RELEVANCE OF RANGANATHAN'S CONTRIBUTION
IN THE AGE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

Two decades have passed since Indian library profession lost its father Dr. S.R. Ranganathan. In the year of his birth centenary, when the profession revisits its past, and the time of Ranganathan is recounted, an effective presence of his footsteps is clearly visible in the whole realm of librarianship. The first major landmark during his journey of the library profession that heralded on 4th January, 1924 when he joined as the librarian of the University of Madras, was the publication of 'Five Laws of Library Science' in 1931. It was followed by thousands of articles and some classics in the profession like 'Colon Classification', 'Prolegomena to Library Classification', 'Classified Catalogue Code', etc. During these five decades, which he spent in the service of library profession, Ranganathan was able to develop his philosophy as a living force. He was a torch-bearer in making library movement in India a successful reality. His role as a teacher, a librarian or a professional leader was always recognised and commended by the world professional community. Two decades after his passing away, the library world is stunned by the introduction of new information technologies, and the whole library scene looks so transformed that the traditional methods seem insufficient to cope up with the changed environment and the need is increasingly felt to search for effective means to control the complexities arising in the library system.

A cursory look at Ranganathan's ideas and philosophy reveals some amazing concepts which have the potential to solve the complexities of the present system. Keeping in view his all pervading philosophy, the discussion here, is restricted to the relevance of some of his contributions in the context of computer and communication technology.

FIVE LAWS AND THEIR RELEVANCE

Dr. Ranganathan made the first formal exposition of his five fundamental laws of library science in the presence of thousands of teachers at the Provincial Educational Conference in 1928 at the Minakshi College, Chidambaram, on the eve of its becoming the Annamalai University. Later on, these fundamental laws were published as 'The Five Laws of Library Science' in 1931 and the book was received by the professionals all over the world as a unique contribution. W.C. Berwick Sayers in his introduction to its first edition, states that "This is one of the most interesting books that I have read in recent years upon our profession. It is unique" [1]. The laws are so fundamental that they are still relevant in this age of 'information technology'. It is said that "a genius is one who foresees the future in the present", and rightly to this, the genius in Ranganathan enunciated laws that show his farsightedness.

The first law - 'Books are for use', is so simple that it is accepted like the universal truth - 'the sun rises in the east'.

'Every reader his/her book'- his second law is really a preacher of democracy and speaks of the right of the reader to his information, which is, a much talked topic of today.

In the age of information technology, the last three laws are even more relevant.

The objective of the third law - 'Every book its reader', can be easily achieved today with the use of computers. In a manual system as Ranganathan suggested, the librarian has to adopt open access, prepare a comprehensive catalogue with all types of approaches, display books, etc. to achieve the objectives successfully. In the computerised environment, the gap between the reader and the book is bridged with the help of the
indexes which are automatically built by the computer to facilitate search by maximum number of approaches.

The purpose of the fourth law - 'Save the time of the reader’ is simultaneously achieved by the use of computers and computerised indexes. Use of computer reduces the time of information retrieval. Computers are now, used to provide quick access to information, whereas Ranganathan talked of this some sixty years ago.

F.W. Lancaster, while discussing the fifth law and its implications, says that, “Ranganathan was a futurist....he timely believed that the library profession will only survive and, retain its value if it continues to adopt to changes in its environment. This, of course is the entire thrust of the fifth law of library science; “Library is a growing organism” [2].

It is erroneously said that due to the impact of information technology IT, the fifth law has lost its relevance, as electronic publishing can save space in the library. But, it may noticed that multimedia and electronic publishing came on the front only after realizing the tremendous growth of literature. Ranganathan had sensed this development much earlier and stated that, "What further stages of evolution are in store for this growing organism - the library - we cannot anticipate fully who knows that a day may not come when the dissemination of knowledge, which is the vital function of libraries, will be realised even by means other than those of the printed books" [3].

**INFORMATION ORGANISATION AND RETRIEVAL**

Ranganathan devised some unique methods and techniques for information organisation and its easy retrieval. He coined a unique method to individualise every document in this world of information explosion through his Colon Classification (CC). Gopinath stated in one of his works “CC edition 7 aims at maintaining simplicity and brevity of notation relative to the complexity of ideas expressed in class numbers. It can be used as a base for the derivation of subject headings and thesaurus construction using a computer. Precision in the notational plane, via the use of indicator digits particularly, makes it easily adaptable to synthesis by computer in the formulation of class numbers”, [4]. Moreover, Colon Classification is based on a sound dynamic theory, whereas other available schemes lack, more or less, a sound theory and are therefore, static.

CC Ed. 7 is a freely faceted classification scheme. The concept of facet analysis has greatly enhanced its applicability. Commenting on the significance of the concept of facet in classification, Coates writes "probably there is no word introduced into the technical vocabulary of information science by Ranganathan which has been more readily understood and given acceptance than the word “facet” [5]. Facet analysis facilitates the formulation of search queries and users' query profiles for searching bibliographic databases. Ranganathan in as early as 1968 started a project called ‘Doc-finder’ [6] for fast document retrieval, which was a pioneering effort towards the development of automatic classification.

Ranganathan propounded chain indexing procedure for retrieval of documents in a natural language order. He derived terms from the classificatory language, i.e., CC itself. At present in a database environment, retrieval is done through matching of keywords from the records of a specific database. Ranganathan’s chain procedure also, gives a list of index terms that are used for searching.

**BIBLIOGRAPHIC RECORD FORMATS**

At present there are a number of bibliographic record formats such as US-MARC, UNIMARC, CCF, etc. These bibliographic formats promote free eXchange of information from the records created in one format to another in machine readable form. Similarly, a Catalogue Code prescribes rules for output of the bibliographic records in a specific manner. However, it is not necessary to input data in the same prescribed sequence, rather it should be in such a manner that the output can be obtained in any desired form. For this purpose, the attributes of a document are to be identified. The 'Classified Catalogue Code' developed by Ranganathan, is one such code, "which prior to the development of database technology, identifies and specifies, in clear terms, all the possible attributes of the entity set - document (or all the discrete data elements of a bibliographic entity or entities) and makes them as a base for framing the rules for their rendering, grouping as well as fixing their relative order or sequence within a bibliographical record for entry and display” [7]. Kashyap goes to the extent of saying that CCC is “one of the most suitable codes for identifying and defining data elements of a bibliographic entity, but also for generating computerised inputs and outputs of bibliographic databases” [8].
CONCLUSION

The ideas propounded by Ranganathan are seminal in nature and need a lot of attention from the professionals, academicians and researchers. Realising this, the Indian Library Association and Sarada Ranganathan Endowment for Library Science organised an International Conference on Ranganathan’s philosophy in New Delhi in 1985. A National endeavour to undertake research on Ranganathan’s philosophy and ideas and to interpret them in the present day context may be initiated. This will be a great tribute to this all time great personality in the world of Library and Information Science.

REFERENCES


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