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S.R. Ranganathan - A Short Biography

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1 Birth and Parentage

Ranganathan was born in Shiyali in Tanjavoor District of Tamil Nadu (then part of Madras Presidency) in his maternal grandfather's house in North Rampart Street, (Vadaku Madavilaga Theruvu) around 9.30 A.M. on 9th August 1892. It was a Gayathri Japam day in the month of *Adi* of the year *Nandana*. On that day and at that time, South Indian Brahmins recite Manthram to Gayathri to redeem them from the sins committed by them thus far. His Janmanakshatra was *Danishta* and Lagna *Kanya*. He was the first child of his parents and the first grandchild of the grandparents both paternal and maternal. His father, Ramamrita Ayyar, belonged to the village of Ubhayavedanthapuram in the Nannilam Taluk at Tanjavoor District. He was a landlord holding a medium-sized property of wet land, growing paddy, the principal food crop of the Cauvery delta. He was a learned and cultured man, used to giving Ramayana Pravachanam to small audiences was influential and was held in high esteem by the people of the neighbourhood and by visiting officials. Seethalakshmi, mother of Ranganathan, was a simple and very pious lady. The parents had three sons and a daughter — one of the sons died in its early age and the daughter was born a posthumous child.

Ramamrita Ayyar died (on 13 January 1898) rather suddenly after a bout of illness at the age of 30, when Ranganathan was only six years old. Ranganathan's mother survived this loss for nearly 55 years and died at Delhi due to a fire accident at the home in January 1953. Ranganathan's another brother Nateshan died in 1964 at Madras and his sister is alive.

2 Family Life

Ranganathan married when he was fifteen years old in 1907. Rukmini was his wife's

name. She was very devoted to Ranganathan and an able house keeper. But she died in an accident on 13 November 1928 at the Parthasarathy Koil Tank, Triplicane, Madras where she had gone for a bath. The couple had no children. Ranganathan married again in 1929 to Sarada in December 1929; she was also devoted to Ranganathan and helped him to work ceaselessly for the cause of the library profession. She even persuaded him to donate large sums of money for the Chair of Library Science in Madras University and to the Endowment. She died at the age of 78 years on 30 July 1985 in Bangalore.

Ranganathan was blessed with only one son, Shri R. Yogeswar, born in 1932. He is an Engineer by profession and is an international consultant on machine tool design and development. He has two sons and a daughter. All of them are living in Luxembourg.

Ranganathan had a simple taste for food. He would not unnecessarily waste money and energy. He was sympathetic to good people; encouraged intelligent students and guided them towards better goal and achievements.

3 Education

Ranganathan's education was initiated on Vijayadasami day in October, 1897 with *Aksharabyasam* at Ubhayavedanthapuram near Shiyali. After this, Ranganathan was admitted to a school in Shiyali, and was handed to the care of Subba Ayyar, a brother of his maternal grandfather and a primary school teacher. During his school days, Ranganathan came under the influence of two of his teachers who shaped his mind -R. Antharama Ayyar and Thiruvenkatachariar, the Sanskrit teacher. From them Ranganathan learnt about the life teachings of nayanars (Shaivaite Bhaktas) and Alvars (Vaishnavaite Bhaktas). Depth of scholarship and essence of life were ingrained in Ranganathan which kept in good stead in his later life to make decisions at crucial junctures.

Ranganathan attended the S.M. Hindu High School at Shiyali and passed Matriculation examination in 1908/1909. Ranganathan passed the examination in First Class, inspite of sickness like anaemia, piles, and stammering. In his high school career he came under the influence of P.A. Subramanya Ayyar, a scholar on Sri Aurobindo.

Ranganathan joined the junior intermediate class at the Madras Christian College in March 1909. Even in those days, there were paucity of college seats. Ranganathan was picked up for his excellent marks in all the subjects and the principal. Prof. Skinner spotted him in a crowd of students and admitted him into the course. Ranganathan passed B.A. with a first class in March/April 1913. In June, same year, he joined the M.A. class in Mathematics with Professor Edward B. Ross as his teacher. Being a favourite student of Prof. Ross, Ranganathan had an excellent Guru-Shishya relationship. More than class room discussions, corridor and staircase discussions were taken recourse to. Ranganathan ingrained this trait into his own discipline later

on. Ranganathan did his Master's degree in 1916 and he wanted to be a teacher in Mathematics. He also took a course in teaching technique and gained L T degree from a teachers' college.

During his college days, Ranganathan cultivated intimacy with his teachers, Professors Moffat and J.P. Manickam of Physics, Prof. Sabhesan of Botany, Prof. Chinnathambi Pillai and L.N. Subramanyam of Mathematics. But Prof. Ross remained his favourite Guru throughout his life.

4 Teaching Career

In 1917 Ranganathan was appointed to the Subordinate Education Service and worked as Assistant Lecturer in the Government College in Mangalore and Coimbatore between 1917 and 1921. In July 1921, he joined the Presidency College, Madras as Assistant Professor of Mathematics. At Mangalore and Coimbatore, Ranganathan taught Physics and Mathematics and at the Presidency College, he taught Algebra, Trigonometry and Statistics. He was a follower of the individual method of teaching putting discussion method into active use. The classes used to be lively, learning - active, and teaching - purposive. Ranganathan earned an epithet *born teacher*. He would interpose his teaching with many anecdotes and examples from life which would keep his students engaged and attentive. Each hour of his class used to be punctuated by applause. He also adopted the technique of assigning students with new topics, to gather data from books, and learning from discussions among themselves and amidst teachers. He organised several seminars and colloquia for students. He continued the same methods with greater vigour while teaching Library Science to students.

Ranganathan was also active in extracurricular activities. From 1921 to 1923, he was Secretary of the Mathematics and Science Section of the Madras Teacher's Guild. He roused public awareness by lectures. He introduced some uniformity and standardization in compiling the question papers for various examinations.

He obtained pension facilities for private school teachers through his writings in papers and association journals. He augmented the finances of the Indian Mathematical Society. He was a popular figure in the mathematical circles and was regarded as an efficient organiser of meetings. His friends have quoted Ranganathan's attitude to work, thus:

Our right is only to do the work falling to our share, never to the fruits of our work.
Flirt not with fruits.

5 Towards Librarianship

Ranganathan left Presidency College in January 1924 to take appointment as the first librarian of Madras University. It was natural for Ranganathan - who was a lively

teacher and had thrilling intellectual experiences with students and faculties of the Presidency College - not to opt for the post of librarian, even though it carried a handsome salary. Ranganathan quite often narrated to us that he never wished to be a librarian. He said that Providence had made him one, for which he never regretted in his later life. In spite of his diffidence and lack of interest, his colleagues and supervisors - being keen on using his innate abilities — saw to his appointment as the Librarian of the Madras University in 1924. He took charge of the University Library at 4.00 P.M. on Thursday, 4th January 1924. But Ranganathan was back within a week at Presidency College to plead with the Principal, *I have come with a specific request. I can't bear the solitary imprisonment day-after-day. No human being, except the staff. How different from the life in the college.* The principal, Mr. Duncan, had to pacify him by saying: *If you feel bored even after you return from England, I shall certainly take you. I shall see that your place in the college is not permanently filled up till you come back from your travel and training abroad.* [Ranganathan (SR). A librarian looks back. *Herald of Library Science*. 2;1963;pl30].

Ranganathan left for England in September 1924 and returned in July 1925, after 9 months of study-cum-observation tour. In England, Ranganathan came in close contact with W.C. Berwick Sayers, Chief Librarian of Croydon Public Library and a lecturer in the University School of Librarianship, London. Under his guidance, Ranganathan visited a large number of libraries. He witnessed how the libraries there had become community reading centres. He also found how the libraries rendered service to various strata of the society: to children, to the working class and to women, besides other groups. This made a lasting impression on his mind; it considerably changed his outlook and he discovered a social mission in his mind; thus he discovered a social mission for the library profession and for himself. The impact of these experiences was expressively stated in 1931 by Sir P.S. Sivaswamy Aiyar, one of the enlightened statesmen of Madras Presidency at that time:

He has brought to his task extensive knowledge of literature on the subject of libraries, personal acquaintance with methods of management of libraries in Britain, trained analytical intellect and a fervid but enlightened enthusiasm for the library movement. He has been the pioneer of the library movement in the Madras Presidency and has been carrying on an energetic propaganda to spread it. He knows how to rouse and sustain the interest of the reader. [Foreword to Ranganathan (SR). *Five laws of Library Science*. 1931. p. xxxii].

6 Activities at Madras

After returning to Madras, Ranganathan began a mission for librarianship. He began to reorganise the University Library. His first concern was to attract more readers to the library and provide facilities for them. He took it upon himself to educate the public on the benefits of reading to one's society and to oneself. He charged the library with a mission of self-education for every one. He used mass media to make the library hub

of activity. The University Library soon acquired a niche in the world of the enlightened public of Madras. The Government of Madras took a keen interest in this and offered a handsome annual grant on a statutory basis.

Within the library, Ranganathan initiated behind the scene work in several aspects of ab initio. Here emerged the Five Laws of Library Science, the Colon Classification, the Classified Catalogue Code. and the Principles of Library Management. Active reference service began to blossom. He introduced open shelved system and provided open access. This gave impetus for readers to come quite often. The atmosphere throbbed with human activity and intellectual atmosphere. Ranganathan designed a functional library building near Madras Beach. All these changes did not happen in a piecemeal but were developed in a holistic manner, inspired by his Five Laws of Library Science:

Books are for use;

Every reader, his book-,

Every book, its reader,

Save the time of the reader; and

A library is a growing organism.

Outside the library, Ranganathan, launched an endless and eternal mission. He gathered the enlightened persons of the area and formed the Madras Library Association, which became the living symbol of the library movement. Ranganathan worked as the Founder Secretary from 1928 until he left Madras in 1945. He pushed the library movement to all the comers of the Madras Presidency, which at that time covered almost two-thirds of South India. Looking at his efforts today, after nearly 60 years, we see that the public library network is quite widespread in South India. The seed sown by Ranganathan has been cultivated for nearly 60 years, and it is currently yielding fruits.

A school of library science was also initiated by Ranganathan in 1929, first under the auspices of the Madras Library Association and later taken over by Madras University. Ranganathan was the director of the school for nearly 15 years. Later in 1957, during centenary celebrations of the University, he donated his life's savings of one lakh rupees to the University to endow a chair known as Sarada Ranganathan Professorship in Library Science. The students of this school have taken leading parts at all levels of activity - local, national, and international.

7 Activities at Banaras

Having performed active library service for 21 years, Ranganathan sought voluntary retirement in 1945 and wanted to engage himself in active research. But he received an invitation to develop the library system of the Banaras Hindu University, by the

then Vice-Chancellor Sir. S. Radhakrishnan. At Banaras, Ranganathan found the library in a chaotic condition. He reorganized the entire collection single-handedly, classified and catalogued about 100,000 books with a missionary zeal during 1945-47. He also conducted the Diploma Course in Library Science during the same period.

8 Activities at Delhi

Ranganathan moved over to Delhi University in 1947 on an invitation from Sir. Maurice Gwyer. He did not take the responsibility of organising the library. He confined himself to teaching and research in library science. Prof. S. Das Gupta, one of Ranganathan's brilliant students, became the librarian of Delhi University. Delhi began courses in Bachelor of Library Science and Master of Library Science between 1947 and 1950. It was probably for the first time in the whole of the Commonwealth, Study Circle and Research Circle meetings were organized. The Research Circle met every Sunday at his residence. Many new ideas and innovations began to emerge. Team research began to develop. Ranganathan was also elected the President of the Indian Library Association (ILA) and Shri S. Das Gupta was elected as its Secretary. The Association was activated and as part of its programme a confluence of three journals, viz.. Annals, Bulletin, and Granthalaya were founded. An acronym ABGILA was given to this composite, three-in-one periodical. The Annals contained research papers of the Delhi Research Circle and soon gained international acclaim.

While Ranganathan was in Delhi, his international contacts began to grow. He had a close liaison with Donker-Duyvis, the then dynamic Secretary-General of FID. Ranganathan was the Chairman of the Classification Research Group of the International Federation for Documentation (FID) between 1950-62, when he produced 12 research reports for FID and from 1962 he was the Honorary Chairman of FID/CR till his death in 1972.

While he was in Delhi, Ranganathan drafted a comprehensive 30 year plan for the development of library system for India as a whole. He was intimately involved in the founding of the Documentation Committee of the Indian Standards Institution of which he was the Chairman till 1967. In 1950, the Indian National Scientific Documentation Centre (INSDOC, Delhi) was founded. During this period, he also promoted the Madras Public Library Act. He also initiated the Classification Research Group at London. He visited USA in 1950 under Rockefeller Foundation and wrote the book *Classification and Communication*.

9 Towards Zurich

In order to gain first hand knowledge of Industrial documentation and to meet his international commitments Ranganathan moved over to Zurich. He wrote the second edition of *Prolegomena to Library Classification* (Published by the Library Association, London). He also regularly contributed to the Annals of Library Science published by the INSDOC.

10 Activities at Bangalore

In 1957, Ranganathan moved over to Bangalore. He did not plan for any institutional organization of documentation activities. But it happened that Bangalore began to be industrialized and was in its ascendancy towards metropolis. Ranganathan was helping as an adviser, the INSDOC, the Planning Commission, and the University Grants Commission. However, soon Ranganathan's solitude ended. Many young librarians of Bangalore began to gather around him. Informal discussions and research investigations were carried out to publish books and other research papers. The crowning point of Ranganathan's activity was in the founding of *the Documentation Research and Training Centre, Bangalore* under the auspices of the Indian Statistical Institute in 1962. The main functions of this Centre are centred around research and teaching activities in library and information science.

Ranganathan was the Honorary Professor of this Centre during 1962-72. He directed the institutional activities with great efficiency and created an atmosphere of academic excellence and simplicity. It was like a Gurukula. Around Ranganathan were his young students eager to learn from him and Ranganathan was equally eager to get the new ideas from them. In 1965, Ranganathan was recognised by the Government of India and made him the National Research Professor in Library Science. This was also an honour to library science and librarianship. At that time, only four other National Research Professors were there. They were Dr. C.V. Raman (Physics), S.N. Bose (Physics), P.V. Kane (Law), S.K. Chatterjee (Literature and Linguistics). Ranganathan was honoured by Delhi University and Pittsburgh University by awarding Doctor of Letters degrees in 1948 and 1964. Ranganathan received these awards and honours in simple and humble stride and advised his students to do hard work saying that reward would come in appropriate time. He used to say *God has chosen me as an instrument, the honour done to me should act as an incentive to the younger generation to devote their lives wholeheartedly to library science and service*. Most of his salary as National Research Professor and the royalties on his books were donated to the Sarada Ranganathan Endowment for Library Science (1961). During the last five years, Ranganathan abstained from travelling and did deep thinking and intensive writing. He wrote many books and articles. He postulated *Absolute Syntax* for indexing language. He kept on working on Colon Classification and proved that the design and development a scheme for classification is a life time activity. Until the end of his life, to the very last day, Ranganathan kept on working. He died on 27 September 1972 after a fruitful 80 years of his life. While he himself contributed to the field of library service, science and profession, he catalysed a human movement whose manifestation is witnessed even today. He wrote sixty books and 2000 articles.

His life was a symbol of immortality. The integral nature of Ranganathan's theory emerged from occasional intuition; and his intellect strove to make it more explicit to the rational mind of the scientific worker. His contributions sometimes bordered on a

poetic beauty and sometimes on uncouth prose - but his life and work in the field of library science modelled an ever-inquiring mind, well-entrenched in the philosophy of *Bhagavad Gita* (Chapter 18, Verse 20).