Ranganathan and Readers' Advisory Service

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Abstract

Discusses nature of readers' advisory service and its importance. States that the readers' advisory service is now getting momentum. Reasons for the slow response from the library professionals are highlighted. Technological tools competing this human skilled service are listed. Ranganathan's views about reader's advisory service are discussed, particularly his unspelt or indirect support and insistence on readers' advisory service is brought forth. Concludes with forceful rationality for providing readers' advisory service.
Keywords: *Ranganathan, Reference Service, Readers' advisory service.*

Introduction:

This year the world is celebrating 125th birth anniversary of the legendary Indian librarian and library scientist, Dr. S. R. Ranganathan. He has been very aptly credited as the father of Indian Librarianship. Of course Dr. Ranganathan contributed not just to the Indian librarianship but to the world's librarianship and that is why the American Library Association called him the 'world librarian' (Sharma, 1979). He took the Indian librarianship to the world scenario. His contributions to analytico-synthetic classification are highly appreciated by the British and American library professionals. Colon classification which is based on analytico-synthetic format is considered as the most ideal classification scheme.Yet another most noteworthy contribution of Ranganathan is his book *'the five laws of library science'*. The five laws enunciated and elaborated with many examples and analogies are valued for the best articulation of the philosophy of librarianship. His contribution to the terminology of librarianship too is always appreciated.

Some of the meaningful, aptly describing and perfectly used terminologies coined by Ranganathan include, APUPA, pre-natal cataloguing, librametry, facet, isolates and foci, common isolates, postulates, arrays, fundamental categories acronymed as PMEST,meta document, etc. His contribution to the then emerging service 'documentation' is also quite appreciated. What is more important is that whatever he thought, he got it recorded in the form of articles and books. There is hardly another library professional who has

published so widely i.e. over 50 books and hundreds of articles. His contribution to the field of Library and Information Science education (courses, curriculum, teaching techniques, training, research and institutions) in India is also cherished by the Indian library professionals and library science educators. Different library professionals have written exhaustively on almost all these and other contributions of Dr. Ranganathan. This article discusses Dr. Ranganathan's views about readers' advisory service.

Reader and Reading-many types and many Perceptions:

Who is a reader? How can a reader be defined? Let's try to understand with the help of our common perception. A person who reads is reader. A person who likes to read very much, who is very enthusiastic or passionate for reading is ardent reader. Then there are people who know how to read but are unwilling to read. The one who doesn't like to read is called aliterate person. Then there are people who read with different purposes. For example, students read for study purpose. Occupational people like legal professionals read for their daily practice. Then there are people who read for entertainment purpose. This type of reading is also known as leisure reading.

There is overall universal opinion that the society is not reading sufficiently. But then if we investigate into the past, near or very long, we may find such a perception prevailing since the early days of writing, manuscripts and incunabula. Such a perception is applicable to the reading of students (reading for study purpose) as well as to those of the adults (reading for entertainment purpose). People have their own rationality for such a perception about the insufficient reading of children and adults. Some thought and still think that people usually doesn't like to read. Others think that people like to read but suitable, interesting books are not available. And the third reason stated for not reading is lack of advice for reading. These are the people who wish to read but don't know what to read. Here is the role for the reading advisor and the purpose for providing reading advisory service

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Readers' Advisory Service-Meaning and Evolution:

Saricks and Brown (1997) defined readers' advisory as patron-oriented library service for adult fiction readers. A successful readers' advisory service is one in which knowledgeable, nonjudgmental staff help fiction readers with their reading needs.This definition restricts the scope of readers' advisory to adult's

fiction reading. Whereas, Dilevko and Magowan (2007, p.3) defined readers' advisory as"a service which involves suggesting fiction and nonfiction titles to a reader through direct or indirect means. This service is a fundamental library service; however, readers' advisory also occurs in commercial contexts such as bookstores." This definition states that readers' advisory service is needed for suggesting non-fiction titles also. It also states that such a service may be given directly by interviewing a reader and then recommending him books to read. Or recommendation for reading may be made available by preparing annotated books about books. A large number of such books are now available. In the opinion of Orr (2013, p. 18) "readers' advisory service meaning knowing about books, knowing about readers and then using professional judgment to successfully match them together."

Though these definitions incidentally, do not include the phrase 'public library', but it must be membered that the readers' advisory service initially emerged as advice to adult learners, and advice to readers in selecting fiction reading. However, it should also be kept in mind that at present readers' advisory service is provided by all types of libraries and intend to help all types of readers in getting the most suitable reading material. 'Reading recommendation', 'reading prescription', 'information prescription', reading suggestion''InforRx', etc. are some of the terms and phrases used to refer to the service that suggests 'best reading' for the given purpose. Readers' advisory service is also put into practice as 'bibliotherapy'. In this service books are recommended as therapy. Many professionals including librarians practice bibliotherapy (Zipora, **2009, p. 21).**

We find many references discussing readers' advisory service (though not with this name) during 1920 to 1940. After that for almost next 60 years this service did not get much attention and as a result, hardly any literature was published during 1960s to 1980s. After 1990 this service has been getting momentum. We can now find many booksand articles are published on this topic (Wyatt, 2010).Some such literature is briefed in the paragraph below.

Literature Explaining Importance of Readers' Advisory Service:

When you try to search literature on readers' advisory service one document which is misnomer and therefore difficult to retrieve is a chapter in an edited book written by F. B. Perkins and William Mathews. The chapter is entitled as

Professorships of books and reading. According to Perkins and Mathews (1876) “the difficulties in deciding what book to read are greatly multiplied in our day by the enormous number of volumes that weigh down the shelves of our libraries” (p. 243). In the same year Samuel Green wrote that, “the need for librarians to give more time to individual reader was met in some libraries not by increasing the reference staff but by setting up another separate department to handle this particular type of question and to advice people on what to read” (Green, 1876, p.18).Thus, Samuel Green is referring to a situation where the readers' advisory service was actually provided by libraries. He also appreciated the role of the readers' advisor by saying that “the librarian is often consulted about course of reading and his judgment in regard to what are the best epitomes of the histories of different countries and of different branches of knowledge is frequently sought”(Green, 1876, p.18).

It must be remembered that Perkins and Mathews (1876) are discussing about the quantity of books in the year 1876. We can imagine the importance of this service in the today's world overloaded with books. The 'overload' stresses the need for readers' advisory service(Baker, 1986). The readers' advisor role is to help narrow down to a manageable number of suggestions that match the reader's stated interest and tastes (Ross, Nilsen and Radford, 2009, p.236). In today's world the overload is further intensified by the growth in quantity and in variety of document forms.

In the today's world readers' behavior is also changed due to the arrival of ICT. Considering the changed technological reading scenario Williamson (2011) felt that “people seeking traditional brick-and-mortar video rental can enjoy our physical space, while Netflix and Amazon customers who expect recommendations while browsing also can have their needs met through readers' advisory.” Williamson (2011) further expresses that “rather than develop[ing] different skills and terms for viewers' advisory, listeners' advisory, and readers' advisory, an all-encompassing term should be created to reflect the universal and modern nature of our skills.” This skill he has named as 'materials matchmaking' so as to cover printed as well as electronic formats of documents. “Materials matchmaking implies the level of personal preference that informs each interaction while keeping the result set broad and un-limited by format” (Williamson (2011).

In the same document Perkins and Mathews(1876, p. 245) express that “for all these reasons we cannot but think that our colleges, while they provide the student with libraries, should also provide him with a professor of books and reading”. On the same page they further state that “even the ripest scholar is puzzled to decide what books he shall read among the myriads that clamor for his attention.”They further wrote that “if in Bacon's time some books were 'to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested' how much greater must seem the necessity of discrimination at this day, when the amount of literary pabulum has quadrupled and even quintupled!” With this background they question, “is there not, then, an absolute necessity that the student who would economize in his time and made the best use of his opportunities, should be guided in his reading by a competent adviser?”Thomas, Hinckley and Eisenbach (1981, p. 13) also felt that “when library users do not know what they want to read, a reference librarian must be prepared to suggest specific titles and subject headings which will coincide with a user's particular interest.” Readers' advisory service is not just needed for the fiction readers. It is valuable for recommending non-fiction also (Wyatt, 2007).

We all know that Ranganathan thought critically about all facets of librarianship and made valuable suggestions to improve the given practice or service. If this is the case what were Ranganathan's views about 'Readers Advisory Service?'

Ranganathan and Readers' Advisory Service:

When we read through Ranganathan's book of reference service we come across a statement that, “for this reason, I do not support the term 'readers' advisory service' used by our British colleagues in the place of 'reference service' (Ranganathan, 1961, p. 55). However, reading this line and then concluding that Ranganathan was against such a service will be an incorrect interpretation. First of all it must be noticed that he did not support the readers' advisory 'term'. He never said that he did not support the readers' advisory service. Secondly, if we read his thoughts on reference service, expressed in various documents on different occasions we realize that he wanted that the reference librarian must provide readers' advisory service. For example, he believed reference service should be provided by library professionals who know the basic reading material in the given subject. Such a

service of reading recommendation should come from library professionals with subject background. That is why he had recruited five reference librarians with different subject background. In this regard he wrote, “By 1930 reference service had put on full stream in the Madras University library.

Five smart young graduates formed the squad of reference librarians. They had specialized in different subjects in their degree course” (Ranganathan, 1961, p. 39). One of the purposes of having reference librarians with different subject specialization is to guide students, research scholars and teachers in selecting their reading materials. Emphasizing this view he stated that “the reference post should be distributed among several subject fields so as to cover the entire universe of knowledge” (Ranganathan, 1961, p. 353).

He believed that librarianship gives an opportunity to library professionals to help users in selecting suitable reading material. Knowledge of this opportunity was responsible to overcome his reluctance to leave his position of mathematics teacher and become librarian at Madras University. In this regard he wrote, “I little knew at that moment that the focal point of work attached to the office of librarian was essentially the same as the one which I had been accustomed as teacher viz. to help each person individually to get information and to choose the books best suited to them” (Ranganathan, 1961, p. 28).

While highlighting the importance of knowing the information sources for serving as reference librarian in the role of readers' advisor he mentioned that “the reference librarian must know the qualities of the book and the documents well” (Ranganathan, 1961, p. 56). While recommending the role of reading advisor Ranganathan (1961, p. 57-58)stated that “the reference librarian should *scan* the bibliographical documents and the original documents themselves and place before the research worker just the documents rich in the matter relevant to the research work in hand and worth study.”

In the following quote in his book *the five laws of library science,* Ranganathan (1931, p. 247) stresses the value of readers' advisor's role. The quote states “the library's educational *counsellor for readers* will devote his time to the more intimate discussion of the books and reading with those who may wish to know of the book journeys of someone else. Furthermore a large part of his

time will be devoted to giving talks on books and other aids to readers wherever he may be called upon to do so by organizations interested in either general or specific intellectual pursuits." Ranganathan (1931) expected that the readers' advisor must prepare for this service and therefore he said that the "necessary knowledge of books and book collections should be very vast and thorough"(pp. 247-48).

Conclusion:

It could be observed from the above few extracts of Ranganathan's thoughts about reference service that reference librarians must be able to provide readers' advisory service. The user may be from public library, where the advice may be given by the library professional for selecting fiction reading. The reader may also be from academic and research library where advice need to be provided for selecting documents for study and research. The modern retrieval systems such as databases, or systems such as Google Scholar, Directory of Open Access Journals retrieve thousands and lakhs of documents in response to a query. No user ever needs and wants such a large number of documents.

Thus there is an acute need of a system of advice or recommendation which will search and identify few most relevant documents. Now this purpose can be achieved to some extent through the filtering systems available in the individual databases. A user or a library professional is able to limit his retrieval to few relevant items by applying the filters such as years, language, type of documents (articles, books, theses, patents), type of journals (peer reviewed, non-peer reviewed), type of articles (research articles, review articles), etc. Even some databases provide thesaurus to enable selecting suitable term/s (broader, narrower, related, equivalent etc.) for searching pinpointed documents. All these features of the database does help in filtering the results to few relevant document. Still it is noticed that the databasesdo retrieve large number of irrelevant documents.This happens because the user many not be aware of the all the types of documents, their features, may not be able to think of the relevant facet or term/s to accurately express his topic. Further, this system is computer based, no human element is involved to discuss with the user to understand user's exact requirement, to modify the search strategy after an interview or discussions with the user.

Modern world is quick in developing tools for reader's advisory service. Goodreads, Novelist, Whichbook, LibraryThing, What I read Next? Fiction_L, Novelist, Book Group Buzz, Fantastic Fiction, and Reading Group Guidesetc. are the internet based products/services that do serve as readers' advisors. They do work as book recommendation system. The citation based indices such as h-index, Impact Factor are also useful in recommending reading to users.However, the value of a human readers' advisor in recommending books and other reading material is always unmatched by any digital system. Because the readers' advisor will be certainly in a better position to understand readers' requirements, and then recommend reading. Printed tools as well as the above mentioned tools can be useful in providing effective readers' advisory service. For increasing the use of readers' advisory service we must consider the suggestion of Ross, Nilsen and Radford (2009, p.40) who stated that, “a library wanting to get into the business of providing readers' advisory service need to promote the service and let users know that it exists.” Yes, this service must be provided and promoted because, “there is virtually no service library users value more highly than the ability to match a book with a reader or to answer the question 'what do I read next'?” (Fialkoff, 1998).

The readers' advisory service is now getting much momentum in America. One indication of this is the amount of literature produced on this topic. However, in India we do not yet notice much evidence of this service. One reason why this service is not getting the expected momentum is that the course on readers' advisory service is not taught in all the library schools/departments. A study found that just 14 out of 56 library schools in America offered course in readers' advisory (Watson & the RUSA CODES Readers' Advisory Committee, 2000). Hardly a paper or topic on readers' advisory service could not be found in Indian library science curricula. In addition to absence in curriculum, shortage of specialized faculties is also a deterrent in the successful provision of this service. According to Moyer (2005)this readers' advisory could not much reflect in the library and information science curricula because there is lack of faculty with interest in readers advisory.In spite of this situation let us be sure that the library professionals are always interested in increasing the use of their reading material. And therefore they will provide readers' advisory service. Provision of this service will certainly increase users' confidence in library professional's ability to advice reading; recommend books. This ultimately will lead to the higher use of books and libraries.

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