theories and methodologies

An Anticolonial Theory of Reading

J. DANIEL ELAM

IN 1931, S. R. RANGANATHAN, AN UNKNOWN LITERARY SCHOLAR AND STATISTICIAN FROM INDIA, PUBLISHED A CURIOUS MANIFESTO: *THE Five Laws of Library Science*. The manifesto, written shortly after Ranganathan's return to India from London—where he learned to despise, among other things, the Dewey decimal system and British bureaucracy—argues for reorganizing Indian libraries. Ranganathan believed that India's libraries, many of which had been established by the British, could promote radically egalitarian ideals if they followed five fundamental laws.

The five laws appear on the first page of the book: "Books Are for Use. Every Reader His Book. Every Book Its Reader. Save the Time of the Reader. Library Is a Growing Organism." For Ranganathan, India's dearth of public libraries prevents its eventual independence. A national library system, properly conceived, would be the catalyst for national sovereignty—but of an independent India that would fundamentally differ from the nations of Europe. Ranganathan was not simply a library scientist; he was a librarian-philosopher of democratic critique.

Of all the laws, the second law—"Every Reader His Book"—is the most important for a future egalitarian reading community. The second law is the only one to receive more than one chapter. Ranganathan devotes three chapters, including three didactic dialogues, to it.

As if to emphasize the radical egalitarianism the law creates, Ranganathan concludes the first chapter on the second law with a didactic dialogue in which several authorities come forward to suggest that the communities they oversee should be prevented from reading books. The "Psychologist" argues that the mentally ill in his care should not be given books; a man representing blind people argues that braille is too expensive and therefore should be eliminated; an expert on the illiterate suggests primers are useless; and the "Jailor" argues that books should be banned from prisons because they incite anticolonial passions—"no books for damned murderers!" he proclaims, perhaps with the recently infamous agitator

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and anticolonial martyr Bhagat Singh in mind (121).

The second law, emerging in human form as a woman, counters each of these claims individually and reiterates her claim that every reader should have access to books and to reading. Each authority figure first balks, then becomes curious, and then relinquishes his power to the second law. Having been collectively persuaded, they join hands:

> All sing in a chorus:
> There's room for all
> Let not the mean
> Or learned dean
> Restrict the books
> T' a favoured few
> We've Books for all.
>
> Books for the rich
> And Books for the poor
> Books for the man
> And Books for the dame.
>
> Books for the sick
> And Books for the fit
> Books for the blind
> And Books for the dumb.
>
> Books for the bungler
> And Books for the wrangler
> Books for the burgher
> And Books for the cotter.
>
> Books for the lettered
> And Books for the fettered
> We've Books for all
> For one and all. (126)

The authorities, thus reconciled with the second law, leave with books and without their former authority: the second law has made them readers. Ranganathan proclaims this to be the first step in the *digvijaya* of library science, or what he calls "the world-conquering expedition" of readers, beginning first with India and the United States: the relinquishing of one's authority to the collective exegesis of readership, "perpetual education," and "unlimited democracy" (132).

This is not exactly what the British Raj had in mind when they established anglophone libraries (and pedagogy) in British India in the mid–nineteenth century. In his "Minute on Indian Education" from 1835, T. B. Macaulay declared not only that "Western literature" was intrinsically superior, such that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (230), but also that the British should teach English literature in order to create "a class of interpreters between us and the millions we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (237). As Gauri Viswanathan has shown, the establishment of "good European librar[ies]" across British India became the means for the British to extend their imperial project. British authorship was the mechanism ("the mask") of British colonial authority.

Of course, Indian readers were more unpredictable and less impressionable to colonial mimicry than Macaulay imagined or hoped them to be. Their reading habits, as Priya Joshi demonstrates, ranged beyond the standard English canon that Viswanathan suggests emerged from the pedagogical laboratory that British India supposedly became. Joshi's archival work on records from colonial library lending reveals a culture of literary consumption through which Indian readers created the conditions for the emergence of the anglophone South Asian novel.

On the other hand, by the 1920s and 1930s anticolonial thinkers were busy theorizing reading not merely as consumption but also as a properly anticolonial practice. Anti-imperial critique envisioned the reader not as a sociological figure or a consuming subject but rather as an ideal figure for ethical and political practices. This anticolonial theory of reading was not concerned with the consumption of literary texts per se; instead, it tried to envision the possibility that the act of reading might signify—that is, the possibility of egalitarian emancipation.

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In the first decades of the twentieth century, many South Asian thinkers had made reading a fundamental part of anticolonial self-cultivation—most notably M. K. Gandhi, whose "experiments in slow reading" in Durban, South Africa, were the beginning steps toward the activist's eventual popularity.[1] Gandhi's proposals for political action included reading, memorization, oral recitation, and cut-and-paste collaging, all of which were intended both to spread an anticolonial message and to cultivate a practice of *satyagraha* (loosely, "soul force"). B. Venkat Mani has provocatively dubbed this kind of vibrant circulation of texts "bibliomigrancy" as a way of illuminating the global movement of books, library holdings, and readers themselves (10).

As Isabel Hofmeyr argues, the Gandhian reader was the *satyagrahi* (a person who attempts *satyagraha*). In Gandhi's formulation, reading was a teleological process of mastery, a mastery that included both the Indian nation as well as (if not more important for Gandhi) the self. Gandhian reading made it possible to envision self-mastery for a future Indian nation, which he imagined, in the meantime, from his diasporic enclave in South Africa.

However, there appear to be just as many anticolonial agitators who urged their readers to read simply for the sake of reading—that is, for its inconsequence. A more vibrant form of anticolonial thought emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, and Ranganathan was its most pragmatic proponent. This form of anticolonial thought argued for reading and communal interpretation not to cultivate a form of mastery but to disavow mastery altogether. Reading, in this formula, was a practice of egalitarian antiauthoritarianism precisely because it urged readers to refuse the calls of authorship and, relatedly, authority. To remain a reader—and to remain a reader with others—were the goals of this anticolonial theory of reading. To put it another way, in the terms of the didactic poem of the second law: to relinquish one's authority in order to become a reader was the ideal of this anticolonial theory of reading. To become or remain a reader, and thus purposefully to divest oneself of authorial claims, was to fundamentally challenge the logic of the British Raj, which claimed to prize self-mastery as the precondition for national independence.

In Ranganathan's four-hundred-page book about books and their readers, the word "author" appears only once—in a footnote—and very few authors' names are to be found in the text, even as examples. Ranganathan was uninterested in authors. As he explains in his chapter on the third law (Every Book Its Reader), readers are the sole purpose of a library, and books without readers, even books by so-called important authors, should be discarded from a library. *The Five Laws of Library Science* asserts the centrality of the reader in an anticolonial library science. The emergence of readers, Ranganathan notes, marks the transition from despotic rule to democracy and freedom. His book is a manifesto fundamentally invested in the tyro rather than the tyrant.

In the case of British India, where the British author was the aesthetic extension of British authority, reconfiguring the hierarchical relation between the allegedly transcendent author and the multitude of readers was a form of imagining a postcolonial democracy. To upend the colonial configuration of authority, anticolonial writers disavowed expertise and self-mastery, instead asserting a heteronomous collectivity formed through practices of reading. As an anticolonial practice, reading could mark modes of refusal, nonproductivity, inconsequence, inexpertise, and nonauthority. In direct contrast to the values of British liberalism, these recalcitrant ideals were perfect for envisioning a radical egalitarianism rooted in communal reading and collective textual criticism.

Ranganathan offers Macaulay's "Minute" as the opposite of his readerly vision. Macau-

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lay's bookshelf of British authors, he argues, simply reproduces British authority in British India by way of what V. S. Naipaul termed "mimic men" in the absence of the British.[2] According to Ranganathan, the elite Indian men the British Raj produced were "filters" (Macaulay's word was "interpreters") who had failed to distribute the education, and therefore the power, that they had been allegedly granted.

What begins as a minor critique of Macaulay's "Minute" becomes an anticolonial proclamation:

> If Macaulay's filter has proved a snare, ere long it will divert its course and keep clear of this clog in the "filter." The Second Law will not take a defeat. It must win ultimately. That is our faith. With the world opinion backing it, it may win even at no distant date. If they are shrewd business men, the "English-educated" Indians should greet it with an olive branch and volunteer their services in its holy war on lingering ignorance. Then only, they will gain any respect in the eyes of the world and then only can they survive amidst the forces that will be set free on the day that the Second Law plants its flag on Indian soil and puts the BOOKS in the hands of ALL, even as it has done on other soils. (92)

Readers form the centerpiece of Ranganathan's cosmopolitan anticolonial library science, and the cultivation of egalitarianism by way of readerly communities stands at the heart of Ranganathan's project. The future flag of India is marked not by new authority but, using Russia and the United States as models, by the idea "BOOKS in the hands of ALL": a truly egalitarian practice of reading and a radically antiauthorial and antiauthor belief in readers.

Ranganathan's philosophy of readerly egalitarianism borders on the absurd. Using a map of Tompkins County, New York, Ranganathan imagines a reading community designed around a set of concentric circles beginning at a centrally located library in the town of Ithaca and moving outward in increasingly larger circles; he imagines that outpost libraries would be located in each quadrant, and books would circulate among all the libraries (323).[3] This geographic model, he demonstrates, aligns with the "internal repose" produced by the communal discussion of shared texts, which prepares readers for democratic society. The psychical circles of "internal repose," like Ithaca's theoretically geographic ones, move constantly from "facts (nadir)" to "fundamental/universal laws (zenith)" and back. Ranganathan's point is not to dismiss facts—which are necessary for his proposed psychical process—but rather to insist on the importance of democratic and egalitarian institutions that create individuals who can resist authoritarianism. The circles, Ranganathan argues, foreground the nonteleology of a properly ethical library science: in the communities of upstate New York—as in the individual—mastery, expertise, and authority are never attained; books circulate and "fundamental and universal laws" shift under the weight of new "facts" (360).

Taken out of its historical context, a lengthy treatise on the ethico-political possibilities of library science might seem strange. But British India in the 1920s and 1930s was hectic with radical utopian proposals, anticolonial manifestos, and radical democratic critiques—not unlike other countries in the years just after World War I. Ranganathan was in good company. He was not alone in bringing home, after the war, a pastiche of Victorian optimism and shell-shocked pessimism. With adjustments and additions appropriate for the pessimistic utopianism of the moment, manuals of nineteenth-century liberal self-cultivation and self-care reappeared (like Herbert Spencer's, John Stuart Blackie's, and Giuseppe Mazzini's), as did radical proposals for the reorganization of society, which were circulated heavily in the literary centers

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of British India, especially in Lahore, Delhi, Lucknow, Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. The library became the locus of anticolonial activity (and, not unrelatedly, colonial surveillance) not simply because Indian anticolonial agitators were studying to become the future authorities of a postcolonial nation. Rather, for many anticolonial thinkers, the library became the location of a global egalitarian culture because it promoted a revolutionary inconsequentialism in the face of the imperial demand for practical knowledge.

The radical importance of this anticolonial theory of reading is not that it places education, literacy, and the inculcation of "loving literature" (Lynch) at the center of the moral and political ideals of an independent Indian nation. Instead, its importance is that it uses practices of inexpert, communal, and egalitarian critique—a celebration of colonial unknowingness ad infinitum—as the model for a truly antiauthoritarian anticolonial politics. In this sense, although Ranganathan and his colleagues openly advocated Indian independence from British rule, they endeavored to imagine, quite seriously, a nation founded less on authoritative national sovereignty and more on egalitarian readerly internationalism—a flag of books, in the hands of all.

Intellectual historians of anticolonialism have not ignored anti-imperial reading, but they have tended to view it as a form of autodidactic and scholarly (and often, therefore, political) mastery and success. In their analyses, reading is consequential in the sense that eventually it leads to expertise and authority—for both the individual and the Indian nation for which the individual was the metonym. These ideals, however, were not those of many radical South Asian anticolonial figures. Reading was revolutionarily anticolonial precisely because it was inconsequential—leaving no traces, it could not demand recognition or seek teleological authority. An anticolonial culture of reading refused and therefore undermined the logic of British colonial rule.

Anticolonial thinkers relied on anglophone colonial pedagogy to perpetually refuse the expertise, and therefore the kind of sovereignty founded on self-mastery, that the British Raj would ostensibly recognize as deserving of national independence. Instead of becoming the mimic men Macaulay had imagined, antiauthoritarian anticolonialism became a different menace, revealing the hierarchical, antiegalitarian norms at the heart of British liberalism and the European nation-state. Envisioned in this way, anticolonial thought becomes about retaining the promise of postcolonial, radically democratic antiauthoritarianism rather than merely attaining national independence. An anticolonial theory of reading, along with the concomitant refusal of liberal self-mastery, supported the emergence of radical democratic theory outside Europe in response to the horrors Europe created around the world.

Ranganathan's lengthy manifesto is one of many such manifestos in South Asian political writing in the 1920s and 1930s that on the one hand imagine the relation between authorship and authority and on the other imagine anticolonialism as antiauthoritarianism. Anticolonial thinkers across the political spectrum not only argued for the importance of communal criticism against individual authorship but also went to great lengths to refuse their own authority and expertise. Gandhi, most famously, attempted to "reduce [himself] to zero" (268) only to be challenged by the revolutionary activist Bhagat Singh for being too much of an author to properly act on behalf of the masses. As I've argued elsewhere, Bhagat Singh's jail notebook attests to his own experiments to reduce himself to a reader, even as postcolonial hagiographers have declared both men masters and fathers of modern India.

Anticolonial theories of reading are the unacknowledged precursors of postcolonial theory, but the radicalism of the worldwide interwar period was quickly overshadowed not only by the new horrors of fascism but also

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by the dull pragmatism required to transform newly independent colonies into postcolonial nation-states. By the 1940s, and certainly in the wake of the horrific partition of 1947, interwar antiauthoritarian ideals dwindled into the joylessness of establishing India and Pakistan as nations and aligning them with the norms encouraged by the United Nations. In the course of becoming properly sovereign, the radical aesthetics that had undergirded South Asian anticolonialism were ignored in favor of state building. After Indian independence in 1947, Ranganathan played a central role in establishing India's national library system; he was the primary figure behind the Public Libraries Act of 1948. Although the act required Indian libraries to be free and open to the public (in accordance with the second law), the act also created gatekeepers and library masters—those same authorities that the second law had once converted into readers. Lost was that original anticolonial recalcitrance.

But to return to Ranganathan's utopian library is to imagine a vibrantly "bibliomigrant" world in which the circulation of aesthetic ideas could be made common and egalitarian. The library, with its endless collection of books—an infinitely "growing organism," as per Ranganathan's fifth law—instigated a culture of anticolonial reading and communal discussion that was perpetually incomplete. It represents an anticolonial politics that does not seek dominance and mastery but rather attempts to remain a perpetual novice, for a postcolonial democracy.

Notes

1. This phrase is taken from the subtitle of Hofmeyr's *Gandhi* .

2. Here Ranganathan prefigures part of Bhabha's critique in *Loc* , as well as Viswanathan's in *Mas* .

3. Ranganathan's vision of Tompkins County is solely a product of his own imagination. Ranganathan likely chose Ithaca because, although the United States had established central public libraries in cities in the eighteenth century, the first nonurban association of networked libraries was established by Ezra Cornell in Tompkins County in 1864.

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