

100 yrs ago, a Madras math prof resigned. And it rocked the world of libraries

This is the tale of SR Ranganathan, known globally as the 'Einstein' of library science, a force in the field, writing laws, drafting legislation and forever changing the way we interact with books

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A hundred years ago, in Madras Presidency, there lived a librarian named SR Ranganathan (SRR), who was bored. So bored that in Jan 1924, just a week after being appointed the first librarian of the University of Madras, he quit, telling his boss he couldn't "bear the solitary imprisonment day after day".

At the time, India was swept up in the tide of the freedom movement. And, the quiet revolution that had begun in the world of libraries went largely unnoticed. Encouraged by his peers to give library science another chance, a reluctant SRR, who wanted to go back to teaching math, set sail for England, where he met Berwick Sayers, chief librarian of Croydon, who opened his eyes to the vast potential of libraries. Sayers later referred to the years that followed as the dawn of the "Age of Ranganathan".

1924 was life-changing for SRR. At University College London, home to Britain's only graduate programme in library science, he was intrigued by the system of classification. The former math professor identified flaws in the rigid Dewey Decimal System (which used only numbers) and set to work on his own: Colon Classification (which used numbers and letters).

SRR's system organises information based on a book's personality (subject), matter (substance), energy



BROWSE FREE: Ranganathan designed the University of Madras library with bookshelves of wood to withstand the coastal air

OFF THE SHELVES

► Born on August 12, 1892, in Thanjavur, the day celebrated as National Library Day in India; he was a math prof at Madras Presidency before he became a librarian

► SRR is best known for his Five Laws of Library Science and developing the Colon Classification system

► He is regarded as the father of library science and was awarded the Padma Shri in 1957



S R Ranganathan
1892-1972

(processes or activities), space (geographic location) and time (date). "His methods continue to influence revisions to the Dewey system as well as has applications in web searches and AI," says M P Satija of the department of library science at Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar

His fascination with libraries grew as he visited more institutions and discovered how they served everyone - children, workers, women - unlike the 'limited libraries' of Madras.

He boarded a ship and returned to India (legend has it that he spent his journey rearranging its library). SRR was no longer bored; he was now consumed by a passion for librarianship. In Madras, he returned to his role as university librarian, a position he held for the next 20 years. "A library is a public institution charged with the task of converting every person in its neighbourhood into a reader of books," said SRR and set about doing just that.

In 1928, he helped found the Madras Library Association. A couple of years later, he penned his Five Laws of Library Science: "Books are for use", "Every reader his or her book", "Every book its reader", "Save the time of the reader", and "A library is a growing organism". These laws are still considered the five commandments of library science.

"SRR's laws may seem simple, but

their implications are profound," says Satija. "For instance, when he said, 'books are for use', SRR was emphasising the importance of accessible libraries where readers could browse and borrow freely - something unheard of at the time. Back then, readers had to request books and waited a day for the librarian to retrieve them. His third law, 'every book its reader', highlights the librarian's role in finding an audience for every book. And his fifth law, 'a library is a growing organism', is about how libraries need to evolve, which we see in today's information age, where 'reader' has become 'user'."

SRR championed free public libraries across India, drafting bills that led to the Madras Public Libraries Act in 1948, the first such legisla-

tion of its kind. Though he seemed shy and scholarly, SRR was witty. "To be a reference librarian, you must overcome not only your shyness but also the shyness of others," he said.

SRR arranged for books to be delivered to readers in places such as Thanjavur using bullock carts. "In some districts they continue to celebrate his birth anniversary by sending out bullock cart libraries," says K Sakkaravarthi of Anna Centenary Library in Chennai.

In the 1930s, SRR had another brilliant idea: a library near Marina Beach, housed in the University of Madras. He designed it himself with bookshelves built of wood to withstand the humid air. He even ordered special chairs and tables from Curzon & Co, a company that became famous for library furniture, thanks to him

When military officers stationed in Madras wanted to use the periodical hall of his library as a ballroom at night, SRR came up with an ingenious plan to stop them. "Bolt all the library tables to the floor," he instructed his carpenters, leaving the Brits with no room to tango.

Though he earned well, SRR lived modestly - no pomp, no tea or coffee, just one simple meal a day. Inspired by Gandhi, he wore homespun clothes and walked barefoot in the library. SRR worked 13-hour days, seven days a week, without ever taking a vacation. It is said that even on his wedding day, he returned to work that very afternoon.

"A modern librarian," said SRR, "is happy only when his readers make his shelves constantly empty. It is not the books that go out that worry him. It is the stay-at-home volumes that perplex and depress him."

SRR was a man obsessed. He classified and wrote. He wrote and classified. When he wasn't doing either, he lectured. "He would pull students from their hostels at dawn, taking them on morning walks, talking about libraries all the while. He'd pause to draw new library arrangements in the sand and dictate notes on referencing," says Satija.

SRR published 2,000 research papers and 60 books and founded and edited five periodicals. In 1945, he moved to Banaras Hindu University as a librarian and professor. There, he single-handedly classified 100,000 books in just 18 months.

In 1948, SRR founded the Library Research Circle - librarians met at his home every Sunday to discuss, what else, but classification. Despite a childhood stammer, SRR became known for his witty speeches, famously saying, "The spoken word is superior, but the printed word is essential to reach more people."

The same year, he also helped to establish the policies of the new library of the United Nations in New York, "for other wise," he said, "it would probably have been much more an American than an international library". "Ranganathan is to library science what Einstein is to physics," said Eugene Garfield, a visionary in information science.

SRR died on Sept 27, 1972, but library science thrives thanks to the man who, 100 years ago, quit his job.

The end? Perhaps not. As SRR would say, the more he did, "the more remains to be done". (Reference: Library Law No 5)

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