Five laws of Library science - Implications

By Afroz Ahmad, Khuda Bakhsh O. P. Library, Patna, Mob. 9006658740

Ranganathan's five laws provide a paradigm of how libraries function, how they grow and serve, how they live, and so provide for us, a framework through which to examine our professional lives and our libraries.

One of the most significant contributions of Dr.S.R.Ranganathan to the field of library and information science has been the enunciation of his Five Laws. These laws were first stated and their formal exposition was provided by the author at the provisional Educational Conference held at Chidambaram (Tamil Nadu) in December 1928.

To have a proper understanding of the Five Laws, it is necessary to know the context in which these laws were formulated. It may be noted that Dr. Ranganathan had his education in librarianship in the University of London, School of Librarianship, in the year 1924. After formal training at the University, he had undertaken an extensive tour of England. This tour provided him an opportunity to observe the working of the libraries in England. Dr. Ranganathan took keen interest in understanding the principles and the practices followed in those libraries and the services rendered to their clientele. He was not convinced of the prevailing practices in libraries and the rules that were taught to be remembered in the organization of library operations. He was not sure of the rationale behind them. They sounded to Ranganathan more like the rules of thumb (i.e. take it as such or leave it) type His analytical mind could not submit itself to such mechanical practices. Therefore, he was engaged in efforts to discover some scientific basis using which the practices followed in libraries, that he observed, could be generalized and reduced to certain minimum number of cardinal principles. In other words, Dr. Ranganathan was in search of normative principles which could enable us to understand the measures to be devised in order to know what needs to be done in the library field to make library organization, management and operation efficient and universalize its services Also, it was his wish that these basic principles may contain in a latent form, many other practices not known at that time, but may surface later. The outcome of this line of thinking on the part of Dr. Ranganathan resulted in his enunciation of Five Laws of Library Science. Subsequently, these laws were fully developed and published in book form in 1931.

Five laws of Library science

Laws are scientific principles, rules of procedure or behaviour. Law is a generalization based on a recurring fact or event. Achinstein, P [1971] considers the following **lingual characteristics of a stated law**:

➢ Laws are simple, precise, and few in number
➢ Laws are essentially general in nature
➢ Their subject is general.
➢ Syntactically they are general and begin with All, Every or No
➢ A law expresses a generality which can be used to express regularities.

Keeping the above mentioned characteristics in his mind Dr. Ranganathan propounded his Five Laws as follows:

- ➢ Books are for use
- ➢ Every reader his/her book
- ➢ Every book its reader
- ➢ Save the time of the reader
- ➢ The library is a growing organism.

When Ranganathan used the expression books and readers he naturally meant that books stand for knowledge and information and readers stand for users of library and information services. In modern studies of knowledge and information and all related expressions, it must be noted that the carriers and channels of information and knowledge have changed from print to other forms, but all the services are revolving round information and users. Hence, the dimensions of services have expanded widely in scope, although the basic philosophy of the service remains unaltered. Therefore, these five laws might be restated to suit the changing context and modern developments taking place in the world of libraries and information science as such. For example, the five laws were restated even during the life time of Dr. Ranganathan as under:

- ➢ Documents / Information are for use
- ➢ Every user his/her document / information
- ➢ Every document / information its user
- ➢ Save the time of the user
- ➢ Document / Information system is a growing organism.

1. First Law: Books are for Use

By using first law Books are for use you are prone to think that it is a self-evident truth or simple statement which does not merit serious consideration and contemplation. But, on deep pondering you change your opinion. This will become evident if we examine the history of books in libraries. In fact, the earlier accent is on the preservation of books rather than their use. Medieval libraries were an example of chained libraries. The books literally were attached to the shelves with brass chains and could only be used in a single location. Obviously, this was done for the preservation of books rather than facilitating their use. This was a natural inclination, at a time when it was very difficult to produce books. This habit somehow continued even after the invention of printing, which facilitated the easy production of several copies of each book. Although, isolated examples of reluctance to permit the unrestricted use of books can be occasionally seen even today, the general position is that books are available for use without any let or hindrance. In fact, policies relating to a library should be helpful in promoting the objective of books being put to maximum use. Let us now examine the implications of the first law in the functioning of a library.

➢ **Implication**

The first law of library science has some important messages for library work. Some of these relate to the location of library, its working hours, library building and furniture and the staff.

- **Library location:** it has a forward thinking message in terms of the emphasis on library location. The law advocates that library be located in a more accessible place in order to encourage more users to use the library. Obviously, it will be a discouragement for people to use books, if they have to walk long distance to reach them. At the same time, the location where the library is situated should be free from noise and other disturbances, so that serious study is possible. An ideal place for a public library should be a quiet central area, while a school library should be located in a prominent place in the school premises. The idea that a university library should constitute the heart of the university, then it should be reflected in its geographical location as well.

- **Working hour:** Another important message inherent in the first law is that the working hours of a library should be convenient to most of the users. Many of the libraries in India need to pay special attention to this aspect and keep them open when their clientele are not engaged in other activities so that they are in a position to visit the library. This type of proactive approach in deciding the working hours of the library will certainly yield good results.

- **Library building and furniture:** The first law demands that proper attention be paid to the planning and designing of the library building and the different items of furniture equipped to the library. The library building should be functional and at the same time, aesthetic in appeal. The items of furniture should be functional, attractive to look at. The racks should be designed in such a way that books are placed at convenient heights facilitating their removal and use by the clientele. Particularly furniture in children's library should be specially designed to attract children. Comfortable furniture always tempts users to frequent the library. The law also implies the concept of a open-shelf library that is equipped with tools and furnishings which makes the books it contains useful. In other words, the first law alerts us to the requirements of properly designed functional building and comfortable furniture to invite and promote the use of its resources.

- **Staff:** Staff form an important component of any library. The first law of library science for its fulfilment calls for certain qualifications and qualities for library staff. Though Dr. Ranganathan has spent considerable space in discussing about library staff in his exposition of the first law, the essence boils down to these important attributes: The library staff should possess qualifications that would enable them to organise library efficiently and Laws of Library Science provide satisfactory services. Obviously, this would ensure the proper use of books. But, much more important than formal qualifications are, perhaps, the personal qualities of the library staff. They should be courteous, cheerful and helpful. Service with a smile should be the motto. The staff should always remember that, everything that they do in the library is a means towards an end, and the end is service to the readers. If a potential library user encounters an unhelpful attitude on the part of the member of the staff, s/he is sure to turn away permanently from the library.. in such a contingency, the cause of the first law is not served rather it is defeated. The credibility of the staff, in respect of their knowledge, ability and personal attitude to readers, is a crucial factor in the promotion of the use of the books. The attributes discussed above deserve special consideration while library staff is recruited. This is necessary to satisfy the requirements of the first law.

2. Second Law: Every reader His / Her book

The second law "Every reader his/her book" (the variant form of which is "books

for all") is perhaps the most under stated; even Dr. Ranganathan acknowledged that with this one principle lies so much of what libraries mean for society. "The law relates to the fact that we all have diverse interests and that there is a book out there to satisfy that for all of us". In other words, the law stands for the mandatory provision of library service to each person according to her/his need. Stated in a different manner, the law advocates the universalisation and democratization of library service. However, in earlier days only a privileged few belonging to aristocracy and upper classes of society were given access to libraries and books. But, with the advent of democracy which ensured the participation of every citizen in governance, the position dramatically changed. Democracy, for its sustenance and survival, needs an educated knowledgeable citizenry. Hence, education and acquisition of knowledge through whatever institution possible became the basic right of all citizens without any discrimination. Hence, the law "Every Reader His / Her Book".

➢ **Implication**

This law has many important implications for the library. The fundamental issue it reveals, tension (conflict) between the cost of materials and the basic right of all persons to have access to materials they need. In providing a library for the use of books, one must be mindful of the fact that since no one individual or library can acquire all the books, this responsibility needs to be accepted at the governmental level. Therefore, the second law imposes certain obligations on the state, library authority of the state, the library staff and the reader.

• **Obligation of the state:** It must be emphasized that it is obligatory on the part of the State to develop and organize a library system capable of providing adequate library service to all people. This has to be accomplished through suitable legislation, which should make provision for financial support of the library system and create suitable mechanism with authority for the coordination of all activities pertaining to its different units. A goal should be set for the library system and services best suited for the society must be initiated. The legislation must be so framed that it would serve as an effective instrument for achieving the goals and the stated objectives envisioned therein. Finances are always limiting factors for library development and the objective should be to derive maximum benefit in terms of library services, with the available limited funds. The library system envisaged through legislation is the public library system, which is available to the entire community. But, public library system, by itself will not be able to provide every reader the books he needs. In fact, public library system plays only a minimal role in fulfilling the book requirements of students, teachers and other researchers. Therefore, the government has an additional responsibility to establish school and college libraries as also, university and special libraries to cater for the demand of students, teachers and researchers. Only when the library system of a state is comprehensive providing library service to all categories of its people, it can be said that the demands of the second law are met.

• **Obligations of library Authority:** The second law emphasizes the fact that it is obligatory on the part of the library authority to accept responsibility in respect of book selection and provision of suitable staff. No library will have enough funds to purchase all the books that it may require. This is the reason why libraries have to take recourse to book selection process.
The second law implies that an adequate and competent team of staff is essential to provide every reader her/his book. In other words, a reader should be able to exploit the resources which are relevant to her/his needs available in the library. The staff has to play a proactive

role in this exercise. In the absence of competent staff willing to help the reader, s/he may not be in a position to locate a good number of books useful to her/him.

The reader also has certain responsibilities cast on her/him by the second law. It particularly wants the reader adhere to the rules of the library in respect of loan and use of books. If the reader retains the book beyond the period of loan, s/he is depriving other readers, who may want to use the book. There are some readers who misplace books with a view to monopolise, or tear off pages from books or even steal them. This undoubtedly leads to the gross violation of the second law. The readers should be made conscious of such violations and their consequences by the library staff through short programmes of user education.

3. Third Law: Every book its reader

The third law of library science is "Every Book its Reader". The approach of this law is oriented towards the book. As per the law, every book in a library should have a chance of finding its appropriate reader and be useful to her/him. In other words, investment in unused books amounts to wastage of funds and must be avoided under all circumstances. The mission of any librarian is to build a well organised collection of resources in order to maximize the chance that users will find what they need. The third law implicitly means that "resources look for users" in fact, the duty of the librarian is to help the library resources find the people who want and need them most. Dr. Ranganathan points out, that library users often, do not know enough about available resources to identify what to ask for. According to him "the majority of readers do not know their requirements, and their interests take definite shape only after seeing and handling a well organized collection of books". This principle naturally addresses the fundamental issue of open access. In the open access system, books are arranged in the shelves in classified order and readers have freedom of access to them. In the course of readers browsing through shelves; they may come across books of interest to
them, the existence of which they may not be aware of. The chances of readers noticing the books and reading them are enhanced by the open access system. The third law, therefore, definitely advocates open access. Adopting an open access system for a library imposes certain responsibilities and obligations on the part of the staff as well as the readers. For example, the classified arrangement of books i.e. the arrangement of books in the order of their relationship with particular subject should be constantly maintained. This means that the shelf-rectification, i.e. restoring the misplaced books to their correct place on the shelf should be done by the library staff on a regular basis. They should also provide shelf guides, bay guides, etc, which guide the readers to their appropriate regions and shelves in the stack room.

The third law also advocates maintenance of a well designed library catalogue with effective cross references, and added entries meeting the different approaches of readers. Of course, the importance of reference service cannot be over emphasized in this connection. Ultimately, as Ranganathan asserted "it should be the business of … the librarian … to adopt all the recognized methods of attracting the public to the library so that every potential reader may be converted into an actual one, thereby increasing the chances for the fulfillment of the third law.

4. Fourth Law: Save the time of the reader

The fourth law presents the biggest challenge to the library administrator. policies must always be formulated keeping in view the needs of the readers (users) in mind. For example, aspects like hours of operation must be set in such a way to ensure the most appropriate and convenient access to patrons who rely on the library for their study and research needs. The

collection must be arranged in an inviting clear and obvious way so as not to waste the time of the user in searching for the books they need. Library users may be busy people, and they should not be made to wait longer than necessary to get their needs met. They should get exact and fast service from the library. It must also be noted that in many individuals, intellectual interest may exist only momentarily and unless it is satisfied at the moment of its existence, it may vanish. Hence, the importance of the law "Save the Time of the Reader". It means satisfied library users. In other words, the prime measure of library's success, it is important to note that frustrated or disappointed users means that the library has failed in its responsibility and has grossly violated the dictates of the fourth law and failed in its fulfillment. Let us now try to analyze the full implications of this law and the various operational methods employed by libraries to save the time of readers.

➤ Implication

Just as the third law the fourth law also pleads for open access system in libraries. The justification is that in closed access libraries, the readers are not allowed to the stacks where books are shelved and have to requisition for books they need. The procedure is that they prepare a list of books they want after consulting the catalogue, and hand over the list to a library staff member. S/he may locate some of the books asked for and report the non-availability of others. On seeing the books, the reader may discover that none of these books is relevant to her/his need. S/he has to prepare another list and repeat the operation and wait again for the result. This trial and error method may consume lot of her/his time before her/his needs are met. A lot of time is spent counter productively in these processes. Obviously, this frustrates the library user. A lot of user's time is saved, if the library follows open access system and maintains a well organized collection of books.

There are other ways to satisfy the law. One of them is following proper classification system which would bring together books on specific subject and also related subjects. Another way is to construct a well designed catalogue which meets the different approaches of readers. It is important to note that while catalogues are tools for retrieving items accurately, they become items that waste the time of the reader, if items are haphazardly catalogued or if the cataloguing is excessively focused on the intricacies of the technique.

Another important aspect which has a great relevance to the Fourth law is the charging system (i.e. loan of books) followed in the library. Earlier systems were time consuming and somewhat cumbersome. Hence, efforts have been made to simplify the process with a view to reduce the time involved in the operation. As a result, modern systems like photo-charging system, ticket system, computerized charging system, barcode system and radio frequency identification (RFID) system have been evolved. Adopting any one of these systems will lead to substantial reduction of time in the issue and return process which the fourth law strongly advocates.

5. Fifth Law: Library is a growing organism

The fifth law is *Library is a growing organism.* Dr. Ranganathan compares library to a growing organism. In a living organism the growth is of two kinds: the child growth and the adult growth. We can notice that child growth is characterised by increase in physical dimensions and it is fast and visible. On the other hand, the growth in adults is mainly in the nature of replacement of cells. It is a kind of internal qualitative change, which may not be perceived, and as such, not visible. When we say library is a growing organism, we mean that library is not a static entity, but a dynamic growing entity. In other words, the dynamic nature of

the library be properly grasped and provided for right from the time of starting of a library so that its growth is not inhibited due to lack of far-sight and planning. On further analysis, we know that the basic components of a library comprise: i) the book stock (or resources), ii) the staff, iii) the readers, iv) the physical infrastructure such as the building, furniture and equipment. When we say that a library grows, we envisage growth in all these components. Naturally, the fifth law has implications for each one of these components.

> **Implication**

Let us try to analyse these implications and try to understand the guidance we can derive from the fifth law in solving the problems presented by the dynamic growth associated with the library.

- **Book stock:** In the initial stages of development, the growth of books including the periodicals will be rather fast. This naturally impacts the size of the stack rooms, size of card cabinets, size of the catalogue room, number of periodical display cabinets and the number of book racks for accommodating the books. Also, as the book collection grows, and the newly added books are interpolated in the classification arrangement, there will be constant movement of books on shelves. This would necessitate re-labeling of shelves periodically. This is essential to reflect the correct position of arrangement of books for easy retrieval.

- **Readers:** When the library functions properly in keeping with the spirit of the first law of library science, the readers of the library are bound to grow. That means the readers need proper facilities by way of reading space etc. and new types of services need to be organized.

- **Staff:** It must be mentioned that mere quantitative growth does not mean anything. There must be qualitative growth also. This requires the number of staff must be increased commensurate with the increase in readers and books to initiate new services to suit the needs of the new readers and to improve the existing services to meet the changed demands of the readers and personalize them with reference to service. The qualifications and skills of the staff need to be updated to meet the changing circumstances. The staff should be provided with opportunities to receive training in new areas of professional development. The motto of the staff should be to render efficient service and save the time of the readers. For this purpose, constant updating of skills and growth in professionalism by learning innovative techniques and new areas of professional development is necessary.

- **Classification and catalogue:** One of the implications of increasing intake of books on a variety of new subjects is that the classification scheme adopted should be hospitable to new subjects. It must enable the classifier to allocate a unique class number to each subject and must facilitate easy retrieval. The growth factor also calls for a card catalogue built on sound principles to help the readers to know the contents of library without difficulty and the catalogue should facilitate easy interpolation of entries. It should be a easy locating tool. Libraries which grow fast, especially, the larger ones, need to modernize their services by taking recourse to computerization of all the housekeeping operations. This results in the efficiency of service.

The fifth law also advocates that care be taken while planning and designing a   library building by making provision for the expansion of the building both   horizontally   and vertically. The need for more space often arises *sooner than   anticipated* and *lack of provision for expansion* would block the development of   library.

- **Weeding of books:** The development plans for a library should also include provision for weeding out obsolete books and adding new ones which are relevant and useful. Weeding need not necessarily mean the discarding of books. It only means removal of books from a library where their relevance has ceased in order to make room for current and relevant books. Such books may be stored where they are available for occasional use. Different libraries in a region may cooperate in planning a storage facility for locating the weeded out books in a central place so that readers in need of such books may go there and consult them.

New Insights and wider interpretation of five laws

A sea changing is taking place in all facets of human society. While knowledge and information have always been instrumental in promoting the material progress at every stage of societal development, the last 50 years have witnessed spectacular developments in the growth, access and availability of information and knowledge. This change is generally attributed to the advancements that have taken place in information communication technologies (ICTs). As a result, knowledge and information can be accessed today instantaneously, irrespective of its location and made available on a computer screen, downloaded and stored for future use. Though, the bulk volume and variety in which knowledge and information is disseminated do not pose any problem of access and availability, the fundamental problem of *use* and *service* to the user remains still somewhat unsolved even today. Ranganathan's laws, though formulated in the context of traditional libraries and their use, and services rendered by them to the user community, it is the opinion of many professional experts that these laws have not lost their relevance even in the context of new developments such as the Internet System, World Wide Web, Digital and Virtual Libraries.

These laws "continue to give us a blue print for our professional values that is as relevant now, as it was in 1931. The language may be seen as restrictive, but the underlying values inherent in them means they can be continuously interpreted for the future" . As a matter of fact, many of the scholars have attempted to do so. For example: Rettison [1992], Chappell [1976], Naun [1994], Gorman[1998], Kuronen and Pekkarinen [1999], Croft [2001], Leiter [2003], Satija [2003], Noruzi [2004] and Choudhury et al. [2006] have provided new insights relating the adequacy and relevance of Ranganathan's f*ive laws* in the present context and their future value.

- Recognizing Ranganathan's five laws of library science and their underlying concepts as powerful inspirations for social change, Mentor Cana [2003], analyzed the "Open Source Software", as defined by Open Source Initiative (OSI) and its congruency with the five laws. He felt that since the underlying concepts upon which the five laws are built had profound impact on our society, then the proponents of open source movement can learn a lesson or two from that example in achieving their objective. Cana explains that a *book* is a basic element of Ranganathan's laws: it contains objective knowledge. This calls for defining the comparative basic elements of software development. Hence, he takes the term *Software* to be the basic element: it contains objective knowledge. He uses the term *Software* to connote a

software product or software modules that can be used to build software products and believes that the five laws of the "Software Library" could be:

➢ Software is for use
➢ Every user his / her software (or software for all)
➢ Every software its user
➢ Save the time of the user
➢ A Software Library is a growing organism.

▪ One of the most useful papers which provides significant insights and wider interpretation of Ranganathan's five laws and establishes their relevance in 21st century is the paper authored by Alireza Noruzi A[2004] entitled "Application of Ranganathan's Five Laws to the Web". The paper poses the question; "does the web save the time of users?" and attempts to answer the question by analysing the application of *five laws* of Ranganathan to the Web and reinterpreting them in the context of the Web. "The Five Laws of the Web" formulated by him are:

➢ Web resources are for use.
➢ Every user his / her Web resource.
➢ Every Web resource its user.
➢ Save the time of the user.
➢ The Web is a growing organism.

Before we actually discuss the impact on the Web, we need to know briefly what the Web is and what it actually contains? The World Wide Web (WWW) is an Internet system that distributes graphical, hyperlinked information, based on the hypertext transfer protocol (HTTP). The Web is the global hypertext system providing access to documents written in a script called Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) that allows its contents to be interlinked, locally and remotely.

▪ **The first law**: "Web resources are for use" is very important because information serves no purpose, if it is not utilised and at least available for people to attempt to learn. The role of the Web is to serve the individual, community and service, and to maximise social utility in the communication process. To satisfy the first law, the web must acquire materials and make them accessible so that they can be used.

▪ **The Second law**: "Every user his / her Web resource" has many implications. It reveals the fundamental need anywhere in the world. This makes diffusion and dissemination very important. In other words, each web resource should think of potential user before Website is created. This means webmasters must know their users well, if they are to provide them the materials they need for their study and research. The second law also dictates that Web serves all users, regardless of social class, sex, age, ethnic group, religion or any other consideration.

▪ **The Third law**: "Every Web resource its user". How can a webmaster find a user for every web resource? There are many ways in which a web can actively work to connect its users. But the most important aspect which should be kept in mind, in this context, is that webmaster should add content with specific user needs in mind and they should make sure that the users can find the content they need easily.

- **The Fourth law**: "Save the time of the user". This law has been responsible for many reforms in Website administration. A Website must examine every aspect of its policies, rules, and systems with the one simple criterion that *saving the time of the user is vital to achieve the Website's mission.* In order to save the time of the user, Websites need effectively and efficiently design systems that will enable user to find what they are looking for *quickly* and *accurately.* At the same time, the Websites they are searching should make them available most of the information that could be *potentially useful.*

- **The Fifth law**: "The Web is a growing organism". The web reflects and represents the changes taking place in the World as the society moves forward. In the process, a large quantity of information is added to it. Hence, a Web is a growing organism. We need to plan and build with the expectation that the Web and its users *will grow and change over time.* To cope with the dynamic situation, it is necessary to keep our own skill levels moving forward. The fifth law alerts us by emphasizing the vital point that *change and growth go together,* and require flexibility in the management of Web collection, in the use of cyberspace, in the retention and deployment of users, and in the nature of Web programs. The law advocates proper and systematic planning to meet the requirements of change and growth.

Compiled by Afroz Ahmad
Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna
Mob. 9006658740