



Lights from the *Ramayana* in Ranganathan's Philosophy

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S. R. Ranganathan (1892-1972) significantly contributed to the philosophical foundations of the discipline of Library and Information Science not only for India but for the whole world. He had a deep understanding of Indian scriptures, like the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Ramayana*. He frequently referred to these sources in his writing and works. He was an avid reader of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, which is often referred to as the *Adikavya*, or the first poem authored by a human in the Sanskrit language, just as its author is known as Adikavi, or the first poet. Ranganathan used to keep this sacred source always with him and read it every day as a devotional exercise. Ranganathan describes various situations of the *Ramayana* depicting how, during a demanding situation, one strong character emerges and takes on the role of a librarian and resolves various functional challenges. He used this source as a motivation to foster good work and commitment and used characters from the *Ramayana* as heroes and guides in developing a vision of the righteous path for the work of librarianship. This paper surveys analogies and examples from various episodes of the *Ramayana* in Ranganathan's writing, and discusses the holistic vision that emerges from them. It also highlights other important sutras he took from the *Ramayana* for describing and prescribing professional virtues important for libraries in his works and reviews previous scholarly discussions of his love of this great epic poem.

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Introduction

The *Ramayana*, an epic poem written in Sanskrit by Maharshi Valmiki, is considered by different authors to be the oldest epic in world literature¹. Although there is no consensus about its date of composition, it is generally supposed to have been written sometime in the first half of the first millennium BCE. There are many versions of the *Ramayana*. Some of the most eminent Sanskrit versions of the poem include *Adhyatma Ramayana*, *Vasistha Ramayana*, *Laghu Yoga Vasishtha*, *Ananda Ramayana*, *Agastya Ramayana* and *Adbhuta Ramayana*². However, perhaps the most popular version currently in circulation is the Awadhi version composed by Tulsidas: known as the *Ramcharitmanas*, it is widely sung in Hindi-speaking areas.

In an audio recording of Ranganathan made in 1951³, he introduces the *Ramayana* as follows:

“The *Ramayana* is believed to be the premier epic poem of India. Its author was the sage Valmiki. Its

age is not definitely known, there is every reason to believe that it is later than the *Vedas* and earlier than the *Mahabharata*. In economy, in the infinity of its suggestions, and in the levels in which it can be interpreted, the *Ramayana* is perhaps unexampled. Its language is simplicity itself. Its melody is charming.

It has been the source for many of the poems and dramas in the different languages of India. The baby hears this story in the lullaby songs. The boy and the girl read it in schools and colleges. It is the most recurrent theme in most of the reading circles and group gatherings. It usually gives the text for exposition of morals, political science, economics, sociology, law, psychology, and indeed of any subject whatever in the theistic pantheon implied in the *Ramayana*. God is called Vishnu when he is conceived of as the protector and redeemer of the world. When God is so conceived, his consort is called Sarasvati”.

The *Ramayana* is renowned as a treasure house of knowledge, and is considered to be a treatise on

Dharma. It has been told and retold orally for several centuries in and around India to encourage people to follow the path of *Dharma*. Today, knowledge of the poem and its message is transmitted through *Pravachanam* (i.e., recitations with explanatory discourses by spiritual leaders or *Dharma Gurus*), *Ramlilas* (i.e., folk plays based on the *Ramayana*), television adaptations in the form of serials, and writings and academic discourses. The *Ramayana* narrates the deeds of the hero Rama, who embodies the ideal of the "Maryada Purushottam", a perfect man who practices the virtues in life. Because of his many virtues, Rama cultivates the best possible relationships with other people in his various social roles as a son, a brother, a disciple, a master, a friend, a husband, and above all, an ideal king.

Given the pervasive influence of the *Ramayana* on Indian culture, it is unsurprising that Ranganathan drew upon its lessons in articulating his vision of librarianship. In this paper, we shall explore the influence of the *Ramayana* on Ranganathan's thought, with special reference to his ideas on the role of libraries and the expansion of their activities, as well as his views on the ideal professional values of librarians.

Ranganathan's Encounters with the *Ramayana*

Ranganathan was a regular and devout reader of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. As he saw it, "the main theme of the *Ramayana* is the descent of God as humans amidst humans, for cleansing the hearts and minds of the humans and establishing peace and order in the world"⁴. Ranganathan accorded immense spiritual and ethical authority to the *Ramayana* and, accordingly, the great epic poem served him, throughout his life, as a guide on how to conduct one's way of life.

Ranganathan was exposed to the *Ramayana* from early childhood. As he recounted later in his book *Reference Service*⁵,

"My father used to read the *Ramayana* every day. It was a delicate fragile manuscript in Palmyra leaves. When my father had gone out, I used to pick it up and 'read' it. This was reported to my father. He felt concerned about the safety of his fragile book. He, therefore, made for me a dummy sheaf of Palmyra leaves. I was not satisfied as there were no scribbles in it. He then scribbled something on each leaf with his stylus. Then it became a book for me! I used to 'read' aloud from it every day".

The daily reading of the *Ramayana* would become a part of Ranganathan's routine throughout his adult

life as well. As he would later report:

"On 14 November 1923, my headmaster P. A. Subramania Ayyar presented me with a copy of the *Ramayana* of Valmiki. Since that day, I have been reading everyday a chapter from that copy. On an average the copy has been handled for about half an hour each day during the last 32 years"⁶.

Ranganathan always travelled with a copy of the *Ramayana* so that he could have it at hand to draw inspiration from it: for example, during his travels to and from England, it was his routine to take a bath every morning and thereafter to sit on the deck of the ship to read aloud from the *Ramayana*⁷.

Ranganathan reread the *Ramayana* a number of times over the course of his life. As his son Yogeshwar Ranganathan later noted, whenever he began a new reading of the *Ramayana*, he used to write the date of every cycle on the title page of his personal copy⁸.

In 1951, Ranganathan's enthusiasm for the *Ramayana* led him to contribute a reading of the 31st, 35th, and 36th chapters of its fifth book to a Folkways audio recording of recitations of traditional Indian religious poetry. He also wrote the liner notes for this record, in which he concisely described the cultural significance of the poem:

"Millions of people in India read at least one chapter of it each day. Some read it as exquisite literature. Others read it for the wisdom it scintillates. Its theistic flavour is its attraction to many others"⁹.

As we have seen, the *Ramayana* was a constant feature of Ranganathan's life and its influence on his thought was profound. As with other great works of traditional Indian literature, it provided him with ideas, allusions, and analogies that he incorporated into his own works and writings¹⁰.

The *Ramayana* and Ranganathan's Vision of the Library

The library is often considered to be a repository, or storehouse of knowledge. However, in his work *Reference Service*¹¹, Ranganathan discussed different moments of libraries' functions, including the "care of books", "making books accessible", and "converting people into readers". Drawing upon Sanskrit tradition, he defined the library as a "Granthalaya"¹² that is to say, a place where the mind of a reader comes into contact with, and integrates into itself, expositions of subjects that are of interest to it. Ranganathan's view of the library was thus much more capacious than the

traditional view.

Ranganathan used the analogy of the *Banyan tree* in *The Five Laws of Library Science*. The Banyan tree is associated with Vishnu (of whom Rama is an incarnation) and is considered sacred, being a symbol of immortality, stability, and continuity. Ranganathan takes up the idea of the Banyan tree from the *Ramayana* and equates the library with the Banyan tree. It is a tree which fulfils auspicious desires and is the resort of the perfected soul. Ranganathan further expatriates:

चित्रं वटतरोर्मूले वृद्धाःशिष्या गुरुर्युवा।
गुरोस्तु मौनं व्याख्यानं शिष्यास्तु द्विन्नसंशयाः॥
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 !”¹³.

It is within the context of the Banyan tree in the *Five Laws* that libraries meet the ever-changing desire of the users through the integration of users, books, and the staff (i.e. the trinity (or Sangam) for the library).

Similarly, Ranganathan considers that a library is like *Kamadhenu*, the miraculous cow-goddess of plenty, who fulfilled all the necessities of the rishis. The mythological background is as follows. Once the king Vishvamitra paid a visit to Vasistha, one of the oldest and most revered Vedic rishis, or sages, who had come to earth to participate in the naming of Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana*. Vasistha was the keeper of *Kamadhenu*. Vasistha gave a reception for the king and his soldiers, in which all the desires of the king and his retinue were met through the bounty of *Kamadhenu*. The king was overwhelmed with his hospitality and inquired of Vasistha how he had been able to provide the various desires and demands of his guests. The sage mentioned that the cow provided whatever was desired and demanded. The king wanted to carry the cow off for himself but did not succeed and found that a sage is more powerful than a king. He renounced his kingdom, took the path of deep devotion (*tapasya*), and became a sage.

Ranganathan mentions that in “The *Ramayana* of Valmiki, “there is a word-picture of the entertainment of king Visvamitra and his retinue by sage Vasistha. The sage invokes his Cow. She could give him anything wished for.

O! Potency in perfection!

Come, come immediately and listen.

O! Cow giving anything asked for.

The result of all my penance,
Shower forth expeditiously unto each

All that each individually wants

From all the best in the six-fold essence.

एहि एहि शबले क्षिप्रं भृदु च अपि वचो मम ।

यस्य यस्य यथाकामं षडसेषु अभिपूजितम् ।

तत् सर्वम् कामधुक् क्षिप्रं अभिवर्ष कृते मम ।”¹⁴

According to Ranganathan, this episode from the *Ramayana* could be applied to an argument for the need to staff a reference service abundantly. As he put it in an article entitled the “Age of Documentation”, “Once king Vishvamitra happened to visit the hermitage of the sage Vashista. That great sage played the host to the entire retinue of the king. At the dinner table, Vishvamitra was amazed to see one to one correspondence between the servers and the guests. Vishvamitra asked Vashista how he secured so many people to attend on his party. Vashista showed him with great joy the Cow of Plenty, the *Kamadhenu*, which provided them for him. The present Age of Documentation will reach its high-water mark, only when each industrial and research organization plays the *Kamadhenu* and provides a large number of documentalists approximating to the number of servers in Valmiki's feast. The greater the number, the more thorough will be the service and the more productive the work of the research workers”¹⁵.

Interestingly, this was not the only place in which Ranganathan discussed the episode of Vasistha's lavish generosity at the feast. In a passage from a paper given at a conference on the theme “From Publisher to Reader”, he wrote that “Valmiki has given that model in the description of the feast given by Vasistha the sage to Visvamitra the king. Each reader is to be attended to by a competent reference librarian. Each one is to be received with geniality. Each one is to be helped in formulating his needs. Each one is to be helped in finding his right reading material. Each reading material too should be found its right reader. Above all, the time of each one should be saved. Each one should also be kept in good tempo. Indeed, we have to remember”¹⁶.

The cow *Kamadhenu* symbolises general prosperity and abundance. Like *Kamadhenu*, libraries exist for everyone and are committed to serve every user individually. We need to establish the proper understanding of ‘what library is and what it can

deliver to the community of users"¹⁷.

The *Ramayana* and Ranganathan's Discourse(s)

When one reads through the various works of Ranganathan, one finds that Ranganathan used analogies from *the Vedas*, *the Upanishads*, *the Bhagavad Gita*, *Shrimad Bhagavata Mahapurana*, and many other traditional sources. There are many studies that have connected Ranganathan's work with ancient Indian scriptures, with titles such as 'Impact of classical literature in the contribution of Dr. Ranganathan'¹⁸, 'SR Ranganathan: combining library science with Indian values'¹⁹, 'Influence of Manu on Ranganathan's philosophy of library science'²⁰, and 'Hindu philosophical undertones in formulating library science into a scientific discipline by SR Ranganathan'²¹. Yet, of all the traditional writings upon which Ranganathan drew, the *Ramayana* held a particular pride of place. It is noteworthy that Ranganathan tended to hold both formal and informal discussions on the *Ramayana* and its message during professional meetings. Whenever he had the opportunity, he sought to explore the riches of the poem through recitation of its text, discussion of its content, and an exegetical application of its message to the issues at hand. Indeed, as we have seen, he invoked the *Ramayana* in lectures, at conferences, and in both his academic and popular writings.

It is worth noting that the *Ramayana* exercised an influence on the form, as well as the content, of Ranganathan's writings. In his late work on Documentation, Ranganathan observed that "the *Ramayana* is an excellent example of how a text is begun, in Indian tradition. The very first chapter of the *Ramayana* is a model for us to emulate. This single chapter at the beginning gives the essence of the whole *Ramayana* consisting of hundreds of chapters. In fact, the name that is given to the first chapter is extremely modern. In Sanskrit it is called "*Samkshepa-Ramayana*". In English, it means the "Conspectus (or Synopsis) of the *Ramayana*"²². For Ranganathan, then, Valmiki's use of the conspectus in the *Ramayana* provided a traditionalist justification for adding a similar feature -- in essence, a kind of summary or abstract -- at the beginning of most of his books.

Ranganathan considered the *Ramayana* to be an ideal source with which to inaugurate meetings with members of his Indian professional circles. As one former colleague reminisces,

"The first few meetings of the Library Research Circle which used to be at his Delhi residence on

Sundays are still remembered. The holding of meetings was usually delayed because of the sonorous recitation of Valmiki's *Ramayana* by Dr Ranganathan which preceded the business meeting. Irritant to several of us, was the holding of the sessions on Sunday afternoon. The constant prodding of "Rao Sahib", as he is affectionately known, at the sessions which were at times a monologue is still remembered with pleasure. Many new ideas were imbibed which have left their permanent mark on me of us"²³.

One of his disciples recounts that "Ranganathan was also willing to share his love of the *Ramayana* with new acquaintances and even people who were not fellow Hindus. For example, as one of his former students relates, during a visit to Sweden, he received a warm welcome from the famous writer Munthe. He was a very old man deeply interested in Indian culture who said, "Yours is a blessed country. You have produced the *Upanishads*; you have produced the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*; you have produced the Buddha; and in recent times Gandhi. How I wish I could hear the *Ramayana* recited!" Dr Ranganathan generally carries with him a copy of Valmiki's classic. Without a moment's hesitation, he read out some profound passages. The aged author realized that it was one of the great moments of his life"²⁴. In a similar vein, another of his colleagues observed that "evidently, Ranganathan's deep attachment to the *Ramayana* had influenced others around him.... I heard a British admirer of Ranganathan telling a group of Indian librarians and students, that the work 'Five Laws of Library Science' was like the *Ramayana*, every time you read, you discover new meaning in it"²⁵.

In sum, Ranganathan had a deep faith in the sacred *Ramayana*, which had an indelible influence on his spirituality and his worldview. He used the *Ramayana* as a guide and source of inspiration for performing his duties. He used analogies from the *Ramayana* to provide support for his ideas and actions and to inspire the development of further ideas for action in the areas of his work.

This faith remained unconditional, unshakeable, pure and eternal; it gave him a bright and meaningful life and allowed him to develop a very broad outlook of an all-encompassing nature. Indeed, Thakore relates Ranganathan's daily recitation of the *Ramayana* to his stupendous achievements²⁶.

Ranganathan's Life as the Performance of *Dharma*

Ranganathan had a strong belief in the God

implying a trust on an eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and Supreme Being and used librarianship as a way to serve the supreme soul. At the same time, such service, in his view, also led to the progressive amelioration of society; as he put it, “ever since the dawn of human knowledge and experience, a system of classification has come into practice in order to differentiate and distinguish one thing from another. Human thought has undergone rapid and radical growth, keeping pace with the ever-changing universe. This necessitated the acquisition of capacity to distinguish between things and to develop the art of differentiation. The intuition (*Divya-indriya*) of the sages and seers ultimately brought into light some vital principles that govern the creation. The two-way approach of the intelligentsia of the bygone days towards physical and metaphysical world has evolved a high state of society laying down certain principles with regard to individual (*vyakti*) and society (*samashti*) as a whole, with a spectroscopic view of their position, relation, rights and responsibilities in all fields of human life. Our people have laid down a great stress on society, and hence evolved as a socio-centred system”²⁷.

Ranganathan led a spiritual life, with faith in the idea of uniformity and holiness in the service of the library profession. In his view, “[l]earning is considered a sacred duty (*dharma*) in Hindu tradition. Rishis (the learned recluse) were the repositories of all learning. They lived simply almost in threadbare style away from the populace amidst thick forest imparting education in guru-chela tradition. Learning was regimented and followed by strict ritual. The denial of comfort was a hallmark of the guru. He was expected to be a role model for his pupil. There was not too much scope for disputing in such a scheme of things. This ancient tradition was essentially *Brahmanic*. Ranganathan was trained in the same tradition. The Madras University Library was no *ashram*, but Ranganathan lived by its precepts in his place of work and at his residence. Work without reward was his motto”²⁸.

Ranganathan emphasised that library staff should perform their duties in such a way that every user would be benefited through access to libraries and books. As he put it “many a times librarianship is a mechanical process. They form a drudgery. But the drudgery is gone through only to derive ultimately the joy of service. The books are mute. They should be dowered with the personality of the librarian, in order

to get activated. This stage of dowering, this stage of activating them, this stage of establishing contact between the right reader and the right book marks the culmination of our work. It is at this stage that we can emulate Janaka in his words of ecstasy:

Iyam Sita Mama Suta, Saha Dharma Carl Tava,
Praticcha Cha Enam Bhadran Te Pānim Grahnishva
Pāninā

[इयं सीता मम सुता सहधर्मचरी तव।

प्रतीच्छ चैनां भद्रं ते पाणिं गृह्णीष्व पाणिना।।1.73.27।।]

Dear reader, here is a book I have acquired, prepared, and decorated for your sake. Accept it. Take it in your hand. Read it. Enjoy it. It will help you all through life”²⁷.

A consistent theme in Ranganathan's thought is in the importance of naming. This is reflected in his concern for the development of a precise terminology for library science as well as in the emphasis he laid upon developing a classification notation that would allow librarians to name a book with a call number that would distinguish it from all other books in their library collections. Here, too, he took inspiration from the tradition of the *Ramayana*. Chakraborty mentions that “Appellation is not a trivial matter in spite of the famous Shakespearian saying, ‘what’s in a name?’” Ranganathan had a different view and he was convinced about the importance of proper appellation. To justify his views, he cited a relevant example from the *Ramayana*: There [were] three religious functions to Rama, his birth, his naming and his marriage. *Putra Karnestijagna* was performed by Dasharatha under the priesthood of Rishi Shringi, and Viswamitra played the primary role in the marriage of Rama”³⁰.

Indeed, in one of his articles, Ranganathan explicitly invoked Maharshi Vasistha's naming of Rama in the *Ramayana*, stressing both the importance of naming as such and its relation to social duty, “But it was Vasistha that gave the name ‘Rama’. That shows how much importance was given to the function of naming. When it comes to naming, Vasistha would not abdicate his prerogative as arch priest. He himself performed the naming ceremony. This indicates the weightage given by Valmiki to name. I think Shakespeare also subscribes to the importance of name. Any intuitive person will believe in it. I have faith in the supreme intuition of the poet Valmiki. I am bred over his *Ramayana*. There is everything in name”³¹. More generally, the *Ramayana*

provided Ranganathan with the inspiration to frame his work in library science as a contribution to preserving a fully self-sustaining knowledge society. As one of his followers noted, "soon his *tapasya* (it was regular concentration upon a single aim in life) began to bear fruit and his austerities got only interrupted in the shape of travels of necessity to all parts of Europe and America, demanding his presence and personal guidance and study of problems facing countries in their beginnings of building up a library system. Wherever he went, he retained his principles and his kind outlook. His intense love of the *Ramayana* has imbedded with an optimism and sureness of objectives in life that easily evoke all appreciation today. His inner rhythm knows exactly where to seek fulfilment for the development of mankind in the thick folds of knowledge."³²

It is important to stress that the inspiration of the *Ramayana* and other Hindu scriptures led Ranganathan to develop a holistic worldview that informed both his professional and his personal life, and that won the admiration of not only his Indian colleagues but also of many of his colleagues in the West. As one British commentator said of Ranganathan "I believe his mystical philosophy to be nearer the truth than Western materialism. He has nobly earned his release from this phase of his destiny. In the next incarnation I rather think he will be a saint"³³. Ranganathan gave memorable expression to this personal ethic in a talk that he gave at the seminar "From Publisher to Reader", believing that a saint believes in truthfulness as truth always conquers: "One meaning of deva (deity) which I have known is monk, sage or saint. They are not one of those selfish deities found in heaven, but they are the seekers of the highest truth. Let me conclude with the repetition of the prayer:

Tamaso ma jyotir Gamaya

Let us take to heart another interpretation of it:

Get away, deadly inertia, idleness, and slowness,
Come in, life-giving energy, unceasing action, and
creative dynamism.

सत्यमेवजयते³⁴

The *Ramayana* as a Source of Ethical Inspiration

It has long been recognized that ethics is an important dimension of librarianship. As one commentator once observed, "there is a need for a self-imposed code of morals for the librarian. Besides

the general qualities of good manners, patience, tact, self-control, courtesy and a will to serve others, he should be careful in his dealings with the trade. Any pecuniary advantage he can secure should go naturally to the library"³⁵.

Now, in the context of Indian culture, the *Ramayana* is considered to be a vital source of ethical guidance constituting an ideal of life and embodiment of principles that helps its readers to perform their duties according to the path of *Dharma*. The ethical standards set by the *Ramayana* are realized in the performance of *Purushartha*, or the four duties of life: *Dharma*, or virtue; *Artha*, or wealth; *Kama*, or desire; and *Moksha*, or liberation. Readers of the *Ramayana* and other classical works of Hinduism find models for living the good life in these texts. Reading and reciting the text with devotion following the right path is *parayana* and, as one of Ranganathan's educationalist friends once noted, "it is impossible to estimate how much India owes to the *parayana* [i.e., devotees] of the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*. They comprehend the whole of our culture. As the latter claims proudly but not without justice. In regard to the four-fold goal of human life [i.e., the *Purushartha: Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha*], what is found here may be found elsewhere but what is not here is nowhere"³⁶. More specifically, in the *Ramayana*, Valmiki depicts Rama as a human being who becomes a king and later comes to be worshipped by all as a god. Rama comes to be known as *maryada purushottama*, or "the man of supreme honor" because of his values, morals, and ideals. In other words, he becomes a preminent literary exemplar of ethical living in accordance with the dictates of *dharma*.

For Ranganathan, the *Ramayana* served as an inexhaustible source for his moral imagination that inspired him to perform his duties with full devotion and dedication. As one of his colleagues would later recall, "[t]he Divine Right so conveniently appropriated by Ranganathan to suit his convenience was effectively made use of by him as a matter of sheer habit. The *Ramayana* was perhaps employed unintentionally by Ranganathan to rationalize his own actions. Religion was a convenient tool for him, and he was not a particularly religious person, contrary to the general impression about him. He was certainly an ethical being. The *Ramayana* for instance provided him an ethical and not religious inspiration. The daily recitations of the *Ramayana* provided him a welcome

relief from his heavy professional schedule. He was thus able to transport himself to an ethical state of being in which gods and goddesses mixed freely with human beings. Similarly, the animals were placed on par with human beings. The *Ramayana* thus provided him with a romantic view of the world more imaginary than real to a romantic being like Ranganathan the present reality was so unreal that the imaginary looked so real. The classic provided him with a futuristic view of the world”³⁷.

One example of the way in which Ranganathan drew inspiration from the *Ramayana* was in his recourse to the wisdom of one of its characters, Hanuman, a divine companion of Rama who served him as master devotedly and unselfishly. As Ranganathan recounted in a presidential address that he delivered in the seminar on “From Publisher to Reader”, he took Hanuman as a model of constancy, patience, and persistence while advocating for improvements in the pay and service conditions of librarians

“When the Commission examines, finalises, and releases its decisions, I am sure that the university and college libraries will find every satisfaction. I feel gratified that this opportunity came for my dreams, ambition, and wishes, entertained and pursued all through life, to be fulfilled within my life-time. In the past, I had to struggle against great odds and secure some result in this university or that. The progress was at snail's pace. Many frustrations had to be faced. Setbacks came. Despair used to invade. But I could recover and regain optimism. For the resilience of a pioneer is unbounded. In moments of depression, I used to repeat reading Hanuman's words:

Anirvedaḥ śriyo mūlam anirvedaḥ param sukham |
Anirvedo hi satatam sarva artheṣu pravartakaḥ ||
5-12-10

Hope and good cheer are the source of service.
Hope and good cheer give strength. Hope and good
cheer lead to achievement”³⁸.

Perform your Duties for the Best Service

In *Reference Service*, Ranganathan includes a chapter entitled ‘*Lights from Valmiki*’ and discusses the four sons of Dasharatha, the king of Ayodhya, each of whom is an incarnation of God and represents a different virtue: Satrugna, control over one's own egoistic tendencies; Lakshmana, who embodies disinterested service; Bharata, who exemplifies the patient bearing of suffering; and Rama, who is the

exemplar of charm, helpfulness, and, above all, competence. Ranganathan considers these four sons as models for the reference librarian, who should try to practice all of their virtues.

In *Documentation: Genesis and Development*⁴⁰, he gives an analogy from Valmiki in discussing the ideal of providing excellent documentation service, integrated with hospitality (friendliness, generous reception and entertainment of guests) provided by the sage Bharadvaja to the king Bharata. These are not the only places in his writings where Ranganathan identifies the professional persona of the librarian with those of Rama and other characters in the *Ramayana*. Some of the other episodes and situations from the *Ramayana* that he uses to inform his discussion of librarianship, include:

- Visit of Vishvamitra as the obtaining of nectar⁴¹ (User coming to the library is joyful at the supreme level)
- Swayamvar⁴² (Selection and relation of books by the users)
- *Panigrahan sanskar* of Sita and Rama⁴³ (The bond between user and the library staff is long lasting, blissful union of two souls in an unbreakable bond of love and affection)
- Dashrath accepting Janak's invitation for celebrating marriage⁴⁴ (Promptness in action)
- Kewat episode⁴⁵ (Rama's gesture as an example of communication to grasp and understand user needs)
- Plums of Sabari⁴⁶ (Quality check of the services being provided to the users. Here Sabari is an elderly seeker of knowledge of *Dharma*, to whom Rama, the God, describes nine ways of devotion [*Nav-vidha Bhakti*] to the God and her Guru Kanva Rishi imparts blessings to her because of her simplicity, kindness, and generosity towards him. While serving berries to Rama, she tastes them herself before giving them to him; Ranganathan asks librarians, in the same way to sample the information sources for compiling a bibliography before serving them to users.)
- Comparison of the hero Rama and villain Ravana⁴⁷ (Attitude can be good or bad)
- Fear of Sugriva⁴⁸⁻⁴⁹ (Empowerment towards better services through support of dispirited users and staff alike, just as Rama supported and empowered the despondent royal son Sugriva when he was hiding himself from his elder

brother, the king Vali; Sugriva would never forget the obligations of Rama to him.)

- Hanuman, the arch priest of service⁵⁰⁻⁵¹ (Persistence in hope and tireless efforts for searching)
- Analogy of Pushpak Vimana⁵⁰ (Capacity to adjust according to requirements and situations)

Each episode of the *Ramayana* forms part of a narrative plot -- that is to say, there is a story attached to it -- and carries a spiritual message. In his discourses, Ranganathan distilled the substances of the episode that he is discussing and has found applications of its spiritual content to professional life. In this he serves as an example to his fellow librarians, who can likewise draw spiritual nourishment from this deep source of Hindu tradition.

Conclusion

As our discussion in the preceding sections of this paper has shown, Ranganathan brought the insights of the *Ramayana* onto the floor of the library, treating the great scriptural poem as a source of wisdom to be dispensed publicly to his colleagues in librarianship. In his view, the full realization of the self, whether individual or professional, could be reached only through one's realization, within oneself, of the values of Rama. Rama, the hero of the epic, exemplifies love, truth, modesty, honesty, morality, and many other attributes, making him the perfect role model to be followed. The *Ramayana* thus provided an important foundation for Ranganathan's understanding of the ethical and spiritual dimensions of librarianship.

We noted earlier that libraries are not merely repositories or storehouses for books but are institutions designed to meet the needs of each and every individual user who visits them. Thus, a library cannot be self-enclosed within its four walls but must be as open to the external world as the sky is. Indeed, this simile can be pressed even further: a library can be said to shower rain from the clouds of knowledge on all impartially. The universalist ethos of library services places high ethical demands upon the librarian, whose role requires the exercise of truth (*satya*), love (*prem*), and compassion (*karuna*), three of the core virtues of Rama in the *Ramayana*.

The truth itself is God like "Satyam Vada" (Speak the Truth), the first law of Veda, which Ranganathan explicitly connected to his First Law of Library Science ("Books are for Use") in the opening pages of

his fundamental work *The Five Laws of Library Science*⁵². When Ranganathan describes reference service as personalised service⁵³, he is, in effect, asking the librarian to bestow loving service to his or her users. Love, of course, demands commitment, sacrifice, and constructive action in the performance of service. To provide such loving service, we as librarians need to understand our users' requirements with as much empathy as we can. We need to be responsive to their needs and to employ our professional knowledge, skills, and experiences to the utmost in meeting their requirements.

The values that Ranganathan learned from the *Ramayana* sustained him in his work and ever renewed his resolve to go further in his devotion to the development of library service in India. As Ranganathan wrote in 1965 to an admirer who had just congratulated him upon his appointment as National Research Professor in Library Science he had done nothing but followed the way the God wished (the Lord's wishes/acts are called *leela*):

"Many thanks for the sentiments expressed in Para 1 of your letter of 2 March, 1965. The award is part of the *leela* (miracle) of the Lord. The same *leela* also gives the physical strength and the mental ability to justify the acceptance of the award, Its true value is only in the incentive it may give to the younger generation of our librarians to dedicate themselves to their work in libraries and to the pursuit of library science with zeal and abandonment in the hope that this would give them as good an opportunity in life to serve our Motherland as the pursuit of any other subject. Our Government is the first in the world to put the newly emerging library science on par with older disciplines. Our young librarian should feel encouraged by this to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the pursuit of the profession." What an excellent expression of the working of the mind of Ranganathan! This should provide an incentive to the younger generation of the librarians to pursue the newly emerging discipline of library science in India with zeal and abandonment and to serve our Motherland"⁵⁴.

Ranganathan considered library service to be a service to humanity and this, in his view, requires library professionals to continually provide users with the sources of the illuminating knowledge of 'Trikaal'--that is to say, the past, present, and future. He was confident that, in absorbing and making their own the lessons of the *Ramayana*, librarians would

advance in their capacity to fulfil this important social function with love and duty and so he could state with full conviction the following sentiments: "I am now happy to feel that in library matters we are on the eve of a sudden mutation. We are on the eve of jumping on to a more productive orbit of work, to a higher energy level. I can now say in ecstasy:

Tamaso ma jyotirgamaya
"Get away, your darkness, Come in, kindly light"
(तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय)"⁵⁵

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