

CREATIVITY IN THE THOUGHT OF Dr. S. R. RANGANATHAN

GIRIJA KUMAR

Chairman

Indian Organizing Committee for IFLA, 1992

RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Dr. S. R. Ranganathan had two sides to his conceptual make up-his intellectual being which was essentially Western oriented and his cultural being which was rooted deep in tradition. His adherence to scientific methodology established his bonafides as his being a part of the mainstream. His intellect cut across national boundaries. He could be classed with Dewey, Cutter and Bliss with ease. His cultural background could be incidental to his contribution to library science.

However, it is equally inadvisable to draw him away from his roots. The cultural influences are prominent in his thought. His manner of presentation of situations is essentially brahmanic.

Dr. Ranganathan was very fond of picking analogies from the Indian religious scriptures for supporting his argument. Ramayana was his favourite. His references were essentially illustrative and at times not necessarily directly relevant for supporting the argument. At times, these were also discursive. It was thus difficult to weave his Indian illustrations into the essence of the argument.

A PRAGMATIST

Dr. Ranganathan was a pragmatist at the bottom of his heart. Those who talk of him as a mystic and an Indian seer may not be doing justice to him. It does not reflect the true reality. He was not particularly a religious man. He was at the most a practising Hindu.

His frequent references to Indian mythology are not necessarily his strong points. He may in fact be arguing from a weaker position in those circumstances. There is, however, no way of dispelling widely believed myths except to wait for a time to come and apply its healing touch. Marcia H. Chappel is a perceptive critic of Ranganathan but when it comes to his essentially

Indian character and its dominant effect on his thought, she drops all deferences to state, "Ranganathan's approach to librarianship is fundamentally not scientific but religious in the broadest sense of the term. In his discussions of reference service he frequently refers to the metaphysical and moral contents that define the place of librarianship within the social order". She is also sure about the influence of Hinduism on the integrative approach and value system[1].

THREAT OF RENUNCIATION

What chappel has suggested is no more than a hearsay. Those who had close association with him like the members of the Classification Research Group, knew him better. D. W. Langridge, for instance, has mentioned Dr. Ranganathan's experiments in extra sensory practices in communicating with the spirits. There are moving references to his two seances in communicating with dead Ramanujan, the great Indian mathematician, in which his spirit affirms all loss of interest in mathematics after his death [2].

Dr. Ranganathan had edited a book on spiritual seances in his early days. The book was published anonymously. He defended his position arguing. "In those days, it was difficult enough trying to persuade people in India that librarianship was a reputable profession, without the added handicap of occult connections" [3].

Similarly, there is an urge for spiritual experience as reflected in his biographical writings. Whenever he felt depressed in his life, he had thought of renouncing the world. It does not, however, mean much. Renunciation is always at the back of the mind of a good Hindu. It is a part of his subconscious being. No harm is ever done. He communicated with his Guru on renunciation from time to time and got the same reply, "You can't do it in this incarnation. You must continue your work and writing, and perhaps think of renunciation in the next life" [4]. Such a piece of advice must have proved to be a psychological palliative to him.

RANGANATHAN AND MYSTICISM

Religion was a part of his personal being. Hinduism being a catholic faith with no central authority or common belief did not enjoin upon him to employ religious traditions in the context of his intellectual thinking. Religion was for the individual. The library scientist in him was a personality of different order. He had himself categorically derived having passed through any "real mystic experience". He has also denied vehemently any association of religious thought with his theory of library classification.

In fact he seems to admonish the author of the piece of writing about mysticism and classification. He has asserted that "a classification scheme should not get consciously involved in intellectual entities of that kind, i.e. mysticism" [5]. Langridge is right when he asserts in defence of Ranganathan, "Much as he appreciated the significance of mysticism, Ranganathan was not himself a mystic. He was an intellectual who absorbed much from the West and united us all in the application of scientific method to librarianship. Religious beliefs and ideas are not apparent in his works as one might expect; though he does quote effectively from Hindu classics" [6].

INDIAN SCRIPTURES

Ranganathan is very fond of quoting from Indian scriptures. The references are mostly ornamental and for effect upon the uninitiated. Being a child of Indian nationalism, he is impelled to flaunt his separate identity distinct from the rest of the world. His brahmanic background makes him emphasize his moral duties to others which he takes rather too seriously. Dr. Ranganathan had a number of good friends. Prof. S. Kuppaswami Sastriar, the great scholar of Indology, was one of them. He must have benefitted by the contact with the Sanskrit scholar. He owes many of his ideas drawn from Hindu scriptures to him. The Principle of Unity of Idea referred to in the 'Prolegomena' [7] was brought to his attention by the professor.

Dr. Ranganathan's theoretical writings are indeed impressive. He is said to be the Pope of Library Classification. His writings on classification are looked upon with awe. His earlier writings are entirely of a different genre. He is essentially a garrulous being. In the true Indian tradition, he finds himself at home narrating endless stories. None is complete without a moral.

His "Five Laws" [8] and "References Service" [9]

are most adept in the techniques special to the art of story telling. The chapter on the Second Law in his "Five Laws of Library Science" makes the most delightful reading. It is in the form of the Socratic dialogue. Equally readable is the Sambandhar episode, based on a folk tale drawn from his native Shiyali. Shambandhar lived in the seventh century. Upon finding the gates of heaven open by sheer accident, he had the good sense to help everyone from his village to slip beyond the portals of heaven. The moral of the story was "in its expression of universal brotherhood, serene as a symbol of the Second Law of library science" [10]. The analogy is far-fetched, but it establishes the humanistic tendencies of the earlier Ranganathan.

THE SPIRIT OF THE LIBRARY

Ranganathan felt at the top of the world in his earlier years. Intellectual activity brought him pure joy. His work on reference service is significant on that account. His *joie de vivre* is definitely communicated to others. He feels like a free bird soaring high in the sky. He sings of "the spirit of the library".

In those years his intellect was devoted to a missionary cause. He was envisaging a network of public libraries spread all over the country. Besides reference service, public library service was another facet of librarianship that concerned him. The medieval seers, viz. Sankara and Ramanuja Acharya have always talked of God in terms of attaining knowledge. In other words only through knowledge ('*gyana*') comes enlightenment. To Ranganathan, library became an instrument of enlightenment. He was thus unintentionally employing the modern concept of human resource development by talking of spirituality. This is what he precisely meant by "the vital principle". It would, however, be wrong to read more meaning into his employment of religious symbolism. His religiosity was of the normal type. Religion was a convenient tool to make a point. In his elaborations, he often talked of the "Inner Man". Many secular thinkers today are also equally concerned with the "Inner Man". Humanism is increasingly coming to be accepted as an intellectual discipline.

Ranganathan was far sighted because he used to speak of what was to become the talking point of the subsequent times:

"..... The vital principle of the library which has struggled through all the stages of its evolution, is common to all different forms and will

persist to be its distinguishing feature for all times to come is that it is an instrument of universal education, and assembles together and freely distributes all the tools of education and disseminates knowledge". This vital principle, "the spirit of the library" - persisting through all its forms is like the Inner Man; and to it are applicable the words of Lord Krishna in Gita.

ANALOGIES AND THREE PLANES

Analogies have provided Ranganathan with the freedom of intellect. Hey presto, like a magician pulling rabbits out of a hat, Ranganathan puts solutions to seemingly unsolvable problems by falling back upon analogies drawn from Indian scriptures. Whether these are appropriate or not, they make a telling effect. His metaphysics is a convenient tool for him twisted and turned around to suit the convenience. It is like Alladin's magic lamp performing upto his will. The analogies from Indian scriptures are indeed post-facto justifications for conclusions he seemed to have arrived at by the sheer force of his intellect.

In Indian tradition, the numeral three is of great significance. Ranganathan seems to make a great use of the same. The whole foundation of his theory of library classification is based on three planes at the idea, verbal and notational levels. In his metaphysical analogy, the living body also consists of three categories; i.e. soul, subtle-body and gross body. The soul is placed at the highest pedestal. It has to do with the primary senses beyond the ordinary intellect. Ranganathan in his writings has talked of creativity being attained through the process of intuition. Creativity has to do with the primary senses. Similarly, the other two planes at the notational and verbal levels have to do with intellectual experiences. They are somewhat akin to "subtle body" and "gross body". He relates all this to the 'vital principle of library'. Again a three-some game is played by him. He talks of three planes of human existence:

- a) the 'Vital plane',
- b) the 'Mental plane' and
- c) the 'Spiritual plane'.

The 'Vital plane' is intended to fulfil the gross needs of the body. This is precisely the function performed by the library. It draws sustenance from the 'Mental plane' concerned with the intellect. Ranganathan himself had operated at the 'Mental plane'. The 'Spiritual plane' was not for him in this life. He has talked of "Pure existence-

cum-pure-consciousness-cum-pure delight", [12] thereby overlaying the essence of his thinking with metaphorical references derived from Indian metaphysics. "The vital principle of the library" in his perspective is intended to envisage a humanistic core for library science. The essence of Hinduism may lie in the universal harmony. Its slogan of the 'world being one big family (*Vasudhaiva Kutumbkam*)' is most appealing. Ranganathan has certainly found analogies for librarianship from fundamental principles of his religious faith. The religious idiom in his instance has definitely a secular face.

INTELLECTUAL ESSENCE

Ranganathan employed references from religious scriptures and philosophic treatises to support his arguments. It was essentially an intellectual exercise. It was a commendable effort even though his knowledge of Indian tradition was not based on deep study of Indian classics. He was essentially an intellectual and not a religious being. His applications into Indian traditions were to discover his roots. Not too much should be read into it. Apparently his knowledge of Indian tradition was acquired by contact with others like his friend Prof. Kuppaswami Sastriar. It was his instinct that led him to the explanations.

It is fascinating to view Ranganathan as an essentially intellectual being. Library science is to be viewed as secondary in his scheme of things. He was perceptive in recognizing the teachings of the *Upanishads* in that the essence of man was intellect and accordingly, "The intellect is restless. It cannot help recalling the pursuit of abstraction at higher and higher levels. The innate urge is irrepressible. It looks for every field to feed on. It finds joy in working in abstract fields of every kind. Classification presents one such field in the field of abstract classification" [13].

To him library classification was an intellectual adventure. His intellectual proclivities came out into the open. His world view is thus sanctified by the support drawn by him from ancient philosophical treatises of India.

The sustenance of his thought thus comes from Indian philosophy rather than religion. The best of his analogies drawn from the Indian tradition have a philosophical purport. The confusion arises in the minds of Western readers due to their inability to differentiate religion from philosophy. The task is somewhat complicated by the fact of symbiosis between religion and philosophical

thoughts in Indian tradition. The writings of Ranganathan to some extent reflect the situation.

EKAVAKYATA PRINCIPLE

There are several philosophical concepts drawn from Indian tradition finding their place in the thoughts of Ranganathan. The fundamental concepts include the principle of *Ekavakyata* (integrative interpretation), the Principle of unity of idea and the laws of interpretation. *Ekavakyata* is most fundamental in his thought. The principle of unity of idea in which the sentences, paragraphs and chapters of a "book fall within a single sweep of comprehension" has been actually practised by him in his writings. The notational representation with zero in the end and based on systematic classification is also drawn from the Indian tradition. It seems to support the principle of *Ekavakyata* in actual practice.

Similarly the laws of interpretation have been employed by him in his theory of library classification. These principles have been widely applied in interpreting legal texts. To him, "the canons, the principles and the rules for classification taken together look like a legal work" [14]. When a conflict arises, it should be resolved with the help of the Laws of Interpretation. He is even prepared to admit that "the rules - and less frequently, even the principles and the canons should be amended in the light of experience so as to remove old conflicts and reduce new ones to a minimum" [15].

Theoretically Ranganathan is prepared to admit that his conceptual framework is subject to reform. It needs to be restructured keeping in view the latest developments in the field of knowledge and information needs of users. So his conceptual framework could work out to be an open-ended system.

Bliss has accused Ranganathan of stealing the principle of synthesis from him without due acknowledgement. Ranganathan has however, made much play of drawing inspiration for his holistic principle from the Vedic principle of *Ekavakyata*. The concept is basic to his thought. In a manner of speaking, the unity of thought comes with mother's milk to Hindu children especially those born and bred in brahmanic tradition. To some extent his teacher of mathematics Edward B. Ross inspired him in this direction. His own mathematical background trained him in this attitude of viewing the world and its phenomena integrally. His early obsession with the *Ekavakyata*

principle is reflected in a stanza from a poem by Francis Thompson:

*All things by immortal power
Near or Far
Hiddenly
To each other linked are,
That thou canst not stir a flower
Without troubling of a star*

The generation to which Ranganathan belonged was discovering India via Europe. The *Ekavakyata* principle had a special appeal to German thinkers, philosophers and poets. Mysticism had also great appeal to English poets like William Morris. All this debate about an integral world view impressed the generation of Dr. S.R. Ranganathan to no end. It, however, came second hand to his generation.

His basic thought owes to the fundamental concepts of mysticism, intuition and '*Ekavakyata*'. These are overloaded with metaphysical references obscuring the real intentions of Ranganathan. He is essentially a pragmatist clothing his argument in a theoretical framework. The integrative world view has come handy to him. He makes effective use of the thesis raising his pragmatism to the level of integrated model.

HOLISTIC PRINCIPLE

The *Ekavakyata* principle was definitely in his mind while he travelled to Great Britain. He saw a practical demonstration of it in the "British library world". Those experiences were absorbed and were illuminated in his future works. This is what had impressed him the most in British experience. He had realised 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 one" [18].

The most concrete form of the principle was manifested in his five laws of library science, which according to him are "a verbal record of the "*Ekavakyata*" of library practice and science, as it revealed itself" [19]. Here Ranganathan finds himself in the role of a self proclaimed prophet who has the benefit of revelation in an early stage of his professional career.

The holistic world view is indeed so integral to his thought that it is next to impossible to view him independently from it. Whether it is five laws, canons, postulated approach, symbiosis

between classification and cataloguing, the concept of unity of thought was uppermost for him. The primordial idea sums up Ranganathan and his thought in one word. The dialectical situation favouring him has come about for his deep roots in the Indian tradition. He has to be largely credited for realizing its far reaching implications.

INTELLECTION

English equivalence of *Ekavakyata* is holism: The literal meaning of the term is "the whole is greater than its parts". Ranganathan may have discovered the English equivalent from the writings of the great South African statesman General Smuts, who wrote a book on the subject of holism. Ranganathan may have found support for his concept of intuition from the same source. Intuition has been called by General Smuts as "this region of knowledge", no man's zone for intellection" [20].

Ranganathan was also fond of the term intellection. There are frequent references to intellection in his writings. It is self evident by now that the terms holism, intuition and intellection have been employed by Ranganathan as they are found in literature of mysticism. The concept of holism is not exclusively used in the literature of mysticism. It is employed widely in the context of knowledge in entirely different connotations.

Dialectics have much use for the concept. The change of quantity into quality resulting in a totally different product or concept is widely recognized in the literature of dialectics. The whole superstructure built by Karl Marx is based on the unity of concepts at the subterranean level, with one closely allied to the other, impacting the conceptual framework with change in situation and evidently ending up as an entirely new and rebuilt conceptual framework. The process is endless and repeated from time to time. The contribution of Ranganathan lies in relating it to the Indian tradition and providing an entirely new thrust to the discipline of library science.

CREATIVITY

Ranganathan has given a great deal of thought to all generation of creativity in geniuses. He was very much self-conscious about his contribution to history. He definitely considered himself a creative being. He was thus anxious to reach the roots of creativity. The five laws were certainly the most creative experience for him. He formulated the five laws in their proper manifestations in 1928 when he was forty. Melvil Dewey invented

Decimal classification in 1876 when he was barely twenty five. Shankracharya became creative by the time he was seven.

Buddha, Christ and Muhammad reached their prime when they were in their adolescence, the scientists are creative while they are in their twenties. Creativity is a late starter among social scientists. Ranganathan became creative when he was middle aged. The creative period in him lasted briefly for just five years, that is from 1928 (with the discovery of five laws) to 1933 (publication of colon classification).

Ranganathan has viewed creativity as a mystic experience. He has attributed creativity to intuitive processes. He has sought to make a distinction between "intellection" and "intuition". While the former is considered as "rationalistic", the latter is related to "mystic experience". Intuition is considered of much higher order than intellection. In his view, there is a realm to which intellect cannot hope to aspire. Creativity is thus the domain of intuition. It is also beyond the reach of scientific method which is good enough for intellectual experiences.

Ranganathan has given equal attention to the subject of intuition. He has, however, not taken into account any literary, sociological or psychological writings in contemporary literature on the subject. What C. Wright Mills has termed "sociological imagination" has not been taken into account by him in his writings on intuition. He has entirely based himself on the Indian tradition on mysticism. He is so much obsessed with the subject that he turns back to it again and again. Here Ranganathan seems to enter the domain of metaphysics with hands and feet tied together. There is, however, a saving grace in all this. He is in the situation of famous Moliere character who had spoken prose all his life without realizing it. There are psychological truths with hidden meanings to be found in verbiage.

Some of his writings on intuition are extraordinary. He lets himself go which is rare in normal circumstances for him. His prose assumes a coloration when he begins to talk of intuition. Not only the mystical experiences, but the very mention of it transforms the man. The term used for intuition in Sanskrit tradition is *Divya Chakshus* (divine insight). Ranganathan seems to be overpowered by this faculty whenever he mentions the term intuition. He has speculated a great deal about it. The spiritual communion in his view approximates to intuitive experience. The literary communion is of the nearest approximation to

spiritual communion. The truth is discovered momentarily in a flash. The experience is best described in his own words "when one is engaged on a problem, the most useful ideas occur suddenly. They seem, at once, to cast a flood of light over murky tracts of half formed thought and promise reward to further exploration, This has been my experience and it is doubtless shared by many others. These surprise ideas present themselves as ready made vehicles coming at the oddest moments. They seldom come if they are sought and get delight in choosing moments when pen and papers cannot be used to impede their flight. They come and whisper in our ears as we are sleeping in bed or as we mechanically repeat a long drawn-out hymn as part of the daily routine of worship" [21].

Surprisingly similar experiences have been related by other creative beings in other fields of knowledge. Ranganathan was thus in the mainstream while operating in the narrow field of library science.

REFERENCES

1. Chappel MH: The place of reference service in Ranganathan's theory of librarianship. *Lib Quarterly*, 46, 1976, 381.
2. Ranganathan S R: Ramanujan, the man and the mathematician (great thinkers of India series, 1). Sarada Ranganathan Endowment for Library Science, Bangalore, 1967 (reprinted 1989), 16.
3. Langridge D W: Ranganathan and mysticism In Dubey, Edward. Ed. S.R. Ranganathan 1879-1972 etc. Library Association, London, 1974, 31.
4. *Ibid*, 32.
5. International Conference On Ranganathan's Philosophy, New Delhi, 1985: Ranganathan's philosophy, assessment - impact and relevance, ed. by T.S. Ranagopalan, New Delhi, Vikas, 1986, 221.
6. Langridge DW: *Op. cit.*
7. Ranganathan S R: Prolegomena to library classification., Ed. 3. Bombay, Asia, 1967.
8. Ranganathan S R: The five laws of library science. Madras, Library Association, 1931.
9. Ranganathan S R and Sundaram C V: Reference service and bibliography. Madras Library Association, 1940.
10. Ranganathan S R: The five laws of library science. *Op. cit.* 133.
11. Ranganathan S R: *Op. Cit.*, 234.
12. Ranganathan S R : Classification and communication. University of Delhi, 1951.
13. Ranganathan S R: Prolegomena to library classification Ed. 3. Bombay, Asia, 1967, X G 22, 572.
14. Ranganathan S R: *Op. Cit.*, DC 1, 123.
15. Ranganathan S R: *Op. Cit.*
16. Ranganathan S R: *Op. Cit.*, PM 7, 373.
17. Atherton, Pauline: Putting knowledge to work, etc. Vikas, New Delhi, 144.
18. Atherton P: Putting knowledge to work. New Delhi, Vikas, 145.
19. Atherton: *Op. Cit.*
20. Ranganathan S R: Prolegomena to library classification Ed. 2. Library Association, London, 1957, 398.
21. Ranganathan S R : Prolegomena to library classification Ed. 3. London, Library Association, 1957, 21.