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M.P. Satija: The Revision and Future of Colon Classification
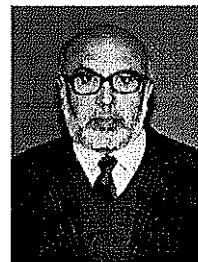
The Revision and Future of Colon Classification

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ABSTRACT: The Colon Classification (CC) was first published by its founder, S.R. Ranganathan, in 1933. Since then it has undergone seven revisions, the most recent being 1987. Although it became India's de facto national classification system, it is falling into disuse, and its perpetuation as a viable system is currently jeopardised. The author identifies a number of reasons for this trend. For example, the CC lacks the institutional support that benefits other modern systems such as the DDC, UDC, and LCC. The author offers a number of specific suggestions for preserving and revitalising the system.

1. Introduction

The popularity graph of many general classification systems is a chequered one. Classification history is littered with many dead systems, and always the horizon is seen with a rising star. Many classification systems have suffered the vagaries of time. Some have stumbled, never to rise up while others have risen and walked steadfastly. A classification system has essentially to keep pace with the times, as classifications are essentially sociological. A classification system has to be kept in constant repair and oriented to contemporary social and economic needs.

Obviously the life and health of any classification system depends upon its acceptability and use. its popularity in turn depends mostly on:

a. Time of arrival on the scene
b. Institutional backup
c. Status of the designer
d. Machinery for its constant revision
e. Extent to which it serves users needs
f. Ease of use by librarians and readers
g. Use by centralised classification agencies like CIP and MARC

2. History of the Colon Classification

The Colon Classification (CC), when published in 1933, was a late-comer on the scene. Until the sixties it was considered the last general classification system for libraries. The Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC), the Universal Decimal Classification (UDC), and the Library of Congress Classification (LCC) had already established themselves. It was received both with wonder and contempt. It was different and in many ways superior to other existing systems for meeting the challenges of the flood of knowledge since the early 20th Century. Unfortunately the law of free market, that a good product will drive out an inferior product, does not always apply to classification systems. Forces of inertia keep a bad product perpetuated, as librarians are reluctant to reclassify their libraries. D.J. Foskett (1989, p.6), knowing well that reclassification provokes a hostile reaction, asserts:

> Yet experience shows that it can be done, if necessary in stages, without too much expense or upheaval. Experience also shows that authorities appear to be quite happy to spend very large sums of money to provide new and elaborate buildings and to invest very large sum in machines for automation which have to be replaced, at even large sums, in a relatively few years. By comparison the labour and cost of reclassification is small; and it should not be forgotten that here we are dealing with progress of information and knowledge and the provision of these is the prime motive for having a library at all.

In the same vein Ranganathan noted that we have been classifying for only a little over one hundred years. But for Indian libraries the time was propi-

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tious, even though the DDC had already been intro-
duced here by the famous American librarian Asa
Don Dickinson [1896-1960]. A vast virgin field lay
open before the CC. Many Indian libraries are still
classifying their collections for the first time, and
many new libraries are still being opened. We still
need many more libraries than are functioning now.
Why is it that new Indian libraries cannot patronise
India's own classification system? As early as 1964,
when CC was in full bloom, H.C. Jain (1964, p.348)
noted: "There are in India a few who ridicule or op-
pose CC, while quite a full of praise for it and have
adopted CC as their scheme of classification."

The CC was designed by Ranganathan (1892-1972),
the true father of the Indian library movement and
science. He was held in high regard all over the world
for his innovation, foresight and dedication. He was
enigmatically prolific. He was a trend-setter and his
authority was unquestionable. Any Indian classifica-
tion system associated with a lesser name perhaps
would have gone unnoticed. However, it is also true
that he came to be recognised as great only after the
merits of his system were recognised, especially in the
UK.

The CC scores high because of its creator, but un-
fortunately it has virtually no institutional backup.
There is no library which works as its laboratory.
Ranganathan had the benefit of the Madras Univer-
sity Library during 1924-1944 as his laboratory for
many purposes. Even before publication of the first
edition, the CC was used to classify the rich and var-
ied collection of the Madras University Library. Les-
sons learned during this period were incorporated
into the first edition, and later ruminations on its
theoretical basis were crystallised in the first edition
of the *Prolegomena to Library Classification* (1937).

In 1945 Ranganathan single-handedly classified the
entire library of the Benaras Hindu University, and
from 1947 onwards he supervised the reclassification
with the CC of the Delhi University Library System.
No doubt, such experiences helped the development
of the CC, but these institutional backings were only
incidental. There has been no permanent institution
to experiment with the use of the CC and to give the
needed feedback for its revision. The DRTC Banga-
lore Library is too small and specialised to work as a
laboratory for the CC.

Furthermore, there has not been any institution to
provide organizational support the way the LC and
OCLC do for the DDC, as the British Standards In-
stitution does for the English UDC, or as FID had
been doing for the UDC (FID has now been replaced
by the UDC Consortium). The CC has not even the
support that the Classification Research Group
(CRG) is giving to the Bibliographic Classification
(2nd. Edition) (BC-2).

In the constitution of the Documentation and
Training Centre (DRTC) there is no mention of sup-
porting and promoting the CC. As long as Rangana-
than was alive, the DRTC faculty worked as a re-
search team on the CC. The results were published in
the DRTC Annual Seminars and in the journal *Li-
brary Science with a Slant to Documentation* [from
1964 onward]. This work also continued to some ex-
tent after Ranganathan's death. But DRTC has no le-
gal or moral concern to back the CC. The Sarada
Ranganathan Endowment (established in 1963), the
legal heir to Ranganathan's material property and leg-
acy, is not in itself a research institution, although it
is now the publisher of Ranganathan's books, includ-
ing the CC. However, its backing is not of much con-
sequence towards the acceptance of the CC.

An analogous and central question is about the
formal machinery for revising the CC. Ranganathan
(1949) projected the CC to be a self-perpetuating
scheme, which it is not. No social institution or
man's creation can be self-perpetuating in this sense.
Revising a classification scheme is essential: to incor-
porate new main classes at their logical places, to
elaborate topics in light of their literary warrant, to
relocate some old topics to more appropriate places,
to delete obsolete classes, to replace obsolete terms
with current ones, and above all, to give the classifica-
tion a contemporary structure of knowledge in har-
mony with the current perceptions of scholars. For
D.J. Foskett (1989, p.6) the objective of revising a
classification scheme "is to give library users an op-
portunity to see a spectrum of the universe of infor-
mation displayed in an order that makes sense, which
enables them to discover how the experts in each field
think it best or arrange their information."

Revisions are also necessary to incorporate new re-
lations among subjects and their combinations. Revi-
sions can also incorporate new researches in designing
classification schedules. Revisions are absolutely nec-
essary to give the scheme an updated style and a con-
temporary outlook. Revision is in fact a double-edged
sword that cuts both ways. If you revise (drastically)
you die, and if you do not revise you also die. In this
regard the comments of Dr. Ia C. McIlwaine (1995,
p.67) are very apt and interesting:

> Whatever we do, we will get criticism. If you do
> not revise outdated parts of a classification it is
> immediately decried as being out of touch with
> modern developments. If you do revise it, you
> immediately receive a welter of complaints from
> long-established users who do not wish to
> change their classification practices.

For constant revision we need a formal, well-con-
ceived policy and a sound machinery. In the case of

the CC, the revision policy and process have been opaque. Different editions were published when Ranganathan had time or had any substantial change to incorporate, especially in the notational plane. The new editions were published at an uneven pace: 2nd (1939), 3rd (1950), 4th (1952), 5th (1957), 6th (1960), 6th revised (1963) and 7th (1987). As a result many librarians thought it to be at experimental stages rather than to be a mature and stable system. Different editions revealed varying degrees of changes. Drastic changes always made switching to new editions difficult – Ranganathan's method of osmosis not withstanding. And different libraries are using different editions, making it difficult to have coordination among themselves.

Ranganathan always promoted team research (Satija, 1993a). In spite of the contributions of a close group of disciples in the form of the Library Research Circle (Delhi), the DRTC faculty, and Ranganathan's spirited students, the CC has always been considered as a one-man show. Many of the colleagues and students were slavish to him, mostly because of his towering personality and peerless intellect. But for many Indians, he was a despot or a hoary father not to be argued with. Some critics were even considered as enemies.

There never has been a formal editorial board for the CC. Ranganathan once announced in a seminar on classification in the USA:

> At the request of Peter Jayasinge of Asia Publishing House (Ranganathan's publisher in the 1960s) a self-perpetuating Ranganathan Colon Classification Board has been formed. Its function is to stay up-to-date and bring out new editions of the Colon Classification, the Basic Versions as well as the fascicules containing the Depth versions for diverse subject areas. It will also bring out new editions of such of the other books of Ranganathan as deserve to be so treated. The board will be an auxiliary of the Sarada Ranganathan Endowment for Library Science (1963). (Ranganathan, 1967)

But nothing has been heard from this board. Ranganathan's students and admirers who valued the CC and wished to see it perpetuated tried here and there to form such a board. Professor P. N. Kaula recounts that in 1957, with the concurrence of Ranganathan, he approached Dr. Lal C. Verman, then the Director General of the Indian Standards Institution (now renamed, Bureau of Indian Standards), to take up the future revision of the CC and the Ranganathan Cataloguing Code. But Dr.Verman in turn suggested that they approach the Indian National Scientific Documentation Centre (INSDOC, New Delhi), in view of

the expertise available there and the professional information services provided there.

Since in those days Ranganathan was associated with INSDOC, he himself did not think it appropriate to be involved in pursuing the idea with INSDOC. A committee was appointed in 1960 for this purpose. In the meantime (in 1962) DRTC Bangalore was established with Ranganathan as its honorary director, and he thought, perhaps erroneously, that DRTC was the right institution for the purpose. So the committee became defunct. One problem with the DRTC is that it does not have the requisite large library to test and base a classification system on literary warrant.

The issue was again taken up by Kaula after Ranganathan's death in 1972. He writes that he discussed the matter while addressing the staff of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Library, New Delhi. Kaula also mentions that a committee was appointed to explore the possibility of revision of the CC. But again nothing came out of this endeavour. (Kaula, 1976)

In a "Seminar on Classification and Knowledge Organization" organized by the Indian ISKO chapter in January 1994, Professor Kaula again voiced his concern for revision of the CC and sought some institutional backing for it. He again suggested INSDOC for the purpose. Mr A. R. Sethi, then the Deputy Librarian, offered the Jawaharlal University Library, New Delhi, to serve as the laboratory in social sciences classification for the CC. Although this suggestion was welcomed, so far it has not been followed up (Singh & Prasad, 1994). Nor does there seem any likelihood of this.

Mr. M.F. Jones of England had raised his concern in May 1966 in a letter to the editor of the *Library Association Record*. Emphasizing the scientific value of the CC and the need for its perpetuation, he wrote:

> Would it not therefore be a good idea if in full consultation with Dr. Ranganathan, a Permanent International Committee were established consisting of men and women well-versed in either practical or theoretical classification (and preferably in both) with the purpose of revising and republishing the Colon scheme, whenever the committee considered this desirable? (Jones, 1966, p.186)

It is difficult to say what made Ranganathan leave the CC a virtual orphan without any heir to bring new editions after his death. Otherwise so tenderly careful about the profession at large and its organizations, Ranganathan left the CC to a doubtful fate.

Even now his professional heir and Secretary of the Sarada Ranganathan Endowment, Professor M.A. Gopinath, is alone in his colossal task. In the seventh

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edition of the CC (1987), the first after Ranganathan's death, there is no sign of any collective work or outside help. Gopinath is without the benefit of the cooperation and expertise of the individuals and organizations that are sincerely eager to see the Colon alive and thriving (Satija, 1993b).

Commenting on the revision of the Library of Congress Classification (LCC), Anthony Curwen (1978, p.23) summed up: "Autocratic, cumbersome, detailed, illogical, pragmatic, practical: it works for the Library of Congress and will probably continue to do so, with a guaranteed built-in mechanism for revision, for as long as book shelving classification is needed, it would seem".

3. Features of the Colon Classification

According to the late John P. Comaromi [1937-1991] (1989), a classification is expected to perform three functions:

1. Organization of ideas, i.e. filiatory sequence representing the structure of knowledge (the cognitive function).
2. Organization of document surrogates (the bibliographic function).
3. Arrangement of documents on shelves (the library function).

Comaromi further asserted that all these functions are conjoined so much that a classification which cannot perform well a higher function will not perform well any lower function.

The CC has a modern structure and also provides a good shelf arrangement. It has a very sound theoretical foundation based upon canons, postulates and principles, and on the modes of growth of knowledge. Ranganathan is credited with making classification an objective science. But sound theory alone is not sufficient. Melvil Dewey knew it very well when in 1931 he wrote that the existence of the DDC depends on constant sales of new editions and that the practical needs of users must always be a major consideration (Curwen, 1978).

The extent to which the CC serves library and information needs is controversial. For some it is too theoretical, for others it is very practical. In the West many consider it a classification designed for Indian subjects – especially the Indology classics; while many Indian librarians consider it as a theoretical and experimental classification. Accordingly, acceptability by the users is mixed. To many librarians the CC is intellectually stimulating. The pattern created by it on the shelves is logical, pedagogical and aesthetical. But many are put off by its notation and boggled by its devices and analysis. The majority of the librarians of Ranganathan's generation and the one following

him never learned or understood it. Some had personal apathy with the system and its creator. The system appeared complex because of its details and frightening notation, as well as its number-building methods.

However, charges of complexity are a bit overblown. The famous J. Mills (1951, p.153), in the early 1950's, wrote that "once the basic rules and disciplines of Colon are grasped (not a difficult matter), the scheme becomes extremely easy to apply – easier than Bliss (BC-1], because [being] more purely logical and leaving few decisions to the classifier." Being a teacher of classification, this author can vouch that students are more at ease with Colon number-building than with the DDC.

It is also true that Ranganathan never fully understood the value of simplicity of notation to gain acceptance from the users. He used to cite an airplane-engine analogy that a passenger need not worry about the complexity of the airplane engine. That analogy could partly be true in a closed-access library. For computerised information retrieval or for arrangement of entries in a bibliography, the complexity of notation is not a hindrance. Perhaps it is an inevitable price for co-extensive class numbers, for a filiatory sequence, for hospitality, and for high recall and precision ratios, as Ranganathan maintained. The CC is at a disadvantage because of its non-use by any centralised classification/cataloguing agency. The only solace is that the CC class numbers are given in the bibliographic entries of the Indian National Bibliography, which otherwise is arranged by DDC numbers.

Marketing and public relations of the CC are extremely poor. Many mediocre systems are popular and progressing because of their marketing networks and techniques. Colon has been under attack both at home and abroad from motivated critics. But nothing has been done to counter the attacks of its detractors and attend to the genuine difficulties of its users. The CC has been projected as India's de facto national classification system, yet nothing substantial has been done to promote its honour. There is no forum for CC users, and there is nobody to whom one can turn in case of difficulties. Books explaining the system are no better than student guides to help them pass examinations, and these books ignore the practical difficulties of librarians.

4. The extent that Colon Classification is used

No serious and widely ranging study of the use of the CC in computerised information retrieval has been made, yet by all accounts a faceted classification is eminently suitable for such application. Also, no exact and authentic figures are available on the extent of use of the CC in libraries. Ranganathan, in a semi-

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nar at Rutgers University, described the extent of the CC use as follows:

> The Colon Classification is in use in the universities of ten constituent states of India. Almost all the public libraries and the college libraries in the state of Madras and Maharashtra use it. It is also in use in some public libraries in other states. Some of the legislative libraries and libraries of government departments are also using it. (Ranganathan, 1967, p.25).

Ingetraut Dahlberg (1977) quotes Dr. Gopinath on the issue as follows: "The CC sixth edition has been used in about 2500 libraries in India, mostly in public libraries, but also in nearly 20 universities, 2000 special and 1000 college libraries."

However, according to the ILA Directory (1951) of the Indian Library Association, out of the 363 libraries listed therein, only 31 (8.5%) libraries used the CC. The majority ~ (55%) of these 31 libraries were academic. According to the IASLIC Directory (1962) of the Indian Association of Special Libraries and Information Centres, which listed 173 libraries, only 23 (13.3%) were using the CC. The use of the CC even ranked behind the use of the DDC and UDC in Indian libraries. A Delhi library directory (1973) shows the use of the system in 10.5% of the Delhi libraries. According to Pushpa Dhyani's Ph.D. survey of Delhi and Rajasthan libraries, the CC's use is up to 24% of the libraries, the majority being academic. (Satija, 1986).

The CC is being taught in all the Indian library schools at every level. Abroad, especially in the UK, its theoretical principles have been taught as a model of faceted classification. However, this place is being taken over by the BC-2, which is admittedly based upon Ranganathan theories (Williamson, 1994). The DDC, UDC, BSO, and numerous specialised systems have also used Ranganathan theories and techniques in their revisions. Numerous specialised classifications have been designed on the Ranganathan model. But the CC has not adopted the organizational and marketing techniques of these successful systems.

5. Suggestions for revitalizing the system

If the trend continues, the future generations may know of the CC beauties and ingenuities only through Mills' BC-2, and the CC may become a mere name. Thus, the future of the CC is predictably bleak, and it is a foreboding to us all to rise to the occasion. The CC needs to be resuscitated, as it is a precious national heritage and still an important force for the management of libraries. Accordingly, some of my suggestions for revitalizing it are that:

1. A Colon Classification association be formed.
2. Some institutional support be sought for the system, since some national library organization must be responsible for the upkeep and spread of the CC.
3. Professor M.A. Gopinath be requested to form a broad-based editorial board to assist him. In the Indian ISKO seminar (1994) "Prof. Kaula advocated that still more people should cooperate in the revision work of CC. Prof. Gopinath agreed to his proposal". (Singh & Prasad, 1994, p.38)
4. A new revised edition be brought out, updating and correcting the errors of the CC-7 (1987). The CC-6 and CC-7 should be merged.
5. A CC bulletin be started to keep in touch with the CC users and researchers.
6. A directory of CC users be compiled.
7. The use of the CC in online systems be studied, and the CC be brought out in a CD-ROM version.
8. Periodical conferences and refresher courses on the CC and faceted classifications be organized.
9. An official manual on the use of the CC schedules (along the lines of the DDC manual) be prepared and published. This will be a device "Whereby the CC classificationists and classifiers can understand each other". (Jain, 1964, p.349)
10. The above named organization would keep a watch on the correct use of the CC and raise the level of teaching the system. It would also work as a clearinghouse for CC literature.
11. Public relations of the CC with the library professionals be spruced up. Librarians at large should be educated about the high and peerless qualities of the CC.

We are left with no other option but to act. In perpetuating the Colon Classification, the Indian library profession has much at stake.

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