

Ranganathan: A Universal Librarian

Abulfazal M. Fazle Kabir

Associate Professor
Clark Atlanta University
Georgia, U.S.A.

Abstract

In formulating Five Laws of Library Science Ranganathan has made a lasting and fundamental contribution to the philosophy of library patron service. His Colon Classification has provided a scheme for hierarchical design of faceted subject classification. For such valuable contribution to the profession he has been acclaimed as a universal librarian.

Keywords : *Ranganathan; The Five Laws of Library Science; The Colon Classification(CC)*

Poised at the threshold of the twenty-first century, the library world can look back and reflect on the achievements of the profession gained during the past century. We have seen much closer interfacing of library users and their libraries. Libraries today are touching their lives and in their library pursuits.

Making of this worldwide giant stride has been possible because of the tireless devotion, hard work and ceaseless quest of a band of zealous librarians and their philosophical thinking. They have through the years put their energies toward the enhancement of the primary functions of libraries, viz., acquiring, organizing and delivering information to the information seekers.

Dr. Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan (1892-1972), of India, is one of these towering library leaders. He was an inventor, an educator, a librarian, and a philosopher, and has made a great contribution to the library profession. His legacy is a message to the profession on a global plane. In his own homeland, Ranganathan's contribution to the library profession has been enormous and all encompassing. He was a prime mover and has put India permanently on the world library map.¹

Ranganathan has made two fundamental contributions to world library and information profession. These are, first, The Five Laws of Library Science (1931) and the second is the Colon Classification (CC). He has been acclaimed universally for these contributions during his lifetime and continues to be acclaimed over these years.

From the middle of the nineteenth century, librarians in the West felt the need and started emphasizing the importance of enhanced services to library patrons. Formulation of the Five Laws of Library Science at long last, pro-

1 V. V. Giri, "Tribute to Dr. Ranganathan," *Herald of Library Science*, 12 (April-July 1973) : 100.



vided a solid and lasting foundation in this direction. The Laws provided essential guidelines for librarians with the potential for planning and providing patron services in all types of libraries. Over the years, library professionals have continued to focus on the implications of the Five Laws in the fast changing and expanding libraries in all the countries. Efforts for efficient, faster, effective, and patron-friendly service became their credo.

Following his Laws, efforts were being made to bring services to every library patron's doorstep in a library. Librarians in all types of libraries tried to incorporate in spirit, action, and practice, the Five Laws:

Books are for use.

Every book its reader.

Every reader his book.

Save the time of the reader.

A library is a growing organism.

Looking through the library literature one can clearly see the evidence of the librarians' efforts in this regard. The "reader" of the Five Laws is the "user" today and the "book" can be identified as all the formats of information sources. The bottom line today is "save the time of the reader user."

In 1975, a resourceful librarian expanded the Five Laws to provide the American interpretation of Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science. This expansion clearly reflects the impact of the Five Laws in the library world:

Ranganthans' Five Laws of Library Science

(American Revised Version)

1. Books are for use.

Tapes, films, records, relics, and books are for use in the information delivery system.

2. Every reader his book.

To every media-ite, his/her medium.

3. Every book its reader.

To every tape, record, etc., its utiliser.

4. Save the time of the reader.

Save the downtime of the patron.

5. A library is a growing organism.

A learning resource center is a growing organism.²

Michael Gorman has recently made a closer review of Ranganathan's philosophy contained in the Five Laws as viewed in the fast changing library scene. He has focused on the validity of the Five Laws. In that context he

2 "Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science : American Revised Version," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, 49 (April 1975) : 575.

has suggested some newer focus for each of Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science as a follow up to Ranganathan's Five Laws. He has suggested five new laws as an expansion of the first Five Laws. He expects that these new Laws would reflect the fundamental aim of the library services as conceptualized by Ranganathan in the original Five Laws. The new laws are expected to meet the challenges of fast paced social and cultural changes affecting library users and the rapid proliferation of technology in the library operations.

Libraries serve humanity

Respect all forms by which knowledge is communicated

Use technology intelligently to enhance service

Protect free access to knowledge

Honor the past and create the future.³

In a recent review article, Kuronen and Pekkarinen have analyzed the Five Laws of Ranganathan and have felt that there is a need of some supplementary laws to the original Five Laws in the context of technological advances of today.⁴ The authors of the article are convinced that the underlying philosophy of Ranganathan's Five Laws is fundamental. However, in this age of global information network, it is necessary to have supplementary laws to be able to cope with the growth in user demand in the libraries. The authors say:

The 'new' supplementary laws relate to Ranganathan's Five Laws the very essence of the virtual library: the library configured by the individual reader. The virtual library makes it possible for the reader to make his/her documents and writings publicly available and part of the global collection.

As such the authors have suggested two supplementary (6th and 7th) laws to Ranganathan's Five Laws:

6. Every reader his library.

7. Every writer his contribution to library.⁵

Considering deep impact of Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science and Colon Classification, an entire issue of *Libri* was devoted to Ranganathan. Several Indian and western authors have analyzed and discussed Ranganathan's professional work from many angles in their papers.

3 Michael Gorman, "The Five Laws of Library Science then and now.....," *School Library Journal*, (July 1998) : 20-23.

4 Timo Kuronen, & Pekkarinen Paivi, "Ranganathan revisited: A review article," *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 31 : 1 (March 1999) : 45-47.

5 *Ibid*, p. 47

The authors have drawn the attention of the library professionals and focused on Ranganathan's many faceted influence to service philosophy and subject classification.⁶ Such continued focus on Ranganathan and his work is a fair testimony that he is a universal librarian.

Ranganathan's second major contribution to the library profession is his formulation of Colon Classification (CC). He had studied Dewey's Decimal Classification (DDC) in his library education. From his experience with DDC he felt that DDC did not provide the flexibility to cover all the different facets of a subject. He was a mathematician and naturally thought about the mathematical configuration of all the facets of a subject. This made the way for formulation of Colon Classification.

In their same review article, Kuronen and Pekkarinen have observed that the Colon Classification had not become as popular as it might have deserved. It is also observed that the theory of faceted analysis implies ideas which are still to be explored to be fully utilized in the electronic environment. Perhaps Ranganathan had developed his CC faceted classification too early. It is expected that wider benefit would be gained from CC as a structured domain language as used in Artificial Intelligence.⁷ It is however, appropriate to acknowledge the increased application of Ranganathan's principles of Colon Classification in indexing, in the creation of electronic databases, and in the development of integrated systems. He has given us the instrument for the accurate analysis of knowledge and its re-synthesis in a linear sequence, while the computer has now become the means for displaying the resultant sequence.⁸

The formulation of Colon Classification drew the immediate attention of the library world to this innovative classification scheme. Ranganathan's own teacher, Berwick Sayers, himself a classification authority, said of the Colon Classification:

Nearly every scheme has not only its main tables worked out 'enumeratively', it has systematic mnemonic schedules which develop and qualify all or some of the subjects in those tables. Ranganathan devised a set of independent tables for subjects, for relations, terms and other classification factors, each of which could be used in combination with the other tables to subdivide. These tables were, in Colon Language, like the parts of a meccano set which by the use of nuts and bolts can be used for many different constructions. In appearance, the numbers are like the classification complex. One result of this method is the very full tables

6 *Libri*, 42 : 3 (July-September 1992).

7 Kuronen, & Pekkarinen, p. 45

8 *Ibid.*

which all other schemes possess are unnecessary. A series of relative short tables can be used to mark the widest range of subject.⁹

Jesse H. Shera realized the potential of Colon Classification and drew the attention of American librarians to the flexibility of the Colon scheme.¹⁰ Garfield notes from a study of *Science Citation Index* and *Social Sciences Citation Index*, that Ranganathan's works were cited more than 400 times over a 20-year period. He states that this is indeed remarkable because coverage in those citation sources for materials in the field of library science was selective and limited.¹¹

Ranganathan had a great impact on library education in England. Mr. Derek Langridge, Principal Lecturer of North Western Polytechnic in England, visited India in November and December of 1969. In his comments of Ranganathan's Colon Classification, he stressed that, "I regard the Colon Classification the best scheme" to teach the principles. He also talked about then changing perspective of the teaching of classification in North Western Polytechnic. He said that between 1951 and 1961, teaching of classification at the Polytechnic was based on PMEST (Personality, Matter, Energy, Space. Time-postulates for hierarchical design in classification.) and the theory propounded by Dr. Ranganathan.¹²

Incorporation and use of Colon Classification continued in the Polytechnic curriculum. In 1954, practical classification was based on Facet Analysis. In 1953, Chain Indexing was introduced and in 1964, Colon Classification was accepted for practical classification. He observed that at the time 50 percent of the schools in the United Kingdom were teaching Colon Classification and, after 1966, the library school in Maryland, USA, introduced the comparative study of Universal Decimal Classification and Colon Classification.¹³

The understanding of the scope of Ranganathan's Colon Classification for computer application and the influence of Ranganathan's ideas on the Western Reserve University system have been described this way:

Hierarchical subject classification and reorganizing stored information are possible only with the Freely Faceted Analytico-synthetic Classification. The only well-known general scheme of its kind for bib-

9 K. Manickavasagar, "Colon Classification in retrospect," *Herald of Library Science*, 8(October 1969) : 269.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 270.

11 Eugene Garfield, "A tribute to S. R. Ranganathan, The Father of Indian Library Science," In *New Trends in International Librarianship*, ed. P. A. Mohanrajan (New Delhi : Allied Publishers, 1984), pp. 274-275.

12 Derek Langridge, "Teaching of Library Classification," *Herald of Library Science*, 9(January 1970) : 13-14.

13 *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

liographic classification is the Colon Classification of Ranganathan. Based on faceted structure as in the Colon Classification, over twenty special schemes have been described and applied particularly in British libraries. Many of these are not freely faceted though they are faceted. Only Freely Faceted Analytico-synthetic scheme for Bibliographic Classification can meet the requirements of computer technology in its application to the retrieval of information embedded in documents.... The other known system that has overcome the rigidity of conventional hierarchy is the Encoded Telegraphic Abstracts of the Western Reserve University (WRU). The devisers of the WRU system admit that the system has been influenced and even guided in its development by the Colon Classification. Jessica Melton made a comparison between the Colon Classification and the mechanical sorting system of the WRU and concluded that of the twenty-five basic ideas, in nineteen cases the systems are in imperfect agreement, and in two in partial agreement; four cases where no correlation existed were due to the omission on the part of the WRU classifier of aspects included in the Colon Classification. These are sufficient proof that classifiers using a Freely Faceted/Analytico-synthetic Scheme for Bibliographic Classification are on par with engineers.¹⁴

In conclusion, it now seems a certainty that the “Age of Ranganathan” will continue to be with the library world for years to come and continue to provide a base for the realization of the concept of total library service.¹⁵

Michael Gorman has very appropriately called Ranganathan a “Renaissance Man”. He said:

Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan (1892-1972) of India is the unquestioned giant of 20th-century library science. He tackled all aspects of the profession of librarianship and always added his own individualistic, and sometimes, quirky perception of the subject. He revolutionized the theory and practice of classification. Though his own classification scheme was never widely adopted, its influence can be seen throughout the practice of information retrieval, in the modern revisions of the Dewey Decimal Classification scheme, and in such pioneering attempts as the PRECIS (Preserved Context Subject Indexing System) subject heading system. If for nothing else, he deserves to be long remembered for his

14 K. Manickavasagar, “Computer and the Colon Classification,” *Herald of Library Science*, 12 (April-July 1973) : 148-149.

15 Michael Gorman, “Let us now praise: A reflective look at six persons who greatly influenced the art of cataloging,” *American Libraries*, 11 (April 1980) : 203.



“Five Laws of Library Science”. The laws are the best summary of what libraries are, or should be about..... There is not facet of the practice of librarianship to which those laws cannot be applied. They represent a lifetime of thought on our profession distilled into universalisms.¹⁶

16 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

