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A living library:

*Padma Shri S.R. Ranganathan (1892-1972),
the Sole Architect of Indian Library Movement*

Not so long ago India was considered among the world leaders in library science education and research. Librarians of the world expectedly looked towards India for some conceptual and practical innovations in the area of information organization and retrieval. Dr. Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan Iyer, deservedly known as the father of Indian Library Movement, literally revived the proud tradition of ancient India to attract scholars from far and wide to learn from our savants. Such an inspiring genius was born to mother Sitalakshmi and father N. Ramamrita on August 12, 1892 in a Vedama Iyer Brahmin family of village Shiyali in the Thanjavur district then in Madras Presidency. Vedama Iyers are said to have migrated long ago from the North.

Family was poor, but cultured and deeply religious. Early death of his father, a small farmer, made his life strewn with difficulties. He was brought up by his maternal grandfather who was an elementary school teacher. Wading his way through hardships, he meritoriously

completed his schooling in 1909, and later passed M.A. in mathematics in 1916 from Madras Christian College. In 1907, at the age of fifteen, he married Rukmini who unfortunately drowned and died in 1928 at the age of 32 while fetching water from the village pond. In 1929 he married Vangal Lakshmana Sarada (1908-1985) with whom he begot his only son Yogeswar (1932-2016), who studied engineering in Switzerland, married a European girl in 1957 and happily settled with three children and many grand children in Luxembourg. Sarada though illiterate was an able homemaker and an adorable and graceful companion, temperamentally a perfect complement to him.

In childhood Ranganathan was in poor health and economically, but made good his inborn shortcomings with undaunted efforts, determination, and the gift of good memory. While in College he came under the tutelage of his mathematics professor Edward B. Ross who was a Scottish missionary. He helped him financially, gave moral support, motivated him to continue his studies after graduation and above all trained his mind in the art of thinking *ab initio*. Ross, a kindred soul, was a helping man and dedicated teacher. Ranganathan absorbed his influence and repaid his debt by dedicating him his revolutionary book *Colon Classification* (1933), and established an endowment in his name at the Madras Christian College. Ranganathan always treated Ross as his intellectual father and his portrait remained with the family wherever they moved.

On earning a teaching degree in 1917 he became a teacher of mathematics in government colleges in Madras Presidency. He loved mathematics and teaching, both. Life was going on, and he was already past thirty without any inkling of the great task ahead that the Providence had assigned him.

Suddenly in 1924, he crossed over to librarianship which in those days was not a career for active scholars and ambitious persons. Profession of librarianship did not exist then. He was appointed librarian of the Madras University at a higher salary of Rs 250 per month.

He got a brief training in librarianship from the University College,

London, where he read all the books in the college library available on the subject of librarianship and with his insights impressed his teachers like W. C. B. Sayers (1881-1960). He also undertook a tour of about hundred British libraries to gain a first-hand knowledge of their working and services. After his training, he returned home in 1925 with his mind swarming with new ideas.

After that, neither he nor library science remained the same. His new found profession provided him intellectual, social and spiritual fulfilment and a lot of fame later. Librarianship became his vocation and avocation to the exclusion of all other worldly engagements.

Then library science curricula and teaching methods did not satisfy his inquiring and rebellious mind trained in science and mathematics. Nevertheless, he was very much impressed by the variety, extent and intensity of library services provided to each British citizen by the legislation based British libraries network.

He set before himself the twin tasks of providing wide library facilities at *par* with the British services to every Indian on statutory basis, this was a utopian goal which is still incomplete and unattainable. The second aim was to make library science true to the name of science by writing it anew on rigidly scientific lines. From the very day, he totally occupied himself with work for the goals he had set before himself. There was no other life for him. Librarianship provided him spiritual sustenance too.

He modernized the Madras University library to provide unheard and unimagined library and information services to the students and faculty. Later such services were extended to the Madras elite at their doorsteps by home delivery of books service — a very noble and novel idea then. It was a master stroke in library marketing. The foremost indigenous need was to create a social awakening for the value of libraries. He started, what we call now, library advocacy. He talked to people whatever be their social rank, to spread the gospel of the social value of library services, work, and library science. He availed every opportunity, platform and available media to convince the statesmen,

scholars, bureaucrats and laymen alike that libraries are depositories of our culture, and an apparatus of social memory. Libraries are indispensable to uplift a nation socially, democratically, economically and educationally — whatever be its social, economic and literacy conditions.

In the beginning, his was the one-man library movement. In his many books he proposed many plans and worked tirelessly for an integrated countrywide system of public and academic libraries. He was opposed to desultory establishment of libraries. In 1928 he founded with prominent Madras citizenry the Madras Library Association (MALA) with the twin aim of promoting library movement and to generate trained work force for the libraries to run on scientific lines.

He succeeded in both so much so that the MALA school was taken over by the Madras University and upgraded its course to university diploma — the first university library science course in India.

Between 1940s and 1950s he adeptly drafted many library plans and library bills to suit Indian conditions, and wrote many books on the organization of libraries and role of libraries in adult education and national development. He was of the strong conviction that libraries are a force in education including adult education. His dream was to provide a free book service to all Indians, and to make India a republic of books and libraries. Political leadership respected him, but looked upon libraries as a luxury of the educated class in a mostly illiterate nation struggling with many economic and political problems after the Independence in 1947 from the two hundred years of British colonial rule. There was no money for his massive plans. He, an incorrigible optimist, never gave up in despite successive failures and even personal discomfitures. At last in 1948, the library legislation was enacted by the then Madras state.

Now (2022) library legislations exist in nineteen Indian states out total of twenty-eight states and eight union territories. But the state of libraries and their services are far from his dreams. The all-India library system that he wanted to build has not come up. Libraries here

and there are not linked in any nationwide system. The information, library and book policy has not yet been finalized. We have a Central National Library, national libraries for different subjects such as arts, science, agriculture, medicine; there are legal depositories of books, state and city libraries, but there is no library structure. There is no formal scheme of cooperation, there is unnecessary duplication of our meagre library resources. UGC's multimillion 'Libraries and Information Network' (INFLIBNET) has not yet brought the academic libraries under a truly inter-connected network. The bibliographical activities of the nation are far from adequate. Yet the model he proposed is still practically valid, and his dream will continue to inspire and guide the Indian library leaders. He would have been happy to see the recognition the National Knowledge Commission (NKC, 2005-2008) has given to the value of libraries to make India a knowledge society. Establishment of the National Mission on Libraries in 2012 to frame library and information policy, and prepare long term plans and strategies for development of the library sector is a right step to implement the recommendations of the Knowledge Commission. But it was only he who with his selfless efforts, vision, high stature, right connections and convincing power that he got us academic status for university and college librarians for which we are eternally under his debt. He also got the subject and substance of library science recognized among the academia, intelligentsia and the government.

Crusader in him never stifled the scientist he was. He possessed a radical and fertile mind. His deliberations on the theory of library science metamorphosed its very face. In his first book *The Five Laws of Library Science* (1931, 2nd ed. 1957), now a classic (reprinted many times), he gave library science its normative principles. This book is a sum and summary of his entire library philosophy and became the fountain head of all his later writings. His Laws are as true as laws of any social science. By induction, deduction and other methods of intellectual elaboration he carved out canons, principles, postulates as simple corollaries of the Five Laws. He showed their neat implica-

tions for all branches of library science from book selection to library administration and documentation to knowledge organization. Five laws are equally applicable to information centres and digital libraries. Authors after authors all over the world have attested to their applications in the electronic and digital environment.

His range was amazingly ecumenical. By the mid-1940s he had done his seminal work by writing on all aspects of the discipline such as library administration, reference service, cataloguing code and cataloguing theory and the most famous *Prolegomena to library classification* (1937). His later work was simply further elucidation and improvement. He was a prolific as well as an innovative writer with uncanny insights and synthetic capacity of the mind. Ideation and idea mapping are his hallmarks. The full volume of his writings measures up to 60 books and 2000 papers, apart from many reports. His Colon Classification (1933), based on the concept of facet analysis, has been acknowledged as a greatest breakthrough in library classification. Its principles are still taught in all the library schools the world over.

In 1957 an international conference held in England accepted facet analysis as the basis of information retrieval both in manual and automated systems. His work has gained so much acceptance that it forms the very bedrock of new researches in library science and information management, and finds applications in new fields such as artificial intelligence, expert systems and knowledge representation. Facet analysis has found many concrete applications in organizing and searching databases and web-based info sources.

He is to library science what Einstein is to physics, said Eugene Garfield (1925-2017), a great information scientist. His classification work has been considerably furthered by some of his British and Indian disciples. International library experts and organizations such as UNESCO and International Standards Organization (ISO, The Hague) always sought and valued his advice. His influence in international librarianship was all pervasive. Perceptible library historians have acknowledged and elucidated his concrete influence first on British

and through it on American librarianship. He had been quite a familiar figure in world library organizations such as, UNESCO, FID, and IFLA. Was thus made honorary emeritus vice president of FID as well as the Library Association (now, CILIP) London. It is believed that without his advice the UN library at New York would have been another US library. He proselytized to his theories many a fine brain such as Bernard Palmer (1910-1979) Education Officer of the (UK) Library Association, through him to whole of the British librarianship. His own teacher, W. C. B. Sayers called him as the foremost grammarian of classification. In the US he cast visible influence on the greats like, Jesse Shera, Eugene Garfield, Pauline Atherton, John Comaromi, F. W. Lancaster, Nasser Sharify and Michael Gorman, to name a few. Above all, the American Library Association (ALA) while sending greetings on his birth centenary celebrations in 1992 acknowledged that he was “instrumental in establishing closer relations between the East and West, and encouraging cooperation at all levels of Librarianship and library education...”. The ALA aptly described him as the librarian to the world.

In March 1945 circumstances forced Ranganathan to leave Madras University. The same year, he joined the Banaras Hindu University on the invitation of S. Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) – then its Vice-Chancellor and later the President of the Republic of India (1962-1967).

On the request of Sir Maurice Gwyer (1878-1952), an eminent jurist, Chief Judge of Federal Courts (now Supreme Court) and Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University, he joined there in 1947 as an honorary professor. At Delhi, he promoted higher education and research in library science. With his sole vision and efforts Delhi University became the first in the entire British Commonwealth to institute Master and Doctoral degrees’ programs in library science that was in 1947.

From 1944 to 1953, he unanimously remained President of the Indian Library Association to which he gave professional outlook, functions and agenda for future work. That is still considered the golden period of this 90 years old all India organization of professional li-

brarians. The crusader in Ranganathan loved people around him. He guided and inspired his library colleagues in intellectual work and to work for the library movement. He formed associations, organized conferences, established small and local research circles to meet regularly when he was at Madras, Delhi, and Bangalore. Of these the Library Research Circle at Delhi (1950-1953) is the most famous. He ardently believed in the value of team work, conferences and associations to develop and strengthen the emergent Indian library profession. From 1955 to 1957 he lived in Zurich and obtained first-hand knowledge of the use of library services in industry and R&D units. It was another active period internationally and intellectually. All eminent librarians of Europe visited him for discussions and advise. In 1962, the Government of India founded for him the Documentation Research and Training Centre (DRTC) at his convenient place, Bangalore, to carry on his research and to train librarians in the advance work of information science and services. Now a world famous centre, DRTC is considered his “crowning accomplishment” (Garfield). He died on 27th September 1972 at Bangalore after a brief illness due bronchitis.

In his lifetime he had become a household name, and a legendary figure in library circles in India and abroad. Library experts in advanced countries were keen to confer with, and listen to him. Invitations were pouring in from various countries. Sponsored by the British Council and the Rockefeller Foundation in 1948, he visited Europe and North America, and many times thereafter to participate in international meetings, conferences, and to deliver lectures or to advise library organizations. He always remained the focus in any gathering he participated. He was a confident and eloquent speaker; Westerners saw in him an embodiment of Eastern wisdom and intellect. They fondly addressed him *Guru*. His work got acceptance so much so that in 1957 an international conference of librarians held at Dorking, England deliberated and scrutinized his work. His theory of classification became the general theory of classification for information re-

trieval. He received universal recognition for his work cutting across political borders and mental prejudices that discount the intellectual work emanating from developing countries. So penetrating was his influence, and personality so peerless that American librarians reverently addressed him as “Librarian to the World”. British librarians named his lifetime as “Ranganathan Age”. He is the architect of the Indian library profession who bequeathed us a rich legacy. We continue to live in his shadow.

He won laurels and acclaims at home and abroad for his single-minded devotion, creativity, and revolutionary work. Inventory of his awards and honours is long beginning with the title of *Rao Sahib* in 1935 by the British Government. Important among them include *Padmashri* in 1957 in the first year of institution of this award, honorary D. Litt. from the University of Delhi (1948) and University of Pittsburgh (1964), National Research Professorship in Library Science (1965), and a two-volume festschrift by an international committee (1962), Honorary Vice-President-ship of the British Library Association (1957); and Membership of honour of the International Federation for Documentation, The Hague (1957), and inclusion of his portrait in the ISI “Cathedral of Man”.

Personal tributes vary from being known as founder of a distinguished school of thought to bringing cultural cooperation between the East and the West; and to enrichment of English language with his new terminology. In 1985, a successful and widely participated conference on Ranganathan’s philosophy and relevance was held in New Delhi. Experts from Asia, Europe, South Africa and North America endorsed his continued relevance in present times. It was the first international library conference devoted to the work of an individual. In 1988 he was inducted into Indian Librarianship Hall of fame. In 1992 ISKO and IFLA held their general conferences in India to celebrate his birth centenary. Government of India issued a commemorative postal stamp in his honour on the occasion. Many festschrifts and books explaining his contributions were released and many international

journals such as *Libri*, *Knowledge Organisation*, and *Herald of Library science* brought out special issues on the occasion.

As a man, he was deeply religious, strikingly simple and modest, living a Spartan life which always and vehemently abhorred intoxicants and flesh food – a true yogi. Parsimony and austerity were his hallmarks. He never even owned a house or car. But in 1957, he donated his savings of one hundred thousand rupees (then tremendously a huge sum!) to Madras University for the promotion of library education. Thereafter, he frequently gave away his accumulated wealth to the library profession in India. In 1963 he established Sarada Ranganathan Endowment in Library Science for promotion of library movement. It is a very active Bangalore based organization.

Temperamentally, he was a mystic and a philosopher. Most of his writings are inspired and intuitive. He wrote that the classic *Prolegomena* (1937) came out whole as an egg — that is he wrote it in one sitting. His *The Five Laws of Library Science* (1931,1957) enshrine his detailed operative norms of library services and development. As a teacher he was par excellence and loved one. His method was Socratic to train the minds of his students in the art of thinking. (Regretfully, there is no Plato to this Socrates, but like Aristotle his influence still prevails internationally). He used to say a teacher is like a midwife who should bring out ideas already within the students. He always taught with anecdotes and group discussion. More than facts and figures, he taught us attitude, spirits and the scientific temperament. He taught life in the guise of library science. He believed in the oneness of knowledge and interconnectedness of everything under the sun. He too often quoted the poet Francis Thompson (1859-1907):

All things by immortal power
Near of far
To each other linked are
That thou canst not stir a flower
Without troubling of a star.

Steeped in Indian philosophy, he saw the entire universe from flowers to stars linked in a Great Chain of Being. In his intellectual work he practiced the Vedic principle of *Ekavayata* – a sort of systems approach which emphasizes continuity and interconnection of entities in this universe. Intuition and flair are its main instruments. It provides a holistic approach to the problems of life and to the universe of knowledge. This accounts for the seminal unity of his work. Accordingly, on the spiritual side he saw the entire humanity as one Big Family. For him libraries and free flow of information were the instruments to promote peace and enlightenment. The scientist was a spiritualist at heart. His contribution to information science is enduring; and his niche is secure amongst the immortals of the library science. We, the netizens of information society, love the man for his dedication and humility; marvel the thinker for the profundity and enigmatic energy of his mind, remember the statesman for his vision and crusades; and awfully admire the librarian for his immense faith in power of libraries and free flow of information to enrich life in every human endeavour and to perpetuate civilization and culture.