

A LIBRARIAN LOOKS BACK

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CHAPTER AE

FIRST WEEK AS LIBRARIAN

1 First Act of Preparation

It was November 1923. Receipt of the news of selection to the new post of University Librarian brought to the mind of 2 the 'fine' of Rs 2 As 14 due to the Madras University Library. In those days over-due charge of delay in the return of books was called by the humiliating term 'fine'. That very moment, 2 decided to get that term softened if possible. But he had to wait for 2 years to get it done. However, 2 said to himself that he should not himself sign the receipt for the payment of his fine. The next morning 2 walked to Egmore with Rs 2 As 14 in his hand. He entered the Connemara Public Library buildings. 2 walked up to the counter of the University Library. 2G stood up and made a deep bow. 2S came rushing to the counter. He saw 2 putting cash on the counter.

2S.—Why should you have come all the way, Sir ?

2.—I had to pay my fine.

2S.—You need not pay it, Sir.

2.—I am sorry, I should.

2S.—Even then, you need not have come, Sir.

2.—How else could I pay my fine ?

2S.—I would have sent a peon to your house, Sir.

2.—(with a smile) I did not want the peon to know about my having been fined by you !

2 Second Act of Preparation

2's mother had been ailing for long. She had been off and on expressing a wish to go on a pilgrimage to Rameshwaram and Dhanushkoti. 2 felt that he should have this wish of hers fulfilled before leaving for England or America. Therefore, 2 took his wife and mother on this pilgrimage during the two weeks' holidays at the end of December 1923. One afternoon they were sitting on a log of wood on the sea sands in Dhanushkoti.

Mother.—I am praying to Samudraraja (God of the Sea).

2.—What are you praying for ?

Mother.—That he should avert the need for you to cross the seas.

2.—You cannot have it both ways.

Mother.—Has everybody with a better scale of salary crossed the seas ?

2.—One of the conditions of the appointment now awaiting me is that I should cross the seas.

Mother.—I know it. You had told me.

2.—Then why do you now raise an objection ? It will put me in an awkward position.

Mother.—I am not raising any objection. I am only praying to Samudraraja !

3 Taking Over Charge

It was 16.00 hours, Thursday 4 January 1924. 2 called on KG, the Chairman of the University Library Committee, at the Museum House. KG and 2 crossed over to the Madras University Library occupying one half of the Connemara Public Library Buildings within the Museum Compound. 2 entered his name in the gate-register.

KG.—You need not hereafter enter in the gate register.

2.—My habit makes me do it.

KG.—At that rate, you will be swelling the number of visitors to the library each day by signing the gate register every time you go out and enter the Library !

2S had a neatly typed sheet of paper. 2 signed it. KG endorsed on it "Forwarded."

2S.—Tomorrow is a holiday, Sir. Should I include tomorrow also in calculating the librarian's salary ?

KG.—You need not bother about it now. The librarian himself will decide it at the proper time !

2S.—Shall I then send this 'Joining Report' to the Registrar of the University ?

KG.—You have to.

After walking down the corridor of the library, KG and 2 went out.

KG.—You will have to face all these meticulous red-tape problems hereafter.

2.—As a teacher I had escaped all this.

KG.—You cannot escape it any longer. Arm yourself to face it !

2.—I have been using this library for the last 8 years. I have found this Assistant Librarian to be very efficient.

KG.—He is, of course. Trivialities in rules and regulations loom large for him.

4 Training in Accounts

While teaching in the Presidency College, Saturday was always a holiday for 2. Even on other days, he had to reach college only at 11.00 hours on most of the days and at 10.00 hours on one day. Friday was a working day.

But Friday was the weekly holiday for the University Library. On the first Saturday, it worked only from 7.00—12.00 hours. Therefore, 2 reached the University Library at 7.00 hours on Saturday 6 January 1924. 2S brought the account books.

2.—Am I to check these accounts ?

2S.—Yes, Sir.

After the checking was over, 2 proceeded to sign the accounts.

2S.—Excuse me, Sir. Financial and accounts powers will be given to you, Sir, only after six months.

2.—Then why did you bring these books to me ?

2S.—The order of the Chairman is, Sir, that I should get the accounts checked by you and then request you to go to the Chairman along with me and the account books.

2.—Why should I come ?

2S.—You are under training, Sir, for six months ! This is a part of your training !!

The account books were signed by KG and then 2S carried them away to the University Library.

KG.—Do not take the trouble to come over here whenever the accounts are to be signed by me. Either I shall come there; or the Assistant Librarian will bring the books to me.

5 Empty Hours

This was all the work given to 2 on the first day of his actual life as University Librarian. Time was hanging on him. 2 waited for the mid-day gun to fire. Then he went home. His former colleague BSR and 2 were sharing the same house.

BSR.—Welcome to the University Librarian.

2.—I wish you welcome me as your colleague.

BSR.—Already tired ?

2.—No; just the opposite of it. No work. Simple imprisonment in a room. It was all terrible.

BSR.—Did you not go into the reading room by way of relief ?

2.—I attempted to. But I was prevented.

BSR.—By whom ?

2.—By the Assistant Librarian.

BSR.—Why ?

2.—The Assistant Librarian said, "An Officer, Sir, should not go into the reading room. If any reader wants to meet the Officer, and I am satisfied that he has real business with him, I shall send him to the Officer's room, Sir." I obeyed.

BSR.—You are a restless creature. I am glad 2S succeeded in confining you to your chair.

2.—Before leaving the library, I looked into the register of visitors.

Only 3 persons had called at the library during all the 5 hours. Therefore, my disobedience of the Assistant Librarian would not have given me much relief.

6 Annu

Sunday to Thursday, the working hours were 10.00—17.00. Therefore, 2 voluntarily walked into the solitary cell in the University Library at 10.00 hours each day and walked out at 17.00 hours. Friday—12 January 1924—was the first free day for him. He felt smothered throughout the week. He went to the Presidency College.

TD.—Did you join your new office on 4 January ?

2.—Yes, I did.

TD.—Did you enjoy your work ?

2.—Work ! There was no work. On Saturday, Monday, and Wednesday, I had to check up the account books and pass them on to KG. This took only a few minutes.

TD.—No files ?

2.—None. It appears that the budget allotment for the year had been already spent out.

TD.—No papers to sign ?

2.—None whatever. The only papers to be signed were the receipts for fines received from readers. In the whole week, there were only 4 such receipts.

TD.—(Smiling) That is some work.

2.—No, not even that work.

TD.—Why ?

2.—I have not been invested with financial and accounts powers. I will not be for six months. Therefore, the receipts should be signed by the Chairman and not by me.

TD.—You will get these powers after your training.

2.—I have come with a specific request. I can't bear that solitary imprisonment day after day. No human being, except the staff. How different from life in the College ! I wish to come back to the College.

TD.—(Smiling) Don't be in a haste. You will be sent out to foreign countries for training. Wait till you have that joy ride.

2.—At public cost !

TD.—Yes. If you feel bored even after your return, I shall certainly take you. I shall see that your place is not permanently filled till you come back from your travel and training from abroad.

CHAPTER AF

FIRST MONTH AS LIBRARIAN

1 Kafka's Dog

The second week in the career of 2 as librarian began on 13 January 1924. Reluctance to go to the library overpowered 2. All the same he entered his

solitary room at 10.00 hours. He said to himself why he should not occupy his time with mathematics. But the cynical observation of ZS haunted him, "If you are appointed, you will spend your time in solving differential equations." "No ; I should not justify that cynicism." said 2 to himself. His room was semi-circular. It had eight libraeo steel racks in four radial lines. To escape monotony, 2 busied himself walking in and out, in and out, of the five gangways again and again, like Kafka's dog. But that brought on additional monotony. He was therefore tempted to look at the tomes tightly packed in each of the 32 bays of the eight steel racks.

2 Book vs Periodical—First Lesson

Each of the twenty-four of the bays had volumes all exactly similar to one another. "Why do they have so many copies of the same book ?" This curiosity made 2 scan the backs of a set of similar tomes. All the titles read alike. "So many copies of this German book !", 2 thought first. But a closer examination disclosed that they were the successive volumes of one and the same book. "I could not believe that a book will be in so many volumes", said 2 to himself. Then, suddenly he remembered the seven volumes of the *Journal* of the Indian Mathematical Society which he himself owned. That was the only set of periodicals 2 had known at that time. He was amazed to find about 6,000 volumes of periodicals regimented in the six racks—all the volumes different and making up about a hundred periodicals. A hundred sets of periodicals ! He opened a few of the volumes of some of the sets. They were on diverse subjects. He could not understand most of the articles.

3 Size of the Library

2.—How many volumes have you.

2S.—About 30,000, Sir.

2.—About 6,000 of these are volumes of periodicals. I find them all here.

2S.—We have another 4,000 volumes of journals, Sir.

2.—Where are they ?

2S.—They have been shelved along with the books, Sir. Most of them are in the gallery.

2.—Ten thousand volumes of periodicals ! Does anybody use them !

2S.—Not much, Sir. Occasionally your own Professor—BR—takes a few of the *Phil trans*, Sir.

2.—What is *Phil trans* ?

2S.—(With pride of better knowledge radiating from his face). It is the *Philosophical transactions* of the Royal Society, of London, Sir. Shall I bring you some of the volumes, Sir ?

2.—Yes, if you don't mind. Bring me the volumes usually taken by Professor BR.

2S.—These three volumes, Sir.

2.—I see. These contain the classical papers of Karl Pearson on statistical methods.

2S.—Prof BR is very fond of these volumes, Sir.

4 First Incentive to Catalogue

This experience gave some relief to 2. The rest of the week was spent by him in turning through the pages of the *Phil trans* and some sample volumes of the periodicals stacked in his room. This made that room shed away that week most of the horror of a solitary cell. It was Friday 19 January 1924. 2 went to his college—Madras Christian College—to meet his Professor.

BR.—How do you find your new work ?

2.—I felt miserable in the first week, for I had nothing whatever to do.

BR.—What about this week ?

2.—Slightly better, for I could spend some time with the sets of periodicals stacked in my room.

BR.—I am sure you will find other interesting things to do in the library.

2.—The library has a deserted look. It is really desolate.

BR.—It is your duty to change it all.

2.—I really do not know what to do or where to begin.

BR.—Start cataloguing books.

5 Second Incentive to Catalogue

It was Saturday 20 January 1924. 2 entered his solitary cell punctually at 10.00 hours. He remembered his professor's suggestion about cataloguing. But he knew nothing about cataloguing. He did not even know about the possible existence of a catalogue code.

2S brought the account books. 2 checked them in a few minutes. 2S carried away the account books to KG. Boredom began to descend upon 2. To escape it, 2 started walking in and out of the five gangways between the four radial lines of the eight libraco steel racks in his solitary cell, very much like Kafka's dog.

Lo ! The volumes of Dickson's *History of the theory of numbers* caught his eyes.

2.—What a find !

2S was called immediately.

2.—A few months ago I came to the library in search of these volumes. But they were not in the catalogue or in the huge bound register of mathematical books usually used by me. But here, they are.

2S.—The volumes in these book racks are gifted volumes, Sir.

2.—And so ?

2S.—They have not been entered in the stock registers of the Boards of Studies. Nor have they been catalogued, Sir.

2.—All these 2,000 volumes are like that. Is it ?

2S.—Not only they, Sir, but all the volumes in your room are like that.

2.—I shall then begin to catalogue them.

2S.—No, sir. The officer should not do such work.

2.—Look here, 2S. I am becoming mad sitting all day without any work. I should begin cataloguing to-day.

2S.—But, sir, you do not know cataloguing.

2.—Teach me cataloguing work.

The face of 2S got irradiated with pride and satisfaction. 2S and 2 spent most of the week in cataloguing. 2S showed to 2 bundles of slips of size 9×4 inches.

2S.—These are catalogue slips, Sir, for the books purchased after the catalogue was printed.

2.—Have you a printed catalogue ?

2S.—Yes, sir. It covers about 25,000 volumes.

2.—Can you show me a copy ?

2S.—Here it is, Sir, There are two catalogues.

2.—I see ! The printed strips in the paste-down public catalogue have all been cut out from there. Is it ?

2S.—Yes, Sir.

2.—Who prepared these volumes of the catalogue ?

2S.—It was done by ES and KH, sir. They were paid a lump sum as remuneration for it.

2.—Who has written these slips for new books ?

2S.—Myself, sir.

2.—Did they teach you cataloguing ?

2S.—No, sir.

2.—But how do you manage to do this cataloguing ?

2S.—(with a look of elation and satisfaction) I simply imitate the printed catalogue.

The remaining two weeks of the month were spent in getting initiated in cataloguing work. Entries with headings such as India, Baroda, Education, Gaekwad's Oriental Series, were intriguing. But no explanation could be got from 2S for such a heading. But 2S said that the printed volumes were not consistent in this matter. He had therefore recatalogued the concerned volumes. He said this with a legitimate pride ; for he took it as an opportunity to measure himself against the British Professors who had done the first two volumes.

6 Third Incentive to Catalogue

About the end of the month, Professor IP called at the library. He was a colleague of 2 in the Presidency College.

IP.—I am glad you are here. I had worked in this Museum in my earlier years.

2.—I didn't know that. And so, you are glad to be put into the museum !

IP.—You have been so active in the college. The work in the library should be dull to you.

2.—Dull, you say. God knows how I am keeping on to sanity.

IP.—Ten years ago, two Feringhee professors catalogued this library. Why not you catalogue the new books ?

2.—Yes. I saw the two volumes of the catalogue they had brought out.

IP.—I would ask you to bring out the third volume quickly. That will produce an impression. What the Feringhees, did you can do equally well.

2.—I have started that work. 2S has been teaching me cataloguing.

IP.—Really it is 2S that did all the work. The Feringhees only gave him some rules for guidance.

2.—I asked 2S for the rules of cataloguing. But he said he has none.

IP.—Probably, they never gave him a copy of the rules. But only gave him oral directions.

2.—But I cannot understand the rationale behind the cataloguing being taught to me.

IP.—Never mind all that. Bring out the third volume. That is all that matters.

2.—Thank you for the suggestion. I shall try my best. For, something is better than nothing. (To be continued)
