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# IS RANGANATHAN A PRAGMATIC PHILOSOPHER? READING THE FIVE LAWS OF LIBRARY SCIENCE IN THE LIGHT OF ANCIENT INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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## **Abstract**

Hindu tradition of India is one among the oldest civilizations of the world. Indian philosophy put forward a Universal view which is rooted in Freedom. It always embraces the Eternal nature of this universe. It is these principles that work in the five fundamental laws of Library and information science of S.R. Ranganathan which in turn assures his philosophical and pragmatic nature.

**Keywords:** Ancient wisdom, Five laws of library science, Ideal librarianship, Indian philosophy, S.R. Ranganathan.

## **1. Indian philosophy: Background and context**

What is Indian Philosophy? What does history tell us? The history of Indian philosophy illustrates the endless quest of the human mind, ever old, ever new. The spiritual motive forms the basis of Indian life, that spiritual truths are ultimate truths in the light of which actual life has to be refined. Ātmānam viddhi, know the self, sums up the law and prophecies in India.<sup>1</sup>

What would be the reason for the dominants of this spiritual motive? India has a great tradition of crafts and industries necessarily imparting an environment for civil life and various branches of physical knowledge such as logic and grammar, rhetoric and language, medicine and astronomy, agricultural and mechanical knowledge, mathematics which were in use during the ancient time. It is notable that one of the first texts in sexology was written here. It extends to all arts and sciences from architecture to zoology. But it is yet another food for thought that still why spiritual motive gained such prominence. Radhakrishnan writes:

For thinking minds to blossom, for arts and sciences to flourish, the first condition necessary is a settled society providing security and leisure. A rich culture is impossible with a community of nomads, where people struggle for life and die of privation. Fate called India to a spot where nature was free with her gifts and every prospect was pleasing. The Himalayas, with their immense range and elevation on one side and the sea on the others, helped to keep India free from invasion for a long time. Bounteous nature yielded abundant food, and man was relieved of the toil and struggle for existence. The Indian never felt that the world was a field of battle where men struggled for power, wealth and domination. When we do not need to waste our energies on problems of life on earth, exploiting nature and controlling the forces of the world, we begin to think of the higher life, how to live more perfectly in the spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, these Indian environs of the ancient times have been a motive for spiritual quest. As it is sure that there is no existence for human beings away from nature the observation put forward by Radhakrishnan is notable. Prominent signs of this spiritual motive are evident in the major Sanskrit literary writings of India. The main aim of the Vedic literature is considered to be a quest to find an answer to the question-'who am I'. Each ancient literary work written here was actually an inquiry of the self. Each philosophical undertaking made here stood for self actualization. Later history marked those who followed this tradition as Hindu.

## **2. Who is Hindu?**

Who is Hindu? This question is relevant. Who identified this human community, which followed the various schools of thoughts such as Sāṅkhya, Nyāya, Yoga, Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsa, Vedānta, Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Śākteya, Jaina, Bauddha, and Cārvāka over various eras developed by various philosophers by the banks of the Sindhu river, with the word Hindu? Why?

In Ṛgveda, the oldest Indo-European literary monument, the ancient remnants of human psyche, India is described as saptasindhu or the nation of seven great rivers. Later with the arrival of Parsi invaders, 's' sound got shifted into 'h' sound according to the Persian language which turned saptasindhu into haptahindu and the word 'Sindhu' became 'Hindu'.<sup>3</sup> This Persian origin of the word 'Hindu' has much more acceptance even though there are many arguments regarding its etymology. Thus the term Hindu is clearly a geographical representation. The thinkers like Karl Marx and Leo Tolstoy might have used the term Hindu in this aspect. The focus of Hindu ideology lies in oneness, freedom and universal brother hood. Eternity forms its basis.

Hindu tradition of India is one among the oldest civilizations of the world. If we view the whole human civilization as a mixture, considering it as a way of

sharing there would be no relevance for purity. Mankind grows through mutual sharing. Radhakrishnan writes:

The naive utterances of the Vedic poets, the wondrous suggestiveness of the Upaniṣads, the marvellous psychological analyses of Buddhists, and the stupendous system of Śaṅkara, are quite as interesting and instructive from the cultural point of view as the systems of Plato and Aristotle, or Kant and Hegel, if only we study them in a true scientific frame of mind, without disrespect for the past or contempt for the alien.<sup>4</sup>

Indian thoughts have, long ago, attained acceptance in many parts of the world. A student with genuine interest in philosophy tries to observe, in depth, the world's different civilizations. A person born in India, and growing as a part of its heritage, can be considered to attain a rapid development in the search for its depth and application.

### **3. S.R. Ranganathan: A pragmatic Hindu**

S.R. Ranganathan (1892-1972), born into a traditional south Indian Tamil Brahmin family, was influenced by Hindu philosophy at very early age. Ranganathan grew listening to the folklore, epic and mythologies of the land transferred through orality by his father Ramamrita Iyer, who was a Ramayana reciter of his village, and other relatives. He was only six years old when his father passed away at the age of thirty. His father's life, which was deeply rooted in the Hindu tradition, might have created a strong influence over Ranganathan. Seeds sown at very tender age began to sprout with time.<sup>5</sup>

The part that formal education (1897-1916) played in the personality formation in Ranganathan is undoubtedly relevant. It was during those days that the Indian thoughts entered deep inside him. Few personalities contributed to it. R. Anantharama Iyer and Thiruvenkatachariar, both Sanskrit scholars, were two teachers who inspired him at school. Ranganathan learned from them the life teachings of Nayanmars (Saivate bhaktas) and Alvars (Vaisnavate bhaktas). P.A. Subramanya Iyer, a scholar on Aurobindo, was one among the prominent figures who influence him during the High school career. It might be from here that he was introduced to the thoughts of Aurobindo. Later the work 'The Mother' written by Aurobindo made a significant influence up on him. The Acquaintance with Edward B. Ross, who was his professor of Mathematics at college, created many a great turning points in the life of Ranganathan. He chose Mathematics as an academic subject, even though Ranganathan had immense dexterity in Physics, Literature, Philosophy and other diverse fields.

After being much influenced by the Indian thoughts, he explained it by relating them with the modern scientific context of library and information

science. Refer to the chapters of part E, 'Mystic picture of reference service', from his work 'Reference service' we can find that it has been divided into various sections, i.e. Light from Vedas, Light from Valmiki, Light from the 'Mother' of Aurobindo and Light from Sanskrit. Suktas or verses from Taittiriyaopaniṣad, characters of Ramayana and thoughts of Aurobindo etc. helped Ranganathan to explain how a reference library and librarian ought to exist. The fifth chapter, 'Light from Sanskrit', reveals his interest and pedantry in Sanskrit language. Similarly the influence of Indian philosophy is thus evident, both in visible and concealed forms, in many of his other works. The works like 'The five laws of library science', 'Colon classification', 'Prolegomena to library classification' and 'Library classification fundamentals procedure, with 1008 graded examples and exercises' are a few among the many examples.

How a person does get formed? Is it a mere and independent process? An emphatic no is the answer. Everyman is a product of his circumstances, a sum of his situations. Having been said that it is not possible to uproot Ranganathan from his circumstances and look at his works outside the context of his life. This treatise intends to analyze the five fundamental laws of library and information science in the light of Indian philosophy. Here the basic nature of this text is being assessed; of these five laws which have stood the test of time.

#### **4. The five fundamental laws of library science**

W.C. Berwick Sayers writes:

Here, then, is a book that may be an inspiration to all those who, in higher or humbler office, will serve India in her libraries. Conceived in a broad, ungrudging spirit, it must enthuse, those who enter upon our profession in that country with the immense, if sometimes undramatic, possibilities of a library. It will show it to be not merely a collection of books which accumulates age and dust, but a living and growing organism prolonging the life of the past and renewing it for this generation, but giving also to this generation the best that its own workers, thinkers and dreamers have to offer.<sup>6</sup>

As observed by Sayers The five laws of library science is a text of great prominence. It has been discussed relentlessly in the domain of library and information science. This work, deemed to be the magnum opus of Ranganathan, is useful for library professionals as Tripiṭaka is for Buddhists.

##### **4.1 First law: A revolution to Freedom**

What does Ranganathan mean by 'Books are for Use'? Does it mean that the sole purpose of books is for usage alone? How did Ranganathan rewrite the

age old tradition which claims that 'Books are for preservation'? These questions call for a relevant inquiry.

Knowledge is meant to be protected not chained. But what picture does history give us on this behalf? The knowledge produced over various time periods had been confined at various levels. The distance between knowledge and its seeker was beyond reach. In the ancient times knowledge was limited to a particular group. It was produced, protected, and propagated for this group alone. Knowledge was bound in a manner wherein it was accessible to the high class and alienated from the lower class. Cāturvarṇya, the traditional caste system of India, which was grounded on Brahmanic superiority, is an example for this.

In the middle ages, books were protected in libraries and other places by being locked into chains. The circumstances in those times had made it impossible, both for a reader and seeker, the free exchange of books. In those days books were very rare and thus honesty. As it were portable property theft was easily possible. Valuables in all ages required protection and thus knowledge was kept under lock and key. Therefore various obstructions were faced in transferring knowledge to the newer generation. The Hereford Cathedral chained library, located at Hereford in England, is considered as the world's largest chained library existing till date. 1500 books, including 227 medieval manuscripts, from 800 AD to 19<sup>th</sup> century are still preserved there in chains.<sup>7</sup> The chain of confinement still continues in various invisible forms in the modern era too. Confinement always spreads over knowledge like a shadow. Ranganathan says:

Even as we are anxious to hand over our books to posterity, every succeeding generation may be actuated by an exactly similar altruistic motive; and in consequence books may have to be forever in chains and may never be released for use. This aspect of the question seems to have escaped notice for a long time and 'BOOKS ARE FOR PRESERVATION' had usurped the place of 'BOOKS ARE FOR USE'.<sup>8</sup>

All forms of knowledge, protected over the generation of several hundred years, must reach the needy without any obstruction. Therefore Ranganathan defied all traditions of confinement. He opened the path of trust, and emancipation. What else shadows over this revolutionary change other than the ardent desire for freedom. Isn't complete freedom a necessity for the production and propagation of new knowledge?

Ranganathan describes 'Revolution' as the final effect of the first law. Why this revolution? It's for freedom alone. Freedom from those chains which confines knowledge. Thus freedom forms the basis of the first law. Indian philosophical tradition, too, developed from free thoughts. Freedom becomes its basic nature. What man attains, by the liberation of knowledge from

various kinds of continuing confinements, is yet again liberation from prejudices obtained through knowledge. When a person is freed from prejudices he moves towards ultimate liberation. It is this freedom that makes possible the ultimate aim put forward by the Indian tradition; liberation of the self.

## **4.2 The Universal sweep of the Second and Third law**

One is a relative, the other stranger,  
say the small minded.  
The entire world is a family,  
live the magnanimous.

Be detached,  
be magnanimous,  
lift up your mind, enjoy  
the fruit of Brahmanic freedom.<sup>9</sup>

The Ancient Vedic thoughts such as *vasudaivakuṭumbakam*: the whole world is one family and *yatraviśvambhavatyekaniḍam*: where the world makes its home in a single nest reveals the universality grounded in the Indian tradition. Hindu philosophy is rooted in experience not in rituals. When religion becomes an experience, it turns universal. And everything fills inside it. Thus strangeness becomes strange.

The second and third law, put forward by Ranganathan, aims at universality. 'Every reader his/her book'; each and every reader will have books of his/her taste or books must reach every seeker. Here, he cuts open a path to knowledge for the user. The gates to knowledge shouldn't be closed up on anyone or no one must be made a stranger to knowledge.

### **4.2.1 The last act of Sambandhar**

S.R. Ranganathan explains the concept of universal brother hood through the myth of the Tamil philosopher and poet Sambandhar who lived during the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Ranganathan writes:

On the day he was married in the neighboring village of Achalpuram, while he walked round the Temple with his newly wedded spouse, seeing the gates of heaven open suddenly, he first gathered together his parents and kinsmen, his friends and visitors, his servants and retinue- and not only these but all the residents of the place, all the men of all the religions, whether moving with the crowd or not, whether blind or lame, whether young or old, whether willing or unwilling-he gathered one and all, first made them pass into the gates of heaven, and himself entered last with his beloved wife and became At-One with the One, in

company with all the others. This last act of Sambandhar would, in its expression of universal brotherhood, serve as a symbol of the Second Law of Library Science.<sup>10</sup>

It is thus clear that universality is the basis of the second law.

The third law; 'Every book its reader' suggests an open access system for the library:

In an open access library, the reader is permitted to wander among the books and lay his hands on any of them at his will and pleasure. The powerful service that this system renders to Third Law can be realized by those who have watched a library change from a 'Closed' to an 'Open Access' state.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the freedom permitted by the first law reaches the zenith of its universality in the third law.

#### **4.3 Fourth and Fifth law in the context of Time**

Carl Sagan writes:

The Hindu religion is the only one of the world's great faiths dedicated to the idea that the Cosmos itself undergoes an immense, indeed an infinite, number of deaths and rebirths. It is the only religion in which the time scales correspond, no doubt by accident, to those of modern scientific cosmology. Its cycles run from our ordinary day and night to a day and night of Brahma, 8.64 billion years long, longer than the age of the Earth or the Sun and about half the time since the Big Bang. And there are much longer time scales still.<sup>12</sup>

Time is described, by the Hindu sages as cyclic; an endless procession of creation, preservation and dissolution. The universe is said to be without a beginning, anādi, or an end, ananta, expressing true infinity. The accuracy of space and time description given by the ancient Rishi-s and Saints, who fathomed the secrets of the universe through their mystically awakened senses, have created amazement in scientists such as Carl Sagan.

The fourth law of Ranganathan, 'Save the time of the reader', emphasize to save the time of the seeker. Ranganathan brings out the great importance that Indian tradition gives for time in laws too. He suggests that all practices in the libraries should aim at saving the time of the reader/user.

The fifth law, 'Library is a growing organism', is also connected with time. The growth of library is concurrent with time. Each library should accommodate the changes that the respective eras demands. Libraries evolve through

generations, and this process remains endless like the time concept in Indian tradition. Ranganathan writes:

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 book? At least Wells<sup>13</sup> has pictured a world in which dissemination of knowledge will be effected by direct thought-transfer unmediated by the spoken or the printed word. An ancient tradition of India gives an exquisite picture of communication in silence:

Look at the foot of that banyan tree.  
What a wonder and what a beauty!  
How aged the pupils, but  
How youthful the teacher!!  
All the doubts of the pupils stand resolved  
By the teacher's eloquence of silence!<sup>14</sup>

#### **4.4 Why the numeral Five?**

Why the laws are five? If we follow the thoughts of Ranganathan, we can see that the usage of numeral five is not accidental. According to the Indian tradition, certain numbers own specific importance. The numerals like 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 18, 108, 1008 follows such distinction. We can see the numeral five running its term in the Indian line of thought in different ways. Taittiriyaopaniṣad identifies five layers or sheaths that every intelligent being is said to possess, which is commonly known as pañcakośa: annamayakośa, prāṇamayakośa, manomayakośa, vijñānamayakośa and ānandamayakośa. Lord Śiva is said to have five faces, pañcarudra: sadyojata (west), vāmadeva (north), aghora (south), tatpuruṣa (east), and ṣāna (skyward). Five letters in Sanskrit forms the holy five or pañcākṣara: na-maḥ-śi-vā-ya. The pañcabhūta-s or the five elements: ākāśa (sky), vāyu (air), agni (fire), jalam (water), and pṛthvi (earth). These are the few among many instances.

Ranganathan has similarly used such numerals entwined with Hindu tradition in many other places. He has classified the fundamental categories of library classification into five elements, i.e. Personality, Matter, Energy, Space, and Time. In this circumstance the title of one of his works which deals with library classification is notable; 'Library classification fundamentals and procedure, with 1008 graded examples and exercises'. This reminds about the 1008 principles of Nyāyakośa. In the work Reference service he justifies that 108 as the number of facts that a librarian ought to find. This is also synonymous with the number of prominent Upaniṣads.

#### **4.5 The vital principle of library service**

Whereas the explanatory note for the fifth law winds up by stating, evidently, the vital principle of library. Herein Ranganathan projects out the quality of *jīvātman*, the embodied soul, referred in *Bhagavadgīta*. He demands that libraries must be centers of universal education just like *ātman*, the soul, dwelling as the centre of *jīva* or the immortal essence of a living organism. Ranganathan writes:

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<sup>15</sup> of the Lord:-

As a person casts off worn-out garments and puts on others that are new, so does the embodied soul cast off worn-out forms and enter into others that are new.

He cannot be cloven; he cannot be burnt; he cannot be wetted; he cannot be dried; he is eternal, all-pervading, steadfast and immovable; he is the same forever.<sup>16</sup>

##### **4.5.1 Flirt not with fruits**

It is interesting the way Ranganathan winds up the explanatory section of the first law. He points out to *Kṛiṣṇa*'s words from *Bhagavadgīta* as a guide to librarians. He believed that each librarian should attain such a state of mental development to serve with knowledge. Ranganathan writes:

The FIRST LAW would say, "Plant your cheerfulness and perseverance in my words, BOOKS ARE FOR USE. Your duty is to serve with books. Service is your sphere. Not rewards. Falter not. Flirt not with fruits. Go forward uninfluenced by any reward, real or any fictitious, remote or immediate." To the librarian, the celebrated words<sup>17</sup> of the Lord Sri Krishna have a special appeal:

Thy right is to action alone and never to fruits.

Let not the fruit of action be the motive.

Nor let thyself be attached to inaction.<sup>18</sup>

#### **5 Conclusions**

Philosophy in India is clearly rooted in religion. As philosophy develops it becomes more critical. Radhakrishnan thinks that, the progression from *Veda sūkta*-s to *Upaniṣad*-s denotes this critical nature of religion. Indian philosophy put forward a Universal view rooted in Freedom. It always embraces the Eternal nature of this universe. It is these principles that work in the five laws of Ranganathan which in turn assures his philosophical and pragmatic nature.

## Notes

1. See, S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian philosophy*. Vol.1. (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1989), p.25.
2. Ibid, pp.21-22.
3. About The Name *Hindu*. [https://www.stephen-knapp.com/about\\_the\\_name\\_Hindu.htm](https://www.stephen-knapp.com/about_the_name_Hindu.htm). Web. Accessed 26 February 2018.
4. See, S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian philosophy*. Vol.1. (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1989), p.8.
5. See, M.A. Gopinath, "Professor S.R. Ranganathan-A short biography". *Ranganathan's philosophy: Assessment, impact and relevance*. Ed. T.S. Rajagopalan. (New Delhi: Vikas publishing house, 1986).  
  
See, S.R. Ranganathan, and P.N. Kaula. *A Librarian Looks Back: An Autobiography of Dr. S.R. Ranganathan*. (New Delhi: ABC Publishing House, 1992).  
  
See, Ranganathan Yogeshwar, *S.R. Ranganathan: Pragmatic philosopher of information science*. (Mumbai: Bharatiya vidya bhavan, 2001).
6. See, S. R. Ranganathan. *The Five Laws of Library Science*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Bangalore: Sarada Ranganathan Endowment, 1988), p.17.
7. *Game of Thrones: Why Medieval Libraries Chained Their Books | Time*. <http://time.com/4861039/game-of-thrones-oldtown-library/>. Web. Accessed 26 February 2018.
8. See, S. R. Ranganathan. *The Five Laws of Library Science*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Bangalore: Sarada Ranganathan Endowment, 1988), p.27.
9. See, Mahopaniṣad 6.71-75, Jeffrey Moses. *Oneness: Great principles shared by all religions*. (New York: Random house publishing, 2002).
10. See, S. R. Ranganathan. *The Five Laws of Library Science*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Bangalore: Sarada Ranganathan Endowment, 1988), pp. 133-134.
11. Ibid, p.259.
12. Carl Sagan. *Cosmos*. 1980. Internet Archive. <http://archive.org/details/CarlSaganCosmosv5.0>.

13. Herbert G. Wells. *Men like gods*, a novel, 1923.
14. See, S. R. Ranganathan. *The Five Laws of Library Science*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Bangalore: Sarada Ranganathan Endowment, 1988), pp. 352-353.
15. See, *Bhagavadgīta*. Chapter 2. Verses 22-24.
16. See, S. R. Ranganathan. *The Five Laws of Library Science*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Bangalore: Sarada Ranganathan Endowment, 1988), p.354.
17. See, *Bhagavadgīta*. Chapter 2. Verse 47.
18. See, S. R. Ranganathan. *The Five Laws of Library Science*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Bangalore: Sarada Ranganathan Endowment, 1988), pp.78-79.

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