



S R Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science: A Foundation for Democratising Knowledge

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Abstract

The author opines that Ranganathan's Five Laws pronounced in 1931 are of eternal relevance and can be considered as the sutras of Knowledge Management. Earlier majority of population were prevented from accessing knowledge. The revolutionary laws he proposed, democratised access to knowledge. Tim Berners-Lee followed Ranganathan's footsteps by making WWW accessible to everyone. But he went one more step ahead by ensuring participation of common people in creating knowledge also. The author opines that the present ideas of Open data (information), Open Government (politics), Open Access (scientific research), Free culture (education and culture) from which the entire society is able to benefit is what Ranganathan envisioned in his five Laws which are based on his principles of non-discrimination. The author also adapts the five laws to suit the knowledge based society.

Keywords: S R Ranganathan, Five Laws of Library Science, Five Laws of Knowledge, Library Science, World Wide Web, Knowledge Management

Introduction

The 125th birth anniversary celebrations of Dr Siyali Ramamrita Ranganathan, celebrated throughout the country recently can be considered as one of the traditions that some 100,000 libraries and their guardians could never stop. Dr Ranganathan is in the league of the many greats this nation has given birth to, and among those who are remembered fervently by thousands of individuals of whom only a handful may have seen him in person. Only a few leaders are remembered that way, and often times, those who are remembered may have had promoters whose mission was to ensure remembrance of those individuals. Dr Ranganathan's case is different. Neither he had his descendants nor his family members who ensured that

125 times over, even after four decades of his passing away, the man is remembered. It is those who have indirectly benefitted from his contributions who ensured his birthday observance year after year.

Beneficiaries of Ranganathan's Contributions

It is apt to say that the librarians are those who benefitted the least among all those who found benefits in Ranganathan's contribution. First, the seekers of knowledge are those who benefitted the most. Then the academics who sought to understand knowledge organisation who benefitted next. And, then, the millions of technocrats who worked in the area of knowledge management followed suit. And, finally

the librarians have been those who reaped the benefits by making their libraries vibrant. So, the least of those who consciously benefited from the works of Ranganathan have stayed faithful and have been remembering him on the 12th of August each year. A good number of them have joined together today, thanks to the M S Swaminathan Research Foundation that chose to remember him and his contributions. A large number of those that attend this function are dispersed all over the country. That is the commitment of these indirect beneficiaries of Ranganathan, none of whom have had the opportunity to meet up with him in person. Perhaps, a good number of the library innovators today were not even born when Ranganathan died.

Major Contributions

Having stated that the librarians are the indirect beneficiaries of Dr Ranganathan's works, I wish to enlist a few among the hundreds of his major contributions today. Those are:

- Five laws of library science
- Basic principles of classification
- Colon classification
- Classified catalogue code
- Madras Public Libraries Act and other state Acts
- Establishment of library schools
- Establishment of the Documentation Research and Training Centre
- The Sutras of Knowledge Dissemination

Someone who managed to stand tall amongst the 900 applicants who wanted to be the Librarian of Madras University simply on the basis of his performance in the interview, largely guided by an article on librarianship that he read from the Encyclopaedia Britannica on the eve of his selection in 1923, Dr Ranganathan went on to comprehend a lot more of librarianship in his life. And, among those are the five

laws that he left behind as a legacy, something is displayed as the sutra in a good number of public libraries today. One among those is a library in Geejgarh in Rajasthan, built by the community with their own hands using rocky material found in the neighbourhood as a Kar Seva. When one enters this library fully managed by the community, most of whom are local women, one gets to read these laws, tearfully to one's own amazement that these semi-literate women could accept and live through those five laws in a remote rural library in Rajasthan where knowledge and books were seldom at the forefront for centuries. The display of those five laws did not miss the eyes of Ms Deborah Jacobs, the Director of Global Libraries at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation either, bringing joyous tears instantaneously.

Sutras of Librarianship

So, what are the five laws of library science that we consider the sutras of librarianship and what are their relevance today, in fact 85 years on after those were first pronounced in 1931. The laws are:

- Books are for use
- Every reader his/her book
- Every book his/her reader
- Save the time of the reader
- The library is a growing organism

Democratising Access to Knowledge

Almost a century ago, access to books and printed material was rare. Most of the access was restricted based on a number of criteria. In many cases, a large number of poor people and the downtrodden never had the ability to access any printed material. That is when these revolutionary laws were proposed, mainly to democratise access to knowledge. This democratisation of knowledge happened after the humankind had chained knowledge many ways possible. Even after King Henry, the 8th declared some

450 years ago that a large copy of the English Bible should be kept in every parish so both the rich and the poor might hear the word of God, the situation in many parts were grim. Knowledge was restricted. And, Ranganathan's five laws paved the way for the common man to access books without any restriction. And, the librarians happily since then have adhered to ethos of the law by bringing books closer to people, although a few regressive librarians, it must be mentioned, have reduced their collection into closed access spaces.

Ensuring Peoples' Participation in Knowledge Generation

In the so-called knowledge era when the Internet and the World Wide Web are open, how do these laws speak to us? When Sir Tim Berners-Lee made the world wide web possible for everyone to access and later at the opening ceremony of the London Olympics four years ago that he would come out and declare, 'the web is for everyone,' he too democratised access to knowledge following Ranganathan's footsteps, but he took one more step ahead by ensuring participation by the commoners as much the highly educated who alone were capable of creating knowledge.

Principle of Non-Discrimination

Today, with the advent of social media and that of multi-media technologies becoming affordable, there is no distinction between a consumer and a producer of knowledge and knowledge objects. Every human being is a knowledge resource today. The Open Web today squarely refers to decentralisation, non-discrimination, bottoms-up design, universality and consensus-based development of the 'free, open and global web' that is conducive to knowledge sharing and knowledge access. These principles have given rise to greater recognition of emerging concepts such as net neutrality, and the permutations of these ideas are today giving rise to Open data (information), Open



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Government (politics), Open Access (scientific research), Free culture (education and culture) and the entire society is able to benefit from each of these. Perhaps, this is what Ranganathan too encouraged when he

said: 'every reader his or her book,' it meant to him the principles of non-discrimination.

Open Knowledge Network

As much printed material are for use, as Ranganathan stated in 1931, all codified and tacit knowledge objects and knowledge sources are for use. Professor M S Swaminathan himself when he stood by my side and declared the Open Knowledge Network of the G8 DOTForce open in Geneva in 2013 at the World Summit on the Information Society, he stated that knowledge should be open, for everyone's use and should flow in all eight directions.

Five Laws of Knowledge

With the Open Web that offers the ability to access, consume and produce knowledge, but also go to the second level of expressing one's own voice, freedom and participation in knowledge creation without discrimination of any kind, we see Ranganathan's principles and his five laws at play. Can we therefore adapt his laws to suit today's knowledge culture? Could we refine his five laws as follows:

First law: Knowledge is for use in 'all' forms: Knowledge is no longer contained in books alone. We see these in the forms of audio-visual

Second law: 'Every citizen' has the right to access 'all' forms of knowledge: Without discrimination of any kind, all available knowledge in any form or format must be made accessible to all citizens. Access to the Internet, libraries and printed material are the basic human right of every individual in this world. Ironically, today, a handful of machines could access more knowledge than that is sought by all humans combined.

Third law: Every knowledge is for access by 'all' without discrimination of any kind: We have seen in the past freedom of expression and access to information as luxurious

entitlements in certain societies, and all such societies have regressed. With the latest resolutions passed by the United Nations on July 1, 2016, access to the largest knowledge storehouse, the Internet is a basic human right, we would have the opportunity to live this law forever.

Fourth law: Save the time of 'all' knowledge seekers: This law makes it mandatory that all intermediaries ought to bring information and knowledge products on a silver platter and serve to all those who need it at the right time in formats comfortable to them and in ways easily accessible, digestible and actionable.

Fifth law: A knowledge system is one that evolves with time to achieve all of the above laws: Modern librarianship is not about just maintaining and storing knowledge material, it is all about pro-actively sharing and facilitating sharing. Add to this is the opportunity to curate and convert knowledge products into accessible, digestible and actionable formats. A library or a knowledge system that adheres to the first four laws can be dynamic and be true to the fifth law; thus, could proudly say that it follows Dr S R Ranganathan's five laws of library science, being the forerunner of democratising knowledge even in this 21st Century.

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