# Voluntary Libraries Go Online:
# A Case Study on Pai's Friends Library and librarywala.com*

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper introduces online library initiatives by Pai's Friends Library and Librarywala.com. The online initiatives are by voluntary libraries launched in Mumbai and Thane district. The paper aims to recognize these initiatives. The libraries are catering its library and information services to thousands of readers remotely. The online technology and marketing of services have been efficiently adopted by these libraries. Apart from its online venture, Pai's Friends Library has five library branches in Dombivli of Thane district whereas Librarywala.com holds a record in the Limca Book of Records, 2010 for being the first and the biggest online library of India. The case study also attempts to find out the information on collection, reach, services, search facilities online, membership fees, design and appeal of the portals, booking facility and specialties of the libraries.*

**Keywords:** *Voluntary libraries, Voluntary organizations, Online libraries, Pia's Friends Library, Librarywala.com*

## Introduction

Mumbai, the economic capital and heterogeneous socio-cultural hub of our country, has housed plentiful libraries of all sorts. There are several youth clubs, voluntary self-help groups, friends groups (*yuvak mandals, mitra mandals*) etc. which have established libraries in Mumbai and Thane district. It is need of the hour to recognize the informal libraries like this genre. The very libraries are just observed or noted as mere reading rooms for newspapers than the public libraries. The reason could be that the libraries severely lack funding from any means and, often, their existence is much depended on self-finance and library membership fees only. Thus it results in poor collection and inefficient service to the heterogeneous user community of the said localities. The trend of voluntary libraries is popular, but, *in disguise* in Mumbai and Thane district. It is because that there are no formal studies have been undertaken in order to understand the work mechanism of such libraries. The very libraries have a great motive to bring books closer to the people where everyone is *made-busy* with their work due to a metropolitan environ. There are many other issues and challenges as per as the objectives behind functioning of the libraries by voluntary groups. It is because some libraries have been started with commercial motive and on the contrary some libraries are frantically awaiting the *takeover* by the government.

In view of the above fundamental and realistic discussion, the paper specifically introduces two such voluntary libraries viz. Pai's Friends Library (PFL) and Librarywala.com, which have gone online to serve its user community. Both the libraries are unique in their approach and existence. The PFL is, a brainchild of a book lover Mr. Pundlik Pai which is, the largest private circulating library with over 90,000+ books in various languages with five branches[1]. On the other hand, Librarywala.com holds a record in the Limca Book of Records, 2010 for being the first and the biggest online library of India[2].

## Concepts

a) *Voluntary Library*: The working definition has been coined purposely in order to differentiate these libraries from public libraries or any kind of libraries.

(i)     A library established voluntarily, having a social service motive as the prime objective, by an individual, informal group or an organization other than Government of any kind or jurisdiction.

(ii)    (ii) A library established by voluntary group to make the books accessible to public with or without any membership charges.

b) *Voluntary Group/Organization*: For the scope and objectives of the study, it treats various similar terms *equivalent to voluntary group as* voluntary organization, social volunteers, social entrepreneurs, unorganized social groups, unorganized voluntary organizations and individuals etc. However, the meaning of voluntary group as defined by Kranti Rana[3] is relevant to the study.

(i)     "Voluntary Organizations or groups depend primarily on appeals to shared values as the basis for mobilizing human and financial resources. Citizens contribute their time, money and other resources to a voluntary group because they believe in what it is contributing to society. They share in a commitment to the organization's vision of a better world. This value commitment is the distinctive strength of the voluntary group".[3]

(ii)    "Their small size independence and focused value commitments give them a capacity for social and institutional innovation, seldom found in either government or business.  They serve as forums for the definition, testing and propagation of ideas and values in ways that are difficult or impossible for the other two sectors".[4]

## Objectives of the Study

The prime objectives of the study are-

a)  to discover the voluntary libraries which have gone online to serve the user community;

b) to understand the library and information services offered by the voluntary libraries and

c) to create awareness (through this research paper) about the libraries amongst library and information science professionals, academicians and society as a whole.

**Scope and Limitations**

As per as scope of the study is concerned, the *geographic scope* of the study restricts to Mumbai Metropolitan City and Thane district only. The research study has restricted its focus only on two online voluntary libraries, viz. PFL and Librarywala.com, established by voluntary groups/organizations in Thane district and Mumbai respectively. The research, its findings and suggestions are solely based on the secondary source of information available on to the websites of the said libraries. The research attempted to introduce the library initiatives as a whole than critically comparing the libraries each other.

**Methodology**

The present study is based on the information available on the existence of the voluntary libraries which have been offering its services online. PFL and Librarywala.com are two such online libraries which are covered in this paper as samples. The selection of the sample is purposive. The information available on to their site was studied thoroughly and selected information for preparing the profile of the libraries and their services.

**Profile of the Online Voluntary Libraries**

a) *Pai's Friends Library*[5]**:** With the objective of promoting reading habit amongst the vast literate population of Dombivli, Mr Pundalik Pai, a fresh graduate then, opened his first library on 22nd May, 1986 with just about hundred books. Later, the first branch of the library was opened at Tilak Nagar area of Dombivli (Thane District). Today PFL is the largest private circulating library with over 90,000+ books in various languages. *PFL has over five branches* in Dombivli itself, catering to over 14,000+ members. In addition to this, it has a separate Education Division comprising of text books, reference materials etc. for students from secondary education to higher education. PFL has been credited to be the *First Fully Computerized Private Library* in Mumbai. Their libraries are open on all 365 days with the qualitative support of twenty experienced library staff.

www.friendslibrary.in is an online venture of PFL. The objective behind launching this website was to break the geographical barrier and showcase its huge collection of books to all books lovers outside Dombivili.

Figure-1: *An online library of Pai's Friends Library (http://www.friendslibrary.in )*



*Variety:*
- Books and magazines in English and Marathi (under General Section) languages.
- Over 10,000+ books comprising text books, reference books, manuals, directories and annual reports.

*Viability:*
- Readers can order books remotely by logging on to http://www.friendslibrary.in
- Phone booking facility is also available.
- Dedicated customer service agents to help select books.
- Separate Section for Kids, also available in English and Marathi (Kids Section).

*Value:*
- Membership fees: Nominal fees with free home delivery service.
- Entitlements: Borrowing facility of unlimited books in a month.
- Same day delivery of books ordered before 12 p.m.

b) **Librarywala.com:** Librarywala.com is a wholly owned subsidiary of Dharya Information Private Limited (DIPL). The DIPL leverages the power of the Librarywala.com brand to offer online customers a premier destination for renting multilingual books. India's first and largest - online multilingual book rental library. Putting technology to the right use, DIPL has launched Librarywala.com as its first initiative offering several bibliophiles an ultimate destination of books. With numerous titles, it is worth giving the customers an easy way to find precisely the books they are looking for. The search and advanced search options enable readers to locate books by title or author or keyword with no time. The readers with a general idea of what they want-

can use the Browse pages to go through hundreds of titles to find exactly the right book.

In August 2007, Librarywala.com launched services in Mumbai offering over 8,000 books in its library which have now grown to over 25,000+ books. With only six months in Mumbai Librarywala.com became a great success story and it opened a branch in Bangalore in January, 2008. Growing to 7,000+ members in a year, Librarywala.com launched its services in Pune in September, 2008. Librarywala.com today offers thousands of books in multiple languages to more than 10,000+ members and over 50+ corporate firms across Mumbai, Bangalore and Pune. In this very small journey so far Librarywala.com had achieved the following:

a) Librarywala.com is voted amongst *the top 30 hottest startups in the year 2008* awarded by Tata and Nen.
b) Librarywala.com has been awarded the *Star Entrepreneur Award 2009* by the Indira International Innovation Summit.
c) Librarywala.com holds a record in the *Limca Book of Records, 2010 for being the First and the biggest online library* of India.

Figure-2: *An online library initiative by DIPL(htpp://www.librarywala.com/)*



Librarywala is offering members over 25,000 paperback books. Its members have been enjoying the highest commitment to customer service, satisfaction, and unmatched value.

***Cost***: With plans starting at just Rs.79/- per month, members may borrow up to 12 books. There is no loan period (no due dates or late fees). Our paperback book rental service is the only one of its kind.

***Collection***: The Librarywala.com not only offers the latest bestsellers, but also offers thousands of titles no longer available at any local bookstore or online retailer. Over the years it has accrued a massive inventory of paperback books. So when a reader finds a new author he/she loves, he/she not only has access to their latest release, he/she also has access to their previous releases too.

***Convenience***: The members enjoy free delivery both *to and from* their door-step. Orders are automatically generated from titles that are in queue on their list so there is never a need to place additional orders when returns are received. Over 90% of new orders are shipped -the same day returns are received.

**How do the readers connect to these online libraries?**

The Librarywala.com has given a beautiful illustration[7] showing how its registered readers connect to its online library. The same method is also applicable to PFL as both the libraries follow almost the same method of functioning as per as their reader's online selection/approach is concerned.

Figure-3: *User's approach to the online libraries*

**Findings and suggestions**

(i) ***Collection***: PFL claims that it has got around ten thousand books entirely earmarked for its online library. PFL provides access to English and Marathi books only. On the other hand, Librarywala.com has earmarked around twenty five thousand books for its online library. The collection comprises of books available in English, Marathi and Gujarati languages. Librarywala.com has given facility for the members/users to donate the books to its library. It has created an attractive webpage with registration form. This is indeed a good approach. However, these libraries should tap the college and university students. They should also concentrate on pure academic collection, in accordance with the syllabuses, of graduation and post graduation courses as there are lot many colleges and two universities are located in Mumbai and Thane district. This initiative will help students to access the online libraries effectively and potentially as the students, of this age, are well versed with the internet technology.

(ii) ***Online registration:*** PFL and Librarywala.com offer creation of online account. The registered users are entitled to order the books online and also get benefit from its other library services.

(iii) ***Membership plans:*** The membership plans are systematically prepared considering the type of users and localities they serve. The PFL's membership category starts from Rs.125 to Rs.2, 800 depending upon the number of entitlement of books and loan period. There are three loan periods viz. Monthly, Quarterly and Yearly.  PFL charges enrollment fees of Rs. 200 and Deposit of Rs. 300 for selected membership plans. General and Kids are the two major user categories made by PFL. The best feature is that PFL has given the online registration form to obtain and complete the new membership formalities. On the other hand, Librarywala.com's membership plan starts from Rs.79 to Rs. 12,000 based on the number of entitlements and loan period. It has introduced three membership categories viz. Reader for Life Plan, Smart Read Offer and Book Lover Offer. Unlike PFL, there are three loan periods. The reader can either choose from a monthly (Cubic, Basic, Classic or Special Children) Plan or even go for a multi-month plan for 6 or 12 months and avail discounts too.

(iv) ***Search facility***: The Search and Advanced Search facilities are available on both the websites. It has really helped tapping the books archived in the online library. The libraries can prepare the PDF files comprising the list of books by subject/author. This will help the remote users to download and also help them while placing demand/order for the selected title/s.

(v) ***Design of the Site***: Librarywala.com's site is attractive as compared to PFL. Both the libraries have tried to attract the remote users by adding the images of the books with lot of appropriate links to main page and connected sub pages of the sites. However, both the sites, especially PFL, need professional design/touch as per as designing of the site is concerned.

(vi) ***Reach***: Librarywala.com operates in multiple cities viz. Mumbai, Pune and Bangalore. The online reach to these libraries is much easier. PFL has given the facility to order books via online or telephone.  These libraries

have potentially embraced social networking sites/mediums too. PFL is connected to Facebook whereas Librarywala.com is connected to Facebook, Youtube and Blog. This will help attract the readers to be the members of the libraries. However, the libraries should engage its members on social networking sites by posting interesting facts, books, links to full text articles *etc*. On the other hand, the libraries have to organize innovative workshops/seminars for the general readers and students.

(vii)   ***Updates***: Both the sites are being updated on regular basis with an addition of new books and magazines. The libraries should also be active on social networking sites by posting new arrivals, reviews, new member alerts and achievements or new initiatives of the libraries. This makes the users to be connected as the online representation of the libraries felt as dynamic.

## Conclusion

The initiative to start a library for the public by an individual or a group of individuals is indeed any appreciable trend. The history of public library system, anywhere in the world, reveals the fact that most of the libraries were initially started by an individual or a group of individuals. The very library voluntarism is a great sign of a progressing society and its culture. Some voluntary groups are realizing that they should start online library to tap the potential user community in Mumbai and Thane District. The need of embracing the online technology and its proper implementation has been rightly felt by the groups. Pai's Friends Library and Librarywala.com are the right examples for the same. Both the libraries have come up with invaluable books, search features and attractive subscription fees. On the other hand, both the online libraries should build the sites more professionally with lot of social networking features. The voluntary groups who are involved in establishing libraries must be recognized by the Library and Information Science professionals and their associations and government bodies.

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