
Book Reviews

RANGANATHAN, S.R.: A Librarian Looks Back: An Autobiography of Dr.S.R.Ranganathan appended with an evaluation of his life and work by P.N.Kaula. New Delhi: ABC Publ.House 1992. XI,485p. ISBN 81-7123-048-2 = Kaula Series in Library Science No.11

Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan (1892-1972) dominated the Indian library scene for half a century. He nurtured and shaped the Indian library profession almost from its infancy and imparted it a momentum. For his Yeoman's work he earned the well-deserved title of "Father of the Indian Library Movement". His influence extended much beyond his country, and he became a much sought-after figure abroad and in international circles. With his hard work and fundamental insights he not only won honours for himself but also for his country. His grateful nation designated him as its first (and so far only) National Research Professor in Library Science for life in 1965. In his honours he saw the profession being recognized and honoured.

Ranganathan was a freak of nature. A person like him appears once in a blue moon; creates a new paradigm; adds new dimensions to the profession; gives new life and look to it; creates a new school of thought; and leaves behind indelible footprints on the sand of time. His devotion to library and information studies was absolute and single-minded. He was dedicated to the cause of providing library services to his countrymen on such levels as are available in advanced countries. His life is the story of the growth of the Indian library movement; and his mind delineated the evolution of the fundamentals and theory of library science. His prolificity presents an enigma to the students of creativity.

The patriarch took stock of his life by recollecting the reminiscences of his work which were published serially from 1963 to 1972 in the *Herald of Library Science* edited by P.N.Kaula. This serialized life account was envisaged as far back as 1954 but could only be started in 1962 with the start of the Herald. From the very beginning it had been intended to publish these serialized articles in book form. The Ranganathan birth centenary celebrations have now provided a very apt occasion for this.

The work is not an autobiography, as it nowhere describes the life and testaments of Ranganathan. Rather, it consists of fragmentary reminiscences dwelling only on those aspects and episodes of his work which Ranganathan wanted to share with his readers. What has been revealed is much less than what has been concealed. Ranganathan hides much. Moreover, much of what has been written is already known to his students. The autobiography broadly consists of two sections A and B of 19 and 17 chapters respectively, each marked by a two-digit subdivision. Section C, consisting of 14 chapters, presents an evaluation of his life and work by P.N.Kaula.

It also contains 34 photographs with descriptions. In the first chapter, Ranganathan captures the moments of the interesting story of his entry into the library profession as an aggressive and trade-unionist teacher of mathematics. He goes on to narrate with human interest the minute-by-minute details of his early days as head of the Madras University Library, his early memories and impressions of the teachers, teaching methods and the academic environments of the School of Librarianship, University College, London. Then chronologically he passes on to: his early work of reorganizing the Madras University Library, the introduction of new reader services, the nature of bureaucratic hurdles and the help received from understanding Vice-Chancellors as well as deteriorating social environments due to communal division culminating in his final exit from Madras. He sporadically describes the work of library organization, the *modus operandi* of shifting the library to a new building without disrupting the library services even for a day and managing the library during the days of World War II. Details of his work of this nature can still be useful to library managers. His cordial and warm relations with library patrons of every rank are inspiring. Some of these readers, when having gained high positions in the government, tangibly helped him in realising his dreams and spreading his message, thus giving a further fillip to the library movement. Ambiguously ascribing his troubles to the prevailing communal prejudices he never comes to the personal and immediate crisis that made him to opt for premature retirement from Madras. He hints at Dr.M.O.Thomas, his deputy, being the trouble maker, but prefers to spare us the details of the real discord with him. In section B we see him as a public figure and a statesman of librarianship. He describes his experience with the conferences and with library associations, especially the Madras Library Association founded in 1928 with Ranganathan as its founder and all-powerful secretary, and the Indian Library Association founded in 1933. Of the latter Ranganathan was President from 1949 to 1953. By all accounts, that was the golden period of the profession. After his tenure the Association grew ineffective, to be reactivated only in the early 1980's with the coming of Professor P.B.Mangla as its president. The social and cultural library milieu has been well portrayed.

He describes nothing of his childhood, nor of his family lineage and married life. It is a pity that his loyal friends, colleagues and disciples find virtually no mention. The work gives no clue to many questions still lurking in the minds of Ranganathan scholars, especially the mystery of his migrating to Zürich with a mind to settle there permanently. Nor is there any description of life in Zürich (1955-1957), which was intellectually quite a prolific period. He writes nothing of the intellectual evolution of his mind and theories - which otherwise is well described in his individual books. The autobiography is intermittent, descriptive and not any spontaneous

narrative. Similar events though distanced by time are juxtaposed in the work. To fully describe an event, he occasionally moves backward and forward in time. For that reason it is difficult to say whether the description ends abruptly with his sudden death and whether he had intended to say something more about his life.

The book essentially reveals us his behavioral aspects. He usually overreacted with persons he thought were his enemies. Many were simply rivals or professional opponents. His conflict with K.M.Asaduallah (1890-1949), Secretary, I.I.A (1943-1947) appears to have been nothing but a clash of two egos, but it made Ranganathan denounce all Punjabis as ridden with an inferiority complex. (The fact remains that the North Indian have remained on the forefront to perpetuate his legacy). No doubt his colleagues were overworked while he gleaned all the glory. He was witty and had the capacity to laugh at himself; and he was quick to admit his mistakes - he called them follies. His attitude was fatalistic, superstitiously religious; and there is abundant proof of his belief in supernaturalism. In librarianship, he was a staunch proponent of empiricism and the scientific method.

In presentation and style this life account is perhaps unique in its kind, and far from exemplary as a model. The *dramatis personae* in the first section have been disguised into alphabetic-classed notation of CC for no obvious reason and without any seeming profit. In the original publication, he designated himself as 2 (2 denotes Library Science in the CC; in the present publication 2 has been replaced by SRR); WCB Sayers as 2SA, Edward Ross, his mathematics teacher, as BR, a working class woman as Y49, and so on. To decipher their identities requires considerable research. Tabulated dialogues, a Ranganathan gimmick, further subtract from the book's literary elegance. Dialogues appear incredible, even concocted, putting the veracity of the document at stake. Technical details and numerical figures are distracting. At times one feels as if reading through a technical treatise. On the other hand it is an interesting story in plain words of an incipient profession of what Ranganathan did for it and of what he received in terms of formal honours, personal delights and joys. It is a balance sheet of the agonies he suffered and the lavish adorations he was paid. The biography is laced with flashes of abstract thoughts and morals drawn from life experience. Conclusions are explicitly didactic. Yet the autobiography is much less than his life work and philosophy. Appendices by Professor Kaula partially fill the gap. Kaula writes about the beginning of his own association with Ranganathan and the work he did for him: he describes Ranganathan's work at Madras, Banaras, and Delhi and evaluates his impact on Indian and worldwide librarianship. The book ends with three valuable appendices: A list of awards and honours Ranganathan won; a descriptive catalogue of the major works published on Ranganathan, and lastly a chronology of Ranganathan's life. Kaula, an apostle of Ranganathan, is reticent as ever, and evades controversial issues. Therefore, this work does not obviate the need for a full and

critical biography. Girja Kumar (1) has already done some spade work and is presently engaged on a fuller volume.

A name and subject index provided by S.P.Das, concludes the volume.

The quality of the paper is poor, misprints abound and for that reason the price of 550 rupees is too high. Nevertheless it is a document of cardinal value for Ranganathan scholars and historians of the Indian library movement. For Professor Kaula it has been a realization of a dream and fulfilment of an obligation.

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(1) Kumar, Girja: Ranganathan, Dewey and C.V.Raman: A study in the arrogance of intellectual power. New Delhi: Vikas 1991. 147p.

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WELLISCH, Hans H.: Indexing from A to Z. New York : Wilson, 1991. XXVI,461p., ISBN 0-8242-0807-2

When a book of this kind is published which as a genre in its narrower field is a novelty and the author is both a respected and a seasoned master of the art the reviewer faces considerable difficulties indeed.

I will risk and call this work a special subject encyclopedia, a long awaited reference tool; and encyclopedias - when well conceived and gracefully delivered as the one here under consideration has been - deserve special attention.

One cannot but agree with James Anderson who, on the back of the dust jacket, recommends the book by stating that it is a sheer delight. This is not a commercially charged casual remark, perhaps solicited by the publisher to promote sales; close analysis confirms it as the truth.

I will take issue with the idea and actual accomplishment of what concerns the intended audience but before that - while running the risk of making untimely and unsubstantiated claims - I must say that this book will be considered first and foremost as a student's aid. Having been a faculty member for quite a while I have had the opportunity to use and recommend a plethora of textbooks, manuals, primers, monographs and other compilations. From a formal and often practical point of view they range from the usual fare of introductory and basic texts with various levels of accessibility or collections of individual essays featuring selected topics and methods to the more bizarre idea of programmed texts or exclusively format-oriented treatment, all lumped together under the magic term of "subject analysis". Indexing and its different areas and aspects generally receive, of course, an optimum 50% of the total but it also happens that they are relegated to a secondary, Cindarella status vis-à-vis classification, which often plays the role of the