

Chapter 16

Extending Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan in the 21st Century: Social Justice Laws of Librarianship

Bharat Mehra

University of Alabama, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter traces the actualities and possibilities of representing social justice and social equity concerns in LIS via extending Ranganathan's five laws of librarianship within today's contemporary neo-liberal and geopolitical realities. Blinders in librarianship are identified in its resistance to intentional, systematic, action-oriented, community-engaged, and impact-driven strategies of social justice and real change owing to its White-IST (white + elitist) roots. These are speculated in relation to the profession's undervaluing of Ranganathan's contributions because of his South Asian (i.e., East Indian) origins as a result of the pedestalizing of its Anglo/Eurocentric components within the legacies of a colonized and imperialistic world order. A manifesto of social justice laws of librarianship is proposed to address past and recent lapses in LIS.

INTRODUCTION

Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan (1892-1972) is considered the father of library science (or librarianship), documentation, and information science in India with his vast knowledge, direction, purpose, creativity, sensitivity, and vision for the growth of the intersecting professions in the country, and the world at large (Das and Patra, 2008; Garfield, 1984; La Barre, 2004; Mehra, Potnis, and Morden, 2012; Sharma, 1984). Sir Maurice Gwyer, former vice-chancellor, Delhi University, once called Ranganathan the “prince among librarians” (Sharma, 1979, p. 58). Jesse Hauk Shera, an eminent American librarian and information scientist who spearheaded technology use in libraries from 1950-1970, wrote: “If there is any single individual who merits being called a ‘one man library movement,’ certainly he [Rangana-

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than] has earned that distinction through his accomplishments in India” (Shera, 1963, p.581). Amongst his numerous achievements in library and information science (LIS), Ranganathan is most well-known globally for the five laws of library science (Ranganathan, 1931), development of the first faceted classification (i.e., Colon Classification) (Ranganathan, 1933), and chain indexing for deriving subject-index entries (Ranganathan, 1938). Ranganathan was also a wise LIS educator and faculty member in various Indian universities, making noteworthy contributions such as starting the first LIS doctoral program at the University of Delhi in 1948 (Kumar, 1987).

This chapter briefly traces the actualities and possibilities of representing social justice and social equity concerns in LIS via extending Ranganathan’s five laws of library science within today’s contemporary neoliberal and geopolitical realities (Buschman, 2017; Cifor and Lee, 2017; Mehra, 2021a; Ranganathan, 1931). Blinders in librarianship owing to its White-IST (white + elitist) roots are essentially responsible for its resistance to intentional, systematic, action-oriented, community-engaged, and impact-driven strategies that further social justice and real change, via information-related work, in the everyday lives of all people, including those on the margins of society (Cooke, 2020; Gray and Mehra, 2021; Mehra, 2021b). Such limitations in LIS as a discipline and field are referenced in this chapter, also, in relation to the biases perpetuated in its scholarship and practice (Abbott, 2001; Bonnici, Julien, and Burnett, 2013; Lugya, 2014; Mehra, 2021c; Moniarou-Papaconstantinou et al., 2010). One problematic dimension of this in an oppressive LIS climate has led to a possible under-application of Ranganathan’s contributions (e.g., Colon Classification) because of his South Asian (i.e., East Indian) origins in a western world that solely pedestalized its Anglo/Eurocentric LIS components within the historical legacies of a colonized and imperialistic world order (Naidu, 2017). In a reflective critique of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), Donald G. Davis, Jr. (2000) notes that even in the 1950s, Ranganathan himself provided a “brave and damning indictment of the treatment the so-called developing world” (p. 15) received in the IFLA organization, when he suggested the persistence of “the old view that ‘international’ in IFLA is exhausted by Western Europe and Northern America” and “It may be unconscious and even unmeant on their part. But to us outsiders, it is clear as day light in the tropics” (Ranganathan, 1954, p. 183).

In this chapter, a manifesto consisting of social justice laws of librarianship addresses past and recent lapses that is contextualized in response to considerations of the contemporary climate. This author makes an intentional choice to use “librarianship” (instead of “library science” as used by Ranganathan) in referring to the social justice laws for representing a broader perspective in the praxis of the profession (instead of a parochial academic and/or narrow disciplinary scope) (Freire, 1970). I present this chapter in its totality as a social justice manifesto that revitalizes and re-interprets Ranganathan’s five laws of library science as the “renewed” social justice laws of librarianship. The narrative first addresses the inherited grievances and social injustices in LIS, followed by a discussion of select injustices toward Ranganathan’s legacy. These sections lay the foundation to identify broad assumptions and caveats represented in the social justice manifesto. These serve as the connective tissue to strengthen the reconstruction of the social justice laws of librarianship that are framed in terms of the “FROM” highlighting the original “TO” their new form and meaning. Each social justice law is structured in terms of the “what to do” (i.e., why) and the “how to do” suggestions for readers to actualize them in their own work settings. In this manner, readers can draw on these pieces together in helping them operationalize and implement the laws in their situational contexts while responding to the diverse circumstances and conditions they experience.

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