Ranganathan’s Five Laws of Library Science: Their Enduring Appeal

Lee W. Finks

1981 marks the 50th anniversary of the publication of a remarkable book, S. R. Ranganathan’s Five Laws of Library Science. I won’t try to guess what percentage of you are familiar with it, but for a number of us, the Five Laws was among the few intellectual high spots we encountered in our trek through library school. In the midst of that ordeal so familiar to all of us, just as we were nearly choking with practical details, suddenly there appeared this man of mysticism and passion who claimed, through some arcane Eastern way of knowing, to present to us the kernel, the essence, the distillation of our professional mission. It was almost irresistible.

These laws of his (see box) had an immediate intuitive appeal to that part of us which craved some philosophical framework for all of the complicated, unconnected notions about librarianship that were beginning to clutter up our minds. We wanted inspiration, as well as something that would raise us a little bit above the banality of mere technique. And when we found them, they seemed just right — simply stated, obviously wise, somehow romantic and charming in an exotic sort of way, and with a gentle modesty and humility that belied their grandiose claim to “law-dom.”

The stature and character of the author himself also contributed to the appeal of the Five Laws. We discovered that Shiyanil Ramamrita Ranganathan (1892-1972) was originally a professor of mathematics who was pressed into library service at Madras University in the 1920’s. He went abroad to study librarianship at the University College of London, working under the renowned W. C. Berwick-Sayers, and returned to India as a man possessed. He lived and breathed librarianship for the rest of his long and remarkable career.

THE FIVE LAWS OF LIBRARY SCIENCE

1. Books are for use.
2. Every person his or her book.
4. Save the time of the reader.
5. A library is a growing organism.

(This version is from the first edition. Other versions are slightly different, e.g., in the 1957 edition, the Second Law is expressed: Every reader his book.)

He was known as the Father of Indian Librarianship for his work in organizing professional associations, developing his country’s regional and national plans, and organizing schools of library science at three major Indian universities. He was a prolific writer, turning out a prodigious stream of books and articles on all aspects of the field. And he developed what is almost certainly the most elegant and ingenious library classification system to date: the Colon Classification, an “analytico-synthetic” scheme of facets, isolates and fundamental categories that is still the delight of classification students.

Dr. Finks is Associate Professor of Library Science, North Carolina Central University.

142 SOUTHEASTERN LIBRARIAN
He was also a devout Hindu and a mystic, and his writings are filled with a sense of dharma, as it is
called, the cosmic law that binds together all things in their mutual destiny. In the Five Laws he speaks
of “the spirit of the library,” a vital force that persists through time and reality, through books, ideas, and
man’s thirst for knowledge, to create, eternally, the climate in which a library will live and flourish.

He even goes on to quote, in Sanskrit, from the Bhagavad Gita, comparing “the spirit of the library” to
the “inner man” of Krishna

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{वासांति जीतिनि यथा बिहाय} & \quad \text{नवानि गृहाति नरोपराणि} \quad \| \\
\text{तथा शरीराणि बिहाय जीर्णा-} & \quad \text{न्यन्यानि संयांति नवानि देहि} \quad || \\
\text{नैनं छन्दनि शाबाणि नैनं दहलि पानक:} & \quad || \\
\text{न चैनं खेदयन्यायो न शोषयणि माहित:} & \quad || \\
\text{अच्छेयो! भयध्रो! भयध्रो! भयध्रो! एव च} & \quad || \\
\text{निस: सर्वत्रत: स्थायरच्यो! सनातन:} & \quad || 
\end{align*}
\]

which is translated, in part:

He is eternal, all-pervading,
steadfast and immovable;
he is the same for ever.

This mysticism and subjectivity were evident too in Ranganathan’s passionate commitment to a
highly personal approach in reference service. Almost sublimely he expresses his faith here at the end
of a discussion of the need for close intellectual contact between librarians and our patrons. We must
never abandon them to our non-human tools, he says, but rather should whisper to them as they come
among us:

“Take my hand,
for I have passed this way
And know the truth.”

As for the Five Laws themselves, we can see that they might be better called precepts, or canons —
not providing scientifically proven explanations or descriptions, but rather holding up to us how a library
ought to be, how books and readers ought to be conceived of, what we librarians ought to believe and
do. He himself sometimes refers to them as normative principles, and once even as mantras.

He tells us that the Five Laws suggested themselves to him as he was agonizing over the
tremendous diversity and complexity he had encountered in his visits to hundreds of libraries in Britain
during his professional education there. “Cannot all those empirical aggregates of information and
practices be reduced to a handful of basic principles?” he cried. “Such questions began to simmer in
my mind . . . The pressure of . . . compulsory tasks was pushing the Normative Principles into deeper
and deeper layers of the mind. But it was a congenial and helpful pressure . . . This went on for three
years . . .

“The acute stage of emergence was reached late in 1928. It was late one evening . . All other tasks
had to be kept aside. The travail was unbearable. At about dusk, Professor Edward B. Ross made his
usual daily call on me . . . He sensed my state of distress. I shared my struggle with him. He was about
to get on his motorcycle. His eyes gleamed . . . and he said, “You mean, “Books are for Use”; you mean
that is your first law?” He went away without waiting to see my reaction; this was quite like him. But this
stroke of intuition of his landed me in perfect relief. The enunciation of the other laws was automatic.
About three more hours were spent in filling up five sheets of paper with deductions from the five
laws.”
In his book, Ranganathan uses the Five Laws as springboards to discuss ideal library practice and attitudes and even to provide a certain amount of hard information on the worldwide state of the library art at that time. The Laws continue to lend themselves to such uses, and a number of library educators still put them up on blackboards or screens to provide a mnemonic framework to get across their own principles and ideals.

**Books are for Use**

Ranganathan used this Law to try to overcome the strong orientation toward a protective, preserving role for libraries that flourished in India (and many other countries) at that time. Among his attempts at persuasion was this fairly typical anecdote that supposedly occurred at the Bodleian Library of Oxford in 1806.

Finding the library closed, a scholar, angry with disappointment, affixed to the door of the library a scrap of paper containing words which the Muse of Greece supplied him for the relief of his feelings: "Woe unto you who have taken the key of knowledge! Ye enter not yourself and hinder those who come."

In sportive dialogs between the "First Law," the "Rule of Least Cost," and the "Rule of Least Space," he railed against those who, by the design and arrangement of stacks and furniture, made the library difficult for the public to use. He also spoke with his offbeat eloquence about the crucial importance of service:

It must be a rule that the moment a Reader enters the library, whatever is in hand must be stopped instantly, and the impression given to the Reader should be one of welcome and attention.

Krishna-like, the librarian should now and again be by the side of every reader... ever accessible to them.

The reader must be "sized up" and humored... Does he growl? Is it the librarian's job to handle every type of reader, not merely just those that are pliant.

Ranganathan had great respect for scholarship and for humanity's never-ending efforts to understand the truth — to understand Brahman. Books are for use, and ideas are for communicating. Libraries are in the center of this noble effort to create an edifice of learning that all can turn to for enlightenment. We must never forget this responsibility to our culture and our potential as a species.

**Every Person His or Her Book**

What a volume of ideas rests in a potential state in these six words of but seven syllables! How exacting will be the task of carrying out these ideas! What a variety of vested interest is arrayed in opposition!

Beginning with Aristotle, Ranganathan reviews society's attempts to make learning a privilege of the chosen few and dismisses them all with scorn. He attacks discrimination against women, racial groups, and the economically deprived and speaks for universal literacy and library outreach. He makes it clear that, if libraries are to be true to such an ideal, an entire civilization's prejudices against those who do not have must be altered.

Indeed, every person is entitled to his or her book. The potential reader and the reader's claim must stay in the center of all of our concern and planning. We must somehow understand our readers' needs well enough to guide them through our system and satisfy them. The reader, each reader, is an individual; and we, individuals ourselves, must always approach them that way. And the reader is also part of a mass, a mass that is often discouraged from and ill prepared for the benefits we wish to share.

**Every Book Its Reader**

Ranganathan uses the Third Law to encourage the application of intelligence and creativity to our cataloging and bibliography, and our overall organization and service. Open access, classified shelf arrangement, cross-references and guides in the catalog, simplicity and common sense in description are among the devices he endorses to assure that books actually do reach their intended audience. What good is a book if no one reads it? How many readers are frustrated because they never know the book even exists?

We must select our books for a reason; we must understand them and their uses; we must describe them so that they are recognizable for what they are; and we must make our system intelligible and practical for our users. Ultimately, we must know the books that we have and be able to connect them with those readers who will profit from them. This means an understanding of ideas, simple and
complex, obvious and obscure, wise and foolish, lofty and trivial, and the ability to interpret them, from author to reader, from reader to author.

Save the Time of the Reader

Here too Ranganathan urges a reasonable and intelligent concern for effective library practice and then puts the reader at the center of it. Any notion of saving the time of the librarian is scorned and dismissed, reminding us of Charles A. Cutter's admirable cataloging rule: "the convenience of the public is always to be set before the ease of the cataloger." He calls to our attention the need for library instruction, helpful signs and guides, specialized local indexes and bibliographies, and simply understood, easy-to-use systems of control.

Be efficient, we hear him say. Be competent. Do your work with a minimum of pretense and red tape. Develop your tools. The search for knowledge or even a stray piece of information is seldom easy. We must make use of all of our skills and all of our technical resources to keep this ever-more-complicated process moving as fast and smoothly as possible.

The Library is a Growing Organism

In the second edition of the Five Laws, this law was inscribed on an introductory page as "Library is a Growing Organism," and it is often quoted that way. To eliminate the article before Library is to personify our institution in a rather charming, whimsical way. For a similar example, some of us might refer to a tree that we know well, not as a tree, or the tree, but as "Tree." "Hello, Tree," we might say, "you're looking nice and shady today," if we were in a certain mood. "Hello, Library," we might also say, "you're looking full of goodies today," or some such thing, showing that we viewed it as a special friend.

Ranganathan felt that our friend Library should grow, especially in richness, and that this potential should be accounted for in all of our systems and all of our planning. And Library should grow well — to be strong and useful — to the extent that we attend well to the first four laws. In the larger scheme of things, the eternal dharma, our collections of books, along with all of our edifices, will crumble and return to dust. But so long as we are responsible, so long as Library is our special friend, we must care for it and nurture it to its proper growth.

When Ranganathan died in 1972, many tributes flowed forth from around the world. Among them were those graffiti that appeared mysteriously on blackboards and walls in the library school at Emory University:

RANGANANATHAN
LIVES!

I would like to think that his spirit does. His two great commitments, to truth and to service, are still needed by us all.

FOOTNOTES

4Ranganathan, op. cit., p. 416.
7Pauline Atherton is the best example of this kind of "discipleship," and professed in her Putting Knowledge to Work: An American View of Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science (Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1973)
8Ranganathan, Five Laws..., 1st ed. p. 17.
9Ibid., p. 63-64.
10Caveat lector: As stated above, library educators sometimes use the Laws as a framework to express their own deductions from them. Here and in the following sections, I myself take the summary paragraph for such a purpose.
11Ranganathan, op. cit., p. 75.
12Cutter's rules are quoted and discussed in Paul Dunkin's Cataloging USA (Chicago, A.L.A., 1969) pp. 5-8 and passim.