



Atherton, Pauline A.

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CHAPTER C

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

A LAYMAN'S REFLECTIONS ON LIBRARY SCIENCE

K Guru Dutt, *Director of Public Instruction*
(Retired), Mysore.

1 Introduction

In the past, these lectures used to be inaugurated each time by a V I P. This year, I suppose by way of a change, a V U P has been asked to do so. I know I owe this invitation to the affection and generosity of Dr S R Ranganathan, and to the partiality of my friends in the DRTC, rather than to any merits of my own. Let me at the outset express my gratitude to them, and assure them how greatly I appreciate the honour. It is undoubtedly my *Adrishta*, a piece of good luck for me; but for you I am afraid it may be your *Prarabdha* or fate. If I fail to come up to the expectations, I would submit, the blame is not all mine.

2 Topic of the Address

On an occasion like this, I suppose I have to say a few words on some topic relevant to your major

interests. Casting about for a theme, I decided on the title "A Layman's Reflections on Library Science." But it would be truer to say that my reflections are not so much on the contents of the science, as on the human predicament today as reflected in the outlook laymen associate with Library Science. Forgive me if I am frank at times, a bit too frank. You may interpret the word "reflections" in any sense you please.

3 Library Science

I am aware that almost overnight, Library Science has sprung forth fully armed like Minerva from the forehead of Jove. It has developed into a highly technical subject with a formidable literature of its own, which, let me confess, is *terra incognita* to me. Then why rush in where angels might fear to tread? My excuse is that a stranger touring a country may perchance notice things which the native misses. Possibly I may be able to view things from an unfamiliar angle, and say things not looked for.

4 Dangers of Extreme Specialisation

Let me start with a general observation. That extreme specialisation is the price to be paid for the advancement of science is a commonplace. But such specialisation necessarily narrows the vision

and obstructs larger perspectives. So an expert has been facetiously defined as one who comes to know more and more about less and less, until in the limit, he knows everything about nothing! Ortega y Gasset has gone to the length of dubbing a specialist as "a trained barbarian." Although Library Science also entails specialisation, yet its distinction is that the more you progress, the more general becomes your range and perspective. A true librarian is, or ought to be, primarily a purveyor of perspectives. But his knowledge has inevitably a skeletal and diagrammatic quality. It is mainly a knowledge of sign-posts and name-boards rather than of the country itself. The iron law of nature is that nothing can be had without paying its due price, although the day of reckoning may be postponed or forgotten. Your knowledge in its devotion to form runs the risk of loss of substance, to use the Aristotelian categories.

5 Ranganathan's Five Laws

I looked for inspiration to Dr Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science, which constitute, as it were, its *Panchasheela*. Their boldness and clarity is striking. They remind me of our ancient *Sutras*; but like them, they invite comment, and can stand a variety of interpretations. There is scope for a *prima facie* view (*Purvapaksha*), for

doubts (*Samsaya*), and for arguments (*Sama-dhana*) leading up to conclusions (*Siddhanta*) which are perhaps immanent in the unspoken assumptions on which the line of reasoning is based. I am here venturing on an unorthodox, but brief commentary.

51 LAW: 1: BOOKS ARE FOR USE

But in the orthodox way, I will first look at the commencement (*Upakrama*) and then at the close (*Upasamhara*) and enclose the other three laws within these limits. According to the first law, books are meant for use. Most certainly. Surely here at least there could be no room for difference of opinion. But the very next moment doubts raise their ugly head. What exactly do we mean by books? Surely not a mere collection of printed pages held together between covers, hard or paperback, irrespective of the nature and quality of their contents.

511 *Significance of the Term 'Use'*

Can we be certain that they will all be of use? What does "use" signify? It may mean different things in different contexts. I once knew a student who used Webster's big dictionary to supplement the height of his pillow; was he not using it? Commonly "use" suggests something basely utilitarian, a word which has a deprecatory and apologetic

sound. It makes me uncomfortable, as marking something secondary, a servile means to some ulterior end. It is the goal or end which really interests us. Here, I recall the distinction drawn by John Dewey between instrumental and consummatory uses. It looks as if the modern world, in confusing the two, is more concerned with the means than with ends: means leading to further means and so on *ad infinitum*, without pausing to think of the significance of human existence — *Purushartha* — as we call it. The consequence of this headlong quest of means is the overlooking of meaning. That is our main trouble. Life has become a meaningless scramble. The revolt of youth, which is in evidence all the world over, has at its base this question: To what end is all this elaborate paraphernalia of a machine civilisation?

It is my deep-seated conviction that science has only instrumental value, except perhaps for its few genuine practitioners. My fear is that Library Science, as envisaged now, is mainly serving as the handmaiden of Science and Technology spelt with capitals. It seems to be pre-occupied with providing grist and facilities to the Information Industry. I do not wish to underestimate this need. But can that be the be-all and end-all of living?

Struggling for and with the amenities of life, we are forgetting to live. A lover of books all my life,

still I honestly feel that the bulk of books are among the amenities which we could well spare without loss. Even the better type of books can easily become a distraction and even a vice. We could certainly do with fewer books from the standpoint of a happy life. But who cares for happiness in these days? It is excitement that we seek, and "divine discontent" that we worship.

6 Law 5: Library is a Growing Organism

I have done with the first law (*Upakrama*). Let us go to the last (*Upasamhara*). A library is a growing organism. I am afraid so. I have a sneaking sympathy with the outlook of the redoubtable Khalif Omar who said of the Koran: "Burn the libraries, for their value is in this book!"; and he straightaway proceeded to destroy the great library of Alexandria.

The point is that all growth is not necessarily good; it may be malignant and cancerous. Or from another standpoint, a virulent form of Parkinson's Law seems to dominate the world of books; and the mathematics of the situation makes me despair of Library Science being ever able to keep up with the tempo of growth. You will retort that that is no ground for giving up. I heartily agree and say "Cheerio!"



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61 PROLIFERATION OF IDEAS

You will permit me to digress a little. The Fourth Gospel commences with the glorious lines: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God." Since then, words have proliferated beyond measure and beyond all control. The result of this inflation has been catastrophic devaluation of the Word (Logos) itself. It is a lost concept, a loss which nothing can make good. Can it be a measure of our progress from the beginning, that we are already nearing the end of the world?

Of late, we are hearing a great deal about the world crisis brewing due to the fast pollution of the environment: the geosphere, the hydrosphere, and the atmosphere. But it appears to me that the root cause lies in neither of these tangible spheres, but solely in the pollution of the *noosphere*—to use a term coined by Teilhard de Chardin—the sphere of knowledge and ideas, in other words, of books.

No doubt, with the phenomenal growth of knowledge, this is inevitable to some extent. Yet we cannot ignore the destructive potentialities of knowledge. That is the significance of the Biblical legend of the forbidden fruit.

7 Maintaining a Balance

71 PRINCIPLE OF YOGA

Our own ancestors had always realised the need for a principle of control over the trend towards endless expansion, a doctrine of balance and limit if the ship of humanity is to be kept on an even keel. In upto-date terminology, a "negative feedback" is essential if the "homeostasis" necessary for a healthy life is to be maintained. In India, such a principle formed the core of the discipline known as *Yoga*. It aimed at the elimination of distractions, especially in the shape of words, and the achievement of a creative silence. But in the world of today, we see on the contrary, the operation of a deadly sort of "positive feedback," a centrifugal force unchecked by a counterpart centripetal energy to keep us in orbit.

72 ABSORB A FEW GOOD BOOKS

To return to our main topic, I remember that as a boy I was greatly impressed by an essay entitled *The man of one book* by Isaac Disraeli, father of the famous Benjamin Disraeli. The essay dilated on the benefits of character and expression accruing to a reader who stuck to one sole book. The practice has its points. The Bible and Shakespeare read in this way contributed to what is best in British life. Similarly, it is impossible to estimate how much

India owes to the *parayana* of the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*. They comprehend the whole of our culture. As the latter claims proudly but not without justice: "In regard to the four-fold goal of human life, what is found here may be found elsewhere but what is not here is nowhere."

73 SPEED IS NOT ALWAYS GOOD

But what about ourselves? We seem to be more impatient than the princess in the Arabian Nights who demanded a new husband every night. We hanker for change, the more the better. We have no time to spare. That is what the fourth law suggests to me, when it adjures us to save the time of the reader and of the staff. The computer has become our model, and will perhaps displace man one day. Speed is our ideal and our principal bane. My doubt is: Save time for what? For, when we have saved the time, we do not know what to do with it, unless we reinvest it, like capital, to launch more enterprises to save more time. Such is our predicament.

So far as the reader is concerned, I feel that the value of a book is inversely proportional to the speed with which he tackles it. The right thing to do is, as in the case of the heart patient, to go slow. If the book is worthwhile, the reader would be well advised to go as slow as he can, tasting each word and sentiment and enjoying the whole.

But if it is not worthwhile, the sooner it is cast aside, the better. There are other ways of spending time. In any case, we should be more heedful that time be well spent, rather than merely saved.

8 Law 2 and Law 3

Finally I come to the twin laws: Every book its reader; and every reader his book. The democratic fervour breathing through these two laws leaves me speechless. Their implication (*Dhvani*) is that a book and its reader have each equal rights. But in reality, they are by no means on a par. I am old-fashioned enough to share Bacon's opinion that some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and only a few to be chewed and digested. Bacon leaves out a large class which Dr Ranganathan includes: those which do not deserve to be read and should forthwith be liquidated. But who is to decide? Of course, the reader for himself, and the library expert for the library; although no such decision can pretend to be final.

81 READER-BOOK RELATIONSHIP

In truth, the relationship between a book and its reader is highly complex. Except in a purely physical sense, a book is no unit. As Pascal said three centuries ago, and thinkers like Ortega and Aldous Huxley in our time, thoughts are as it were atomic.

The common experience also confirms that ideas and words are the actually viable units. The *Vakya-padiya* of the great Bhartrihari, a fifth century treatise on the philosophy of language, is so named because it maintains that sentences and words are the basic quanta of communication. Their being strung together in a book (*grantha*) is adventitious. Books are indeed of very unequal texture. As Emerson has rightly said, "Even from Plato I can at best extract a dozen sentences of lasting value."

82 VALUE OF A BOOK

The notion of value is however a notorious variable depending on the reader's calibre and sensibilities, as well as on his temperament and even the passing mood. No reader is the same at all times, and his reaction to books, even to one and the same book, is changeable. Of course I am speaking of true books and not of compendia of information masquerading as books. The relation between a book and a reader is by no means constant; and it is no use trying to simplify it. For, as Whitehead has observed: "Every simplification is an over-simplification."

9 Conclusion

I have finished, and I can see you heaving a sigh of relief. Have I been controversial? Yes, deliber-

ately. I have voiced grave misgivings. They are not only mine. But remember that they are only *Purvapakshas*, which invite refutation at the hands of experts. I am sure Dr Ranganathan's Five Laws can fully meet the challenge. It is for you to find the correct interpretation: Experts, like books, are also meant for use, the layman's use.

Now for the inauguration. The word itself, as you know, goes back to an ancient Roman religious ceremony. The Augur was a priest who foretold future events by omens indicated by the flight of birds. The word 'auspice' also has an identical meaning. An Augur was also believed to be a soothsayer. "Sooth" meant truth, and the uttering of it was held to be auspicious.

Here now I am officiating as an augur. I see before me a wise and gracious bird who has flown all the way across the oceans for our sake. The signs are altogether propitious. I foresee that we are in for a highly interesting and profitable session. All that is needed to perfect the occasion is responsive attention on our part. Let me repeat the sacred traditional formula: *Sumuhūrtah Sāvadhānah!*

On behalf of the Trustees of the Sarada Ranganathan Endowment for Library Science and on behalf of Dr Ranganathan and Mrs Ranganathan, Prof P N Kaula, a member of the Board of Trustees, proposed a hearty vote of thanks to Shri Guru Dutt for his scintillating inaugural address, full of wisdom, delivered with humour. He also thanked the audience for gracing the occasion by their presence.



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