

# Understanding the Online Presence of Voluntary Libraries of Mumbai and Thane District: A Case Study\*

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## Abstract

*Voluntary libraries (VLs) that influenced the existence of formal libraries are functioning across the world since time immemorial. The VLs, which aim to spread book culture, are established and run by individuals or social groups. The formal libraries that are popularly known as 'public libraries' are supported by government bodies. But VLs are, voluntary initiatives, working behind the screen where there is no access to public libraries or even where the public library system is well in place. But the literature review of the study revealed that there is hardly any literature directly discussing the status and contributions of VLs. Therefore, any study on the VLs, which fall into unorganized or voluntary sector, would boost the popularity of these libraries and also the volunteers/voluntary groups associated with them. In an attempt to identify their popularity (online), this paper explores the online presence of VLs particularly of Mumbai and Thane district. The motive to find this phenomenon is indirectly associated with functioning of the VLs, their preparedness in embracing technology, technology supported library services etc. The study found that the VLs need to do a lot to project their presence online as only six VLs have their official websites out of 26 VLs, in Mumbai and Thane district, surveyed for the study. The trend is quite challenging and also positive as some libraries are operating online with an exceptional approach towards their patrons.*

**Keywords:** *Online Presence, Voluntary Library, Volunteerism, Mumbai, Thane*

## 1. Introduction

The voluntary libraries (VLs) are established and run by individuals or non-governmental organisations. These VLs, of any geographical jurisdiction, are serving the people since time immemorial. In view of technological advances of VLs, the Indian VLs are yet to explore the avenues fully. The VLs which gave birth to public and non-public libraries are striving hard to connect with their readers. Thus, many VLs especially in India, are trying to embrace technology to attract the users to their libraries. But, in general, it is also true that the libraries of any form and place are trying hard to connect with their readers on World Wide Web. This effort can be attributed to many reasons

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like the exponential proliferation of information and communication technology (ICT), innovations in dissemination of library and information services online, decreasing interest in the visits to the physical libraries etc.

The libraries of today's genre need to connect with their patrons well. This applies to the libraries' presence online as well. Solomon (2011) rightly says, "It is easy to get a free account on any of the hundreds of social media sites that currently exist, but social media is not about coverage, it is all about making connections". This applies to the VLs and their presence on Internet. Though there are few VLs existing on social media sites, but they seldom connect with their clients actively. It is important to note that mere presence online is not significant enough but building connection with the readers and possible readers is of abundant value.

Any study on the VLs, which fall into unorganized sector, would be a boost to the libraries. Thus, the study was undertaken as part of the pilot study on VLs of Mumbai and Thane district for understanding these unique libraries that hold immense importance. It was also, particularly, to know how best these libraries could help build the strong user base and popularise the library-culture among the people, of any nation or state. This study highlights the facts about the presence of VLs online so as to know the status of the VLs in view of their functionality with the help of technology. The study has been carried out on selected VLs of Mumbai and Thane district.

## 2. Concepts

The paper states 'voluntary library' and 'online presence' quite often based on the following observation and understanding of the said terms.

- a) *Voluntary Library*: Many libraries are categorized based on the type of readers who access the library and type of parent body that supports the library. The literature review revealed that, the term 'voluntary library' is not so frequently-used nomenclature in the literature of library and information science. (However, D W Davies's (1974) work, entitled *Public Libraries as Culture and Social Centers: The Origin of the Concept*, is the only source that has mentioned the term.) The contextual meaning of the VL can be defined as 'a library that is established by a voluntary group or an individual volunteer or informal group or organisation, other than any Government (and its affiliated agencies/bodies) of any kind or jurisdiction, to make the books accessible to the public with or without any membership charges'. Such libraries are existent till date in almost all the countries but they are differently called as social libraries, book clubs, circulation libraries, reading rooms, popular libraries etc.
- b) *Online Presence*: The 'online presence' is expressed in view of the official websites of VLs, accounts on any social networking site, information about their libraries on the third party sites like search engines, web directories etc.

### 3. Literature Review

The scope of literature review was pertained to the literature available in the form of books, journals, reports and web-directories. A lot of research work is done already on public libraries but not significantly on the libraries established by voluntary groups. Prior to synthesis of the collected data, the required information was mapped out from different types of documents viz. conceptual, background, methodological, empirical papers and books.

Initially, the works of Simon Eliot (2006), Dhar (2010), Purandare and Mandpe (2010), National Knowledge Commission (2007), and Reitz (2004) were thoroughly studied as to understand the trend in using the different names for VLs, but not 'voluntary library' directly. In some of these works, the VLs are named as social libraries, circulating libraries, subscription libraries, proprietary libraries and popular libraries. Though the meaning and objectives of these terms slightly differ, they were all voluntary initiatives. These terms are closely associated with the concept 'voluntary library'. However, D W Davies's (1974) work helped trace the use of the term 'voluntary library' which is an exceptional source that mentions the said term. Hulagabali's (2011) paper on *Voluntary Libraries Go Online: A Case Study on Pai's Friends Library and librarywala.com* helped for the background study on the theme of this paper. But the author discusses on two libraries that have used the online medium effectively to connect with their patrons. Based on the methodology adopted by the author, this paper was planned with more number of samples (VLs) that have equal presence of their libraries online.

Kranti Rana's (2001) *Peoples Participation and Voluntary Action Dimensions, Roles and Strategies* was referred exclusively to understand Indian voluntary sector as the third growing economic sector of India. Government of India's (2001) report related to Indian voluntary sector was also referred to as VLs fall in the category of voluntary sector also known as independent sector, third sector, civil-society sector or social economy sector. The works of Lee and Erickson (1990), Purandare and Mandpe (2010), P S G Kumar (2002, 2008), Government of India (2001), and Pyati and Kamal (2012a, 2012b), also proved relevant to the study. Though these authors have addressed the VLs in different names, the works have helped build basic understanding about the VLs, their growth in different countries and the importance they hold in the presence of public library system.

### 4. Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- a) find out the online presence of VLs of Mumbai and Thane District and
- b) understand how far the VLs have realised the importance of online presence by having their official websites and accounts in any of the social networking sites.

## 5. Methodology

The geographic scope of the case study is limited to the VLs of Mumbai and Thane district. However, there would not be any comparative study between VLs of Mumbai and Thane district. The study was carried out based on the facts and missing gaps found in the existing literature. The study was conducted on VLs to find their online presence, initially, through these selected search engines and online directories (like justdial.com and sulekha.com). The geographic locations were selected on the said tools and then searches were made to retrieve the information using techniques like 'word search' and 'phrase search'. Word searches were: 'voluntary library', 'public library', 'Mumbai Thane libraries', 'library trends', 'impact of libraries', and phrase searches were: "impulses behind establishment of the libraries" and "circulating library" growth and development etc. However the results were biased towards public libraries. The results were then browsed one by one and the details of each library were documented in a separate sheet. It was then that the required details, facts and figures about the (online presence of) VLs were drafted. The selection of samples was based on the final list prepared using the said tools.

The questionnaires were also used to ensure whether the noted libraries were VLs. The questionnaires were sent to 35 VLs out of which, 26 VLs responded. The data was tabulated and calculated in MS-Excel. Apart from the questionnaires the official websites of the selected VLs were also explored with the help of search engines. These sites were accessed to find out the various features made available on the site for their readers (and netizens in general).

## 6. Discussion

The following heads explain the status and facts about the online presence of VLs of Mumbai and Thane district.

**6.1. Availability of Computers:** It was necessary to know the technological infrastructure of the VLs before finding any information related to their online presence. It was found that the librarians consider computers to be very essential to cater good service to their clients. 15 libraries therefore, are using computers and the remaining 11 libraries work manually. However, it was noted that even the interest to buy computers is low among the VLs who work manually. This became evident when among these, only one library revealed that it was keen to buy computer.

**6.2. Utilities of Computers:** The respondents were asked to furnish the details like why they use the computers. It was good to note that all VLs (15) that use computers are mainly using the same to maintain all kind of library records. The following Table 1 shows that (among 15 libraries) 13 libraries 'specifically' use computers for searching their library catalogue. This shows that the VLs have facilitated the library catalogue of their collection to their patrons.

Table-1: *Utilities of computers in the VLs*

<i>Computers are being used in VLs for</i>	<i>No. of VLs</i>
To maintain all library records	15
To search library catalogue/ list of books search	13
To access Internet	11
To access/use CD-ROM/DVD	7
Other activities	5

It is also an important finding that 11 libraries use computers for accessing Internet. This is a positive development of VLs. Seven libraries use computers for accessing CD-ROM/DVD and another five libraries use it for different purposes as well. Their use of Internet is indirectly related to the theme of this paper as it underscores the fact that they are aware of the Internet technology.

**6.3. Availability of Information Online:** It is observed that most of the libraries' contact details are available in the business directories viz. sulekha.com, justdial.com, yellowpages.com etc. (see Table-2). Apart from these directories, search engines also fetch the contact details of the libraries. In this view, the respondents were asked whether they knew that their libraries' details were available on the said directories or Internet. It was found that only seven libraries are aware about the availability of such information online which means, many libraries (19) are unaware of their presence online. The following third party sites have mentioned about the VLs.

Table-2: *Online presence of VLs of Mumbai and Thane district on third party sites*

<i>Directory/Website</i>	<i>URLs</i>	<i>Search method</i>
Sulekha	www.sulekha.com	Select location and search by keyword
Yellow Pages	www.yellowpages.co.in	Select location and search by keyword
Justdial	www.justdial.com	Select location and search by keyword
asklaila Mumbai	www.asklaila.com	Select location and search by keyword
Karmayog	www.karmayog.org	Static page of list of VLs
MumbaiMag	www.mumbaimag.com	Static page of list of VLs
Mumbai77	www.mumbai77.com	Static page of list of VLs

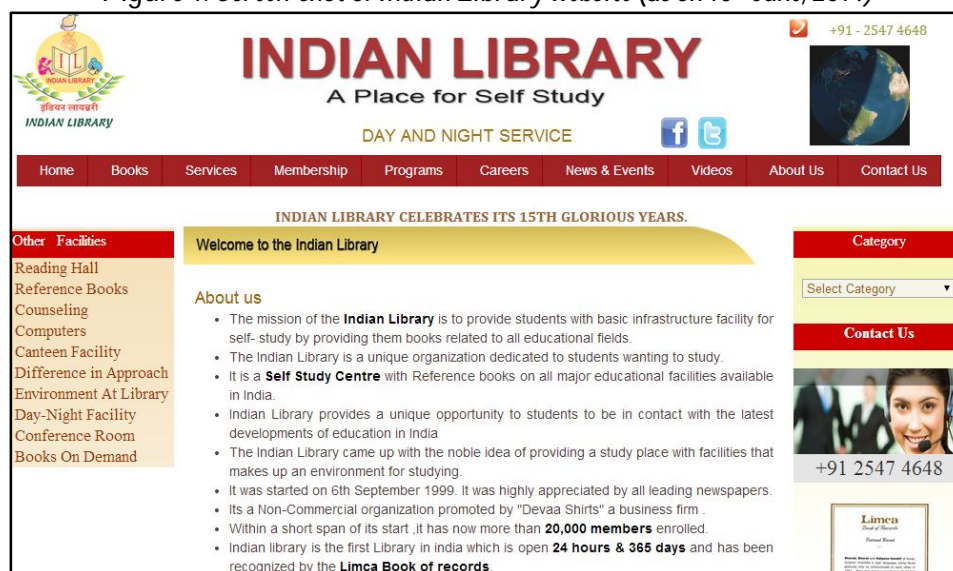
**6.4. Availability of Library Websites:** The readers of today's genre are the frequent visitors to online resources. But only five libraries have their official websites. The following web links of the websites were collected through questionnaire as well as referring to the online directories, search engines and official websites of the VLs.

Table-3: *Official websites of VLs of Mumbai and Thane district*

<i>Name of the VLs</i>	<i>URLs</i>
Indian Library, Thane	www.indianlibrarythane.com
Librarywala.com, Mumbai	www.librarywala.com
Roxy Library and Reading Room, Mumbai	www.roxylibrary.com
David Sassoon Library, Mumbai	www.davidsassoonlibrary.com
HELP, Mumbai	www.healthlibrary.com

The websites of the VLs were browsed individually and important features of the same were documented. It is important to note that websites of four VLs are dynamic and two libraries facilitate webOPAC (online public access catalogue) to access the library's collection.

Figure 1: Screen-shot of Indian Library website (as on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2014)



[www.indianlibrarythane.com](http://www.indianlibrarythane.com)

Indian Library, Thane that entered *Limca Book of Records* for its 24x7 service, is one of the successful VLs in Maharashtra in particular and India in general. The library's presence on web is effective as it features all necessary options and services to the users to be connected with the library.

Table-4: Status and features of websites of VLs

Online Presence Features	Number of VLs
WebOPAC	2
Search Box	2
Membership Tariffs	5
Contact Details	7
Dynamic Websites	4
Static Websites	2
Updated Sites	4
Non-updated Sites	2

**6.5. Effectiveness of Library Websites:** The library websites are effective when the libraries keep them updated with interactive features, contents, activities, and updated list of their collection. In view of this, it was necessary to know from the respondents whether their library websites were attracting the possible users. Among five libraries (based on primary data), which have their websites, three librarians opined that their

libraries' presence in the form official website was effective in terms of attracting the users. This trend can be attributed to the features listed in Table-4.

Figure 2: Screen-shot of Roxy Circulating Library website (as on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 2014)



[www.roxylibrary.com](http://www.roxylibrary.com)

The above screen-shot of Roxy Circulating Library, Mumbai clearly exhibits attractive features and services of its library. Using dynamic approach to the site, it is trying to deliver what its users expect from a library site.

**6.6. Use of Social Networking Sites:** Today's users are familiar with the social networking sites and they often use such platforms. All six libraries that have their official websites, use the social networking sites for their libraries. Four libraries use Facebook and two libraries use Twitter. Even the blogs are not popular among the VLs as only two libraries were found to be using the same. The chances of attracting possible patrons to their libraries would be more, when the libraries take official websites and social networking sites more seriously.

## 7. Results

The common observation from the study reveals that, despite the libraries being located in the metropolitan cities, where user expectations are to avail technologically supported services, only 57.7% VLs have got computers. The following results further discuss the facts in detail.

The librarians of VLs have realised the utilities of computers to cater good service to their clients. Thus, majority of the libraries (15) are using computers and the remaining (11) are functioning without the same. It is good to note that computers are being used mainly to maintain all kind of library records and 13 libraries use computers for facilitating library catalogue of their collection to their patrons.

Barring six VLs which have their official websites, most of the libraries' contact details are available in the business directories viz. sulekha.com, justdial.com, yellowpages.com

etc. Apart from these directories search engines also fetch the contact details of the libraries. But only seven libraries are aware about the availability of their library's presence online. All six libraries that have their official websites use social networking sites for their libraries. Blogs, Facebook and Twitter are popular among them. It is good trend that two libraries have given the webOPAC facility to access their libraries' collection remotely. Moreover, these libraries have attempted to keep their websites dynamic and user friendly with all necessary features a library should possess on its site.

## 8. Conclusion

To sum up, the VLs are serving book lovers without any government affiliation and financial aid. But awareness about these libraries among the library science professionals, students, researchers and public at large needs to be worked out. Efforts need to be made by Directorate of Public Libraries, Government of Maharashtra to identify and support VLs in all possible way. The Directorate and library science schools of universities need to support research projects on VLs.

Considering the above findings, it is evident that the VLs are yet to realize the importance of online platforms as a powerful medium for catering information services online. Therefore, the VLs need to put efforts in automating their libraries as well as creating official websites of their libraries. The financial constraints of VLs might be a big hurdle in doing so. Moreover, if given any required support and recognition to the VLs, they can work on par with the public libraries or even beyond any such library system.

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