourth laws are only derivatives of the first law. Thus the First Law (Complimented by the rest) is the ultimate in librarianship; it explains the very purpose of the library, justifies the very existence of libraries, and argues for professionalism in librarianship. Ranganathan called the Five Laws as the foundation of librarianship. It is in fact more than the foundation. The laws are the foundation, the structure, the exterior, the interior and everything.

3. The Ranganathan Era

The Ranganathan era was a watershed in the history of librarianship in India. From nowhere, he enunciated the Five Laws, and libraries of all types went through a transformation.

The seeds of professionalism were sown during this period by Ranganathan, and he personally and single-handedly nurtured it for quite a lengthy period. He demonstrated the importance of the Five Laws first in the Madras University Library and later in many other places.

4. The Transformation

Convinced that the Five Laws were the ultimate, Ranganathan formulated theories, techniques, and procedures to support these. Thus he developed a new theory of library classification and cataloguing, a new approach to references service, principles of book selection, and emphasised the importance of library management. He critically examined every factor that would directly or indirectly contribute towards the fulfilment of the Five Laws. He borrowed heavily from other disciplines to strengthen the case that 'Books are for use.' He personally supervised the transformation in Indian Libraries with great joy. He left no stone unturned which would have blocked such a transformation, often to the dislike of many. Ranganathan definitely succeeded in bringing forward librarianship from nowhere to a respectable level. He even developed built-in mechanisms to keep the ascendancy going. This he did by introducing library legislations, library education, library publications, raising the status of librarians, introducing research in librarianship, establishing international links and so on.

5. High Expectations from the New Generation

Ranganathan had very high expectations from younger generations. He was very hopeful that the later generations would complete the work initiated by him to the satisfaction of the Five Laws. He often used to say so with great enthusiasm. I still remember the talk he delivered at DRTC in November 1970 to the delegates of the IASLIC Conference, which was held in Bangalore that year. After feeling the pulse of the audience, which included many from the 'younger generation', Ranganathan went on with

his talk for about two hours, at the end of which he was literally 'gasping for breath' and could not even get up from the chair without support. This was a true demonstration of the frustration of a leader with his own generation.

But where is the New Generation?

That 'younger generation' about whom Ranganathan spoke so enthusiastically in 1970, is almost on the way out. Whether that generation of librarians rose to the expectations of Ranganathan is debatable. But it is a fact that their contributions did not make any marked improvements to the cause of 'Books are for use.' The user is still in need of a better deal and library resources continue to remain under-utilised or unused. Definitely the increasing use of technologies has made some difference

or improvement to the information provision function. But the credit for that should go more to some other profession.

6. Ranganathan's Message

'Effective information provision' is the very purpose of librarianship. This may be seen as a new interpretation of the First Law. If the use of technology is going to aid it, let us change it; if conferences and seminars are going to aid it, let us organise more of these. But the relevance to the fulfilment of the First Law should be tested before embarking on any activity. Ranganathan practised this, and this was his message to the library profession, which he passed on to the new generation of librarians through the Five Laws.

“The conscious development of intellect and the total neglect of the development of will by our educational agencies lead to devastating results of a far reaching kind. The intellectuals possess a powerful tool in their hands to make plans of all kinds, to speak to the masses in all sorts of appealing styles, and to entrench themselves in advantageous positions. They do not have the will to carry out the plans conjured by their intellect, or to carry out the promises glibly made by them or to pay-back to the community in a worthy way for the advantages derived by them in their entrenched positions . . . But alas! our educational agencies do precious little to develop the will.”

-SR Ranganathan in Social Education Literature