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Dr. S. R. Ranganathan- The Universal Librarian

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As we remember and pay our homage and tribute to Dr. S.R. Ranganathan, those of us who were his students in 1954-55 can recall with pleasant memory the intellectual ferment that bubbled excitedly in the profession those days and the inspiration and the spirit of dedication transplanted by our teachers in the students of Library Science all over India. The single most important contribution of Dr. Ranganathan as I would like to recall is the invincible message of a “profession with a mission” and the job satisfaction in the usefulness of providing reference service and other library services for the user’s satisfaction.

During my active professional career of nearly 38 years there were many instances when my faith and conviction in the philosophy of Dr. Ranganathan was firmly cemented by the expressions and feelings of the librarians all around the world. Even non-librarians, e.g. one of the leading professors of international relations many times appreciated and congratulated me for my opportunity to learn from the team of the great teachers such as Dr. Ranganathan and Prof. Dasgupta, who were ‘Gurus’ in the real sense of the term.

As his student in 1954-55, I found it fascinating to listen to his lectures which were always intercepted with Sanskrit shlokas from Upanishads, Gita and other anecdotes from Ramayana and Mahabharat. He made it very simple for me to grasp the true essence of the philosophy of library service through these examples from our scriptures. Even Lee W. Finks an associate professor at North Carolina Central University’s School of Library and Information Science quotes these examples while comparing the spirit of the library to the “inner person. “Mysticism and subjectivity were evident in Dr. Ranganathan’s passionate commitments to a highly personal approach in reference service. His faith is sublimely expressed at the end of a discussion of the need for close intellectual contact between librarians and patrons. Dr. Ranganathan firmly believed that we must never abandon our patrons to our non-human tools. He

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said, “We would whisper to our patrons,” as they come, “take my hand for I have passed this way and know the truth.” It is just such mysticism and such idealism that Dr. Ranganathan’s strong appeal lies.”

At the centenary celebration of the English Library Act in 1950, Dr. Ranganathan representing India made one of his most characteristic gestures. Representatives from other countries had bestowed gifts upon Lord Mountbatten, who presided, but Dr. Ranganathan came unprovided with a gift. He told Mountbatten “I offer you on this occasion a profound present, which cannot be seen or touched, but a present which will last forever, unlike those presents that are perishable – the everlasting universal soul, which is one and all.” Also my single most important recollection of what Dr. Ranganathan was in the eyes of one of the American professors is a very brief encounter with Dr. Jesse Shera of the Western Reserve University, Cleveland, U.S.A in December 1958. When Dr. Shera learnt that I was a student of Dr. Ranganathan, there was a complete transformation on his face. He affectionately took me to his office and chatted with me for more than half an hour. He asked me many questions on our studies in India. It dawned on me then how Dr. Shera, the great American librarian was influenced by Dr. Ranganathan’s philosophy.

Another instance I would like to recollect is when I found Dean Lester Asheim one day in front of the Reference Desk in our library and I immediately greeted him “Yes Dr. Asheim what can I do for you, and he responded, I am pleased that as a good Reference Librarian you have recognized me. But I wonder how. I reminded him regarding our meeting at the W.M.U., when he was one of the members of the accreditation team. He immediately said, “Oh yes, you are the student, I quizzed on the philosophy of Ranganathan and the colon classification during our stay at the W.M. U. No wonder you did well as you were given the opportunity to understand the basic philosophy of library service by the great teacher Dr. Ranganathan. Dr. Jesse Shera has best summed up Dr. Ranganathan’s multifaceted achievement as the father of library science in India, when he called him “a one-man library movement.”

In contrast to likes of Dr. Shera there were American librarians who found Dr. Ranganathan difficult to follow. Also his literary style has often proved a stumbling block to western readers. His writings they found sometimes in strange English in which the exoticism often arises because he uses words with secondary meanings. He has added freely to the terminology of the library profession- idea plane, notational plane, macro thought, rounds, levels, interpolation of facets etc.

Professor Lee W. Finks finds him a devout Hindu and mystic. I like to

quote Finks again; he says “Dr. Ranganathan’s writings are filled with a sense of ‘dharma’, the cosmic law that binds together all things in their mutual destiny. In his book on the Five Laws, he speaks of “the spirit of the library”, a vital force that persists through time and reality, through books, ideas and our thirst for knowledge, to create eternally the climate in which a library will live and flourish.

To quote Fink further “How compelling to believe that this brilliant man could perhaps through some arcane Eastern way of understanding, recognize the kernel, the essence, the distillation of our professional mission and present it to us in the form of five simple canons. And how appealing to have our instincts buttressed by the knowledge that this prophet of librarianship was also the creator of elegant classification systems and theories of indexing that are still studied today as well as pragmatic force behind an entire great nation’s library development.”

One of the few philosophers of librarianship Dr. Ranganathan as we all know, made contributions to library administration, library education, library literature, classification and cataloging theory. As professor of mathematics, he brought his disciplined mind to bear on problems of documentation helping to transfer librarianship to science.

Sydney J. Pierce who held a joint appointment in sociology and library and information studies at the University of Oklahoma told his students “My suggestions? Find time to read Ranganathan and anyone else whose works you have heard of but never read. If older books and articles turn up in searches of the professional literature, find out what they have to say. Browse old volumes of professional journals; they remain both relevant and readable.”

Dr. Ranganathan has contributed to the common body of theory of library and information studies, which shape the intellectual traditions of our field of studies and provide the intellectual stimulation that comes from reading it. When we come to the subject of our tools e.g. the classification systems or the mechanized systems of retrieval of documents or information we find that we shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us. As soon as the tools start shaping us we become the victims of a failed system.

Dr. Ranganathan constantly used to remind us in our class to be sure to remember that the Colon Classification which has been an upgraded version of the Dewey, would be constantly studied for further improvement and the new and revised editions would appear to assist us but unfortunately new editions have not been appearing regularly. However the basic principles of this classification system have been applied in the computerized system of retrieval of information and documentation. Many people have written on the

application of Dr. Ranganathan's postulates and principles of the general theory of knowledge classification to database design and information retrieval and on Dr. Ranganathan's thought and its significance for the mechanization of information storage and retrieval.

His arguments for the re-examination of traditional practice of library classification and for the introduction of new foundations are based on the "recognition of the universe of current knowledge as a dynamic continuum. It is ever growing; new branches may stem from any of the infinite points, they are unknowable at present, therefore they cannot be enumerated here and now, they cannot be anticipated in totality. He thus wanted to open up a new dimension in library classification, so that it could stand a higher pressure from the field of knowledge. To quote Derek de Sola Price "Last year's index is no good for this year's science." The ignorance of Dr. Ranganathan's suggestions in the library world and the critique against the "practicability" of these theories are due to the fact that the majority of "classificationists" do not feel the need for basing their work on a dynamic theory. Libraries traditionally continue their services to the feeding of readers only with the macro subjects embodied in books and other materials and have shown little interest in retrieval of the micro level units of thoughts in their collection. The study and understanding of these micro level thoughts have been left to the scholars of the specific subject specialization or the specialist librarians.

Jesse H. Shera in his book "Libraries and the Organization of Knowledge" wrote "Whatever one may think of the Colon Classification, certainly its distinguished creator has surpassed all others in his grasp of the fundamental problems of organizing the intellectual content of graphic records. " In his facet analysis and its American counterpart, semantic factoring, the role of classification in bibliographic organization achieves a new and greater significance than it ever had as applied to book arrangement. He was recipient of the Margaret Mann Citation in 1970. As recognition for his contribution to Library Classification, the Ranganathan Award for classification research are being presented every year by FID since 1976.

Most probably as I could understand with my limited knowledge Dr. Ranganathan seems to have known the limitation of his contribution to the future both in classification in general and in particular to the colon classification. Thus it should be noticed that details in his classification system may meet obsolescence, but not its underlying principles.

All of us are aware that Dr. Ranganathan's work and his impact have been known and felt far beyond the national boundaries. His research, his philosophy, his studies towards a unified theory of library science, empirical work in

organization, subject classification, cataloguing and indexing are utilized and revered throughout the world. The application of information technology in Library and Information Science has not diminished the value of Dr. Ranganathan's contributions. On the one hand more recent areas of their usefulness are being identified and on the other hand, information technology is enabling the realization of Dr. Ranganathan's vision of a "user-centered", "user-friendly" library and information service implied in his Five Laws. He was convinced that these laws were applicable to all types of libraries, not only in India, but also in other countries. Impressed by the implication of the Five Laws, Pauline (Atherton) Cochrane said, "If Dr. Ranganathan had done nothing more than publish the Five Laws of Library Science, he would have to be seriously considered for a library Hall of Fame.

The five laws have had a deep impact on international librarianship. D.W. Langridge writes "the profession was given for the first time a set of fundamental laws to which all problems may be related.

Coming back to my personal experience Mrs. Kamla Kapoor, our Chief Librarian at the USIS library, who was also Dr. Ranganathan's student, always emphasized the importance of these laws in our day today activities at the USIS library. She was able to demonstrate to us the importance of providing satisfaction to our patrons in a "user- friendly manner. "Readers" or "users" were not to be neglected in preference to our non-human tools, e.g. the card catalogue or the computers. However, that did not mean neglecting the power of these tools. Today it has become very important and necessary to be able to rely on indexing systems that enable intermediaries to hit the target documents/ information swiftly and accurately and also to make an effective and friendly dialog with user who is in search of information or document. Dr. Ranganathan's contribution to the progress of the library and information profession is that he contributed in the steps of the pioneers Melvil Dewey and Henry E. Bliss by making seminal advances on their ideas about the pursuit of schemes for the systematic arrangement for "user-satisfaction."

To get some better idea of the depth and breadth of the influence F.W. Lancaster, Mory Jo Zeter and Laura Metzler at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign conducted an analysis on how much Ranganathan has been cited, by whom, in which source and in which context in the thirty years (1956-1990) using Social Science Citation Index and Science Citation Index. The result indicates that his influence has not diminished over the years. The analysis has been concluded as follows:

"One cannot fail to be impressed by the very wide range of topics with

which Ranganathan's name has been connected while other individuals may be more cited, overall, it seems unlikely that anyone in the field of library / information science has been cited in more diverse contexts. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to point that many of the references are very superficial ones acknowledging some intellectual debt to Ranganathan without actually explicating Ranganathan's work or explaining in detail the nature of the debt. It seems that Ranganathan's name is used by writers to give their papers some 'academic respectability' and this in itself is sufficient proof of stature of the man".

This conclusion gives a note of caution to future authors not to indulge in making non-substantive reference to Dr. Ranganathan in articles they write.

I would like to quote Robert Wedgeworth, IFLA's President, who paid his tribute to Dr. Ranganathan, at the opening of the IFLA General Conference in 1992, as follows:

"Ranganathan who broadened our total vision of librarianship and Bishop who raised our standards for library education provide "enduring legacy" that helps us to sustain as we address the problems of our times... The lives of Dr. Ranganathan and to a lesser extent William Warner Bishop have significant implications for us today. Ranganathan led us to appreciate a much expanded concept of the "Aboutness" of works we classify for retrieval. This laid the basis for classification systems that permit more precise convergence of user needs and materials that meet those needs. He also sensitized us to the needs of the users. Ranganathan and Bishop understood and were excited about the potential for our field. Their example should give us strength to renew our efforts in a more concentrated way to demonstrate the library and information services offer substantial benefits toward improving the quality of life through support of basic programs in health, education, industry and "spiritual well being. Realizing these objectives is not easy.

Eric de Grolier in his talk on "Library and Information Policy Perspectives and Ranganathan's Heritage" has paid his tribute as follows:

"...the heritage of his (Ranganathan's) thought still remains most living and the influence of his research most timely. Indeed one could assert that Ranganathan anticipated almost all recent developments in the field of library/ information services organization, despite the fact that he died before the time of the full impact of "new information technologies" on the services offered to the users. In 1972, there were still no "online services". However he kept abreast of progress in the "mechanization of library services" (This is the title of his paper at the first IASLIC conference in 1956). Here I would like to quote from his 1969 speech titled "Impact of Electronics" which has been cited several times.

“Law 5 of Library Science has now come with a message, it tells the library: “You are a growing organism. Therefore, you must grow with the world. The world is now in the electronic age. You should use the electronics to speed up work and to save manpower wherever practicable. In respect of finding documents for readers, you should instruct electronic engineers to design a “Doc- Finder” which will give speed without sacrificing any of the essential human needs laid down by the other Laws of Library Science.”

As we remember Dr. S.R. Ranganathan today on his birth anniversary, let us resolve not only to look back but rather to look ahead to see what the profession should be doing to fulfil commitment in the decade ahead. Story of our failure and success both should be remembered and the path ahead in this time of new challenges to our profession should steer clear of all the obstacles to library’s role in nurturing the human mind and spirit and linking people with information and something more. We must also understand the nature of information in our society. Dr. Ranganathan has provided us with the bridges of understanding, but we must learn to walk on this bridge and cross it over for the benefit of the society to honour Dr. Ranganathan’s memory.

Last but not the last Dr. Ranganathan would be happy if we follow the tenets of “Gyan” i.e. knowledge, which he imparted to us. As we accept the challenges in front of us today and try to find the new avenues to realize our dreams, Dr. Ranganathan’s soul will surely remain in peace eternally.