



Atherton, Pauline A.

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CHAPTER K

GENESIS OF THE FIVE LAWS OF LIBRARY SCIENCE

1 Golden Jubilee of the Five Laws

Dr S R Ranganathan conceived of the Five Laws of Library Science in 1924. Four years from now, the golden jubilee of this event, which marked the transition of our discipline from "Library Economy" to "Library Science" will be celebrated. The statements embodying the Five Laws were formulated in 1928 and published for the first time in 1931 in a book of the same title (13).

It is appropriate that in an essay on the implication of the Five Laws of Library Science, we should take a brief look at the context and the causes for the formulation of the Five Laws.

2 Ranganathan's Love of Teaching

Ranganathan was appointed Librarian of the University of Madras in 1924. He was not happy to be the University Librarian. In fact, he wanted to quit the post and return to his first love, namely, teaching. This was only natural. Half a century ago, library work hardly offered anything challenging, particularly to one who had a Master's Degree in

Mathematics and had already experienced the thrill and joy of teaching mathematics and physics to young, uninhibited, growing minds in the undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate classes, for some seven years earlier. Besides, for Ranganathan, the joy was all the more because as a born teacher, he was attracted to teaching not because it offered a career, but because he had decided to make teaching his field of work. It would appear that, in spite of the desire of and pressure from, some of his elders at home wanting him to enter the lucrative civil service or the lawyer's profession, he was determined to take up teaching.

3 A Momentous Decision

Before taking a final decision to quit librarianship and return to teaching, Ranganathan listened to Mr H S Duncan, the Principal of the Presidency College, where Ranganathan had been working. He advised him against leaving the librarian's job. He said in effect, "You have not seen much of librarianship yet; you may find something in it after you have studied the subject in London; the University is deputing you shortly." Accordingly Ranganathan postponed his decision. That was a momentous decision. For, perhaps without his knowing it, a new chapter in the development of library science was begun by him at that very moment. Ranganathan

was deputed to study library practices in the British Museum library in 1924.

4 Outmoded Practices and Unwanted Subjects

On his reporting himself at the British Museum Library for observation and study of library work, Sir Frederick Kenyon, the Principal Librarian, informed Ranganathan that he would be able to learn there only some eighteenth-century practices unsuitable for university library work, and that he should join the School of Librarianship, University College, London. Thanks to the sympathetic understanding on the part of the library school and of the British Museum Library authorities, Ranganathan could join the course in librarianship. There again, he found himself with the prospect of learning History of English fiction, Sanskrit grammar, German grammar, Indian palaeography, and Epigraphy, none of which would be of use to his library work in India. Thanks again to the library school authorities, he was exempted from attending the classes on these subjects.

5 Three Contextual Features

In the library school, subjects such as Classification, Cataloguing, and Reference Service attracted his attention and provided food for his thinking. He had admiration and appreciation for his teacher W C Berwick Sayers, and the latter reciprocated

the same. This facilitated a good deal of intimate discussions between them on classification and other aspects of library work.

Secondly, having exempted himself from attending the courses on Sanskrit grammar, etc, Ranganathan found adequate time to read almost all the books on library work available in the libraries of the school and of the Library Association — which were not many in those days. This gave him a broad perspective and at the same time, a deeper knowledge of the library practices and library service developed and prevailing in the early twenties of the present century.

Thirdly, Ranganathan visited over a hundred libraries of different varieties — public, college, and university — in Great Britain, to observe and study library practices, first-hand.

These experiences appeared to have had a deep influence on his subsequent ideas about the library.

1 From what he saw of library service in Great Britain, he realised the great potential of the library as an agency for social advancement;

2 He made it his life's mission to secure for his motherland social progress through the promotion of library service;

3 He recognised that some empirical guiding

principles have been formulated for some aspects of library work — for example, Cutter for Cataloguing; and Richardson and Sayers for Classification. And he was already making a radical departure from the existing methodology in the design of his Colon Classification, the idea of the analytico-synthetic approach having been triggered by his observing the working of the meccano toy in Selfridge's store;

4 He recognised also that there was no unifying set of guiding principles for library practices and services as a whole; that several areas of librarianship lacked empirical principles and decisions were taken and practices devised *ad-hoc* by precedence and by trial and error. The helpfulness of the decisions depended a great deal on the flair and experience possessed by the librarian concerned; and

5 The impact of all these ideas on a man trained in systematic scientific thinking was that he intuitively saw the need for a unified theory on the basis of which every technique and practice of library service could be derived and be guided in their development.

6 The Five Laws are Born

Conceived in an incipient form in 1924 and worked upon in the following five years, the Five Laws of Library Science were formulated in the

final form in 1928 and published in 1931, after being used as the basis for the teaching of every branch of library science for three years. The precipitating factor was a series of lectures that Ranganathan delivered to an audience of about a thousand teachers at the Conference of the South Indian Teachers' Union in 1928. In these lectures, he propounded his ideas on library practice and library service as derivable from the Five Laws he had then been formulating. He also showed their connection to the methods of teaching in schools and colleges.

61 FIRST LAW EMERGES LAST

It would appear that Ranganathan at first formulated the statement of four laws only — Law 2 to Law 5 in the present set. He felt that some vital principle was missing from the set and he was obsessed by it. At that time, his former Mathematics Professor, Edward B Ross used to visit him almost every day at the University Library. Their mutual affection was like that of brothers. Prof Ross used to discuss various library matters with Ranganathan. On one of these visits, Prof Ross sensed the anguish in Ranganathan. The latter explained what was worrying him and Prof Ross at the point of leaving the library said in effect, in a moment of intuitive flash, "you mean Books are for Use"! And



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so Law 1 was formulated and with it the set was complete.

62 TESTING GROUND

The Summer Course in library science conducted under the auspices of the Madras Library Association from 1928 and absorbed into the Madras University Department of Library Science started in 1931, was a laboratory for Ranganathan to propound his ideas in library science based on the laws and study the reaction of students. The Madras University Library was his other laboratory for testing the effectiveness of the library techniques designed by himself in terms of the reaction of readers. The blending of the findings from the two kinds of tests enabled Ranganathan, in a great measure, to formulate, elaborate, and refine most of his basic ideas on almost all facets of library service and library science with the Five Laws as the foundation.

7 Library Science and Service in a Nutshell

With the formulation of the Five Laws, a unifying theory for all library practices and services, and a set of guiding principles for the dynamic development, study and teaching of library service as a whole, became available. Postulates, canons, and principles, based on the Five Laws, for guiding the development, study, and teaching of each

of the branches of library work could be derived. Changes in library practices could be predicted in the context of the changes in the needs and demands of the society; and the effectiveness of each library practice could be tested against the implications of the Five Laws. The discipline of "Library economy" completed a full cycle in the Spiral of Scientific Method and attained the status of a science (14).

To illustrate, here is a definition of the scope and content of Documentation — a modern concept — in terms of the Five Laws. Ranganathan writes (17):

"Driven by the Five Laws of Library Science and urged by the demand for nascent micro thought by specialist readers, the library profession is now faced with a new situation calling for new techniques, new attitudes, and new forms of service . . . Documentation may be defined as:

1 Promotion and practice of bringing into use of nascent micro thought by specialists (Law 1); and

2 Pinpointed (Law 2),

3 Exhaustive (Law 3),

4 Expeditious (Law 4),

service of nascent micro thought to specialists;

5 In spite of the continuous ever increasing cas-

cade (Law 5) of nascent micro thought on an ever multiplying number of subjects, communicated through several thousands of periodicals”.

71 COVERAGE: MACRO TO MICRO

The Laws provide guidelines not only in the formulation of a theory for large divisions of library science such as Book Selection, Classification, Cataloguing, Reference Service, Physical Bibliography, Management, Library Buildings, Fittings and Furniture, and Documentation, but they also guide Librarians to make helpful decisions on such minute aspects as “the appropriate width and treatment of the window-sill of the stack room,” “the sequence of the elements in the host section of a bibliographical reference,” and “the size of lettering in the shelf guides, gangway guides, and bay guides.” In Ranganathan’s own words, the *Five Laws of library science* “contains, in little, practically everything which is found more elaborately elucidated in all the succeeding books of the family” (15).

8 Perennial Source of Inspiration and Guidance

Elsewhere I have 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 impact of these five succinct statements, first published, in

1931, is still being felt around the world via transmitters, namely, Dr Ranganathan's students and followers who know the importance of these laws on every continent and most every country where there is to be a philosophy of library service and development... The explication and amplification of these statements by teachers in library science classes also help to perpetuate his teachings because these words stir students to think of and believe in library *service* above library *work* as their life goal. Few writers have caught the essence of librarianship in such few words and have been as eloquent as Dr Ranganathan is in his several lecture tours around the world in the past forty years" (1).

Berwick Sayers, who was an important early influence on the formation of Ranganathan's early library ideas, caught the deep significance of the Five Laws in these words: "The *Five Laws of library science*, 1931 (new edition 1957), a work of great simplicity which conceals depths and yet reveals what may be called the spiritual but intensively practical springs of his activity" (20).

That the Laws are perennial sources of guidance in all library work and service is reflected in two different ways in the statements by two American teachers of library science. Talking about the func-

tion of a librarian, Dr Jesse Shera says: "... It is our objective, our role in society, our dedicated purpose, to make this communication as complete as possible. In a sense I am saying what Dr Ranganathan says in three of his Five Laws, 'Every book its reader, Every reader his book, Save the time of the reader ...' basically this is all I am saying and I am doubtless taking a much longer time to say it less effectively than Dr Ranganathan has" (16); or as Prof Grave of the Graduate School of Library Service, Rutgers University, put it in a review of edition 2 (1957) of the *Five Laws of library science*: "The laws themselves have as much validity now as they ever did. They have been formulated in fewer than 25 words ... Every thoughtful librarian will want to spend some time and mental energy on a systematic consideration of the implications of these Laws" (5).

9 Principle of 'Ekavakyata'

It will be most appropriate to close this Chapter with an extract from one of Ranganathan's books (17) to indicate the profound Vedic principle that has guided all his life and work and pictures in a nutshell the causes and consequences of the formulation of the Five Laws:

"I owe this large family of books to Edward B Ross, my professor who initiated me in the

art of thinking in the six years he taught me mathematics. His development, not only of the lectures in the classes on any particular subject, but even of every conversation I have had with him — I have had them from 18 March 1909, the year in which he captured my mind, to 14 April 1932 when he retired and went back to his home country — has produced a lasting impression on my mind. That impression had been given a name by another respected friend of mine Mahamahopadhyaya Professor S Kuppuswami Sastriar. That name is *Ekavakyata* (= Unity). He used to say that all knowledge was one. The Vedas form, in a sense, a single sentence. So does every chapter of it form a single sentence; and of course, every sentence in it is a single sentence.

“When Providence transferred my field of interest from Mathematics to Library Science, this *ekavakyata* tradition of the Vedic ancestors demonstrated in daily life of my Professor, came with me. When I spent a year wandering amidst diverse libraries in Great Britain in 1924–25 to prepare myself for my new life, the light of this *ekavakyata* principle was disclosing the minutest imaginable details in library practice. It illuminated each of them, and at the same time threw them into a coherent whole. I felt the *ekavakyata*

pervading all that I saw in the British library world and all that I read in the splendid library on Library Science found in the School of Librarianship of the University College, London. I still find it guiding me in all my thought and life. I often realise that even apparently trivial occurrences are organically fused into a single life-experience. Occasionally when immersed in thinking out ideas, all the long years of life fuse into a single moment. Such is the potency of *ekavakyata* . . . The *Five Laws of library science* is a verbal record of the *ekavakyata* of library practice and science, as it revealed itself to me."



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