



From stammering to eloquence: Ranganathan as a speaker and orator

M P Satija

Honorary Professor, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, Punjab, Email: satija_mp@yahoo.com

Received: 30 March 2022; accepted: 21 April 2022

Ranganathan is globally known for his abundant and pathbreaking scholarly works in the field of library and information science. However, very little is known about Ranganathan, the speaker. This paper looks at Ranganathan, the speaker and orator.

Keywords: Ranganathan SR, Library Science

Introduction

Ranganathan was not a naturally gifted speaker. In fact, in his early years, he was afraid of public speaking and stammered too. In 1905, when Ranganathan was a student of the 4th standard, a teacher posed a question to the class. No one knew the answer except Ranganathan. He gave the correct answer but struggled a good deal to express it. His teacher is reported to have pitied him. Ranganathan's stammering lingered all through his school and college days¹.

Ranganathan joined the Madras Christian College in 1909. In those days, Ranganathan lived six miles away from the college. On a few evenings, when some great speaker was to speak, he would stay back to listen and take notes. V. Krishnaswamy Ayar, C. Sankaran Nayar, and V.S. Srinivasa Sastry were among those whose speeches he enjoyed. He even got opportunities to listen to Mahatma Gandhi and Annie Besant—great orators of those days¹.

In his autobiography, “A Librarian Looks Back”, Ranganathan wrote about his anxiety when tasked with his earliest public speaking duty. He shares about an incident when he was the Secretary of the Mathematical Association of the college. In the inaugural meeting of the Association, he was to deliver the customary vote of thanks. Since he stammered, he prayed for some divine intervention that would save him from the embarrassment. But when his turn came, he stood up, closed his eyes and imagined there was no one in front of him. He made a short speech and at the end, there was the clap of hands. He opened his eyes and found himself perspiring. Surprisingly, he had not stammered. His stammering had vanished¹.

A new confident speaker was born that day. His transition from a diffident to a confident speaker is an example of the will conquering the nerves. He got rid of stammering with his willpower but became an eloquent speaker with constant practice.

Once the initial difficulties as a speaker were overpowered, Ranganathan began to love speaking. After all he was library crusader and a missionary. He found spoken words more effective than the written words. He discovered that a half an hour speech could bring more immediate and solid results than a book that took him half a year of writing. Ranganathan never lost any opportunity to have a heartfelt talk with others to promote education and libraries.

An inaugural address at the opening ceremony of a village travelling library service, or a lecture at some library school in the United States, he spoke with the same zest and concentration. Palmer affirms that “he would as happily speak to a local parents-teachers association on school libraries as he cloistered with ministers of state in planning the national library services...”². It is quite interesting to note that many of his books have emerged from his speeches. His spoken words consisted of addresses, talks, radio talks, lantern lectures (a sort of power point presentation of pre-computer days), lectures at symposia, and discussions with friends and other interested persons, both at home and abroad.

After the First All India Educational Conference was held in December 1930 at Benaras (now Varanasi), Ranganathan led a library procession from Calcutta (now Kolkata) to Bansberia, a suburb of Kolkata. The procession halted at every library on the way, and Ranganathan delivered a speech at every

halt. It educated Ranganathan in planning out appropriate speeches—more than a dozen—that day to suit each context¹. One of the many who influenced him as a speaker was Dr. S. Radhakrishnan (a family friend who later became the second President of the Republic, 1962-67)¹.

Although some have found defects in his written English³, his command of spoken English and style of lectures have been acknowledged and admired unanimously. Kumar⁴ and Razzaque⁵ found in him a charming speaker, the former for his bagful of anecdotes like interconnected stories narrated in the *Puranas* and the latter for "his mode of speaking sweet tongue and occasional humour."

Shastri⁶, recalling his four days with Ranganathan, said that Ranganathan spoke English with natural ease and fluency as if it were his mother tongue. He was gifted with a power from providence to tell difficult things in a simple way. His flawless English and oriental appearance were antithetical. Shastri tells further that "to prevent people from feeling bored he used to supplement his talks with humorous incidents and many memorable snippets from his tour of foreign countries." He continues to highlight Ranganathan's qualities: "Doctor is an expert speaker as well as a good teacher. His style of making people understand his thoughts is unique. Nobody feels bored in his presence. He at once catches hold of the persons who tend to lose interest by directing his questions to such persons."

Kaula⁷ found in Ranganathan a rare combination of a speaker and a prolific writer. In 1930, Ranganathan gave a lecture in the Buddhist Hall in College Square, Kolkata. His "talk gave verbal pictures of the library organizations of some of the countries in Europe and a dream-picture of what it should be in India."

Whenever Ranganathan came upon the dais, he was always brief. His lectures and papers to be read used to be circulated in advance. On the stage he was in the habit of discussing some critical points for highlighting them, instead of reading the paper. His brief speeches always won thunderous applause from the audiences.

Razzaque⁵ and Coblans⁸ were of the view that Ranganathan's method of teaching is in the way of Socratic dialogues. Ranganathan reportedly brought a problem before an audience and involved everybody in the discussion. The audience felt that the answer was found with mutual efforts and discussions. It was Ranganathan's deliberate way to give credit to others.

He treated himself like a midwife to help deliver ideas by others. He taught students by giving them a feeling of not being taught. He had friendly discussion or debates in his classes. This method was brought to further perfection when he taught at the DRTC, Bengaluru⁹. He advised reference librarians that while giving reference service to the library users, "do not let them feel that they are being helped or guided; we should make a reader feel that he himself is intelligent enough to locate the desired information in the library"¹⁰.

Sometimes he put the question and left it to the listeners to answer the questions themselves or reach their own conclusions. This was to provoke them to think independently thereby giving way to a chain of thoughts and new ideas. Ranganathan was too often benefited by this method as he himself admitted that such questions have many times led him to formulate new canons and educe new theories.

According to Thillainayagam¹¹, Ranganathan could speak extempore on any subject—social or technical. In 1954, Ranganathan was invited to address the All Hyderabad Library Conference. At the last minute, he came to know that a minister would also be present. It is said that Ranganathan decided to talk on the government's need for documentation services. The minister was so influenced by the talk that the same evening he invited Ranganathan to address a specially convened meeting of the secretaries. This led to the development of governmental libraries, and the contribution of documentation services in the economic, industrial and social development of independent India.

Muthiah and Rajamoni¹² have said that Ranganathan could speak for any length of time without notes. They further consider him as "a sort of endless reel, from which he can cut out required length for any occasion". Sastri¹³ considered him a "charming and convincing lecturer". It is said that a single speech by Ranganathan was convincing enough to attract J S Sharma, a young history scholar, to the profession of librarianship. Later in life, Dr J S Sharma went to head Punjab University Library at Chandigarh and the library school that produced many librarians and teachers¹⁴.

Subba Rao¹⁵, one of his students and later an associate, giving an intimate view of his master, recalls that at meetings or conferences he always found a charged atmosphere within 5 to 10 minutes, "where every eye was riveted to the dais and S.R.R.

was unwinding the thought to the exhilaration of the mass consciousness.”

For a taste of his speech and humour, for those not fortunate enough to have listened Ranganathan speaking, his posthumous book *Documentation: Genesis and Development* (1973) is highly recommended. The book had developed out of a lecture delivered to the documentalist-librarians who came to Bangalore to attend the Sixth All India Seminar of the IASLIC in November 1970. The opening paragraph of the speech reads¹⁶:

“It has been very kind of you to have come all the way to DRTC, and as Ajit Mukherjee said, walking on feet (sic) to digest your food” (Laughter). I am the greatest beneficiary by your all coming here in such a large number because as my friends will tell you how my health improves in the midst of young librarians. I am quite sure when I go back home after an hour allowed for me – not for me alone, but for me and you to put questions— I am quite sure that my wife will not be able to recognize me in this youthful condition (Laughter). But you have come here at your peril, because you are going to listen to an old garrulous fellow. But forgetting that, everybody will be anxious to have the tea that is waiting for you at the other end. Ajit has asked me to go on full measure. Well, that is your peril. The second peril is that you are going to listen to an old man with old views. You are all young people; it is very difficult for young people to tolerate the old views of old people. But we old people too have to tolerate the young people's views. Otherwise, we will not be able to exist (Laughter).”

The speaking tone is conversational in a colloquial style with a human warmth. It is something out of the ordinary to be so informal for a man of international fame, and it is unusually witty, jesting and frivolous for a valetudinarian in the 79th year of his life, just two years before his death due to old age. A further reading of his printed lecture will reveal how he is informative in a humorous way discussing everything without giving any sermon. It always made him the cynosure of all the eyes and the most sought-after figure, wherever he went. He has indicated beyond doubt that there is always a place for personal feelings in objective and dry subjects like classification and documentation. This is what T.H. Huxley (1825-1895), the great English biologist and anthropologist had always advocated and practiced in his writings

especially in promotion of Darwin's Theory of Evolution of Species.

In his old age he tended to over talk—an old man is twice a child, they say. Kumar⁴ says that that an interview granted for fifteen minutes would go on for about two hours. Shastri⁶ claims that Ranganathan could talk from 8 am to 9 pm. In the Sixth IASLIC Seminar, he considerably overstepped his allotted 30 minutes and remarked, “I think I have exceeded my time enormously. That is the cost you pay by asking an old garrulous fellow to come and speak, I cannot leave the topic without mentioning at least two anecdotes.” And he continued for an even longer period. This tape-recorded speech delivered verbatim covers 150 pages of an 8-volume book.

Nonagenarian Girja Kumar speculates that Ranganathan's tendency to over-talk later in life has a relation with his initial shyness. In the last years of his life, Ranganathan, it seems, was in a hurry to share new ideas and future programs with his friends and disciples. And he became garrulous. Nevertheless, his words delivered passionately were meaningful and loaded knowledge.

Let us investigate a perplexity and self-answer Palmer, who was instrumental to introduce him and his theories to the West¹⁷. Knowing very venial mistakes in his written English, Palmer was quite confounded as "In conversation and lectures Ranganathan's style did not strike him as being un-English". He claimed that "put Ranganathan in front of a European audience and he will explain the more difficult concepts in a way which strikes home to the simplest listener. He will lard his discourse with examples and the questions and answers will flow on until the chairman of the meeting had to call a halt.”

Similar is the experience of D J. Foskett, another outstanding member of the Classification Research Group (CRG, London)¹⁸. Through Ranganathan's books Foskett got the impression of his being abstruse and un-English, but he records with wonderment that "when one met him in person all of these things, all of these doubts disappeared, and what he said to one was so clear and transparent that it was very difficult to resist his persuasive power and I know that none of my friends felt any difficulties or barrier of technical and professional jargon; and he was to my mind, one of the pre-eminent communicators of what we understand by library and information service today”.

It is a matter of speculation as to why Ranganathan's speeches and lectures were applauded with commendations as convincing, while his books in serious prose are vulnerable on the ground for their language and style. We can learn from Palmer that "word sequence in written English is of prime significance; but that in spoken English, it is less so, because one has at one's disposal a whole armoury of tricks (inflections, intonations, pauses, gestures) with which to emphasise a particular word, regardless of where it falls in a sequence." What Palmer says of English language only is, in fact, true of every language. These remarks are further authenticated by the linguist Turner¹⁹ who asserts "writing is a special, careful, elaborated, shuffled, pruned, and tidied form of language, very different from the everyday spontaneous, precarious adventures of speech..."

We conclude this article with another speech of Ranganathan delivered as the presidential remarks at the All-India Library Conference Nagpur (1949):

I have been a friend of books all my life. My profession has all along been to care for them. The books have, therefore, confided a secret to me. And that is, "The spoken word is far superior to the printed word." The printed word is, however, necessary to reach a larger audience. It must be used as a substitute for the spoken word. Spoken words carry more thought, as they are enriched by the whole personality of the speaker. Printed words lack that advantage. Spoken words can even be laconic and yet can convey more by suppression than by expression. Printed words must be more elaborate as they are without the help of contextual personality, and yet everybody cannot draw their full meaning from them. Spoken words can be outspoken¹.

References

- 1 Ranganathan SR, *A Librarian Looks Back: An Autobiography of Ranganathan*, Ed. by P.N.Kaula (New Delhi: ABC Publishing House) 1992, 485 pp.
- 2 Palmer BI, Ranganathan as a Person, Edward Dudley, (1974) p.17.
- 3 Satija MP, *S.R.Ranganathan and the Method of Science*. New Delhi: Aditya Prakashan, 1992.
- 4 Kumar G, Ranganathan the Man, *ILA Bulletin*, 10(3-4) (1974) 53-62.
- 5 Razzaque MA, Four Days with Ranganathan." In *Festschrift*, chap. W 6) (1965)
- 6 Shastri DP, (1965). "Four days with Ranganathan" In *Festschrift* Chap.W 92).
- 7 Kaula PN, (1965) "Ranganathan: A Study" In *Library Science Today: Ranganathan Festschrift*/ed. By P N Kaula. Mumbai: Asia Publishing House, chap. U1.[Hereafter called *Festschrift*]
- 8 Coblans H, Ranganathan in the international scene'. In *SR Ranganathan 1892-1972: papers given at a memorial meeting on Thursday 25th January 1973*, Ed. Edward Dudley, 1974, London, Library Association, pp 28-29
- 9 Satija MP, Tiwari A and Bagchi M, Documentation Research and Training Centre: In Historical Perspectives, *Library Herald*, 60 (1) (2022)
- 10 Ranganathan SR, (1961) *Reference Service*, 2nd ed. Mumbai: Asia Publishing House
- 11 Thillainayagam V, Homage to Dr Ranganathan, *Herald of Library Science*, 12 (2-3) (1973) 216-17
- 12 Muthiah VS and Rajamoni AN, (1965) "Dr Ranganathan as a Public Speaker." In *Festschrift*, Chap. V92.
- 13 Sastri KSR, (1965) "The Genius of Dr Ranganathan" In *Festschrift*, Chap. W2.
- 14 Sharma JS, (1965) "My Initiation to Library Profession" In *Festschrift* Chap. W91.
- 15 Subba Rao CV, Ranganathan: An Intimate View, *Herald of Library Science*, 12 (2-3) (1973) 154.
- 16 Ranganathan SR, (1973) *Documentation: Genesis and Development*. New Delhi: Vikas, 1973.
- 17 Palmer BI, (1965) "A Problem in Communication" In *Festschrift* sec. T14
- 18 Foskett DJ, Ranganathan's Professionalism, 1974, In *SR Ranganathan 1892-1972: papers given at a memorial meeting on Thursday 25th January 1973*, 1974, London, Library Association, p.23
- 19 Turner GW, (1973) *Stylistics*. Penguin, 1973 p.8.